

acts

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OFFICIAL ORGAN OF ANIMATION AND COMMUNICATION FOR THE SALESIAN CONGREGATION

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1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

THOUGHT “NOW IS THE ACCEPTABLE TIME”¹

1. VOCATIONS: A POINT THAT GIVES US FOOD FOR THOUGHT – A propitious moment. – In harmony with the Church. – Vocational guidance in our pastoral renewal. – A new approach.

2. THE SALESIAN COMMUNITY: A SETTING FOR VOCATIONAL EXPERIENCE AND PROPOSALS. – The logic of “Come and see”. – The vocational force of community life. – Pastoral action of the community. – Follow-up. – Some areas for special attention. – “The angel declared unto Mary”.

Rome, 8 September 2000

Feast of the Birthday of Mary

My dear confreres,

I cannot begin this letter without a heartfelt word of thanks to you for your fraternal closeness and prayer during the trial which the good Lord has laid upon me.

It has been his will that this has led to a greater fraternal union within the Congregation and the Salesian Family and all have come to know more about our confrere Bro. Artemide Zatti, for whose beatification all requirements are now substantially complete. Soon we shall see him raised to the altars.

This present letter continues the Chapter theme on the presence and life of the salesian community, to help you in your reflections in the provincial chapters and later in the General Chapter.

We had already identified three areas in which the salesian community must be competent and visibly present in the neighbourhood: fraternal life, witness to evangelical values, and welcoming reception of the young and the poor.

¹ cf. 2 Cor 6, 2

1. VOCATIONS: A POINT THAT GIVES US FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Among the topics to which the Congregation showed itself very sensitive at the time of the consultation on the theme of the coming General Chapter, there was that of our ability to attract vocations. And rightly so. This has always been considered an essential characteristic of our witness and was in consequence frequently referred to with various emphases in the GC24: our formation for vocational discernment²; unified vocational promotion in the Salesian Family³; the salesian community's ability to foster the vitality of the charism and vocational dynamism through its own deep, conscious and radical way of living them⁴; and the recommendation of a follow-up which once again proposes the question of vocations in the EPC⁵. It was therefore a matter demanding our attention, and one we could not fail to take up again.

Even more clearly and decisively the GC23 had placed the vocational field among the essential areas of our journey of faith with the young⁶ and a characteristic dimension of Salesian Youth Spirituality⁷.

Within the theme of the GC25, which refers specifically to the life and mission of our communities, we want to examine the conditions of life and activity which can foster a joyful and encouraging experience of vocation, a way of life that will be both witness and prophecy, an environment that becomes a vocational appeal for all who feel attracted by Don Bosco's spirit and mission.

Concern about vocations is, in fact, one of the factors that

² cf. GC24, 141-142

³ cf. GC24, 143. 146

⁴ cf. GC24, 159

⁵ cf. GC24, 165

⁶ cf. GC23, 149-157

⁷ cf. GC23, 178-180

led to the choice of the theme of the Chapter. In a certain way the crisis in vocations to the consecrated life, which we are experiencing in a good part of the Congregation and of the Church, is profitable for us in the sense that it compels us to evaluate the quality of our personal and community life, the significance of our structures and organization, and the possibility of being more effective and positive at the present day.

Young people need witnesses; they need people and environments that show by their example the possibility of adopting in our society a life style in accordance with the Gospel. This gospel witness is really the first educative service to offer them, the first proclamation of the Gospel.

This letter is intended to be a contribution to the examination the Provinces have to make; it will try to throw some light on the topic, to encourage the great deal already being done, to prompt every confrere and community to become personally involved in vocational witness and proposals, and to open wider horizons so that our pastoral work be not limited in the field of vocations to general and superficial proposals, nor be reduced to seeking for candidates to the salesian life only outside our own settings.

The theme of vocations has often emerged as the leading question or concern in the conversations I have had with confreres during my visits: and this not only through fear of our becoming extinct in vast areas of the north-western world, where every year sees a fall in the number of confreres, a rise in their average age, and a scarcity of newcomers; but also perhaps because the lack of vocational fruitfulness is a clear reflection of the little force of attraction exerted by our communities and the limited depth of Christian life that we propose to young people.

The questions of the confreres always concern the particular situation regarding vocations in each part of the world: they ask about the possibilities of finding more of them to the consecrated life in environments considered to be strongly secularized

and well-to-do, characterized by freedom, by the many opportunities for young people, by short-term life-projects; about the conditions needed to ensure authenticity and perseverance in contexts marked by popular religious devotion, by a demographic situation of very large numbers or by limited prospects in life for the young. Many have asked for this to be included among the reflections on the community for the coming Chapter.

This, on the other hand, is in line with what our Constitutions state when they insert the promotion of vocations among the *objectives of our mission*: “Faithful to the commitments Don Bosco has passed on to us, we are evangelizers of the young, and the more so if they are poor; we pay special attention to apostolic vocations”⁸.

Confirmation is found in art.28, in the chapter concerning those to whom our work is primarily addressed. “To meet the needs of his people the Lord continually calls some to follow him in service of the Kingdom and enriches them with gifts for the purpose. We are convinced that many young people are rich in spiritual potential and give indications of an apostolic vocation. We help them to discover, accept and develop the gift of a lay, consecrated religious or priestly vocation, for the benefit of the whole Church and of the Salesian Family. With equal zeal we nurture adult vocations”⁹.

Every Salesian therefore should be someone who seeks vocations and follows them up. Every community has this same purpose among its main objectives. We must examine whether this directive of our Constitutions shapes the action of every community in the individual provinces and inspires the activities of every confrere; or, on the other hand, we are so poorly informed and attentive with regard to vocation and the ways that lead to an evangelical decision, that we cannot take our pastoral work to its point of full maturity.

⁸ C. 6

⁹ C. 28

Now All this reflects *the experience and concern of Don Bosco*. The thought of vocations was ever in his mind in a practical manner. We need only recall two facts. The first was his initiative in creating the students section at Valdocco for the benefit of those who by their good nature and intellectual ability gave signs of a vocation to the ecclesiastical state. Their commitment to study, but more especially the intensity of their life of piety and relationship with Don Bosco himself, would lead to the maturing of the seeds he had spotted in their first contacts.

The second fact is the host of priests and religious who came from the Oratory and of whom Don Bosco himself was proud and happy to give statistics, as a sign of the sound Christian formation of his youngsters. We may quote from the Biographical Memoirs: "In 1883 in the presence of Fr Dalmazzo and others, Don Bosco exclaimed: 'I am happy now! I have had careful statistics drawn up, and we have found that more than two thousand diocesan priests have come from our houses. Let us thank the Lord and his Most Holy Mother for having given us the means to do all this good'.

However, his figures were not final; before his death an additional five hundred boys had entered diocesan seminaries. There were also others whose vocation he had encouraged who began studying for the priesthood after his death. We need to add those from other salesian houses who entered the seminary and we should also mention the many who joined religious orders. There is hardly an Institute in Italy that does not have some of Don Bosco's sons among its priests. Another merit of his is that he indirectly helped to strengthen the Church. We could say that it was his example and sometimes his insistence and cooperation that led to the opening of many minor seminaries. It was from him that not a few rectors of minor and major seminaries learned how to look after their charges with loving and fatherly care, and to stress piety – especially Eucharistic piety – that is so indispensable for persevering in a priestly vocation. All this greatly benefited the diocesan clergy in their re-

spective dioceses. (...) From what we have already said and will say, we can infer that it is no exaggeration to state that in his lifetime Don Bosco formed some six thousand priests".¹⁰

From the school of Don Bosco there came a Rua, a Cagliero, a Dominic Savio and many others. Salesians of today are convinced that the flourishing of vocations in different contexts, through proper attention to pastoral work and the process of Christian formation, is a measure of their ability to communicate a sufficient knowledge and a love of Christ to prompt others to imitate and follow him. And on the other hand they discover how far from the salesian ideal are those who think that vocations should be sought in other contexts or through the efforts of persons with this special task, while the community should be dedicating itself only to providing "services", albeit for the benefit of the very poor.

A propitious moment

There are many points from which one could start for a fuller understanding of the vocational question. In Sacred Scripture we find paradigms where is clearly seen the part of God, who never fails, and the conditions for the response of the man or woman.

The Bible has pages for times of vocation difficulty or sterility. In them God, who is the guarantor of salvation, speaks directly to the heart of people to ensure that his covenant is remembered. I like to recall the episode of Samuel. At a time of decay of religious institutions, when the attention of everyone was concentrated on war efforts, when even the figure of the prophets had been forgotten, Samuel received the direct call of God during the night. There were no models with which to identify and the urgent demands of the people were not of a religious nature. And yet God spoke directly to the heart of the boy to make him his witness and spokesman.

¹⁰ BM V, p. 267

In this letter I want to recall your attention to the fact that we may be living a *phase of special vocational possibilities*, if only we can succeed in expressing our love for Jesus and in passing it on to others.

In the context of the Jubilee we have lived though two events which have made us think about the interior openness of young people to Jesus and to the force exerted on them by Christ and his plan.

The first in order of time was the *Forum 2000* of the Salesian Youth Movement. While I was at Colle Don Bosco, a young man asked me a straight question: "Are there any vocations for the priesthood and consecrated life from the Salesian Youth Movement, and in particular from the animators?"

The Rector Major replied that vocations have certainly matured, but it is also true that this element of salesian youth spirituality has not been sufficiently cultivated from the proclamation to the suggestion, from the suggestion to the personal follow-up of those who show an aptitude, signs or early desires. In his message for the progress of the SYM in the year 2000, the Rector Major included this precise point. You can read it in this same issue of the Acts.

The second event was the *World Day of Youth* in Rome. In his homily during the celebration of the Eucharist the Pope exhorted the young people to think also about the possibility of giving themselves completely in the priestly ministry or the consecrated life: "May every community always have a priest to celebrate the Eucharist! I ask the Lord therefore to raise up among you many holy vocations to the priesthood".¹¹ And later he said: "May sharing in the Eucharist also lead to a new flourishing of vocations to the religious life. In this way the Church will have fresh and generous energies for the great task of the new evangelization".¹²

¹¹ John Paul II, Homily of 20 August 2000, *Osservatore Romano* (Eng. edtn. 23 August 2000

¹² Ibid..

Individual conversations with young people have revealed how much they think about the radical following of Christ. But it often finds them unprepared to respond and, as has already been said so many times before, it finds them uncertain in the face of discovering the real possibilities that match their expectations for living out such a vocation for the whole of their lives.

It is true that the young people present in these two events do not represent all of the world's youth, and not even all Catholic youth. They were young people who had been chosen, especially in the *Forum 2000*. But these are precisely the youngsters who are open to a committed vocational dialogue, and who have admitted that they have not always experienced such a dialogue.

Perhaps we are living in "new times", in which an adaptation of pastoral work for vocations in terms of images, language and suggestions is essential.

It is not my purpose here to repeat the theological doctrine about vocation, nor to describe the sociological and religious conditions of certain areas in which difficulties seem to be concentrated. We have heard enough about such things. It has been rightly said that we must move on from proposals to practical suggestions.

There is a certain phenomenon which must make us think. In some of the so-called difficult areas there are found together communities, spirituality centres or ecclesial movements which are strongly attractive, and other works and communities which do not manage to give rise to any desire to join in an experience which the young people have right before their eyes.

Also in areas which are still fruitful there is a difference between the kind of young people who are attracted by our life and their behaviour once they have joined a community: it is a matter of authentic motivation, of Christian spiritual formation, of a project of life in Christ, of interiorized faith.

We must give serious thought to this point. Effectively vocations represent our main problem, which we share with other

religious Institutes. There is an abundance of working groups in every continent: it is quite easy to pick them out and count them. The collaboration of lay people has also been developed to an increasing extent to respond to the urgent needs on many fronts. Animation techniques are widespread. But without persons who bear unalloyed witness to the charism, all this gets nowhere!

“Pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest”.¹³ This expression of Jesus remains always true, and applies more than ever to our present moment in history.

The Lord is giving us a new opportunity, but at the same time is asking us for a purification, an emphasis on what is essential, an ability to get into living contact with Christ rather than be involved only in personal relationships or in providing services.

In harmony with the Church.

A congress took place in Rome from 5 to 10 May 1998 on vocational pastoral work in Europe. A working document had been circulated in advance which set out, as objectively as possible, the quantitative and qualitative situation of vocations, but also the vocational awareness of local Churches and the methods of pastoral work for the promoting of vocations which they had developed.

The resulting document dwelt naturally on the human, social and religious conditions of young people; but it also pointed to positive signs, the present resources, the seeds of a new season which would need wise cultivating by all communities, and especially by educators.

When the work was ended a final report was published, with many new ideas and a wealth of suggestions.

A similar work was carried out in America, and at the end of February the Congregation for Christian Education pub-

¹³ cf. Mt 9, 38

lished a number of the review *Seminarium* concerning the situation of vocations in the future, for which the Rector Major of the Salesians was asked to contribute an article entitled "Youth pastoral work and vocational guidance",¹⁴ a sign of how much our experience is appreciated.

For our part, we have devoted a great deal of study to the *Ratio*, which deals also with the prenovitiate and the criteria for discernment concerning admissions.

There is no point in dodging the issue: the vocational problem is a burning one! Nevertheless the general intention of the congresses is to "foster hope". That is the tone of earlier documents; and that was also the feeling of the meetings. We have confidence that the Lord will continue to raise up prophets and men after his own heart.

The Union of Superiors General of Religious Orders and Congregations also decided to focus reflections on the possibilities and conditions for proposing a vocation nowadays and maturing candidates for the consecrated life, particularly in places where the religious dimension seems to be of very little social relevance, and to be left to personal consideration.

All this provides us with an overall view of the new conditions in which vocations are born and develop.¹⁵ In some places we are undergoing the trial of sterility, like that of Sarah or of Anna, mother of Samuel. But we cannot accept that we should decide we are going to become extinct and simply programme how our charismatic heritage can be passed to others, for example to lay people, and to abandon all hope of Christian life and the *sequela Christi* in the secular culture!

If Christ has been for us the meaning of our pilgrimage, if our experience with him has been a happy one, it is better to do what Abraham did, beg for a son who will maintain the succes-

¹⁴ *Seminarium* Year XL n. 1 January-February 2000, p.67-80

¹⁵ USG - 55° *Conventus Semestralis*. "Le vocazioni alla vita consacrata nel contesto della società moderna e post-moderna", Ed. Il Calamo, May 1999

sion and set about doing something to ensure it. It is necessary, it is said, not only to call but also to challenge, by once again presenting in their paradoxical reality the phases of a way of life conformed to the Gospel, such as the beatitudes, the cross, the freedom of self-realization in God.

Vocational guidance in our pastoral renewal.

For many years now the Congregation has been reflecting on the process of the education of young people to the faith. It has singled out *in vocational guidance its fundamental and essential dimension*.¹⁶ We want to help the young to face their own future in an attitude of availability and generosity, predispose them to listen to the voice of God, and accompany them in formulating their own plan of life.

In this vocational commitment we give priority to complementary things which are mutually supportive: the guidance offered to all young people within the educational program; the constant effort to discover and follow up with various and appropriate initiatives vocations of particular commitment in society and in the Church; special attention to vocations of service to the Church itself (vocations for dioceses and for other religious institutes) and of the world as a whole (missionary vocations, including those of the laity); a particular responsibility regarding the salesian charism in its many forms, through the discernment and fostering of the seeds of a salesian vocation, both consecrated and lay, present in young people.

We are convinced that we make a gift of a great treasure to the Church when we discover a good vocation. It does not matter whether the person concerned goes to a diocese, the missions or a religious house. It is always a resource placed at the disposal of the Church and the Kingdom.¹⁷

¹⁶ cf. SGC, 374 e 692; GC21, 110ff; GC23, 149ff e 247

¹⁷ cf. MB XVII, p. 262

The situation is not easy. The Congress "New vocations for a new Europe"¹⁸ listed some of the causes or roots of the difficulty: a complex and pluralist culture, without foundations, which tends to produce in young people a fragile identity; a culture of distraction, which risks drowning or nullifying questions about the meaning of life; a mentality which leads to the idea that life's possibilities must be enjoyed without delay; the fleeting nature of ideas and commitments, which are unconcerned about any definite guiding principles. But it is in a context like this that the Gospel must be passed on and offered as a norm and way of life.

In these circumstances we try to live with an *attitude of serene faith and hope*, and without faultfinding. When Abraham was sad because he could not see how he was going to have any descendants, God invited him to go out of his small tent and place himself under the great tent of the Lord, the sky, and with that much vaster horizon interpret and believe in the story which God, faithful to his promises, was preparing for him.

This attitude of hope must also guide us in reading the signs of the times: the lack of vocations (an evil) can be seen as an invitation to purify our intentions, and recognize the need to concentrate our attention on what is essential in consecrated life and in our specific vocation in the Salesian Family.

When we pray to the Lord of the harvest, it is important that we are moved more by his Kingdom and the desire to do his will, than by the need or anxiety to have successors for each of our present works who will take our place in the many apostolic projects we are animating.

Meanwhile, among the young in the Salesian Family, and among people in general, we are spreading a **vocational culture**. This is an expression first used by the Pope,¹⁹ which we

¹⁸ cf. "New vocations for a new Europe", n. 11c: *Man without vocation*

¹⁹ John Paul II, Message for XXX World Day of Prayer for vocations (1993)

have later explored.²⁰ It is a matter of promoting a form of life and the choice of personal options for the future according to a set of values such as generosity, acceptance of the mystery, availability for being called and involved, belief in oneself and one's neighbour, and the courage to dream and desire on a grand scale. In addition there are educative proposals and experiences in line with the values proposed.

The concluding document of the Congress on Vocations in Europe²¹ declares that this culture is now becoming the first objective of vocational pastoral work, and perhaps of pastoral work in general.

A new approach.

Through this process of reflection and experiences which are now taking place, we recognize an availability in the young which is open to the experience of God, and we discover new elements which are important for the birth and growth of vocations.

In them we observe first of all the *new subject to which our vocational discourse is addressed*. It is the young adult, still an adolescent because of the lengthening in the years of compulsory schooling and because of the later age at which a decision is made about a state of life. For us it is important to include vocational elements at every age, but we have a particular place among the animators, volunteers, young collaborators, university students, and the older pupils in schools.

This innovation implies another which touches us very closely: talk about Christian life and vocational guidance for these young adults is something *much more demanding and specific*. They are not joining a team for work or service. If it is a matter of lay work, even though performed voluntarily, they know they have other similar openings and structures

²⁰ cf. VECCHI J., "La vocazione tra cultura e culture: crisi del modello occidentale?", in *Cultura e Vocazioni*, Rogate, Rome 1994, p. 31-63

²¹ cf. "New vocations for a new Europe", n.13b

available. It is the vision and meaning of the particular kind of life which determines the direction they take. Only if they are attracted by Jesus and have understood what kind of life he is offering them do they decide to follow him.

It has been said that we are in an age of "religious barbarism". There is a need to make young people aware of the great originality of Jesus Christ, the *other* and not only the enjoyment of short-term generosity. For the purpose of vocational appeal, religious anonymity of a group constituted in the name of Christ is quite useless. It is much better to declare openly by words and deeds, the choice we have made and the joy with which we live it.

In the Acts of the Apostles we read that while the community of the followers of Christ were giving new and specifically Christian signs, the Lord directed towards them day by day those who were being saved.²² The two things are necessary and complementary: the voice or grace of the Lord and the signs of the community.

Some constantly occurring points in the conversations I referred to earlier, and that are found as well in experiences of the provinces, can also help in reflecting on the vocational capacity of our communities. Here they are:

1. Vocation is an **attraction**. If the charism and the life of its bearers and representatives at the present day is not, so to speak, enticing, the conditions for raising up followers simply fail. It had already happened with Jesus himself. The apostles were bound to him by a quite extraordinary admiration; they had perceived the goodness which came forth from him and so they had asked: "Where are you staying?"²³ and they went to stay with him.

In the meeting of the Superiors General, various Institutes

²² cf. Acts 2, 42-47

²³ Jn 1, 38

presented experiences of open and welcoming communities, new and bold mission frontiers, and experiences of consecrated life expressive of the primacy of God, which had stirred up the interest of young people.

I want to stress the genuine nature and community character of the experiences of God, particularly close to youngsters of a “religious” turn of mind at the present day, even if they have to understand the everyday nature of our relationship with the Father in the light of the event of the Incarnation, freeing themselves from the momentary fascination of the extraordinary.

2. The vocation is a **call and a grace**; it is not within our power to inspire it or cause it to be born. The initiative is God’s. This is a constant element in biblical vocations and is repeated by Jesus himself: “You did not choose me but I chose you”.²⁴ It is necessary to pray and work, to accept and be grateful – even for a single vocation, to observe and discover. In this sense we are not complaining, and our heart is grateful to God for the more or less 500 young people who have this year entered our novitiates.

3. The vocation is a **journey** closely linked to a maturing in faith in a dialogue with God that lasts all through life. The basic condition for it to emerge is the development of every aspect of the Christian life: truth, good behaviour, prayer. Vocations of a “sociological” character have well nigh disappeared. A strong personalization of the faith and a life interiorly bound up with Christ are indispensable for the maturing of proposals in line with the Lord’s words. Do you remember the conversation of Jesus with the rich young man? To be honest and upright is not enough. It is a matter of grasping the mysterious dimensions of our existence.

²⁴ Jn 15, 16

4. Everyone experiences this call because **God has a plan for every individual**. Everyone needs to become aware of this. It is up to us to help each one to develop his vocation with a suitable program: for the lay life, for the priesthood, consecrated life, consecrated secular life. It is true nonetheless that accompaniment towards the priesthood and the consecrated life constitutes a special aspect, and we must not level everything down in a too general discussion on vocation.

5. A **direct and explicit work** is needed for vocations of particular consecration or service. They do not arise spontaneously, not even in religious environments. Models of ecclesial vocations are little known, even among young people who have been taught their religion. This is why Dioceses and our own Provinces organize animation programs. And we see that where such a service is functioning things go better, always supposing that the communities do not delegate to the service what they can and should be doing themselves. We must avoid falling into genericism by no longer distinguishing the different kinds of calls or appeals which Jesus himself has made.

6. **Every community**, and in them every member, must be deeply involved according to his possibilities in the discovery and helping of vocations. The effort of a "recruiter", or delegate for the purpose, is totally insufficient and gives no guarantee as regards either quantity or authenticity.

Beyond its inadequacy for achieving the desired result, what is at stake is the continuity of the mission of the community and of the individual. Each community represents Don Bosco in the context in which it lives and works and is delegated to continue his charism and mission. It is a mere excuse to say that our mission can be passed on to lay people, or to programme our own extinction even for religious motives.

God will say what our fate shall be; but it is important that it be not influenced either by our own negligence or by mistaken choices, such as that of failing to put to young people

forms of a deeply committed Christian life and the radical following of Christ.

7. Young people feel the need of a **direct experience and contact** with the realities involved in vocational choice. In this sense an important part is played by the environment in which the young person is committed: there models can be found, values can be tested, friendships made and especially responsibilities practised which are typical of ecclesial vocations. Our parishes, schools, oratories and volunteer groups must become communities where ministries at the service of a mission are experienced and an encounter with Christ is fostered.

8. Many vocations, as we have said, now mature at an age older than used to be the case, and that means a **longer period of accompaniment**. A vocation-based catechesis should really begin in childhood or adolescence; but the work must not be abandoned when the young people enter the university or similar environments. The average age of those entering the novitiate at present varies from 21 to 27 years.

As well as being longer, the accompaniment must also be more consistent as regards faith and Christian practice. It must correspond to the intellectual development of the young person, to the questions to which life and society give rise in his mind. Two Encyclicals of John Paul II – *Veritatis Splendor* and *Fides et Ratio* – give us an idea of the questions of ways of thinking and attitudes to life about which young people hear the most widely differing opinions, all put forward with the greatest assurance and in the name of the right of the individual to think and express himself.

There are situations where follow-up is necessary. It is clear, in fact, that ways of thinking and attitudes to life, if not enlightened and guided by the Gospel, are a hindrance to subsequent vocational decisions and block the road to be followed. For this reason in the concluding document of the congress on vocations in Europe there are many proposals for a decidedly

Christian focus: to present Christ as a project for man, to invite him to the *sequela*, cultivate the primacy of the Spirit, foster evangelical radicalism as a prophecy, and provide spiritual direction.

9. The connection with a **community setting** is indispensable. No one has a vocation to solitude and isolation. And so even the local Churches are recommended to organize the community so that it is rich in ministries or services for the mission.

In recent years we too have been able to draw some useful conclusions, as we observe the percentage of young people who have been called who have had the experience of the salesian educative community, of the group, of a youth community, or of voluntary service. .

To contact with the educative community is at present being added the *experience of life in the salesian community* for young people who have already moved a certain distance along the way.

The criterion to be followed is: "*Come and see*". For a short or longer time these young people take part in the prayer, planning and realization of work, and in the community life. It goes without saying that it is a matter of selected communities, which show themselves capable of providing this welcoming acceptance. But in several Provinces an effort is being made to increase their number. The ideal is that every community could be a setting for vocational experience.

10. In the journey of faith there are some **experiences which are particularly revealing** as regards the characteristics and demands of vocation, and which help vocations to mature more rapidly. We can include in these commitment in pastoral work, learning how to pray, further reflection on the faith, work in the volunteer movement, and retreats. In such experiences the religious dimension is felt more directly. They are called significant experiences precisely because of their in-

tensity, and they should never be omitted from a vocational program.

11. In many cases an **explicit invitation** is needed. Today's social environment does not encourage a religious vocation. Its relevance and social significance at the present day is limited; models to refer to for imagining how life will be in the distant future are confusing if not discouraging. To some extent the Church, considered as an institution, is presented as the heir to a past era of intellectual and moral servitude.

The young person may desire to make a commitment, but he is drawn naturally to movements and causes more popular at the present day: peace, ecology, the poor. It needs the strong attraction of Christ to point in a different direction. And here lies our test as pastors and educators of the young.

The young person, moreover, often fails to recognize that he has the requirements needed for a vocation of special service or consecration. The disciples felt themselves captivated by Jesus, but to understand that they could become his followers they had to hear the invitation: "Follow me!"

In conversations with our young confreres we find that for nearly all of them there was someone who made the proposal to them, who gave them a call. It makes us wonder how many of them would not have come without this providential invitation, and how many in fact have not joined us because no one gave them the call or even raised the question.

12. Accompaniment or spiritual direction becomes necessary. This had been already stated in the vocational congress of 1982, which recalled the words of Paul VI: "No vocation matures without a spiritual director who follows it up".

But we can take the expression "spiritual director" not in its technical sense but with a broader meaning, referring to someone capable of doing the following-up – provided that this person knows the subject's background and the demands of the spiritual life and is able to lead the young person towards new

goals in the life of grace. And here perhaps we touch on another weak point: our ability to illustrate and be enthusiastic as we indicate stages and requirements, inviting the subject to reach out to more demanding goals, correcting what is not conformable to God and helping him to accept everything that makes space for God in life, with a periodic review of the progress made. We need spiritual guides who are not only understanding but positive in their approach and experts in the spiritual life.

All this was found also in the concluding document of the congress on vocations in Europe, to which I have already referred. The young person feels the need to match up many points of faith with the ideas and suggestions that come to him from his surroundings. He needs someone to talk to. He needs to clarify some aspects of Christian morality. He needs support and guidance. Especially, since he does not have the experience of the path of grace and the possibilities inherent in a life in Christ, he needs someone to open these horizons to him.

It is a recognized fact that around certain spiritual directors, certain centres of spirituality, and certain experiences of faith, candidates are appearing for the priestly, consecrated and committed lay lives.

We are in the same situation as everyone else. In some places we are living through the trial of sterility. But at least we have the advantage that we already work for young people. We carry out an activity in education which is tailor-made for a vocational approach. We have, in the educative communities, environments which can offer an exciting stimulus; and we can even extend the offers of involvement and apostolic work beyond our own foundations.

The SYM of the year 2000 should express itself in volunteer groups and in groups for prayer, reflection on the faith, and cultural development, all of which can be fertile fields for fostering vocations. If it is not our destiny to reap them, let us at least sow the seeds abundantly.

2. THE SALESIAN COMMUNITY: SETTING FOR VOCATIONAL EXPERIENCE AND PROPOSALS.

After this brief analysis of the vocations situation, which makes no pretence at being complete, and some general suggestions for pastoral work, let us now refer more directly to the theme which will be the object of our coming Chapter, to reflect on what elements of the community can become part of the vocational invitation.

When we think of the origin of our Congregation and Family, from which salesian expansion began, we find first of all **a community**, which was not only visible, but indeed quite unique, almost like a lantern in the darkness of night: **Valdocco**, the home of a novel community and a pastoral setting that was widely known, extensive and open. Among those making their way there through interest or curiosity were eminent persons of the civic and political world, fervent Christians and ecclesiastics who saw in it a religious revival, and bishops from round the world.

Such a community gave rise to a new culture, not in an academic sense but in that of a new style of relationship between youngsters and educators, between laity and priests, between artisans and students, a relationship which had its effect on the area and on the city itself. And if we can believe what was written at the time, it was a culture that caused raised eyebrows which eventually caused doubts to arise about Don Bosco's mental health.

Furthermore there were new educational initiatives: well known examples include the hostel for boys going daily to work in the city, the teaching of arts and crafts, and the kind of life that was built up.

All this had as its root and *raison d'être* the faith and pastoral charity, which tried to create from within a family spirit, and led to a deep affection for God and our Lady.

The term "religion" in the familiar description of the preventive system was by no means a formality. It included the invitation to undertake a life in God, as we are reminded by the episode of Michael Magone in tears, and to guiding able youngsters on the road to sanctity, as we see from Don Bosco's conversation with Dominic Savio.

This roused in the youngsters desires to belong to so unique a community and to take part in so novel a work. An opportune word from some Salesian or from Don Bosco himself was then a help in reaching a decision.

In this way the Salesian Congregation was made up initially and to a great extent from members of the Oratory, boys who had already had an educative experience with Don Bosco and in his house.

Will our present-day communities be able to produce a similar phenomenon, albeit on a smaller scale?

In this work of Don Bosco for vocations **certain important elements** appear which can throw light on our reflection, even though the language and setting are of the cultural and theological context of his own time.

He takes special care to plant and develop seeds of a vocation in the youngsters. He does not trust to chance but collaborates actively in making God's gift perceived.

With a great variety of means and initiatives, he builds up a suitable environment, in which suggestions about vocation can be favourably received and reach maturity; a central element of this environment is the *family spirit*, being made to feel at home, welcomed and appreciated.

He promotes an *intense spiritual atmosphere* which leads to a personal relationship with Jesus, to frequenting of the sacraments, to devotion to Mary, and to a kind of prayer that leads to an ever deeper rooting in the heart and in life of a personal acceptance of God's plan. The same line was followed in the brief recommendations to foster vocations.

It helps to *purify and mature the motives* for the choice of a state of life, centering them in the glory of God and the salvation of souls, through experiences of generous and enthusiastic commitment to the salvation of the young.

Don Bosco takes great care, moreover, to be the *animator and spiritual guide* of the boys who show signs of a vocation, particularly through confession, but also by making it easy for them to meet and converse with him. In this ministry one of the most striking elements is his great prudence in discernment which enables him to guide candidates with realism and awareness of the spiritual requirements.

Underlying it all is his deeply rooted conviction that every success in the vocational field is to be attributed to God and the motherly protection of Mary Help of Christians. And so he recommends to everyone constant and fervent prayer for vocations.

The intensity of Don Bosco's work in favour of vocations, which we have spoken of, emphasizes his sense of fidelity to the Church and his readiness to be surprised at the generosity of the young. It enables us to understand why he insists so much that we all work hard together to obtain for the Church those great treasures which are vocations.²⁵

The vocational movement is no different at the present day, even though we recognize that it is felt less intensely by the Christian community itself. People go to where they feel attracted. Certainly it will not be because of our organization, nor because of our service and work, that young people nowadays will feel attracted to the consecrated life, but because of the depth of the religious element. "The Lord added to their number those who were being saved", says the Acts of the Apostles,²⁶ as we recalled earlier. There is a close connection between the signs expressed by the community, those of

²⁵ cf. *Le vocazioni nella Famiglia Salesiana*. IX Week of Spirituality of the Salesian Family. January 1982. LDC, Turin 1982, p.145-183

²⁶ cf. Acts 2, 48

meeting together for the *fractio panis* and placing everything in common, and the voice of God speaking in the hearts of potential members. This is the profile of the vocational process.

It will be useless for us to offer lay or secular communities to young people who are looking for the sense and warm experience of God, to those who have begun to appreciate the Gospel and want to live it with greater intensity. We must offer them ourselves as a setting where they can experience the Gospel!

The logic of "Come and see"²⁷

Modern culture is very sensitive to signs and witnesses, to trials and experiences, and much less to words and promises.

Nowadays vocational proposals occur in the evangelical style of "*Come and see*". This was also the process Don Bosco followed, as we have said. He wanted to show to young people a form of Christian life which would make them happy. And so he took care to see that there reigned in the Oratory a great happiness and a family style that attracted young hearts.

An important objective is to build a salesian community which makes visible the values of the religious life embodied in the confreres, and manifests the motives for the educational options and commitments; a community in which the joy of fellowship and of the family spirit is felt, which is able to communicate by its own life experience, rather than in words; a community capable of enveloping others in its atmosphere and even more in its history, because it gives an effective account of what it is doing, e.g. its meetings with missionaries; a community that shares with others its moments of prayer, that bears witness by its particular experiences and activities, and especially by its style of life.

There was a time when it used to be said that a commu-

²⁷ cf. Jn 1, 39

nity would be ruined once it became lax. Nowadays it is said that we are living in a time of mystics and prophets and that much more must be done to ensure the future of religious life. After Vatican II, Institutes in general have made great efforts at doctrinal, structural and operational renewal, but not on this account do young people join them. The problem is not to be found so much in their rectitude and observance, as in that "something extra" which attracts; not in the normal upright style of life which serves to preserve things as they are, but in the extra something which forms part of prophecy, of significance, of basic values; or in what might be called the "warm experience" which gives rise to inspirations and the desire for a life commitment.

The vocational force of community life.

It is easy to see that consecrated life has lost its visibility in some parts either because of the strong secularization of the surroundings, or sometimes because of the decision of those who did not want to stand out as "religious men" and had concentrated only on the "human" value of their option.

Even Christians do not always understand the significance of consecration and even less the meaning and value of consecrated life. Frequently the latter is reduced to a greater willingness for the service of others; its witness to the primacy of God and its prophetic significance get lost.

This too has been a focal point in reflection on the religious life: it is asked what contribution is made by the witness and specific activity of a religious person in the fields of health, education, or social service as compared with what is done by upright lay people.

The Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* frequently repeats the urgent need to give visibility to consecrated life: "Their lifestyle too must clearly show the ideal which they profess, and thus present itself as a living sign of God and as an

eloquent, even if often silent, proclamation of the Gospel".²⁸

"Young people will not be deceived: when they come to you, they want to see what they do not see elsewhere. An immense task awaits you in the future: in a special way young consecrated persons, by witnessing to their consecration, can lead their contemporaries to a renewal of their lives. An impassioned love of Jesus Christ is a powerful attraction for those other young people whom Christ in his goodness is calling to follow him closely and for ever. Our contemporaries want to see in consecrated persons the joy that comes from being with the Lord".²⁹

In the meeting of Superiors General of May 1999, we asked ourselves about the ability of our young people to understand in what way ours is a *sequela Christi*. We reflected especially on the ways or forms of life that can evoke in the minds of the young the image of a gospel lifestyle. It is evident in fact that neither external solemnity nor normal daily life means very much to them. Here are *some elements* that should characterize our communities and *make visible their consecrated life*.

a. *Show the joy of brotherhood and of the family style of life.*

The most efficacious environment for the discovery and guidance of vocations is the family atmosphere of welcome and faith, created by the testimony of a community which gives of itself with joy.³⁰ Witness of this kind arouses in the young the desire to know and follow the salesian vocation.³¹ This is what our Constitutions tell us.

We must *make more visible the fact that we are a religious community that lives and works together*. It often happens that youngsters never meet a community of persons, but only individual Salesians who work on their own.

²⁸ VC 25

²⁹ VC 109

³⁰ cf. C. 37

³¹ cf. C. 16

It is well to remember that the salesian mission is never an individual fact but is always the expression of a community. Don Bosco himself thought at once of a group of collaborators and was much concerned about the unity of his Congregation. Even today young people need to see Jesus through a united fraternal and joyful community. This means that we have to give attention to our personal relationships and brotherly communication. In a world which is divided and torn apart, in a society of mass dimensions in which individuals are often treated as so many mere numbers, the witness of evangelical brotherhood offered by our communities can become ever more significant and effective.

b. Testify to the joy of vocation.

“No one will be able to take your joy from you”, said Jesus.³² We are called upon to live and communicate the experience of having received a gift: “O Lord, you have enticed me, and I was enticed”,³³ “Christ Jesus has made me his own”.³⁴ “*Vidimus Dominum*”. We have experienced a meeting, a revelation, a “vision” of the Lord.

“The eager enthusiasm of this experience must not grow less as we grow older or acquire deep-rooted habits. It is destined rather to increase and fill the whole of life. If it fell short, religious life would lose its motivation and be drawn into functionalism, i.e. into nothing beyond the correct fulfilment of one’s duties. What would happen to us would be what takes place in old couples who continue to live together in peace, but do not expect either anything new nor further happiness”.³⁵

We must examine ourselves to discover whether tiredness or some disappointment has taken from us, if not the will to live our consecration seriously, perhaps the conviction and ini-

³² Jn 16, 23

³³ Jer 20, 7

³⁴ Phil 3, 12

³⁵ AGC 365, pag.15

tiative to present our lives to others in an effective manner. This joy and enthusiasm should lead us to overcome in our daily life and our relationships with the young and with people in general the inclination to make the minimum of effort, a kind of leveling down, and to proclaim instead reasons for satisfaction, for contentment, for hope, rather than for displeasure, ill-humour and discouragement.

c. *Show, in our manner of life, the human and educative value of the evangelical counsels.*³⁶

Nowadays there is much insistence on the anthropological significance of the counsels: they do not put limitations on the individual, but open a much wider field to his aspirations and energy. "The decision to follow the counsels", we read in the Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, "far from involving an impoverishment of truly human values, leads instead to their transformation. (...) Thus, while those who follow the evangelical counsels seek holiness for themselves, they propose, so to speak, a spiritual "therapy" for humanity, because they reject the idolatry of anything created and in a certain way they make visible the living God".³⁷

This demands of us an effort to live them not only honestly and faithfully, but also in attentive dialogue with today's culture, so that their humanizing value can clearly appear, especially to young people.

Our Constitutions emphasize this *educative value* in the vows: "Obedience leads to maturity by extending the freedom of the sons of God".³⁸ "The witness of our poverty, lived in a common sharing of our goods, helps the young to overcome their selfish possessive instinct and opens them to the Christian sense of sharing".³⁹ "Through chastity we bear witness to the predilection of Christ for the young; it allows us to love

³⁶ cf. C. 62-63

³⁷ VC 87

³⁸ C. 67

³⁹ C. 73

them in an open and uncomplicated way, so that they know they are loved, and it enables us to educate them to love and to purity".⁴⁰

How are we to translate these values in the reality of our community life?⁴¹ How can we make the evangelical counsels become a novel part of education? If religious working in this field had only more time available than their lay counterparts, or possessed better structures, they would contribute little of substance to the work. The frequently recurring question about the specific value of their presence in education would be justified. It is our duty, as individuals and communities, to see to it that our *sequela Christi* becomes a force, a lesson and educative plan that is not generic but specific: regarding the attitude towards material goods and their use in a time dictated by wealth and economics; regarding attitudes towards sexuality and love, and the meaning of freedom at a time when the principle of pleasure and individual choice is the order of the day; and regarding relationship with God throughout life at a time when some aspects of religious belief are absent or "disembodied".

This prophetic value is also shown when we make statements about the great themes of human history and the world of youth, intervening to create evangelical opinion on reality and current situations. Our profession must become the proclamation, serene but decisive, of the benefits the Gospel proposes with respect to sexuality, riches and freedom.

d. Spiritually animate a broad educative community.

This means being signs of God and educators to a personal relationship with him⁴² for young and old, individuals and institutions.

The most evident expression of our presence as conse-

⁴⁰ C. 81

⁴¹ cf. also GC24, 152 and AGC 363, p.36-37

⁴² cf. C. 62; GC24, 151 and 159

crated persons in education is the orientation of all – teachers and pupils – towards the Father. Our consecration is an invitation to rethink and realize the implication of *evangelizing by educating* – a formula in which *evangelizing* indicates the purpose and *educating* the overall way we choose.

Communities capable of communicating and sharing salesian spirituality, of creating environments with a strong evangelical quality, of encouraging young people towards sanctity, of offering to educative communities motives and experiences which animate and encourage them despite their limitations and difficulties: these are the kind of communities we have in mind today, open and with initiative, and not lacking in an identity and visible dimension: just in fact like Valdocco.

Nowadays many younger and older lay people want to see and take part in our prayer and work. We must arrange matters so that it is possible to pray with young people, share moments of fellowship and programming with lay collaborators and even bring some of the likely young people in with us for a temporary experience of community life.

In this way our community “becomes a leaven giving rise to new vocations after the example of the first community of Valdocco”.⁴³

This openness can be achieved in various ways and at different complementary levels: through a welcoming community environment attentive to the quality of personal relationships; with special moments of communion and sharing between us, cutting down if necessary on other occupations and services, as a sign of the importance of community life; by always speaking positively to the young and lay people about our community life, our confreres and our common plans. It is effectively achieved also: by sharing as a community in the work and life of the neighbourhood community; by taking part in the more important events in the life of the local area, and giving our generous

⁴³ C. 57

collaboration; by offering to the young and to lay people moments of sharing in which all the confreres take an active part; by also fostering the external image of our own work and that of the Congregation, and other similar initiatives.

Pastoral action of the community.

In addition to representing salesian life and offering themselves as places for spiritual experience, our communities carry out an educational and pastoral activity. In this connection there are some points to keep in mind lest we lose our aim and miss the mark.

To help in living our own vocation, to give rise to vocations to special consecration, is – as we have said – one of the *objectives of the mission of the Congregation* and is therefore an essential dimension in every foundation, project or pastoral action: it constitutes the *highpoint of our educative and pastoral activity*, and is the force that gives direction, unity and authenticity. It is like the main axis of the whole process, in each of its stages.

The guarantor for this commitment is the salesian community, as responsible for the authenticity of the educative project, and with it the EPC, properly motivated and instructed by its animating nucleus.⁴⁴

One of the features distinguishing between Provinces which have a certain number of vocations, as far as circumstances permit, and those which still remain sterile, is the presence in the Province of active communities which pay particular attention to spotting boys and young men with special aptitudes, following them up as they mature, and finally calling them. Where the communities have delegated this work to a single confrere, the results are poor.

Where all are committed to this task, including those with a particular talent for such work, we are gathering at least the

⁴⁴ cf. GC24, 252

little that every foundation should be able to give. Today, especially in northern and western parts of the world – but the phenomenon is extending more and more – there are no places where large numbers of vocations are to be found. In every setting we must gather in those whom God puts in our path: they will differ widely in age, condition, religious background, personal history, and contact with the Congregation.

This concern for vocation is a *fundamental service* in the first place for every young person, so that he may discern God's plan for him and so fulfil his life to the full: in this sense it aims at developing in him availability for taking up his life as a gift and service, for discovering his hidden qualities and awakening his responsibilities towards others.

It is also a service to the Church. The latter becomes a sign and instrument of salvation to the extent that every baptized person brings to it new possibilities and energy. And so every Christian must be helped to discover the riches of the vocation to holiness and to share the responsibility for the Church's mission in the world.

And finally it is a service to the salesian charism, the legacy we have received from God for the Church and for the young.

For its authenticity and development we bear the responsibility. This charism unites us in the Salesian Family, of which the different groups mutually enrich each other through the exchange of the different ways of living it, each of them bringing an original contribution to the whole. We joyfully try to communicate to others the different forms (religious, priestly, secular, male, female) for taking up salesian spirituality, by fostering together the vocational call.⁴⁵

From what we have said can be seen the *close link between youth pastoral work and vocational guidance*, which we must consciously establish and translate into action.

⁴⁵ GC24, 143

Youth pastoral work is aimed from the outset at a particular objective: to make the believer attentive to the Lord's call and ready to respond to it. To make all pastoral work "vocational" means making its every expression lead the individual to discover the gift of God in his life – faith, membership of the Church, the particular talents he has received, his particular vocation and mission – and help him to recognize it, develop it, and place it at the service of the community.

Following the fundamental objective stated above, work with the young in all our foundations should ***give priority to certain options***.

In the first place I would put *preferential attention to people*, rather than to the implementation of previously prepared programs, the transmission of intellectual content, overriding concern about administration or the maintenance of structures. Attention to people means approaching them, getting to know them, making friends with them, and encouraging them to adopt a life plan.

Alongside this should be placed the *priority of evangelization*, making Christ known to young people, motivating them to allow themselves to be enlightened and questioned by him, directing them to meet him and to an ever more convinced acceptance of the meaning of life which he reveals. This is linked with a unified and progressive process of education which helps to personalize the faith and gospel values; this is well described by the GC23 which starts from the encounter with Christ and shows, with plenty of suggestions, how to start the young on the way to a commitment for the Kingdom.⁴⁶

In such a process the active participation of the young people themselves is important; they must be encouraged to reflect and ask questions, urged to express themselves and give full play to the desire to try themselves out and not hesitate to live in conformity with the radical demands of the Gospel.

⁴⁶ cf. GC23, 149-156

It can happen that under the pressure of a multitude of activities, concerned about structures and busy about organization, we run the risk of losing sight of the horizon of our activity and appearing like so many activists or grass-roots theorists, managers of works or structures, admirable benefactors but poor as explicit witnesses to Christ, mediators of his saving work, formers of souls, and guides in the life of grace.

It is urgently necessary at the present day that in all our foundations primacy is given to evangelization, through a clear and explicit manifestation of our evangelical motivation, the effective proclamation of the person of Jesus, direct and pedagogically prepared contact with the Word of God, moments of celebration and of personal and community prayer, meetings and meaningful communication with believers and Christian communities or with those seeking the right path.

It must also be emphasized that the vocational guidance of which we are speaking is given ***following certain criteria***: we must not limit ourselves exclusively to seeking candidates for a certain kind of life, but – without neglecting a specific type of vocational pastoral work – set about rather *providing a guidance service for every young person*; fostering in both ecclesial and civic settings a *vocational culture*, i.e. a vision of life as gift and service rather than an excessive desire for self-fulfilment, as though all one's personal efforts should be directed to self-aggrandizement; we must suggest and develop some *fundamental human and evangelical attitudes* for making a responsible choice about a form of service, as an ability for self giving, for relationship and dialogue, for collaboration and sharing. Finally we must open up the vocational panorama of the Church, not least through meetings and contacts and a detailed knowledge of some outstanding witnesses.

We can also include some ***particularly important points*** to prevent our pastoral activity being mistaken as regards the intention, spirit and vocational objective which must guide it.

- *Every salesian community bears the first and main responsibility for the vocational animation of the young people with whom it is working. I repeat that vocational guidance is not the duty of only certain confreres who have received this special task, but an essential dimension of the educative and pastoral activity of the whole community and of every Salesian, as we were reminded by the GC23.*⁴⁷

The young must experience the salesian community not only as a group working to provide a service for their benefit, but especially as a fervent community of faith, wanting to pass on its own unique experience and making its own vocation contagious: this is the first and most efficacious way to promote vocations.

- *Let us never neglect to pray constantly for vocations and to want them.* This is the lesson of Jesus and his reaction in the face of the crowd following him and the small group of apostles who would have to collaborate with him in the mission. Before sending them out, he asked them to pray to the Father that he would multiply the workers: "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest'. Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness".⁴⁸

The community which does not pray unceasingly for vocations, involving others in praying for the same intention and especially the young, cannot live to the full the apostolic mandate of Christ.

The Diocese of Rome has experienced a big change in its vocational situation. At its centre it has Thursday as a day of

⁴⁷ cf. GC23, 247ff

⁴⁸ Mt 9,36 - 10,1

prayer for vocations in which the young also take part. Certainly the Lord asks us to do something about matters ourselves, but that night the Apostles spent the whole time fishing without him proved only tiring and fruitless!

– *And then we must be practical and positive.* Sometimes we have a certain reserve, a kind of fear as to what kind of reception we might get if we talk about vocations, or we may be moved by a false respect for the freedom of the young. This prevents us from putting clear and explicit proposals to them, while they are hearing them in abundance from the environment, often with little educative meaning. We get lost in the initial stage of the process and we end up with a rather general sort of Christian formation, like an impersonal *new age* with little encouragement and accompaniment for those who are avidly seeking and aiming at the highest goals.

Fr Egidio Viganò wrote: “Silent testimony and implicit invitations are not always sufficient to awaken vocations. (...) There has been unfortunately, and maybe it still lingers on in some confreres, a doubt or negligence about giving appropriate open expression to personal invitations. Failure to do so becomes, in fact, a pernicious ‘vocational silence’; one might even speak of cowardice or unawareness in respect of one’s own ministry, because a young Christian has an objective right to know of the Church’s vocational possibilities”.⁴⁹

Practical and positive too should be the care given to situations where the clear and joyful living of Christ’s project is expressed in different vocational options, with a positive attitude to the world of the young, the poor, and human values; elements of spirituality are offered to those able to accept them, such as initiation to prayer, to listening to the Word, and to participation in the sacraments, the liturgy and Marian devotion; groups and associations of the Salesian Youth Movement are promoted as settings where Christian and vocational maturing is fostered,

⁴⁹ AGC 339, p.29

and where experience can be gained of commitment, gratuitous self-giving and volunteer work. The fostering of ecclesial and liturgical ministries is not overlooked, such as altar-servers, animators, readers and liturgy guides for assemblies, and a personal invitation to cultivate one's vocation through participation in some community connected with vocations.

– In a context of first evangelization or of re-evangelization special importance attaches to the effectiveness of the Church (and hence of our participation) in the *animation of the Christian community* which should make its presence felt in the neighbourhood, and in particular among young people. If it seems practical and close to the young from a social, cultural and religious standpoint, vocational proposals become more viable. Hence the need for the formation and development of a robust group of responsible Christians able to put forward specific suggestions which are serious and demanding.

Follow-up.

Follow-up, or accompaniment, has been found to be decisive in the educative and pastoral process which is centred on the young person. Particularly is this the case in the salesian educative system, founded on the presence of the educator among the pupils and on a personal relationship based on mutual knowledge and interest, and on understanding and trust.

At this Don Bosco was a master without compare. The main ways of his guidance were to make contact with the youngster in the latter's own setting, and then educative conversation, spiritual direction, and sacramental contact.

In our own times much emphasis has been laid on the urgent need for follow-up through a valid counsellor, on account of the complexity of the problems young people have to face and of the personal attention they consequently need.

It is desirable, therefore, to go beyond the normal run of work (valid and indispensable though it undoubtedly is) and

follow-up each individual according to the level he has reached, and especially those who give signs of a desire and willingness to make further progress in education in the faith. This is something that is a challenge to our own preparation.

We know how to teach catechism; but do we also know something of the pathways of grace, so that we can point out habits to be avoided and others to be acquired? Do we take the time to guide those who desire it in the spiritual life, and not be content with basic religious knowledge? Don Bosco was able to give Dominic Savio pointers for a journey to holiness: how do we feel in such a connection?

To avoid all misunderstandings and for peace of mind, it is well to remember that when we speak of follow-up or accompaniment we are not talking only about individual dialogue; we are referring to a whole web of personal relationships which help the young person to interiorize the values and experiences he lives through, to adapt general proposals to his own particular situation, and to clarify and deepen his motivation and criteria.

In this way follow-up includes the whole educative environment provided by the salesian community to foster the interiorization of educative proposals, and with them vocational growth, presence among the young with the intention to get to know them and share their life – with all this promoted by the whole community and by every confrere; it leads to the growth of groups where the young are followed up by an animator and encouraged by their own companions.

An important field for follow-up, available to nearly all confreres consists of those brief occasional contacts which show an interest in the individual and his world; attention to certain moments of special significance for the youngster; moments of regular personal dialogue following a pre-designed plan concerning a simple but challenging plan of life; and contact with the salesian community to learn from it and share its life of prayer, community life and style of apostolate.

To which of these options should we give priority so that in

our works there may be this overriding attention to individuals, with various opportunities for contact and personal dialogue?

Some areas for special attention.

For some time now, and after more than a little confusion in thought and action, the distinction has been recognized between vocational pastoral work in general (i.e. for everyone), and specific vocational pastoral work, i.e. the kind that tries to discover and accompany vocations of special significance in building the Kingdom.

We must promote all vocations in the Church. But today, says the document "New vocations for a new Europe", there are some vocations which call for special attention on our part. In a time like our own, in need of prophecy, it is wise to foster those vocations which are a particular sign of 'what we shall be (which) has not yet been revealed'⁵⁰, like vocations to special consecration.

It is wise and indispensable to foster the special prophetic aspect of every Christian vocation, including the lay vocation, so that before the world the Church may be ever more the sign of the future, of that Kingdom which is 'already with us and is yet still to come'⁵¹.

– *The vocation to consecrated life*

Our society, and often the Christian community itself, does not have an adequate knowledge of the religious life, so as to understand its meaning and value.

Our way of living the consecrated life has lost visibility and in several aspects seems incomprehensible. This is something that becomes more disturbing in face of the growing presence of laity in the Church and, for us, in the salesian mission. It is true that these lay people can contribute a great deal, but

⁵⁰ 1 Jn 3, 2

⁵¹ cf. "New vocations for a new Europe", n. 22

it is equally true that Don Bosco wanted at the centre of his Family a community of consecrated persons.

The salesian vocational proposal, nowadays more than in the past, requires that we live and present, in fidelity to Don Bosco's project, a model of the consecrated person which is meaningful for the young and which brings out the fundamental aspects of consecrated life, rather than its ministerial or functional characteristics.

It is not enough to talk about Don Bosco and the salesian mission; we must also indicate the importance and value that, in Don Bosco's plan, life in God has, as the specific reference point for the charism. "Don Bosco wanted consecrated persons at the centre of his work, persons oriented to the young and their holiness (...); with their total dedication he could give the solidity and apostolic thrust needed for the continuity and worldwide extension of the mission".⁵²

– The vocation to lay and family life

Our educative and pastoral activity is frequently not very direct as regards vocational opportunities. It seems as though we are concerned only about certain special options of life, and that we do not consider lay and family life as a true vocation.

Many young people who are both committed and open, engaged and young married couples, university students and young workers, ask us to accompany them with more attention at the moments when they are searching for and making their vocational choice. For this reason Youth Pastoral Work and vocational animation must present to these young people the different vocational models in the Church, giving proper value to the vocational option for lay and family life. We ourselves must give greater value to Christian matrimony as a true vocation and commit ourselves to accompanying the young people in their process of discerning and maturing in this option.

⁵² GC24, 150

– Young adults: animators and volunteer workers

There are young people who generously share in many aspects of the salesian mission; they have an authentic will for service and are looking for a life project that is meaningful for them, even if they still have to set about realizing their early dreams. We have to help them so that their experience of animation or volunteer work may have a vocational aspect and encourage them to think about their life according to the Gospel and God's plan for them.

This puts on us an obligation to enable each of them to deepen the faith and reflect on their own experiences of animation, by offering them practical opportunities of personal follow-up and making it easier for them to take part in special occasions of spirituality and Christian life. It can sometimes happen that we are more concerned about the service they provide than about them and their vocational development.

– Families

Another group of people that I think it important to link in with vocational animation are families. For a variety of reasons and many different situations, many of them – even Christian families – find it difficult to understand, respect, encourage and promote the vocational choice of their children. They often think of their future using criteria which are different from, if not opposed to, evangelical values with a vocational dimension. For this reason it is important that on our part we should know and interest ourselves in the family experience lived by our young people, accompany and help the parents in their responsibility as educators in the faith, deepen with them their sense of vocation and get them involved in the educative and pastoral process being offered to their children. There are some wonderful examples in the Congregation of families which meet together to support the vocation of their children by prayer and support; these are initiatives we should encourage!

"The angel declared unto Mary"

I finish, as always, with a Marian reference.

Among biblical vocations, that of Mary is not only the most crucial in the whole of history, but also the one most clear and simple. The story is built up with references from the Bible which recall ancient hopes, express present expectations and anticipate dreams of man's salvation. Mary, who personifies the whole of humanity, feels all this in her heart and is called to place herself in God's hands so that it may be realized.

We often pause to think about Mary's words and attitudes, and rightly so. She is the icon of the Church and the model of availability.

In the Annunciation there is *an image of God*. A controversial film has tried to explore it. He is a "personal" God, who follows the vicissitudes of man and saves him by his love through recognizable mediators and actions.

God sends an angel: he communicates with Mary, as in many other places in the Bible through a message and a voice which is heard first interiorly before being heard exteriorly. God makes his designs known to us not only, and maybe not even principally, in solemn moments or with great panoply, but in ordinary life. The annunciation took place at Nazareth, in a private house, to a young espoused maiden living the human experience of love, family and responsibility.

We shall hear God within ourselves as we go through our lives and fulfil our duties. But as we see boys and girls around us, we must be aware that a communication with God is taking place in their hearts too. Mediations are important, but in the history of salvation God has often done without them, as in the case of Abraham, of Samuel, and of Mary. And this may be one of the experiences of the *Forum 2000* and of the *World Day of Youth*. The Lord had preceded us in the mind and desires of many young people.

God also has the mysterious power of making fruitful what

to the human eye is sterile, limited or lost. And it is not an ordinary fruitfulness but one that is rare and precious, from which the children of God have taken their origin.

This is an invitation to review our faith in the action and power of the Spirit. Just as a virgin can conceive a son, so our apparently sterile world can be fertile – through the action of the Spirit – with possibilities of which we hardly dare to dream.

Often we pause to examine the soul of Mary through her words and behaviour so as to discover something behind the external appearance. We understand that the most important and mysterious thing takes place in her heart and mind. Her conversation with the angel, whether it was a revelation, a vision, the hearing of a voice or just internal inspiration, is something private that remains hidden. It certainly involves her own life, a careful discernment of what was echoing within her. It is a trusting dialogue with God about her destiny; it is availability to God's plan; it is an entrustment of herself to him for the realization of what he is now asking of her, for all the intermediate stages and for the final result.

In every life there is an annunciation; indeed there may be many of them, all linked in some way: they propose something new, they provide light for understanding and are an invitation to be open in hope.

The annunciation reminds us that our docile, trusting and continuous response to God is something personal. There is nothing produced by man or woman that has not been conceived and matured interiorly. Thoughts, feelings, desires, plans and events take shape in our heart. There is God's sanctuary. From that sanctuary Mary confesses her intention to remain a virgin, but also her availability, her trust in God.

The Spirit does not work by compulsion nor mechanically but by suggestion, by interior dialogue, by inspiration: he takes all the time necessary to perform calmly, at human pace, a work that is complete and well ordered.

This too is our road and the one we want to help our young people to follow. May Mary grant us to be able to "amplify" and be mediators of the personal word of the Lord which resounds, not always intelligibly, in the heart of the young.

This is the wish I send you together with my fraternal greetings; may reflection on this theme of the coming General Chapter strengthen the vocational capacity of every community and every confrere.

With the protection of Don Bosco and of Mary Help of Christians,

John F. Smith