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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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YEAR LXXVIII      **N. 359**  
april-june 1997

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Editrice S.D.B.  
Edizione extra commerciale  
Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco  
Via della Pisana, 1111  
Casella Postale 18333  
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Tipografia: Istituto Salesiano Pio XI - Via Umbertide, 11 - 00181 Roma - Tel. 78.27.819  
*Finito di stampare: Aprile 1997*

## **HE HAD COMPASSION ON THEM (Mk 6,34)**

### **New forms of poverty, salesian mission, effectiveness.**

The new scenario of our educative commitment. - An option of the Church. - Our process of reflection. - Practical initiatives.

**Looking to the future.** - A Christian reading of the present reality. - Deepening inspirations. - The poverty of the salesian educator. - Opting for the young who are poor. - Our concern: to educate. - Promoting a new culture. - Evangelizing starting from those most in need. - Conclusion.

Rome, 30 March 1997  
*Easter Sunday*

My dear confreres,

I am writing to you with my mind on the Resurrection. This year the solemnity provides us with a singular opportunity for fixing our gaze on Jesus Christ, in accordance with the line proposed by the Church for the run-up to the Jubilee of the year 2000.

In the light emanating from his figure I thought I would dwell with you on a particular point of our program: to seek a greater effectiveness as we put ourselves more decisively at the service of young people who are poor.

The fourth chapter of the Constitutions begins with a quotation from Mark's Gospel: "He saw a great throng and had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things".

In the Gospel it is the prelude and motivation for the multi-

plication of the loaves. In the Constitutions it introduces the chapter concerning those to whom our mission is directed.

The biblical scenario provides an eloquent icon: the crowd hungry and somewhat bemused, the disquiet of Jesus at seeing them, the challenge to the apostles to meet the situation, their declaration that they could do nothing, the miraculous multiplication of the bread which appeared initially as quite insufficient.

For us it is a key to the pastoral reading of the present youth reality and of the mission to be realized in connection with it.

Linked with the image of the Good Shepherd, taken from the prophet Ezechiel and placed at the heading of the first chapter of the Constitutions, it reminds us that "reading the Gospel we become more aware of certain aspects of the figure of the Lord; predilection for the little ones and the poor; zeal in preaching, healing and saving because of the urgency of the coming of the Kingdom; the preoccupation of the Good Shepherd who wins hearts by gentleness and self-giving".<sup>1</sup>

And so the individual touches acquire a very real significance. At the present day there is a multitude of adults and young people who are lacking the fundamental needs of life, who are wandering aimlessly and waiting for some sign of solidarity. To them is extended Christ's compassion which goes far beyond human sentiment. It is an expression of God's merciful heart, his will for the life and happiness of every human being.

For this reason he passes the problem to his disciples. They have to think it over, overcome their sense of inadequacy at the dimensions of the phenomenon, seek out the available resources and then leave it to the power of love to do the rest.

The gospel story has some interesting indications about the attitude Christ's disciples must have in the face of human, spiritual or material needs and about the ways to meet them: enlighten the conscience with God's word and build solidarity.

<sup>1</sup> C 11



There is also a basic logic in the calculation and use of the resources. They are multiplied to an infinite extent when the relationship between persons and things are rebuilt in the light of the Eucharist.

### **The new scenario of our educative commitment.**

The contexts in which we work are changing before our very eyes. Economic, social and cultural factors are bringing about a new configuration of societies. Hence the priorities of our mission are also changing, at least to some extent: the subjects to whom we give preference, the gospel messages to be disseminated and the educational programs to be set in motion.

The scenario is characterized by a particular phenomenon: poverty. This is not just the condition of a certain number, but the drama of the whole of humanity, a drama which is spiritual before it is material. At world level it manifests tragic dimensions and its effects on individuals and whole peoples are devastating. Rightly has it been repeatedly denounced by the highest scientific and religious authorities.

Scenes of such poverty enter our own houses from time to time through television, giving rise to sentiments of compassion and raising salutary questions. One need think only of hunger, "a scandal which has endured for too long", "which puts at risk both the present and future of a people" and "destroys life", in the words of the latest document offered by the Pontifical Council "*Cor Unum*";<sup>2</sup> or the exodus of thousands of refugees, victims of racial conflict, religious discrimination and rivalry which has become an art; or again the process of precarious urbanization without even a minimal guarantee of work, accommodation, services and civil participation, which are the hallmarks of social emargination.

<sup>2</sup> cf. "Hunger in the world"

If we also add immigration or work by juveniles, slavery of various kinds, the situation of women in many contexts, the exploitation of the weak, we have a bleak picture of human sufferings, but one which is still incomplete.

Poverty appears today in many forms, far more numerous than in the past. Aptly do we speak of 'poverties' in the plural, classifying them as old and new. It highlights the fact that some of them have come into being and extended only recently. They are linked in fact with the present conditions of life; they appear therefore as being less known in their causes and more exposed to moralistic judgements and facile allotment of blame.

To the lack of economic means indispensable for life, which has always been considered the main form of deprivation, are now added other manifestations in which this is not the main or originating factor: shortcomings in the family environment, failure in education, unemployment, dependencies of various kinds, delinquency, homelessness. Nor should be underestimated lack of motivation for living, the absence of human and spiritual prospects which lead to phenomena of compensation and evasion.

In more advanced and complex societies the poor include also those who are compelled to remain on the margin of the growing demand for cultural and technical formation, or who find it impossible to satisfy deeply felt needs: personal identity, a normal place in society, meaningful personal communication, free time, the need for formation, participation in wide-ranging projects.

This multiplicity of forms makes poverty a universal fact. Even wealthy societies and those with advanced technologies nurse them inwardly, not only because of immigration, but as a residue of their own system. Walk through the streets of a city and you cannot fail to be struck by its manifestations.

There is an inter-relationship between some forms of poverty and our style of life. The world has become interdependent in good and evil. From a system of economics and pro-

duction which has many good points, but does not include placing the person at the centre nor of considering the minimum standard of well-being indispensable for all, depends the present unemployment situation, the impoverishment of many, and the consequent falling off in educational possibilities. From the economic and cultural policies of part of the world arise new tragedies which afflict other large groups of the planet almost anonymously. Think of the national debt of some countries, about which the Church too has had something to say.

There are many examples easy enough to find which confirm such interdependence. The prolongation of borderline situations is due without any doubt to the absence of social solidarity, to delay in defining and implementing mutual rights and duties between peoples in a unified world, to tardiness in drawing up possible development plans with resources which are certainly available but are allowed to go to waste.

In the opinion of all observers, and it is confirmed by statistics, the forms of poverty in the world are not getting any less but are rather increasing, especially in depressed areas. 1996 was the year dedicated to the elimination of want, but it concluded with a bitter discovery. Deprivation increases in the same degree that efforts are made to resolve it through interventions in the sectors of finance and assistance.

*Centesimus Annus* refers to this very point: "In spite of technical and economic progress, in the countries of the West different forms of poverty are being experienced by groups which live on the margins of society, by the elderly and the sick, by the victims of consumerism, and even more immediately by so many refugees and migrants. In the developing countries tragic crises loom on the horizon unless internationally coordinated measures are taken before it is too late".<sup>3</sup>

All forms of deprivation obstruct and can even destroy the

<sup>3</sup> CA 57

educative reserves of the person. We are affected in a particular way by those which compromise the possibility of growth among young people, even though we recognize that they are not isolated and autonomous phenomena and cannot be treated as such.

The kinds of youthful poverty that we find ourselves up against every day have as their cause financial need, educative and cultural shortcomings, family instability, sordid exploitation by third parties, racial discrimination, sweated labour, lack of work-training, dependencies of various kinds, closed horizons which suffocate life, deviancy, and affective loneliness. We have to look carefully at these things as the field of commitment we have been assigned by the Lord.

But what impresses us most is the dissemination of a basic difficulty which is spreading among young people and driving them to forms of marginalization and rejection of growth. The risk affects all of us, to such an extent that the GC23 points to poverty as one of the main challenges to our mission, precisely in respect of the education of young people to the faith. "The social condition of 'poverty' is a challenge to every person of good will. The impossibility or great practical difficulty of self-realization as individuals, in the absence of the minimum requirements for adequate development, pose serious questions"<sup>4</sup>. "Those who, as disciples of Christ, see and understand these realities and ponder them in their heart, are called upon to show sympathy with those in such situations and be united with them in their sufferings"<sup>5</sup>. "When we look at the social condition of poverty with the eyes of Don Bosco, and see how it destroys so many young people whose horizons do not extend beyond their immediate needs for survival or an ideal devoid of sense, we feel challenged to make our salesian presence among the poor more consistent and effective".<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> GC23 78

<sup>5</sup> ib. 79

<sup>6</sup> ib. 80

## The Church's option

The love of the Church for the poor forms part of its constant tradition<sup>7</sup>. The figures of men and women saints, religious works and institutes, all show this to be the case. Numerous lay people too have committed their lives to the same objective either publicly or privately.

In contexts of greater privation, charismatic persons have arisen in the Christian community who have tackled widespread social evils with opportune initiatives. Between them they managed to attend to almost all the kinds of poverty of their time: indigence, illiteracy, abandonment, slavery, imprisonment.

Several of them founded communities with spiritual and practical objectives for meeting the needs of the poor with wide-ranging projects. They have gone down in history as outstanding witnesses to the Gospel and are amongst its most eloquent heralds.

When the social question first arose, a more critical vision of society highlighted the mechanisms which gave rise to want and indigence. At that time the Church denounced the models of economic, social and political organization which undervalued the worth of the individual, deprived him of the right to the goods necessary for a fully human life, and extended destitution and emargination.

The social teaching of the Church became more continuous after the Council, not only because of the dimensions being taken on by poverty and the perception of its causes which were taken for granted, but also because of the greater awareness that was growing in the Church concerning the latter's testimony and mission.

There are five Encyclicals which, in association with the problems of labour and relationships between nations, deal with the more serious problems of underdevelopment:

<sup>7</sup> cf CA 57

*Populorum progressio* (1967), *Octogesima adveniens* (1971), *Laborem exercens* (1981), *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (1987), and *Centesimus annus* (1991). To them must be added the declarations of the Synod of Bishops on justice (1971) and those of the important continental Synods.

In the context of this general sensitization the expression "preferential option" for the poor began to gather strength. It was not only a recommendation for individual charity, but a criterion for the pastoral activity of the Church.

The Council had proposed it with many indications addressed to Bishops, priests and all Christians. I quote just one extract which provoked an ample response. In the decree concerning priestly ministry, we read: "Although priests owe service to everybody, the poor and the weaker ones have been committed to their care in a special way. It was with these that the Lord himself associated, and the preaching of the Gospel to them is given as a sign of his messianic mission"<sup>8</sup>.

It was the Third Latin-American Conference of Puebla which coined the expression "fundamental option", specifying the significance and pastoral applications. After an evangelical reading of the realities of the continent and a discernment of the role of the Church in such a situation as the bearer of the good news, the Conference declared: "We affirm the need for conversion on the part of the whole Church to a preferential option for the poor, an option aimed at their integral liberation"<sup>9</sup>.

From that time the option for the poor and the words which express it have spread through all the continents. In one of the most recent documents of the Italian Bishops' Conference we read, in line with the preceding: "The preferential love for the poor is revealed as a necessary dimension of our spirituality.

<sup>8</sup> PO 6

<sup>9</sup> Puebla n.1134 - cf. nn. 1134-1165

With the lowly and the emarginated we can all retrieve a new kind of life" <sup>10</sup>.

We find it too in many recent writings of the universal Church. A typical example is found in n.42 of *Sollicitudo rei socialis*: "The option or love of preference for the poor is an option or a special form of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity, to which the whole tradition of the Church bears witness. (...) Today, given the worldwide dimension which the social question has assumed, this love of preference for the poor, and the decisions which it inspires in us, cannot but embrace the immense multitudes of the hungry, the needy, the homeless, those without medical care and, above all, those without hope of a better future" <sup>11</sup>.

It is something particularly recommended to religious. They in fact, because of the radical nature of the 'sequela Christi', represent in a more immediate manner the love of the Church and of Christ for the poor, and to their credit they have a rich tradition of initiatives: "The option for the poor is inherent in the very structure of love lived in Christ. For each Institute, according to its charism, this involves adopting a simple and austere way of life, both as individuals and as a community. Strengthened by this living witness and in ways consistent with their choice of life, and maintaining their independence with respect to political ideologies, consecrated persons will be able to denounce the injustices committed against so many sons and daughters of God and commit themselves to the promotion of justice in the society where they work" <sup>12</sup>.

With the opening of the phase of the new evangelization the option for the poor becomes endorsed in many different ways. Emphasis is placed on the fact that it opens the way for the

<sup>10</sup> "Con il dono della carita" Nota della CEI nn. 34-35

<sup>11</sup> SRS 42

<sup>12</sup> VC 82

proclamation of the Gospel, makes concrete its sense, and by it is illumined.

The heart of the new evangelization is the Gospel of charity which takes up the human problems and situations which have need of the transforming force of love. It is a charity which is expressed in the immediate circumstances, but above all is decisively involved in a wide-ranging and enduring social and cultural project, in which the individual is always considered in the light of his vocation and dignity, according to what has been revealed in Christ.

And even at the risk of labouring the point, I feel I must recall how the option for the poor forms an integral part of the Church's program for the Jubilee of the year 2000: "From this point of view, if we recall that Jesus came to 'preach the good news to the poor' (Mt 11,5; Lk 7,22), how can we fail to lay greater emphasis on the Church's preferential option for the poor and the outcast? Indeed it has to be said that a commitment to justice and peace in a world like ours, marked by so many conflicts and intolerable social and economic inequalities, is a necessary condition for the preparation and celebration of the Jubilee. Thus, in the spirit of the Book of Leviticus (25,8-12), Christians will have to raise their voice on behalf of all the poor of the world"<sup>13</sup>.

The long process of reflection has also had the effect of clarifying the sense of the preferential option for the poor. It does not imply any exclusion whatever, nor lack of attention to anyone, but expresses the involvement of the whole Church at this historic moment in time through which the world is living. It is not parallel with or juxtaposed to evangelization, which will always remain the first and most original task of the Church; but it is to be understood within the proclamation of Christ in line with the explanation of Paul VI in *Evangelii nuntiandi*.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> TMA 51

<sup>14</sup> cf. EN32



It is not the task of only certain people, but is taken up by the Church as such. It is not to be realized through polarizations, but in communion; it is not to be achieved through the protagonism of certain persons or groups, but through the complementary qualities of talents, services and projects.

### Our process of reflection

The Congregation has not remained indifferent in the face of the new manifestations of poverty in general, and in particular with regard to the signs of youthful hardship. It has always in mind the image of Don Bosco who, like Jesus, could also feel deep emotion at the sight of youthful privation.

It cannot forget the words in which Don Bosco expressed his reactions with regard to the youngsters in prison: "I saw large numbers of young lads, aged from 12 to 18, fine healthy youngsters, alert of mind; but seeing them idle there, infested with lice, lacking food for body and soul, horrified me".<sup>15</sup>

From that experience there began to emerge a new figure of a priest for the young, a new kind of educative work was born, a new kind of educational atmosphere. Processes of growth were envisaged tailored to the condition of the youngsters, to a point at which today the name of Don Bosco is linked with certain models of work and a certain style of education, even though he had not always been the first to think of them<sup>16</sup>.

He seems to say as much himself when he comments: "It was on that occasion that I found out why many of them were brought back to that place; it was because they were abandoned to their own resources. Who knows — I thought to myself — if these youngsters had a friend outside who would take care of them, help them, teach them religion on feast days...

<sup>15</sup> *"Memoirs of the Oratory"*, p.182

<sup>16</sup> cf. STELLA P. *"Don Bosco nella storia"*. Vol I pp.106-112

Who knows but they could be steered away from ruin, or at least the number of those who return to prison could be reduced? I talked this idea over with Fr Cafasso, and with his encouragement and inspiration I began to work out in my mind how to put the idea into practice”<sup>17</sup>

From that time the choice of prevention was clear in his mind, and in its more complete form the choice of a style of education based on preventive criteria, i.e. careful to develop the energies which enable the individual to emerge from the conditioning which life can impose, able to anticipate gravely negative experiences which would compromise his personal resources, or at least to escape from which would involve a useless and painful expenditure of energy.

The problem of the young, after he had sought them out and approached them, has gone down in the oral and institutional tradition of the Congregation, and has recently been studied with the rigour proper to professional historians. The conclusions are convergent and can help to throw light on human situations of the present day and the decisions they call for<sup>18</sup>.

The broad field of youth is always Don Bosco's fundamental option. Preference for the poor, the abandoned and destitute, those in need or in moral danger, gradually took on a greater variety as Don Bosco progressively came to grips with new needs.

At the moment of the greater development of his work he approached a fringe group of ordinary youngsters, with unspoiled human resources, in financial need if anything for a suitable human and Christian development; a group of middle-class youngsters “of good character and religious dispositions”, suitable candidates for an ecclesiastical career or likely to provide an exemplary basis for his institutions; and a small margin of mischievous boys of various kinds for whom preventive intervention seemed desirable.

<sup>17</sup> “*Memoirs*”, p.182

<sup>18</sup> cf. BRAIDO P in “*Annali di storia dell’educazione*” 1996, vol 3. p.185

In a youthful environment of an educational and positive kind, permeated by reason, faith and loving kindness, a work of re-education and recovery is possible to some extent. He would not accept houses of correction as they were conceived and managed in those days. He had always thought rather that the work of recovery and re-education should be carried out through the combined elements of the preventive system: reason, religion and kindness.<sup>19</sup>

Don Bosco presents his system of education as the most adequate for the reclaiming of boys affected by delinquency or otherwise outcasts from society. This is reflected in his words and in his letters to cooperators, to public authorities, and to past-pupils, when inviting them to collaborate with him in the education of the young, especially those who are poor and abandoned, so as to rescue such children from the material and moral ruin of the prisons, from corrupt habits, and from losing their faith.<sup>20</sup>

Recently have come to light the dimensions and extensive social value of Don Bosco's interventions which are not confined to educative environments too narrowly defined. And this not only because he had in mind the regeneration and well-being of all civil society, and because in the work of education and advancement of the young should be involved every kind of element linked with social and political life, but also because educative programs themselves should not be limited to hidebound prototypes but be freely open to innovations in broad social environments. Think, for instance, of relationship with the world of work, the drawing up of contracts, the use of free time, and the promotion of popular culture and instruction.

Don Bosco promoted or at least dreamed up vast social projects for prevention or for social assistance

The Constitutions, which guide our behaviour as individ-

<sup>19</sup> cf. BRAIDO P. ib. p.190

<sup>20</sup> cf. BRAIDO P. ib. pp.183-236

uals, and to an even greater extent our communal project, have reproduced these convictions of Don Bosco in the chapter on those to whom our mission is directed. They present successively: the young, and especially those who are poorer; youngsters about to enter the work-force, and those who give signs of a vocation. Those who are poorer are described as the first and foremost to whom our mission is directed, and for this reason "we work especially in areas of greatest poverty"<sup>21</sup>.

It is clear that the poor youngsters who are indicated as the main ones for whom we work, are not there in the Constitutions as just one of the categories listed, but they are at the centre, bestowing a significance in the light of which can be understood the other elements of the field to which we feel called. Similarly the reference to the young is not to be placed on the same level as our commitment to adults of the working classes, but rather as a motivation for the latter.

The salesian mission therefore has a unified definition, and is not just an undifferentiated list of possibilities. It moves from an option which manifests the kind and intensity of pastoral charity which is demanded of us, and which extends to other wider circles with the same spirit.

Later, and in view of the new reality, in the general Regulations are listed the different kinds of poverty to which we want to respond through our service of education: "in the first place for youngsters who because of economic, social and cultural poverty, sometimes of an extreme nature, have no possibility of success in life; for those who are poor at an affective, moral and spiritual level, and are therefore exposed to indifference, atheism and delinquency; and for those who live on the fringe of society and of the Church"<sup>22</sup>. In this way we recognize the extension of the kinds of poverty in complex societies, in which it frequently happens that the different forms mutually develop

<sup>21</sup> C.26

<sup>22</sup> R 1

and condition each other, creating situations which are strongly dehumanizing.

Also suggested is a flexibility of approach and educative structures in line with the needs of those for whom we are working. The permanent point of reference is the 'oratorian'<sup>23</sup> model as a receptive environment, attentive to personal relationships, open to all activities and forms of expression suited to the situation of the youngsters, organized "according to a plan for the total well-being of man directed to Christ, the perfect Man"<sup>24</sup>.

### Practical initiatives

Recent years have meant for us a slow but constant evolution in many senses concerning the choice of those who are poorer. Emargination and youthful deprivation are better known and followed up with greater concern; their manifestations are better understood and more attention is given to their causes.

To the dissemination of knowledge of this kind have contributed the recommendations of General Chapters, the custom of planning, the spreading of the results of specific research projects and initiatives, such as the organized observation of the youth condition, courses of social pedagogy, meetings on the theme of privation, and various short or long term surveys we have made.

The validity, degrees and complementary forms of prevention have been clarified, as also the salesian sense of prevention, which does not exclude the salvaging of those already suffering the consequences of marginalization and deprivation, but rather is proposed as an excellent way for reawakening their still healthy resources and prevent a definitive deterioration.

<sup>23</sup> cf. C 41

<sup>24</sup> C 31

This was confirmed by the Rector Major at the end of the GC22: "The pastoral charity lived by Don Bosco prompts us to go to the most needy of young people, to those in special danger, whether in the third world or in the consumer society. Don Bosco teaches us that the educative strength becomes evident also in its capacity for rescuing boys who have been abandoned but who still preserve some seeds of goodness, and for preventing further deterioration in those who have already started on the downward slope"<sup>25</sup>.

The General Chapters have continually prompted greater enterprise and boldness of initiative in expressing our solidarity with the various forms of poverty. After the proposal of new presences in environments of marginalization expressed by the SGC<sup>26</sup>, and endorsed by the GC21<sup>27</sup>, a practical guideline of the GC22<sup>28</sup> asked the provinces "to return to young people, to their world, their needs, their poverty, by giving them true priority expressed in a renewed educational, spiritual and affective presence among them, relocating our works if necessary in the places where poverty is greatest"<sup>29</sup>.

The request for a more decisive insertion among the very poor is emphasized again by the GC23. After presenting poverty as one of the arguments which challenges the communities more directly because of its gravity, urgency and dimensions, the Chapter asked every province to identify new and urgent fronts for commitment, mainly among young people in greater difficulty, setting up for them some new work as a sign that we are moving towards young people who are farthest away<sup>30</sup>.

To the clarification of the concepts of prevention and preventiveness, to the greater knowledge of youthful deprivation,

<sup>25</sup> GC22 72

<sup>26</sup> SGC 39-44. 181. 515. 619

<sup>27</sup> cf. GC21 158-159

<sup>28</sup> cf. GC22 6

<sup>29</sup> ib. 6

<sup>30</sup> cf. GC23 230

to the insistent prompting of General Chapters, must be added a further fact. In the provinces we are witnessing a certain movement towards the very poor. Everywhere a creative response is being given to a possible plan for relocation. According to the context such plans are aiming at reaching youngsters who live on the streets, at setting up a presence in urban areas of generalized privation, at solving the problems of school drop-outs by alternative educational processes, at helping young prisoners, at working among young drug-addicts with forms of prevention, reception and follow-up during a recovery process.

The overall number of these initiatives remains consistently high, and they have in fact increased in number over the past six years.

Some of them provide a new model from a pedagogical and salesian standpoint, professionally sustained as they are and resolutely continued. In this way we too have been able to make, through our modest initiatives, our contribution of pedagogical and social reflection based on the preventive system, with regard to certain forms of delinquency.

The influence should not be underestimated that these initiatives exert on other sectors of education in the province and on the greater knowledge of youth deprivation, and consequently the incidence they have on the social context and public opinion.

The GC24 noted their capacity for bringing in and involving lay people. "Reflection in common, a shared project and relationship with the laity are positive experiences, especially in the so-called new presences, as a prompt response to the problems raised by youth unease, emargination, etc. It is in such settings as these that are being developed the best forms of lay participation and volunteer work"<sup>31</sup>.

It should be added that to the various forms of emargina-

<sup>31</sup> GC24 20

tion and hardship partial responses are given also in our other educational foundations. One has only to visit some of our oratories and centres for professional training to be convinced of this. In them not only is an effective first prevention possible, but young and older boys who are already at risk of going astray find welcome, interlocutors and suggestions.

With the polemics, which at one time opposed the different kinds of work to each other, brought to nothing almost everywhere, and with the excessive individualism overcome which led to some of these works being considered the private concern of individual confreres who were responsible for their foundation, there is now evident everywhere a more decisive assumption of them on the part of the provinces, and hence a greater integration of initiatives and of confreres working together in the provincial project.

## LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

### A Christian reading of the present reality

Seeing the crowd, the disciples came to Jesus and said to him: *"This is a lonely place and the hour is now late; send them away to go into the country and villages round about and buy themselves something to eat"*. It was an observation born of the common sense of ordinary people, and at the same time a way of not having to take on the problem themselves.

Jesus replies: *"You give them something to eat"*<sup>32</sup>. With that he is saying that the problem is their concern too; and the disciples are surprised at what he tells them to do. They think over what he says, but immediately conclude that they cannot do it. The crowd is too big and they have no resources. This is often our own feeling and our own conclusion.

<sup>32</sup> Mk 6,37



They do not understand what Jesus has in mind. They think of the many in need and their own lack of means. Jesus on the other hand counts on the little they do have available. For him the solution does not depend on the initial quantity of food.

The extension of poverty in fact has deep roots. Some of them are certainly personal. They belong to the one who suffers distress and emargination and to those who are more closely linked with his life and growth.

Even in well-to-do contexts favourable conditions for development are set at nought when personal dispositions are lacking. On the other hand, if personal resources are strengthened these manage to make an opening in even strongly conditioned environments, and to bring about in them significant transformations in the order of relationships, sociality and sharing. To count on persons and their motivations is therefore an indication which is always valid.

But it is true that personal development can be fostered or made difficult, even to the point of bordering on the practically impossible, by cultural causes, i.e. those linked with the predominant mentality of the environment, and which determine behaviour, judgements, and manner of life and relationships.

In recent times therefore there has been insistence on the urgency of working for a culture which recognizes the dignity of every individual, strengthens solidarity in all its forms and settings, ensures the right and benefit of education for all, does not give way to prejudice or to summary easy evaluations, and does not fall into the trap of selfishness or consumerism. Only in this way can the social texture be repaired and made more human.

The same insistence is found throughout the ethical and social teaching of the Church. For us this is very stimulating, because it links the commitment to human advancement, which we fulfil through education and evangelization, to a wider scenario where there are other possible initiatives. This coincides

with what we have inherited from Don Bosco and is suggested to us by the Constitutions, when they refer to our presence among the working classes and our activity in social communication.

But to the radical causes in individuals and in the common mentality must be added structural causes, which should perhaps be placed first because of their weight.

They act simultaneously on many persons in extensive environments and with powerful mechanisms. They have therefore an unparalleled capacity for imposing situations, modes of thought and styles of life, regenerating or prolonging the emargination that goes with them. Phenomena like those of hunger, deprivation, prolonged conflicts, exploitation of labour, devastation of natural resources, are sufficient to give some idea of this.

Reflection should serve not so much to lead us to the usual denunciations, but to the correct formulation (even in small matters) of educative and evangelizing activity. We cannot educate, in fact, unless we are aware of the world in which we live.

For some years now it has been frequently said that we are facing a phenomenon of impoverishment rather than one of simple poverty. It is not a transitory phase, one that will pass, a consequence of the past; but the result of present economic, social and political structures, though there are other causes too which influence the extension of poverty<sup>33</sup>.

The scenario is also worn down through the prevalence of a single universal economic model. The logic it imposes is that the production of goods is dictated by profit, and is not regulated by the need for a just social development which includes everyone.

Among its most serious effects is the slowing down and even the decomposition of social solidarity, and the reduction of the individual to nothing more than a being who can possess, produce and acquire.

<sup>33</sup> Puebla, n.30

The human model is centred in fact more on having than on being. This is why consumerism makes such strides: work to have, have to acquire, acquire to consume.

### **Deepening inspirations**

The web or network described above shows that any solution is precarious and insufficient if it is not based on the human heart: on our own hearts as disciples called to make our own the compassion and logic of Christ; on the hearts of the young to whom we want to draw close; on the hearts of those who relate to Christ as his followers and admirers; on the hearts of those who have materials, intelligence or competence; on the hearts of those who must give social and political guidance.

This is what Christ's gesture suggests. The quantity will come and will be more than sufficient to meet the need if there are those willing to put their loaves and fishes at the Lord's disposal.

The same message reaches us from the elements of our own charism.

Our charisma was born at Becchi with the vocation of Don Bosco. The house of his infancy reflects the icon of the multiplication when on it is superimposed the map of the salesian works now distributed all over the world. There, in surroundings of real though dignified poverty, Don Bosco gave to God all he had to give: his life.

He experienced financial hardship for the realization of his studies and his dreams. He worked for an employer. At the same time he felt the solidarity of the human and Christian community and especially the support of the priests. With their encouragement and modest financial help they brought to Jesus the boy of the loaves and fishes which have now become a huge number.

Our work is the result of grace and geniality, but also of humble and almost anonymous solidarity.

The spiritual home of the mission is the oratory, begun without any fixed base, lodged at first in a shed and subsequently developed into what is now Valdocco. Of it Don Bosco wrote: "As a rule the Oratory boys included stone-cutters, bricklayers, plasterers, road pavers and others who came from distant villages. They were not churchgoers and had few friends, so they were exposed to the dangers of perversion, especially on feast days"<sup>34</sup>. His words are a constant reminder of our origins and of our Father's preference when we think about the present state of youth deprivation.

From our contact with poor youngsters was born our pedagogy, with its characteristic content and methods, with the figure of an educator who goes beyond his institutional role and is for his boys both a friend and father. Fr Caviglia calls it a "pedagogy for poor youngsters".

The situation of poor youngsters prompted initiatives and programs which permeate our history: the oratory, trade schools, family hostels. Don Bosco repeats this when presenting the story of the Congregation in the *Memoirs of the Oratory* and in his spiritual Testament. It seems the natural place from which to start a renewal.

The source of our inspiration is always the pastoral charity diffused by the Spirit in baptism and in the call to the salesian life: but the seeking out, contact with and the sharing of the life of the poor youngsters are the "providential circumstances", the indispensable mediation in the beginning and practical development of our mission; it is the experience of freely given love which is accepted and given back in return, of a salvation lived out in daily life, of a return to life itself.

In his contact with poor boys, Don Bosco discovered interior riches, an innate potency and dignity both felt and desired. Each boy bore in his person the signs of God's love in his desire for life, in his intelligence and heart. The poverty which pre-

<sup>34</sup> "Memorie" p.197

vented them from developing as individuals and children of God was an appeal and a challenge to restore to them the awareness of their personal worth and bring out the gifts with which God had enriched them.

Don Bosco therefore conceived his priestly service as a work of education to make hidden resources flourish, to bring out traits which seemed to have been negated, so as to bring the youngsters to a satisfactory level of human and Christian life, and even to holiness. He showed them God's face in Jesus, a God who cares for the flowers of the field and the birds of the air, whose will it is that not even one of the most lowly be lost, who does not wait for the lost sheep to return but goes in search of it; who experiences deep compassion in the face of every painful human situation and reawakens hope.

For Don Bosco this constituted an authentic experience of God, discovered with admiration and recounted with joy in his paternal providence; it is the experience of Jesus when he noted with surprise that the Father had concealed the wonders of the Kingdom from the wise and prudent and had revealed them to children<sup>35</sup> — something which helps us to understand and assert the value of every child, no matter what his appearance, because "their angels are in the presence of the Father".

Poor youngsters therefore were, and still are, a gift for the Salesians. Returning to them will enable us to recover the central element of our spirituality and our pedagogical practice: the friendly rapport which creates correspondence and the desire for growth.

Today we must go again beyond the established structures, beyond the normal things we give; we must go out, make a mental and pedagogical exodus towards relationships and shared presence.

This is the fundamental attitude through which the preventive system realizes in educational terms the following of

<sup>35</sup> Lk 10,21

Christ, who set up his dwelling among us, who came to seek what was lost, who mixed with publicans and sat at table with sinners, who drew near to the poor and the sick and made of these gestures the sign of his mission of salvation.

The Kingdom of God is manifested, grows and reaches realization among the poor, because it consists entirely in a gratuitous relationship which Jesus establishes and renews with those who think they are without merit in the eyes of society or the eyes of God.

Sometimes we are too concerned about what we can give, or what we lack which stops us doing something, even to the extent of becoming unable to discover the riches which are present in the young and which could be rendered fruitful, and with which we ourselves can become enriched. The preventive system compels us to empty ourselves and accept the gifts the Lord offers us, especially through those most in need and apparently less worthy.

### **Poverty of the salesian educator**

What we have said so far leads us to reflect on the *poverty* of the salesian educator. Before being concerned with norms regulating the use of money and material things, this refers to the good things in which we place our hope and happiness. Blessed are the poor!

It is a gift of the Spirit which makes us capable of communion. It consists in a deep need for God and our fellow men. It stems from the experience of the love of God and of our response to him in our openness to others. In its light material goods are seen to be functional and secondary. If a person has found in love the sense of life, he has no need to attach himself to things to be happy, even though he may make free use of them.

The God of Jesus, himself sufficient for happiness, makes himself poor so as to enrich us. He is a God who chooses those

who are aware of their own insufficiency and fills them with good things, because it is of his very essence to freely give. He is the first to desire, and much more strongly than we do, that the poor have life, and he comes to meet us in needy youngsters to offer us the gift of his presence and a share in his love.

In the awareness that all we are is a gift and that others, even though they be poor, are able to enrich us, we look on them and draw near to them with gratitude and expectation; we foster their self-expression, we provide opportunities for their participation, even though it be limited and imperfect; we do not consider ourselves free of human distress, but collaborate with a sense of humility in the growth of their life; we rejoice at the energies they are developing and the goals they are reaching, especially in the case of the lowly and the outcasts. We know that what we receive from them and from God is much more than we ourselves are able to give.

This vision characterizes our *prayer*, which in this way becomes simple, trusting and creative<sup>36</sup>; centered in thanksgiving for what God has freely given us, and for the life of the young; a prayer which disposes us to share with them in giving and receiving<sup>37</sup>; which expresses and develops in us the need for God without whom we can do nothing<sup>38</sup>, and leads us to the discovery of the Kingdom which grows among those who welcome God, whether they have an abundance of material goods or not.

Convinced that what we do for them we do for Christ, we commit ourselves to work in *professional* fashion, freely drawing on whatever is made available to us by science and technology. We undertake a continual formation to provide an adequate response to new situations of poverty; we courageously set up new forms of group activity, and look for resources for the service of the poor and try to manage their organization more effectively.

<sup>36</sup> C 86

<sup>37</sup> C 95

<sup>38</sup> C 12

At the same time we maintain a *style of life* which is *simple* and even austere, without giving way to the desire for unlimited possessions or convenience. This was the advice Don Bosco gave his first missionaries: "Let the world know that you are poor in clothing, food and abode, and you will be rich in the sight of God and will win the hearts of men". Even in our activity we put our trust in the poor means of friendship and rapport, rather than defend ourselves behind organization.

This spirituality will help us to live another characteristic attitude of our Father: *trust in Providence*. Don Bosco's poverty was serene and undisturbed, attentive to the Kingdom of God and his justice, but it was also industrious at the service of the young. He was able to begin with little, motivate collaboration, and direct the use of money to educative ends. He asked, and he awaited God's response, but he did not get entangled in the seeking of financial means.

In a culture characterized by excessive concern for one's own security, especially material, we have to be signs of evangelical freedom, concerning ourselves first and foremost with persons and the Gospel, in the certainty that God will help us to find the resources we need. This is how all our works began, and the great enterprises of the Congregation started in the same way.

### **Opting for the young who are poor**

The new forms of poverty must find the Salesians sensitive, able to appreciate the negative effect they have on young people, and be ready to intervene as was Don Bosco with the poverty of his own time.

A positive response is already a reality in many places, but for all of us Christ's question repeats the "charismatic challenge" in a direct and simple manner. How many loaves and fishes can you and will you make available?



The GC23 recognized that our works directly addressed to young people in difficulties have a strongly multiplying effect: they are points of reference for the promotion of solidarity, they win general approval and bring about collaboration of many kinds; they create a solid mentality among people, and gain the support of society<sup>39</sup>.

How can we further extend this solidarity?

Let us begin with the *confreres* and the *communities*. Facts must be more widely known, sensitivity must be sharpened and refined, trust and courage must be inculcated, and the charismatic originality reawakened.

It is no small matter if in a province or local community all the members succeed in grasping the implication, the depth and modern manifestations of youth deprivations in their particular context as a risk threatening all youngsters and adolescents, and exploding at times among groups which are weaker and more exposed.

Neither is it a small matter if they are able to overcome the tendency to put all the blame on the young, denouncing juvenile delinquency, and renew their confidence in the resources of young people and in their desire to renew themselves. Loving kindness, reason and religion can still triumph when we succeed in making ourselves efficacious mediators.

In this way the Salesian can relive the style of Don Bosco, destroying barriers of diffidence, helping to overcome prejudice and providing opportunities for fruitful contacts. This will enable us to insert ourselves spiritually and physically in the real world of the young.

I will not delay to spell out what such insertion calls for and the transformations it brings about: daily contact with these youngsters and their situations of hardship will produce in the communities new stimuli for a faith lived out as a saving reality which can transform history. It will move them to live

<sup>39</sup> cf. GC23 290

their educative service with greater simplicity and creativity.

Without this spiritual and physical movement towards poverty, it becomes difficult to provide a coherent response to the challenge of youthful emargination. Knowledge and close contact lead to the sharing of what we have by grace, of what the young are suffering, of what they want to attain, of the path they hope to follow. What this implies in personal denial and the assuming of the sentiments of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, can be described only by those who have experienced it.

Then there is another step that must be taken, one that is both complementary and demanding: the elaboration of a *provincial project* for juvenile emargination which involves the communities. The reality of youthful deprivation and the risk of emargination must be taken into consideration in all our foundations. They should lead to the specifying of contents and educative methods for a more careful and updated prevention; for the animation of the locality in view of shared responsibility on the part of institutions and families; for the quality of relationships and life.

They could lead also to giving priority in the various foundations to the *acceptance of a greater number of boys and young persons who are at risk*, who can be kept away from delinquency by suitable programs and an educative and supportive environment.

They will in any case keep the educators more alert to initial latent symptoms of distress and the first manifestations of yielding to emargination.

In addition to this general attention, there is need to create *some initiatives and set some groups apart* for working directly in the environment of emargination among those already affected by it.

Once any opposition or sense of the unusual has been overcome, work of this kind will help all the communities in the knowledge and treatment of distress and keep alive the style of the preventive system.

## Our concern: to educate

Poverty and emargination are not a phenomenon which is purely economic in nature, but a reality which touches individual consciences and challenges the mentality of society. Education is therefore a fundamental element for their prevention and suppression, and is also a more specific and original contribution which we, as Salesians, can provide.

To educate means to welcome, to converse and to understand. It means helping the individual to find himself again; to accompany him patiently in a process of recovery of values and self-confidence. It means rebuilding reasons for living.

Systematic teaching is an important way for preventing and overcoming poverty and distress, but only if it leads to contact with the individual as a whole; institutional anonymity or simple knowledge of a pupil's name will not realize the ends of education.

Education at the present day demands of us a new capacity for dialogue, but also for putting forward suggestions. You have to get down to the individual and to what is really bothering him or challenging his life; you have to get him involved in experiences which help him to get the sense of daily effort, get him concentrating on something rich in interest and linked with what is fundamental and which, while providing him with the means of earning his livelihood, makes him capable of acting as a responsible subject in all circumstances.

In education certain points of greater urgency stand out. The GC23 indicated the group: life - love - conscience - solidarity, as a challenge to our work, even of evangelization<sup>40</sup>.

The Chapter considered these as one of the aspects to be given attention in all our educative programs and indicated their main objectives: through relationships, convictions and experiences, to get well rooted the *value of the individual* and his inviolability, above any material goods and every organizational

<sup>40</sup> cf. nn. 182-214

structure, so as to enable him to make autonomous options in the face of the powerful manipulation mechanisms and to correctly assess inhuman situations; to guide young people to an *adequate knowledge of the complex cultural, social and political reality*, beginning with the daily and local situation, so as to reach eventually social and economic institutions and models which have a determining influence on the common good; to *involve* young people from both poor and well-to-do backgrounds in initiatives which call for solidarity, so that they can learn to take on the sufferings of others and collaborate in overcoming them.

The program set out constitutes an efficacious means of prevention against dependence and negative influences; it offers indications for a process of recovery and at the same time requires the involvement of those youngsters who have managed to stay free from or have overcome the risks of the different kinds of poverty. It is up to us to translate all this into daily practices.

### **Promoting a new culture**

These forms of poverty are born and spread in a world which is intercommunicating and interdependent. The assessments made of them, the hopes that may be awakened of overcoming them, the practical ways of becoming involved, are linked with the ways of thinking and reacting of individuals, of groups and of society as a whole.

This is seen whenever there is discussion on the use of goods, on the rapport between individuals and between peoples, on the harmonization of different standpoints, on the way to deal with deviations and transgressions.

Efforts against emargination are the more efficacious the more they penetrate or transform the sum total of perceptions and feelings which mould the thought and conduct of a society or among the members of active groups. A commitment of help and assistance to individuals is therefore insufficient,

even though it may be important.

What is wanted is a work of *social animation*, which will give rise to changes of vision and criteria through gestures and actions. Such steps and operations create new forms of relationships and models of conduct which embody values far different from those which control many of our habits, like selfish possession, the satisfying of personal interests, the condemnation of those who suffer dependence, and the abandonment of the weakest.

It is a matter of promoting a culture of one's neighbour, of sobriety of life and consumption, of availability and free sharing, of justice understood as attention to everyone's right to a dignified life and, more directly, to the involvement of persons and institutions in a work of broad prevention, and of acceptance and support for those who have need of it.

Our educative environments can be *centres for elaboration and points of radiation* for this kind of culture towards the family, groups, the local neighbourhood, local circles and institutions and, through social communication, to society in general.

There are some movements and initiatives without major support which nevertheless exert a powerful influence because they express new relationships and anticipate new criteria of solidarity: private associations for sound business dealings, family movements in which the members undertake to live with the minimum necessary and to avoid superfluous extras, and the volunteer movement.

These are just some models of life promoted by Christian circles in the context of the new social culture, which undertake to live according to the Gospel and not according to the promptings of consumerism. Other initiatives and aggregations of a similar kind can be created in the same sense.

They end up by functioning as a network and appear as interlocutors who are materially weak but morally strong in the face of political and economic organisms and institutions. More important still they succeed in multiplying aid projects and presences of sharing and solidarity.

This is a field in which we Salesians, with our international organization, multiple resources and rich spiritual patrimony, have great possibilities, and at the same time an important responsibility. We must make an effort of collective pedagogy to become involved and to offer practical means and projects to many people who are disposed, as a humble evangelical avant-garde, to adopt a solid and generous style of life.

### **Evangelizing starting from those most in need**

Salesian activity, in whatever environment it be carried out, always includes the proclamation of Christ, and solicitude for the eternal salvation of the individual. In every initiative of prevention, formation and rescue, this is always the main intention and objective, even though it may be necessary to spell it out gradually as the subjects become able to receive it. We want them to be aware of God the Father, that they know Jesus Christ; and we believe too that by faith in him they will find unsuspected energy for the building of personality and all-round development.

The GC23, in presenting the characteristics of the journey of faith which we Salesians make with young people, says that we must give priority to the most lowly and begin from them as a condition for reaching all the others. "The option for the poor and lowly is something that determines not only the beginning of the journey but also every further stage until the conclusion is reached", because a person who has already travelled part of the way can always be "invited to support by his witness those just starting"<sup>41</sup>.

This is once again an authoritative indication of where we should take our place: among the lowliest, as judged by human criteria.

<sup>41</sup> cf. ib 105

The proclamation of salvation to the poor is the sign par excellence of the Kingdom, and in consequence is the most profound dimension of our educative mission. Personal knowledge of and relationship with Jesus Christ is not a privilege for those of the young who are more committed or protected, but a gift offered to all from the outset. If Christ wants to give himself to the poor and needy, and this he has made clear during his earthly existence, we must not delay the discovery of his gift.

Evangelization certainly begins with a *contact*, the ability to assume the suffering and hope of the young person, to support him in his desire to begin again, to draw closer to the signs of God and the Church. Salvation is proclaimed and realized when a situation is created in which the youngster is set free from whatever was conditioning negatively the best part of his life; when in contact with other people who show him a disinterested love he discovers life's value and possibilities.

*Daily contact with adults* capable of creating a family atmosphere, a friendly relationship which portrays interest for the young and leaves space for their responsibility, kindness and firmness, demand and understanding, become a testimony which can produce wonders and bring to light the best of what lies hidden below the surface. In this way questions arise which provide an opportunity for explanations tailored to the understanding of the individual youngster.

The first glimmer of light on the journey of faith *must be fostered and developed* with patience and perseverance, concentrating always on what is positive in the youngster and on the interior strength of conscience, profiting by the experience of the group and the environment, sure of the energy for revival that comes from prayer and the sacraments. In this connection it would be well to read and put into practice what Don Bosco felt about the value of faith and conscience in the process of salvaging the young.

In the Church there is frequent reference to the new evangelization, and it is emphasized that the "newness" lies in the witness of charity, in the proclamation of Christ in the heart of

present-day life and culture, and in the movement to those who remain at a distance.

Our own contribution can consist precisely in trying to set up processes of evangelization in youthful situations of particular difficulty.

## Conclusion

Jesus asked them: “How many loaves have you? Go and see’. When they had found out, they told him ‘Five and two fishes’. Then he told them all to sit down in companies on the grass; and they took their places in rows, by hundreds and fifties. And he took the five loaves and the two fishes, and looked up to heaven; and he blessed and broke the loaves and gave them to his disciples to set before them, dividing the fishes too among them all. All of them ate and had enough, and when they took up the broken pieces and what was left of the fishes, they filled twelve baskets with them”<sup>42</sup>.

The presence of the Lord becomes a miracle of solidarity so that the people can have bread in abundance. He prompts his disciples to seek out the resources that are available. He creates a true fellowship which leads to participation and then to communion. In this way a dynamism which began with a feeling of compassion becomes transformed into actions which fill with life those in need with the Word which enlightens and the Bread which sustains. What was very little turns out to be sufficient for all, and there is even some to spare.

Here lies our task and our hope: positing signs which will multiply. For this reason, in our programming for the present six-year period we have placed effectiveness at the centre of our attention<sup>43</sup>. It emerges from the places, the spirit and style in

<sup>42</sup> Mk 6, 38. 43

<sup>43</sup> cf. AGC 358, pp.52-53



which we realize our mission and provide our witness. And so we have taken as our main criterion of reference relocation and the redistribution of resources.

The elements which give rise to effectiveness are: the unconditioned manifestation of evangelical charity, the ability to "save" those whom men abandon to their fate, the desire to give life and hope, efficacy in the proposal of faith, the gregarious strength which leads persons of good will to unite so as to do good, the ability to bring mentalities and rapport to maturity in the light of the Kingdom.

Many initiatives are 'good', but not all of them speak with the same eloquence, realism and truth. Many works can be useful in various ways, but not all of them express the Gospel, the love of God sown in the hearts of believers, with the same immediacy and depth. Many interventions appear as acceptable and functional in the society in which we live; some of them are strongly 'evangelizing' in nature, and prophetic. One of these is our presence among youngsters most in need. We know how much individual provinces are doing in this regard, and how much they would like to do if they had available the necessary personnel.

May the contemplation and reminder of the multiplication of the loaves serve as an inspiration and criterion for a decisive movement towards poor youngsters, even when resources are in short supply.

And may Mary, who at the Annunciation placed herself entirely at the Lord's disposal, help us too to be ready for the work of salvation which stems from the merciful heart of God.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Juan Trecchi". The signature is written in a cursive style, with a large, sweeping initial "J" that extends downwards and to the left, forming a triangular shape.