

# acts

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

---

OFFICIAL ORGAN OF ANIMATION AND COMMUNICATION FOR THE SALESIAN CONGREGATION

---

**YEAR LXXIX      N. 364**  
**july-september 1998**

1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR	1.1 Fr Juan E. VECCHI <b>CHURCH AND FAMILY EVENTS</b>	<b>3</b>
2. GUIDELINES AND POLICIES	2.1 Fr Antonio DOMENECH <b>Renewed pastoral work for vocations</b>	<b>41</b>
3. RULINGS AND DIRECTIVES	(None in this issue)	
4. ACTIVITIES OF THE GENERAL COUNCIL	4.1 Chronicle of the Rector Major	<b>56</b>
	4.2 Chronicle of the General Councillors	<b>66</b>
5. DOCUMENTS AND NEWS ITEMS	5.1 Intervention of Rector Major at Synod for Asia	<b>89</b>
	5.2 USG statement on relief of external debt	<b>91</b>
	5.3 Canonical erection of the Vice-province of Ethiopia and Eritrea	<b>92</b>
	5.4 Canonical erection of the Vice-province of Indonesia and Timor	<b>94</b>
	5.5 Appointment of Confederal President of Don Bosco Past-pupils	<b>95</b>
	5.6 Our dead confreres (1998 - 2nd list)	<b>97</b>

Editrice S.D.B.

Edizione extra commerciale

Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco

Via della Pisana, 1111

Casella Postale 18333

00163 Roma

---

Tipografia: Istituto Salesiano Pio XI - Via Umbertide, 11 - 00181 Roma - Tel. 78.27.819

*Finito di stampare: Luglio 1998*

## CHURCH AND FAMILY EVENTS

1. **The Synods** - American solidarity - Asia calls for the Gospel - Life and proclamation - A look towards the young - Concern for education - 2. **Celebrating in order to grow** - Some memories - The gift of brotherly union - Don Bosco: a fascinating Saint - Relevance of the message of education - A strategic point: formation - Conclusion.

Rome, 29 June 1998  
*SS. Peter and Paul*

My dear confreres,

In meetings I have had recently with provincials and confreres it was suggested to me that occasionally I should interrupt the series of letters of a doctrinal character and pass on to you, almost in the style of a Good Night, some impressions and news of the Congregation and of the life of the Church seen from my own point of view.

This time I am trying this and do so very willingly. The Provinces, meanwhile, are deeply involved in the most complete and systematic application possible of the GC24. This requires not only organizational expertise, but also a deepening of salesian spirituality, reflection on our educative legacy, and the strengthening of our ability for animation as Salesians with an adequate store of ideas and skills. They have therefore abundant material to keep them occupied.

There are many events I could speak of and situations on which to comment. I will choose just two of them: the first because of its ecclesial importance, and the other for its salesian significance.

## 1. The Synods.

I have had the good fortune to take part in two synodal assemblies: that for America and the one for Asia. At the first, nine salesian bishops were present; at the second we had four bishops, with a further three confreres and an FMA invited as experts. The two Synods were part of a series of six similar assemblies. They were preceded by the one for Africa (10 April – 8 May 1994) which gave rise to the Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, already published. They will be followed by those for Oceania and for Europe, due to take place respectively in November of this year and in the spring of 1999. A final assembly of the universal Church will serve as an occasion of convergence and unification, of deeper study and synthesis.

Even though they are directly concerned with individual continents, the Synods carry out a reflection and propose lines of thought which are useful for the universal Church and for personal Christian life in any context. They view the present panorama from every angle, because people, cultures and social situations are interdependent.

Seen together in this way they appear as the point of convergence of four requirements which are emerging in this period of approach to the third millennium: the commitment of the whole Church for a new evangelization; the urgent need to develop a broader and practical spiritual communion in the Church, which is the subject of this evangelization; careful attention to the culture or cultures of which the Gospel must become the leaven and critical yardstick; and the intention to enter into dialogue with society in process of rebuilding and in which the Gospel must find an echo, challenging consciences and structures.

The stages of the process which lead to the conclusions of these assemblies are well known: the selection of a theme, the distribution of the *Lineamenta* for reflection and contributions from the Churches concerned, and the preparation of the *Instrumentum laboris* which collects together the contributions,



and forms the basis for discussion.

When the assembly begins, after the opening conference which summarizes the work of preparation, there is the listening phase in which each member can speak to emphasize, develop or introduce a theme he considers important. Then follows the *Report after the discussion* which highlights the key points of the debate. The *circuli minores* make a first study of these which they present to the assembly, after which the work returns to the groups themselves for the elaboration of the *Propositiones*, placed in order and unified by a commission under the responsibility of the Secretary General. Corrections and integrations follow, and then comes the final voting which is by name and with the voting sheet signed by the voter. This is the process already used in various assemblies with fixed timetables and procedures, which permit free expression but call for careful preparation of the contributions.

From the statement of the theme for each Synod, from the proposals made in the *Lineamenta*, from their development in the *Instrumentum laboris*, from their deeper analysis in the discussion, from the collection of the key points emerging in the *Propositiones*, one point stands out very clearly: the need of Christ for the salvation of man, the man of today, and the wager of the Church (we can say the faith!) on the power of enlightenment, liberation and renewal inherent in his mystery. At a time of the declining of ideologies and the devaluation of every "theory" concerning the human person, the event of Jesus and his Gospel, the experience of human life and of God that with Him and in Him can be made, reappear as a source of wisdom and reason for hope. His declaration is resounding again: "I am the way, the truth and the life".<sup>1</sup>

The Church therefore reaffirms her determination to live in herself the mystery and presence of Christ with greater intensity. Frequent and of primary importance is the call to conver-

<sup>1</sup> Jn 14,6

sion, to authenticity, to witness on the part of individual Christians and communities, in line with the conditions in which life is now expressed and with the challenges presented by mentalities and environment.

Evangelization has become understood as the communication of a way of life. Of great interest therefore is what is said about ways for setting out what we live with greater energy and dynamism, along new lines and in more efficacious ways.

All this is expressed very clearly in the formulation of the themes: "The Church in Africa and her evangelizing mission towards the year 2000 - "You shall be my witnesses"" (Acts 1:8);<sup>2</sup> "Meeting with the living Christ, the way to conversion, communion and solidarity in America";<sup>3</sup> "Jesus Christ the Saviour and his mission of love and service in Asia: "That they may have life, and have it abundantly""; <sup>4</sup> "Jesus Christ: walking his way, telling his truth, living his life: an appeal for the peoples of Oceania";<sup>5</sup> "Jesus Christ alive in his Church, the source of hope for Europe".<sup>6</sup>

The modern or postmodern age, call it what you like, presents a challenge to believers: it is the question of Jesus himself: "But who do you say that I am?"<sup>7</sup>

The Church is not unaware of the human situation in which this question, with its consequent response, must re-echo and be understood. The world seems united by the elimination of physical distances, by universal practices and customs and by social communication. In the field of economics there has been a "globalization" which makes it appear to be the one and only place of exchange, interdependent in its parts, and obeying the same laws. On the other hand it is deeply divided by ethnic

<sup>2</sup> Synod for Africa

<sup>3</sup> Synod for America

<sup>4</sup> Synod for Asia

<sup>5</sup> Synod for Oceania

<sup>6</sup> Synod for Europe

<sup>7</sup> Mt 16,15

and national rivalries, by financial interests and unexplainable inequalities and, as regards norms and values by individualism. For the future the prospect seems to be either a peaceful coexistence of persons and peoples in solidarity, or the indiscriminate domination by the few with the impoverishment and exclusion of the many.

In the religious field there is a vague search for religious experience, a sign of dissatisfaction with purely temporal horizons; there is a numerical growth of Christianity in vast areas, a more precise identification of believers in others, a fundamentalism which attempts to establish supremacy through repression and violence, and the diffusion of widely varying ideas all with some semblance of spirituality.

The Church is aware that it is not alone in its responsibility for the Kingdom, but that it is its sign and instrument. It accepts therefore as part of the normal daily features of its activity financial openness, interreligious dialogue, and solidarity with humanity in its pilgrimage.

The field is wide open, as also is the commitment. The participation of all is needed. And so lay people, priests and consecrated persons are urged to renew their spiritual life, aiming at a holiness that can say something to men of the present day; to live the Christian vocation with joy; to return always to Christ as the source of strength and meaning; to be updated in the reading of reality so as to proclaim the Gospel in an effective way.

Reference to the figures of the officially recognized saints and martyrs, and of those on the way to such recognition, has been frequent, deeply felt and inspiring. The holiness of the disciples of Christ, in fact, is put forward by the Synodal assemblies as the primary method of evangelization.

### **American solidarity.**

The new element which gave universal significance to the Synod for America was the consideration of the continent as a

single unit. The assemblies of Medellín, Puebla and Santo Domingo were of and for Latin America. They were confined to the particular features of that area, and took up their perspectives. The United States and Canada were considered as belonging to a different world: it was the classical North-South division, developed countries and those in process of development, rich and poor, secularized environments and those of popular religious devotion.

But this time the bishops of the two halves of the continent were brought together. The situations of the Churches were approached as forming part of a single phenomenon, and this meant that problems could be addressed in terms of interdependence and solidarity.

The Synod for America therefore moved freely between three perspectives, and considered them together: evangelization in the restricted area entrusted to each diocese, the Christian sense of life and projects in contexts of a certain magnitude such as nations or regions of the continent, and questions of continental and world level requiring collegial treatment. It was a question of grasping every present possibility of Communion and making them operative by a body of bishops formed of 1,625 members.<sup>8</sup>

America appears as a pluriethnic continent, formed of native peoples, populations coming in successive waves of emigration from Europe and Asia, and descendants of Africans who were brought over as slaves. The second group, those from Europe, is the most consistent, but the native groups are increasing in numbers and in the awareness of their own identity. There is a desire for peaceful coexistence and integration with an increasing appreciation of the different values.

It is also a "Christian" continent in respect of cultural substratum and social tradition, with the Centre and South Catholic and the North Protestant. This character is seen in

<sup>8</sup> Annual Church statistics. 1 July 1997

the regular organization of the churches, in ethical criteria, in popular religious devotion, in the tendency to adhere to new religious movements, and in the response given to the sects. Nowadays the influence of secularism is felt on mentality, on individualism in the organization of life, and on subjectivism in the expression of faith. But powerful currents of Christian life are seen to be developing; many aspects of culture are awaiting the gospel message; there is freedom for the proclamation and activity of the Church.

The social and economic situation tends towards a progressive impoverishment: the number of the poor is increasing, as also is the distance between an ever more reduced minority with resources and an ever growing majority of people who lack what is necessary for their own development. This phenomenon is observable also in the North. It is blamed on the present system of managing the world's resources, the method of governing national societies, and of conceiving international order.

It is a continent which is showing a new sense of solidarity: in the recognition and peaceful coming together of the different ethnic components, and in regional organization through such organisms as *Nafta*, *Mercosur*, and the *Andean Treaty*.

A term that recurred frequently during the discussion was *globalization*, i.e. the world-wide nature of problems, and interdependence between peoples and their areas of activity. From the significance and economic consequences of the word, not always just and desirable, there has been a change to a definition more human and all-embracing, providing hope for a more practical organization and more lively practice of episcopal collegiality and of communion between Churches.

Some areas were indicated in which ecclesial communion can be expressed more concretely and with a greater possibility for involvement.

One of these is that of economic relationships between peoples, particularly with regard to **foreign debt**, which has been

a burden for years on countries of low and medium development and prevents them from improving their quality of life or of increasing indispensable wellbeing. The proposals were very modest and discreet.

It was asked that the Holy See should continue to insist, by means of an authoritative document, on justice in international economic relationships, which have no sufficiently based ethical code of practice at present.

The hope was expressed that the Bishops Conference of America would promote a meeting of experts at high level to seek a technical solution to the problem which would satisfy the fundamental interests of all parties. Its objective would be the cancellation of the debt, or a substantial reduction even to the elimination of interest once the capital had been brought down, with the obligation of using the part of the debt condoned for the benefit of the poorest sector of the country benefiting by the arrangement.

Another area for collaboration is that of care for **emigrants**. There is a great movement from the South towards the North. The Hispanics constitute the latest wave of emigrants which have given greater consistency to the Catholic component of the United States. They carry with them some characteristics of their faith and ecclesial life, but on the other hand both men and women are exposed to various forms of exploitation because the illegal status of many of them leaves them a prey to every kind of blackmail.

The phenomenon caught the Churches by surprise; formerly they did not have any clear policy in this regard and had not been able to give the immigrants sufficient assistance, much less accompany them from a human point of view at the time of their arrival and insertion.

The intention was endorsed to achieve a greater mobility of priests and religious in both directions, to bring about greater understanding and better pastoral care. For us it is interesting

to note that this coincides with a certain project of collaboration which had its first expression in the creation of an "interamerican" region, and is now being manifested in new initiatives.

Collaboration was called for in facing the spreading of the **sects**. The evaluation of these in the early part of the assembly was rather severe. They were considered aggressive and bent on denigrating Catholicism. They use proselytising methods which profit by the financial and psychological weakness of the people and create dependence. They rely on powerful financial and technical resources which allow them to acquire property and rapidly construct places for meetings and religious practice. But after mentioning these aspects, which seem realistic in view of a possible dialogue or collaboration with them for the benefit of mankind, the discussion turned to the reasons for their ability to attract and to the limitations of our own proclamation and faith proposal, and of our celebrations. Finally a more respectful view was reached of the sects, recognizing the fact that despite the far from indifferent criticisms expressed they do constitute "religious expressions", and that for many they represent an appeal to feelings and encourages a change of conduct.

And then there is the phenomenon of **drug-trafficking**. Its organization has reached highly sophisticated levels. It is master-minded not by those who cultivate, transport or sell narcotics, but by those who have the necessary capital and have available also other sources of income. They are able to launder money through non-suspect investments and even institutions. This totally disrupts the social life of some countries, making it completely arbitrary. It is a phenomenon which comes home to us in our commitment to prevention, assistance and rescue. It is no bad thing therefore to be aware of the dimensions of the problem, to be forewarned about its ramifications, and knowledgeable about its implications.

Finally there is **financial cooperation** among the Churches. Some have more than adequate resources and others are extremely poor. There is not at present a regular interchange of goods, even though Christians always prove generous in their offerings. An improved distribution would permit the evangelization of some disadvantaged areas with better results.

For the realization of such proposals of collaboration between these different regions of the continent, forms of communication and coordination were adopted which would not add to the existing structures but rather review those already existing so as to make them more responsive to the new demands of collegiality.

In addition to this concern for the accomplishment of forms of pastoral work in line with "globalization", a discussion developed on the state of the faith in the continent, and on ways to bring about the proclamation of the Gospel to groups in situations which at present seem a long way from it.

**Evangelization** is a complex process which includes multiple activities, various modes of service to peoples in different stages of development. Such complexity is very obvious in America after 500 years of history and through the authoritative presence of the Church in widely varying sectors of life.

For this reason we heard in the course of the first two weeks 221 interventions of eight minutes each, made by members of the Synod, plus a further 33 interventions of six minutes each from the "auditors" and other invited persons. With various evaluations and suggestions they highlighted the dispositions needed in evangelizers like bishops, priests, laity and religious; they tried to clarify the role of the ecclesial community, like the parish, the family, ecclesial movements, Catholic schools, and universities; they emphasized the attention that must be given to different groups: the poor, the young, the sick, women, intellectuals, emigrants; they hoped for a renewal



and development of the different activities such as catechesis, the liturgy, education, social communication, assistance and charity, and the prophetic ministry.

Subsequently there was a greater concentration on the fundamental themes about which to organize the guidelines.

In face of the lack or reformulation of the meaning of life, and of the new religious movements, the need was seen for insisting on the **personal experience of Christ** and on ongoing formation for priests; on the setting up of pastoral work in terms of missionary ideas and conviction; on the preparation and greater involvement of the laity and hence on a reordering of the tasks of priests, who must be above all guarantors of evangelical authenticity, animators of the community, formators and spiritual guides of individuals and groups.

Because of the numerous wounds and lacerations, insistence was laid on pastoral work characterized by understanding, charity and forgiveness, able to take on the conditions of the people and accompany them on a possible path towards the realization of a life according to the Gospel.

Faced with the evolution of the mentality for the influence of a universal culture and the means of social communication, it was proposed to insist on **inculturation** in two senses: appreciating and accepting the lawful expressions of native cultures, and dedication to the evangelization of the new urban culture.

This is the context in which the Salesian Family is working with more than 9,000 between Confreres and Sisters. The Synod provides us with a panorama of the Church and society which is useful for taking our bearings at a time which is complex but full of possibilities.

We await therefore the Apostolic Exhortation, which will soon be made public by the Holy Father in the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Guadalupe, and which must be the object of careful study.

## Asia calls for the Gospel

‘Challenge’ is the word which comes frequently to mind when you think of the evangelization of Asia. And in few cases does the word have so real a meaning. Asia, it was said during the Synod, is the home of a little more than 60% of the present human race. It was the first to receive the Christian message which immediately reached some of its farthest parts.

But today Asia is still the continent in which Christianity is numerically least present: except in the Philippines and Lebanon, Christians are a tiny minority, even though they have considerable cultural and social weight. Their percentages are at their lowest of 0.21% in Cambodia, 0.19% in Bangladesh, 0.05% in Bhutan, 0.02% in Mongolia, and going down to almost zero in Saudi-Arabia. Faced with percentages like these, those of Sri Lanka (6.60%), Vietnam (7.94%) and Indonesia (2.78%) seem good.<sup>9</sup> In comparison with the total population, relatively few persons outside the Christian communities know about Jesus Christ, even though many have heard him mentioned. The **missionary dimension** therefore of the faith and of Christian communities appears as the dominant point for reflection.

The Synod has made clear the multiple reality which exists under a single geographic name. Asia extends from Siberia to Indonesia, from Lebanon to Japan, from Arabia to China. Many and diverse are its cultures, rooted in antiquity and with a great influence on the people, even though nowadays they must come to grips with currents of thought and forms of life which pervade the world.

There is a great diversity of religions, born and developed in Asia and sometimes deeply penetrated by local customs. Their enumeration during the Synod in both interventions and texts always ended up with the addition “and others”, because of the impossibility of listing all of them and the fear of leaving one of

<sup>9</sup> International Faith Agency, 17 April 1998 – No.4091/4092 – NE 232

them out. Asia appears therefore as a continent "open to mystery, to religious sentiment, and to the idea of divinity", even though in recent times it has suffered like the rest of the world from the impact of demythologizing and practical materialism.

Asia is also multifaceted from the standpoint of political organization: together with democratic States there are also strongly repressive ideological systems, the residue of former communist regimes now running wild, military dictatorships, rigid fundamentalist governments and longstanding areas of conflict among peoples. It is multifaceted too from a social point of view: contexts of wellbeing with first-class technology, and vast areas of widespread poverty where the struggle for greater social justice is not yet felt. The map of religious freedom and human rights looks like a leopard skin.

It is multifaceted too as regards evangelization, the historical origins of which go back in some cases to the Apostles, and in others to the patristic epoch, to mediaeval Europe, to the modern era, to the last century, and to the post-war period. Different rites have matured and today characterize the Christian presence in some areas. The vicissitudes of the Christian community through the years have followed diverse paths in their confrontation with powers, religions and societies, and their present place in the social context varies. An example of this is provided by the relationships with Islam.

Against this background the **Christian sense of identity** is striking. Their joy is evident at having received the light of the Gospel and of being reached by Christ. The desire is also felt for communicating to their neighbours what they themselves have experienced: "The heart of the Church in Asia will be restless until the whole continent finds rest in the Peace of Christ, the Risen Saviour", was one of the statements made, and the expression summarizes a feeling that was in the air throughout the discussion.

Several interventions provided first-hand testimony to Christian communities in situations of suffering, of discrimina-

tion, of precarious and heavy conditioning: China, North Korea, some Arabic countries, and the central Asian Republics where evangelization has begun again only recently.

The highpoint of this testimony was the exchange of greetings and messages with the Chinese Bishop Duan Yimin. With his Auxiliary, Bishop Xu Zhixuan (both belonging to the so-called official Church), he had been invited to the Synod by the Holy Father. They were not given permission – according to the spokesman for the Chinese Government – “because they had been chosen arbitrarily and unilaterally, and because China has no official relations and religious links with the Vatican”.

Bishop Duan Yimin expressed his adherence by fax at the risk of being accused of wanting to establish relationships with a foreign State. “In the first place”, he had written, “I want to greet the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II. It is impossible for me to take part in the Synod for political reasons. I am absent in body, but my heart is permanently present with you in the Synod of Bishops. (...) In the Synod”, he went on, “all is made public to be put into practice by all who believe in Christ. I would be glad to be informed of what takes place, and for this I thank you in advance”.

## **Life and proclamation**

The paths of evangelization will therefore not be the same for all the regions of Asia. But certain indications emerge which do seem to be of universal application.

One is the value that attaches in Asia to **life** rather than to doctrinal explanations. Often Mother Teresa is recalled as a figure able to proclaim the quintessence of the Gospel by her life.

Among the aspects of life a central position is held, because of the sensitivity of the context and with regard to other religions, by the **experience of God** made by the Christians and its concrete manifestation in attitudes and practices. Spirituality, prayer and the sense of God appear as convincing signs of a proclamation of salvation which will find a way into the Asian heart.

Pressing recommendations were heard and even precise details and clarifications were given about "Christian spirituality", with sources, significance and procedures different from, though not opposed to, "natural" spiritualities. It is Trinitarian, "following Christ and in conformity with his paschal mystery"; it is the gift and presence of the Spirit who unites and fuses in a single movement love of God and love of man, as a commitment in history for the Kingdom.

Religion, culture and life in Asia have **harmony** as the ideal objective: transcendent and temporal, divine and human, creation and the work of man, exterior life and depth of heart, religion and its practice, individual and society, tend to become integrated in an experience of personal unity, interior serenity and reconciliation with reality.

The **quality of relationship**, in the first place the human kind which generates peace but also the other which is established between different realities, is another important aspect of the manifestation of faith. For this reason the compassionate and attentive love for every being is something that pays off. Hence it suits many Asian peoples to present Christ as Master of wisdom, the spiritual Guide, the Principle of energy and healing, the Source of light and enlightenment, Merciful friend of the poor, Liberator, Good Shepherd, and Obedient to God.

In life must also be included **the public options** of Christians, their initiatives, service and expressions of social commitment. Hence reflections were made on the quality of formation of believers, on the condition and ministry of priests, on the place to be allotted to lay people and the follow-up they must be given, on the importance to be assigned to the presence of religious, and in particular to that of contemplatives. The value was recognized in the past and for the future of the different forms of service of the Church: education, development, preference for those who are poorest, and influence in the social sphere.

To the most prophetic expression of Christian life on the part of individuals and communities must be added a clear and abundant proclamation of the Gospel, appropriate to the plurireligious context.

**Christ must be proclaimed.** To know him is the right of everyone. For this reason, with due respect to the value of other religious experiences, the urgent need was seen to make clear the evangelical concept of salvation. Similarly a meditation on Christ as the one definitive Saviour, an enlightenment concerning the mediation of the Church, a theological reflection on the value and limits of religions appears necessary to add thrust and point out clearly the starting and finishing points of evangelization. This in fact implies not only listening to the proclamation, as though it were a religious explanation or a spiritual pilgrimage which man must undertake, but the personal acceptance of Christ as man's fulfilment and the mediator of our rapport with God, the conversion of mind and change of habits, and insertion in the Christian community through baptism.

Closely linked with witness and proclamation, and almost part of them, are interreligious dialogue and the effort at inculturation. We dealt with this in the letter on missionary commitment: "Look around you and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting".<sup>10</sup> The Synod's emphasis enriches our reflection.

The insistence on **interreligious dialogue** is interesting as emphasizing that it is not only a matter of verbal discussion to face up to and clarify the various terms and religious concepts, but also of the "dialogue of the heart, life and works", i.e. of peaceful coexistence and friendship, service to the individual and groups, shared responsibility in social initiatives and commitment to common values. Dialogue includes participation with those belonging to other religions, the advancement of justice and peace; joint activity for the protection of children

<sup>10</sup> AGC 362

from all forms of abuse, for the advancement of women to equality and freedom, for the extension of education to all, for the overcoming of social and religious discrimination, for the assistance of immigrants, and for the defence of human rights.

The urgent need of **inculturation** was emphasized for overcoming the image of Christianity as a "foreign religion". It was made clear that the task is one for all the people of God, guided and animated by their pastors. In it therefore the Christian formation and practice of the community have an importance no less than that of the reflections of theologians.

It is a long and unending process which has as its reference point and source of energy the incarnation of Christ, with at its centre the paschal mystery of his passion, death and resurrection. It implies the effort to introduce Christian word and practice into the heart of culture, and hence acquire the discernment to accept what is valid in cultures, express the Christian mystery through their elements, introduce into them the new ideas of the Gospel, purifying those which are incomplete and abandoning those which are opposed to man's salvation.

The Asian Synod therefore, like its predecessor for America, was more than an Assembly. It was an **experience of communion**: felt and expressed with visible signs by those who took part in it; extended in spirit and prayer to all the Churches and peoples of the continent. It took into account, therefore, the situation of those who are suffering through lack of freedom, particularly as regards religion or for other causes. It asked publicly for a change on the part of those in power who are responsible for these situations of unjust discrimination and oppression. The thought of the conditions of the Church recently or still present in China have led to the recalling of other similar periods in history, in which martyrdom has been a mark of the life of the Christian community. An object of attention and of interventions was the situation of Iraq and the consequences on the people of the imposed sanctions, with

also a general ethical judgement on the use of such political measures.

Encouraged too was a movement of missionary endeavour in "new" areas where Christian communities are taking root: Siberia, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgistan, Tad-jiskistan, and Turkmenistan.

These are ecclesial, political and cultural scenarios which help us to form an idea of the situation in which our confreres are living, and to consider in what direction we should point our future efforts, having in mind the effectiveness of our "mis-sionary" contribution.

### **A look towards the young**

During the synodal discussions some themes recurred which we have particularly at heart because they help to place us as Salesians in the movement of the new evangelization.

The first concerns youth. In both Synods it emerged that young people constitute the numerical majority in nearly all the countries of the respective continents. They represent the human riches of the future for society and the Church. They therefore deserve from the latter quite particular concern.

Young people of today are to be found in a whole variety of situations, and hence service to them must be diversified in line with the reality in which they are placed, always with the objective of offering them the possibility of a personal encounter with Christ.

In the case of America some of these situations were explored in pastoral detail. For those youngsters who are already *in sufficient contact with the Church*, catechesis needs to be rethought and organized so as to lead to a personalized faith which becomes light and guidance for private and public life. To those with the necessary dispositions, Christian commitment in its various forms should be suggested: active involvement in ecclesial communities, membership of Christian associ-



ations or movements, the missionary volunteer movement, the possibility of a vocation of total consecration.

A high proportion of the continents' young people are *a long way from the Church*. The Christian community, it was emphasized, must try to make contact with them, overcoming physical distances and also those due to interests, culture, personal and social situations. A particular effort is required to reach the young individually and in the places where they gather together through need or preference. A way of proclaiming Christ must be thought up in response to the search for happiness, meaning and fulfilment they are experiencing and their desire for other ways of life.

And then there is the multiple category of *young people who are poor*, economically or culturally: those on the margin of society, the destitute, the unemployed, those without any preparation. These are groups which need a specific service of charity, welcome reception, instruction, rescue and follow-up. The presence and solidarity of Christ's disciples is for them a sign and first proclamation of the Gospel.

*Young university students* need special care to the extent that they are a determining element for the immediate future of society. They are on the receiving end of systematic cultural communication, and are exposed to ethical challenges and to the social and economic visions of the present day. The reflection and practice of the faith, at a deep and well founded level, has for them a particular importance, as also has the social thinking of the Church.

Analogous, but differing in some respects were the perspectives of the Assembly for Asia. For the small proportion of young Christians was asked a more substantial spiritual nourishment through meaningful liturgies, enlightening homilies, learning how to pray, and reflection on problems which are of particular concern in the period of youth.

It was recommended that intellectual and cultural formation be integrated with emotive and moral development, so

that the young recognize and take up the values of their own culture with a Christian awareness and become moulded in harmony with their religious and cultural identity.

Of the young too it is expected that they will become evangelizers of their peers and active elements in society. In contact with other youngsters of different religions in educational environments and elsewhere, young Christians (if appropriately prepared) are given an opportunity of being harbingers of peace, of tolerance, and of acceptance of diversity. Finally insistence was laid on the need for youthful interchange with other Churches and countries.

For these reasons support was given to the idea of a director or person in charge of youth in the principal pastoral structures.

Special attention needs to be given to young women. The Church, by reason of its proclamation, promotes their dignity, their freedom from various forms of subjugation and exploitation, and from every form of discrimination in respect of education, and personal choice in questions which specifically regard them (marriage, work, etc.).

### **Concern for education**

The theme of youth brought with it that of education. A great deal was said about it in both assemblies and it finished also in the "Proposals" in each case.

Perhaps in some interventions the idea of education was centred too much on processes of teaching and linked with the respective institutions, rather than presented as a permanent dimension of evangelization; evangelization brings about growth in humanity, and an education which takes its inspiration from the image of man revealed in Jesus Christ is already evangelization, though it is not sufficient by itself. But this approach was accepted after the interventions. "The Church supports and encourages the whole of the educative process in so-

ciety in which the human person is formed and made capable of tending to his integral development in conformity with his destiny"; "education is an integral part of evangelization". Both statements were made during the Asian Synod.

Christian presence was encouraged and recommended in institutions for formal and systematic education, where religious have a unique tradition for quantity of initiatives and pedagogical experience. But they must strengthen and express more clearly the Catholic identity and intention to evangelize. For this reason cultural content and the tenor of communication must be revised, as also the method of confronting other aspects of life which teaching programs neglect. The processes of education possible in plurireligious educative environments need to be restudied.

Christians committed in this field need specific pastoral care to encourage and qualify them in their work and make them aware of the importance it has in culture and the ecclesial community.

Alongside the network of institutions for systematic education, every initiative was encouraged for youngsters and adults not reached by such education. In this way education appears as a broad spectrum of possibilities, open to creativity. The hard core are the institutions for teaching and systematic preparation for work, but they are not sufficient by themselves and it is hoped that there will also be other forms adequate for meeting the present requirements.

In the American Synod a lance was broken in favour of freedom of education. This was understood as the right of families to freely choose its kind and aim without being penalised from the standpoint of public recognition or new financial burdens. It was understood also as the possibility for the Church to set up educative initiatives which would enjoy juridical and financial parity. "It must be asserted", it is emphasized, "that the State has the obligation of providing education for all, and in particular for the poor, and also the task of respecting and

protecting freedom of teaching. State monopoly must be denounced as a form of totalitarianism if it violates fundamental rights, in particular those of the family in what concerns the religious education of children. The family in fact is the first educational setting for the whole person".<sup>11</sup>

The Asian Synod, for its part, recognized that in many countries Catholic education is esteemed for its organisational efficiency, its teaching quality and pedagogical competence. It has created opportunities for the education of neglected minorities, for rural populations, for girls and in general for the poor and disregarded.

Moreover it emphasizes the role that has been played by Catholic educational institutions in evangelization, from both the aspect of proclamation and that of inculturation and religious dialogue with regard to life and society.

For the future the work and its importance will not become less, but the need is seen for rethinking and reshaping the educative apostolate. In the first place by a decisive directing of services towards the poor and emarginated to develop their ability to live in society as full citizens with full voice; and this even with the possible financial difficulties it could imply. It is hoped that in a spirit of freedom and without any suggestion of proselytism, Catholic schools may be places where the faith can be put forward and accepted. Finally, it is asked that institutions of a higher level (high schools and universities) commit themselves to a greater degree in the formation of leaders for the Church and society.

## **2. Celebrating in order to grow**

The Rector Major's journeys in the last two years provide ample material for interesting comment. Some of them were

<sup>11</sup> From the *Propositiones*

for the purpose of visiting communities in particular circumstances: the Eastern Circumscription, which is continuing its growth and progressive organization; Cuba, which after a long period of restricted freedom and vocational stalemate, is beginning to sense a time of development lying ahead; Cambodia, where we have begun our work in two professional schools; China, which is showing signs of hope, offering some possible openings, but with uncertainties still existing; and Africa, where two new circumscriptions have been constituted and a third will be erected in the near future.

A certain number of visits were motivated by centenary celebrations of salesian work in various countries: Bolivia, Paraguay, Egypt, South Africa, North Belgium, USA, Poland and El Salvador. Other more frequent and fleeting visits were linked with a jubilee of a particular work: Alexandria (Egypt), Nazareth, Cuorgnè, Caserta, Pisa, Trieste, Sondrio, Legnago, Pavia, Carmona.

It is impossible for me to dwell on every journey and every visit, and so I will comment only on some of the recent ones – made on the occasion of centenaries – which have left me with some common impressions, despite differences in contexts and style.

Everywhere the celebrations have provided an opportunity not only of remembering the past, but also of charismatic reflection, of renewed pastoral initiative, of membership of the Salesian Family, and of extraordinary communication with the local people. They aimed at bringing together in specific programs confreres, young people and all those who in various ways feel themselves linked with the spirit and mission of Don Bosco. They reached the local Church, social forces and public opinion with news of history and educative messages, testing our capacity to activate multiple and effective channels of communication.

The desire to rekindle the enthusiasm of the beginnings and of the most flourishing moments of salesian life in the country concerned was expressed in the search for a **spiritual renewal**. I am writing after the retreat which brought to-

gether for the first time in history all the rectors of the Provinces of the United States and Canada with the Rector Major. Similar events have taken place elsewhere with the presence also of some members of the General Council.

**Historical memories** have been collected in volumes and articles which tried to bring to life again the circumstances of the beginnings and the main stages in our subsequent activity. Put to the test were the state, credibility and availability of the documentation referred to in some of the articles of the Regulations<sup>12</sup> on the basis of the principle stated in art.62: "Special importance attaches to the preservation of archives and other documentary material, because of their cultural and community value".

The published volumes are clearly written for the benefit of the people and are reminders for those locally concerned. They constitute a collection of attractive and thought-provoking material, because they reflect daily life in figures of confreres and lively anecdotes.

At the same time the need is felt of greater historical completeness and a better arrangement of studies which would render more adequately the picture of our insertion in a particular context.

**Pastoral initiatives** have been directed especially towards the young. Their interest has been stimulated by the personal sayings and doings of Don Bosco and in the present work of the Salesians in the various countries and in the world in general. They have been involved with enthusiasm and conviction at times of large-scale gatherings, religious celebrations and artistic manifestations. Those with greater interest have taken an active part in the preparation and realization of the events, and have frequently been also the beneficiaries of particular initiatives for their own spiritual life. Everywhere was clear the vocational significance which lay behind the celebrations.

<sup>12</sup> R 62, 146, 178, 180, 191

In this way we have been able to verify the hold we have on young adults, noting the results of efforts to form animators, volunteers and collaborators, and we have seen at first hand the advantages that follow an integration and cooperation between the youth pastoral work of the SDB, FMA, Past-pupils and Salesian Cooperators.

Pastoral relaunching has led also to the thinking-up of new forms of activity, made possible by the reshaping of works which seemed less urgent and the consequent redeployment of personnel; to the reformulation of our services in works already existing, in line with criteria of effectiveness; and to the strengthening of front-line initiatives begun earlier.

The **Salesian Family** has been present in different ways in local meetings and in civil and religious commemorations. It is becoming ever more visible and complete. It displays the desire for communion and the capacity for practical co-involvement, even though its reaction has frequently been stimulated by an 'ad hoc' committee rather than been animated by a permanent team. Its participation is a good reflection of its present state in each locality and opens up encouraging possibilities.

Authorities and social organizations have been provided with abundant information on the objectives the Salesians pursue, on their characteristic educative style, and on their future intentions. Personal relationships, participation in civil and religious activities, interviews given to the media, special insertions in newspapers etc., have all provided openings for communication with society.

Civil authorities, in line with the dimensions and incidence of salesian work, have considered the celebrations as cultural events of interest also to them, and have willingly conferred honours and recognitions: honorary citizenships, official receptions, public monuments, commemorative stones, names of streets and squares. Such recognitions, rather than being honours sought after, are for us parameters for measuring the reality of our insertion in the social texture and invitations

to provide with still greater confidence a service to the young marked by our charism.

### Some memories

A certain concentration of national centenaries in America documents the implications of our first missionary project: the times of realization, the preferences shown, the directions and criteria of expansion. In the 25 years between 1875 and 1900 the Congregation set its roots in almost all the countries of the continent through a regular and planned annual insertion of confreres offered by regions more flourishing in respect of vocations.

The uninterrupted succession of local centenaries, particularly in Europe, gives on the other hand an idea of the expectations existing in the infant Congregation and of the mobility towards which it seemed also to be driven. According to data in the Central Archives, in fact, though they come from different sources, 664 requests for foundations from widely different countries reached the Rector Major, Bl. Michael Rua, between 1888 and 1900. Of these more than 200 were accepted. The mobility appears in the fact that 38 of these houses were closed again while Don Rua was still Rector Major, and a further 29 afterwards.

In every case it is a moving experience to look again at the **emergency situations** which the Salesians were called upon to solve or at least improve: immigrants with no religious care or with difficulties of insertion, who easily gave rise to prejudice among their new neighbours by their image as labourers, the apparent domestic conflict to which their poverty seemed to expose them, and the noisy forms of their Sunday relaxation; street children without the possibility of education, who thus became a social danger; the need for preparation for work in countries which had no training programs for this purpose; missions among native minorities difficult to contact. Listening to speakers and givers of conferences, I formed the idea that we were not called to strengthen normal pastoral activity



but to solve extreme situations for which there was no one available on the spot, or for the solving of which those already there did not feel themselves capable. The spirit of adventure, a sense of pastoral courage and the awareness of bearing a prophetic message of salvation for the young and the working class, characterized all the beginnings.

Memories recall the **precarious conditions** in which work often began, where the confreres lived, and the environment and working conditions and equipment: an old barracks (Paraguay), a long abandoned fortress (Alexandria), the crypt of a church (New York), a farmhouse on the edge of a city or even outside it, and similar situations. It goes to show how the evangelical quality of the work, dedication to the poor and rapport with the people led gradually to better conditions, always with an eye to the needs of the young.

The Salesians were also accompanied, almost instinctively, by **certain pastoral convictions** which were so deeply rooted in them that they needed no verification: the universal value of the oratorian model, the efficacy of the preventive system, the preference for trade schools, closeness to the people and their problems, the commitment to the immediate promoting of local vocations to continue the work. The Sunday after their arrival in Bolivia, as Fr Ceria relates,<sup>13</sup> the Salesians began the festive oratory which immediately brought together 250 boys, despite the restricted space. And we have heard of similar experiences linked with other beginnings. They are initial traits which become prolonged and eventually merge into developments with greater fruit.

In ways like this Provinces came to be established and the Congregation extended after the manner of concentric circles around the first foundations, in a process which was neither uniform nor consistent. But the educative and pastoral service became diversified and enriched, until it includes at the pre-

<sup>13</sup> Ceria, *Annali*, vol.II, p.552

sent day an array of initiatives which cover poverty, formal education, the involvement of the young and adults in apostolic enterprises, work at university level, accompaniment of ethnic groups, means of social communication, and the animation of a vast apostolic movement.

### **The gift of brotherly union.**

The thing I find most striking in visits, in meetings, and especially on the occasion of celebrations, is the **unity of the Congregation**: an enthusiastic sense of belonging combined with a desire to work and achieve objectives together. This is something we often take for granted and we may not avert to the wonder it represents, the grace it needs, the delicate work it supposes and the richness it signifies. We are talking about a body of 17,000 persons spread over 2,000 communities linked around 91 provincial centres.

I have perceived this unity as a fact lived quite naturally by the confreres, without any problems about the risks it could imply, or even the awareness of them; and with the deep joy of feeling united in a common vocation and enterprise despite distances and differences. I have noticed it also as an objective of animation and government, and as a concern in groups of reflection. And I have thought spontaneously of that passage in the Constitutions which says: "Superiors at every level of government share in one and the same authority, and exercise it in communion with the Rector Major for the benefit of the whole Society. In this way, while fostering the good of each individual community, they are solicitous for the unity, growth and perfecting of the whole Congregation".<sup>14</sup>

This unity refers to the **spirit and religious mentality**, recognizable everywhere under different cultural wrappings. The difference in customs, language and manner of life do not im-

<sup>14</sup> C 122

pair the identity of vocation and the typical characteristics of salesian life. Passing through all five continents and different countries, we find the same family style of life and work with certain universal aspects and others diversified from place to place.

Unity of this kind does not come about spontaneously. Contributing to its creation and reinvigoration are the acceptance, study and reference to the Constitutions, which set out an individual and community project, with choices of inspirations and attitudes, and with practical indications for the ordering of life.

It has been strengthened through the years by the guidelines of General Chapters and the work of clarification and stimulation of each successive Rector Major. It is enriched by contact with updated salesian literature. It is kept alive by communication with the Congregation: of the substantial kind through directives and guidelines, and also of the informal kind which comes through the rapid exchange of information. Where confreres and communities have easy access to these sources in line with the value due to each, and where such sources are esteemed, one notes a greater abundance of references and motivations and a greater daily sense of life in unity.

Nowadays, when the multiplicity of proposals and the chronological distance from our Founder might make us more disposed to accept different ways of doing things, familiarity should be encouraged with the texts which document our history and present our religious experience in an authoritative manner.

But this unity we are speaking of is also stable from an **institutional and organizational** point of view. I am told this frequently by friends who admire the linkage and correspondence that exists between the Rector Major and his Council, between the Provincials and their Councils, and between both of these and the Rectors. It reminds us of a desire of Don Bosco which coincides with that of Jesus himself: that the union between his disciples should be real and manifested by signs that could be humanly perceptible. Organization for the purpose of unity is a criterion which Don Bosco seems to have developed

precisely through the practice of government: "For a Congregation like ours to prosper, it must be well organized".<sup>15</sup> The instrumental sense of structures, loyalty, shared responsibility and spirit of initiative ensure a practical decentralization which multiplies services and works, and which here and there even spills over into individualism: a risk to be accepted and a price to be paid for reconciling necessity with coordination and creativity.

In conversations with confreres I often hear it said, in contrast with my comments above, that some guidelines which imply a change of course are assimilated only slowly and apparently reluctantly by the communities. The application of General Chapters is an example of this. A certain tardiness is in the very nature of adaptations to be made which require complex processes, and in the dimensions of our Congregation which require long periods for them to reach all its parts which differ in cultural context, language and pastoral situation. But it is clear that we are everywhere moving in the same direction.

The unity of spirit and mentality, which rests also on institutional clarity is manifested in the first place in a **fraternity** of human and even juvenile traits. Salesians willingly listen and take an interest in the different situations in which their confreres are working. If nothing is said of particularly sad or painful items of which they have heard general remarks, they ask for further information. The story is often the part of the conversation most eagerly awaited and followed. In interregional meetings called for the purpose of studying problems of particular areas or sectors, discussion starts up at once as between members of a family, even though the participants may be seeing each other for the first time.

Great confidence is shown in the richness that can result from diversity, when there is awareness of the common inspirational elements and guidelines. Living together in "international" communities committed to the same salesian mission in

<sup>15</sup> BM 9, 268

line with the style of life traced out by the Constitutions, is already an established fact and is becoming ever more a criterion to be followed; it has in fact already been our practice.

I would add that unity is seen to be **efficacious in practice**. It is evident in declarations of availability and the readiness shown in putting at the service of the Congregation whatever the Rector Major judges suitable.

We see this in missionary collaboration. At a time of a widespread falling off in vocations we were able to launch "Project Africa", which is now at the consolidation stage. Through the annual sending out of missionaries, new foundations are being established or areas are being strengthened where there is the possibility of development.

Not less is financial solidarity, expressed through various channels: the missions fund, the solidarity fund, notable contributions by the Provinces to the missions entrusted to them, the funds raised by individual missionaries.

It has not escaped me that this grace of unity of spirit, of mentality, of government and fellowship and work, may come up against some of the typical trials of our time, like the simplistic assertion of cultural peculiarities, regionalism, gratuitous confrontations which seem to be taken for granted, an enclosure in one's own environment of work which hinders the giving of thought to the Church, the nation and the world. Such things have a grain of truth, but must be approached positively, kept within reasonable limits and made to interact with a firm identity, a sense of cordial belonging and a deep understanding of the reality of the Congregation. They are harmful, on the other hand, when they grow in uncontrolled fashion and in isolated form.

### **Don Bosco: a fascinating Saint**

Among the factors contributing to our unity as a Congregation and Salesian Family, the first and most powerful is love for Don

Bosco. It is an empathy, an admiration, a feeling, an attraction, a kind of instinctive energy which leads to his imitation, the desire to remain with him spiritually and be involved in his work.

We know that grace is at the origin of our vocation. By directing us to Don Bosco as our Father, Teacher and Friend, the Holy Spirit has led us to the religious consecration characterized by his mission to the young and his educative concern.

In salesian tradition our affection has always been manifested without shame, almost with youthful enthusiasm, prolonging the admiration of the first young oratorians who wanted "to stay with Don Bosco" and formed the first nucleus of the Congregation. It is the sign of a filial rapport which is deeply felt.

From the Salesians this enthusiasm and admiration passes in the first place to the youngsters themselves, who express it in many forms according to their style: with songs, scenarios, T-shirts, celebrations, pilgrimages, reading of some biography, presentation of films and videocassettes, pleasure at being in or linked with our houses, friendship with confreres: a common collection of songs and hymns which by now has spread around the world and is heard in every language.

I have seen at first hand two results of this affection. In the young it gives rise to initiatives, thoughts, desires and projects in the line of commitment and growth in faith; it is a powerful vocational factor. In the communities it is a source of joy, of confidence in our work, of serene identification and membership. Even in cases in which a critical observer might discern a bit of ingenuity or exaggeration the results are positive. Coldness and detachment, on the other hand, seem entirely unproductive.

The admiration is not confined to our own environment. We hear comments, necessarily of a general kind, about the genius and originality of Don Bosco in ecclesial circles, from civil authorities and from ordinary people. Many expectations rely on the application of his methods and on the setting up of educative initiatives like those to which he gave origin.

I found interesting the study on the formation of Don

Bosco's image.<sup>16</sup> It was certainly influenced by the adherence of his youngsters, who had been won over by his ability to love them and open them to life. They collected and spread anecdotes, dreams and enterprises with extraordinary narrative verve when modern means of communication were nonexistent. As they passed on their experiences, they seemed almost to bring the fascinating fatherliness of Don Bosco to life again. It is something that has remained among our charismatic and pastoral characteristics: the enthusiastic love for the Founder and its communication to the young.

It was also influenced by the manner in which his enterprises were presented by the Salesian Bulletin, under his direction and in line with his own criteria. Good was to be spread and presented in an attractive way.

But especially it was influenced by the direct impact of the style and educative results in a society becoming more and more concerned with the phenomenon of youth.

At the origin is a typical holiness, marked by pastoral charity capable of reaching a person's heart and attentive to the questions of his time. Congar, in a well known comment on the Council, referred to Don Bosco in these terms: "The greatest novelty of the Council lies in this: if the Church is in the world and in the world there are problems, then holiness is a phenomenon which is of concern to culture. This may seem a debatable concept, but a central point of the Council's intuitions is that there is a connection between holiness and history. With the Incarnation human history becomes the place where the love of God is expressed; holiness therefore is not born of flight from the world or its rejection, because it is in the measure that I immerse myself in the world to save it that I find the great gift of God.

Who are the saints? I like to recall in the first place one who preceded the Council by a century: Don Bosco. He was

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Stella P., *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica*, Vol.III; ch.I, pp.13-61

prophetically a new model of holiness through his work which distinguished him from his contemporaries' manner of thinking and judging".<sup>17</sup>

"We study and imitate him", say the Constitutions.<sup>18</sup> The two seem linked together. Today a great deal is said about creative fidelity with respect to consecrated life. A serious approach and renewed attention in this sense not only takes nothing from the image of our Father, embellished by affection and by a tradition which has kept the memory of his deeds alive, but endorses the validity of his permanent place in the historical and ecclesial context.

### **Relevance of the message of education**

One of the elements which emerge from the visits and is highlighted in celebrations is the esteem on the part of civil and ecclesial authorities for salesian work, specifically because of the combination of its original characteristics: its place in the youth area, preference for those most in need, harmonious integration of education, advancement and evangelization, and positive insertion in the ecclesial community and in society.

The preventive system in its various aspects, which include the manner of being present among the young (assistance), the creation of broad youthful environments for encounter and work, a community which includes young people as members with responsibility, multiple projects adapted to different levels requirements and groups, the oratorian model which impresses a physiognomy on all initiatives: these are all elements which give rise everywhere to positive comments, expectations and the desire for greater knowledge.

In the presence of authorities and of the people we have the opportunity to explain our fundamental intuitions, our history,

<sup>17</sup> Congar, Vatican Radio, 20 Feb '84; *Avvenire* 22 Feb '84

<sup>18</sup> C 21



the modern formulation of our system, and to reply to questions about its efficacy in the face of phenomena at present troubling society.

I come back home with offerings or requests for new foundations, not only in the so-called poor countries but also in those well developed but beset by new and uncontrollable manifestations of youth distress, and of new questions linked with the accompaniment of young people in the faith. The traditional educational agencies and initiatives on which at one time we used to rely are proving insufficient, not from a quantitative standpoint but from their adequacy. At the centre of the crisis is "educative rapport" (parents and children, the generation gap, institutions and students, teachers or communicators and pupils) which is the hub and wisdom of the preventive system. It happens not infrequently therefore that those unable to appreciate pedagogical details see in the salesian method and in the way young people respond to it that it provides the young with a sure formula for handling and resolving difficult situations.

Not only is this legacy of ours recognized, but practical appreciation is shown for our competence, especially in some specific areas of education: preparation for employment, the animation of spare time, informal education for the rescue of children, scholastic experience, youthful emargination, group activity.

We see in these requests an invitation by society and the Church to exploit all the individual and communal resources of our charism, and to think up new applications and possibilities of activity.

The salesian mission and its animating spirit are today at the centre of an effort of diffusion which must not diminish, but rather come to grips in practice with what is learned in life. Don Bosco used to say: "Come and see how we work". Direct contact with the young and their circumstances, our way of setting up and animating a work of education will always provide the best presentation and the best lesson on the preventive system, which cannot be understood unless it is seen in action. Systematic

knowledge and practice make possible its communication to those who work with us in the pastoral field of education.

**A strategic point: formation.**

In moulding the reality we have spoken of, an indispensable part has been played by formation. The forms of apostolate of the Salesians and the contexts in which they work have been and still are very diverse. The Congregation has gone ahead by preparing its members as pastors and educators, deploying communities (often small ones) in distant places and confidently entrusting them with pastoral opportunities and responsibilities. Trust was shown in their fidelity and creative ability.

With so open a style and in fields of activity so diverse, formation comes to be an aspect which is both strategic and sensitive. It should not therefore be exposed to improvisation nor sacrificed to practical needs. The Constitutions lay down the principle of unity and decentralization in formation. To ensure a proper balance between these two criteria and protect them from individual or occasional evaluation, they also indicate limits by indicating a program which is obligatory for all (the *Ratio*), and leaving to the responsibility of Provinces or Provincial Conferences local adaptations in the *Directory*, both of them requiring the approval of the Rector Major and his Council.

Human maturity, spiritual depth, pastoral competence and enthusiasm, and the salesian spirit all take root and have their first sure growth in a deliberately formative environment and with the help of prepared formation guides.

Formation communities and structures are the most powerful system we have available for communicating our spiritual heritage and salesian pastoral praxis: for the length of time of exposure, for the systematic nature of transmission, for the human environment in which communication takes place, for the many channels through which it is passed on, and for the willing participation on the part of those to whom it is directed.

Results show that the kind of formation we have used in the past has been efficacious in its fundamental aspects: identity, religious sense, moral dependability, communal responsibility, pastoral dedication, and the ability of striking up an understanding with the people.

The unity created by it, which is not just material uniformity, has been strengthened by living in international centres which have provided qualified superiors and created networks of friendship, interests and knowledge.

At the present day much evolution is taking place in the system of formation. The very concept of formation is changing, starting from the need for ongoing formation and from the multiplicity of possibilities which the subject is called upon to use and unify. We are facing the need for an overall adaptation of the system of formation, in line with the new type of candidate which is coming forward, the configuration of the pastoral field, the practical model we are trying to apply, the challenge posed by secular culture to Christian identity, and to the consideration of the place of our religious consecration in the ecclesial context. We are therefore facing a demand for a greater expansion of the professional approach in our educative and pastoral work.

This must not lead to a disintegration which is frequently the involuntary result of an incomplete and sectorial vision, but to a greater convergence on an identity, analyzed more deeply and assumed with greater awareness. This is the effort asked for from the Provinces in the processes of revision desired by the last General Chapter.<sup>19</sup>

But rather than from the reform of programs and methodologies, greater help will come in the immediate future from the personal determination and community commitment to not allow the gift we have received wither, but to extract from it all its richness through a form of community life which gives due importance to the formation of the confreres.

<sup>19</sup> cf. GC24 147

**Conclusion.**

What I have said to you represents no more than a tiny part of what is emerging from the events of the Church and the more modest ones of those of our Family in which I have taken part. Living them from within, so to speak, leads us to a feeling of gratitude to the Lord, which is almost one of adoration. He is present with his Spirit and guides the progress of the Church and of our Family. To this gratitude for his gifts and divine protection is united the recognition of so many brothers and sisters who by their daily fidelity and extraordinary efforts have built the reality we witness today.

May Mary Help of Christians help us to follow where they have led and continue the work, confident that the seed will continue to fall in fertile soil.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Juan Turchi". 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. The rest of the name "uan Turchi" is written in a more fluid, cursive script.