

# acts

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

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OFFICIAL ORGAN OF ANIMATION AND COMMUNICATION FOR THE SALESIAN CONGREGATION

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anno LXXXVI  
january-march 2005 **N. 388**

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Editrice S.D.B.

Edizione extra commerciale

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*Finito di stampare: gennaio 2005*

«CHRIST LOVED THE CHURCH  
AND GAVE HIMSELF UP FOR HER » (Eph. 5,25)

*Commentary on the Strenna 2005*

The reason. - Rejuvenating the Church: a gift and a task. - A testimony, a model, an image. - Church, the *light of all nations*, mystery and sacrament of salvation. - The Church, at one with the joys and hopes of humanity. - *Union of the Church with the entire human family*. - *To whom is the Council addressed*. - *At the service of men*. - Towards a youthful image of the Church. - *A witnessing Church*. - *A liturgical Church*. - *An evangelizing Church*. - *A serving Church*. - Ecclesial sense in Don Bosco and in Salesian tradition. - For a pedagogy of being Church and living with the Church. - *Making the Church known*. - *Making the meaning of Church more widely known*. - *Gaining experience of Church*. - *Leading others to find vocation in the Church*. - By way of conclusion: like the colours of the rainbow.

Rome, 1 January 2005  
*Solemnity of Mary Mother of God*

My Dear Confreres,

I greet you with all the affection God the Father has for us, giving us his only begotten Son born of Mary through the power of the Spirit.

I do so at the beginning of 2005, in which we shall celebrate the 40th anniversary of the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council, which was a real Pentecost for the Church, called to continually renew itself so as to reflect more faithfully the face of her Lord.

This is the reason why I felt called to propose to the whole Salesian Family as the Strenna, that is, as a real spiritual and pastoral programme for this year, the task of ***rejuvenating the face of the Church***. Someone might ask where this idea came from, what inspired it. Well my reply is twofold. On the one

hand, because travelling around the Congregation throughout the world I become aware of the need there is to recover, where it has been lost and to strengthen where it is weak, affection for the Church, who is *the Mother of our faith*. On the other hand, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, speaking about the action of the Spirit the sanctifier in the life of the Church says that "by the power of the Gospel He makes the Church keep the freshness of youth. Constantly He renews it and leads it to perfect union with its Spouse." (LG4).

I also took the decision, in agreement with the General Council, to present as my circular letter at the beginning of this year my commentary on the Strenna, so as not to multiply messages and to encourage the assimilation of those that are offered. If in some Provinces there is the danger of indigestion from so many documents that are read without leaving time for personal assimilation, in others there is the problem of trying to keep up to date because of the difficulty in translating and presenting to the communities the documents that arrive, so that they struggle when they receive so many documents and consequently often fall behind, which can create a two or three speed Congregation. There is also another factor in favour of this idea, which I consider the most important one, and it is the attempt to offer an annual formation help for the whole Salesian Family to whom the Strenna is addressed, which then helps so strengthen in all the members a sense of belonging to the spiritual and apostolic family of Don Bosco. I am sure that my decision will be well understood and readily accepted by all of you.

This time I don't even provide information about the visits made to the Provinces in these months, although it would be worth doing so since it helps people to know the Congregation better and to appreciate the confreres and what they are doing in many very different contexts. This then throws light on attitudes, customs and behaviour both personal and communitarian that deserve consideration to encourage and launch forward all

the Provinces with Don Bosco's pastoral daring and imagination. I have noticed how in this regard the letters about the Regions are producing what I hoped for: an increase in knowledge of the Congregation and co-responsibility in her progress. It is an effective way of fostering communion and participation.

Among the events in which I have taken part in this period, the most important without doubt was the **World Congress on Consecrated Life** which with the theme "*Passion for God – passion for humanity*", wanted to face up with sincerity and humility to the current situation of a way of life that since the Vatican Council has been going through a process of renewal and which little by little is beginning to indicate the features of her new face. The Congress tried to be open to the newness of the Spirit, which continues to raise up seeds for new growth with forms of life that then become more meaningful intelligible and effective in the evangelisation of culture. The conclusions reached, while being illuminating and providing suggestions for the future, make an appeal to the will for conversion of each and every religious, so as to make clear the *absolute primacy of God* in our life, which is seen in an intense life of dialogue with God in which is nourished the *desire for brotherhood* and the *passion for the salvation* of men. I hope you have had the opportunity and been interested enough to follow the event on the website "*Vidimus Dominum*" which provided a wonderful service for religious around the world. In any case I hope to be able to share with you on another occasion the reflections this Congress offered me and their consequences for Salesian life and mission.

A first opportunity for sharing some thoughts about the Congress I had in the "Good nights" that I gave to the community of the Generalate and to the UPS Vice Province, and in the **Meeting with the Provincials of Europe** held at the Salesianum between 1st and 5th December, to reflect on our Salesian presence in this continent which is going through a quite rapid process of profound changes which provide new opportunities

for Salesian life and mission, and at the same time challenge it and oblige us to make decisions to modify the structures so as to repond more significantly and effectively to the needs of the young. I invite you to read among the documents in section 5 of these Acts the addresses I gave at the beginning and at the end of the meeting, where you will be able to find described both the aims we set ourselves and a summary of the more important conclusions reached. On Sunday 5 December, at the end of the meeting we had the gift and the joy of being able to offer a personal greeting to the Holy Father John Paul II in his house.

I won't expand on the matter as I prefer now to leave the word to the commentary on the Strenna with best wishes for the New Year. May Mary take us by the hand and guide us throughout 2005. From her we shall learn to love the Church as Christ loved her and gave himself for her.

### The reason

There was a man sent by God whose name was Angelo; or rather, whose name was John. Yes, John XXIII, the good Pope who one day was prompted by the Spirit to rise up and proclaim a new Spring for the Church. With an unexpected gesture he not only opened the windows but threw wide the doors as well so that the Spirit could enter. The Second Vatican Council which he convoked was like a cyclone entering unexpectedly into a closed and blocked up environment, "*the rush of a mighty wind*" (Acts 2,2) as in the Cenacle on the day of Pentecost.

On the occasion of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ending of the Second Vatican Council, and in the light of *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes*, which have enabled us to see the Church as a Mystery, the People of God, the Body of Christ, the Mother of believers and Servant of the world, we are conscious as members of the Salesian Family that "it is the Church's task to reflect the light of Christ in every historical period, to make his face shine al-

so before the generations of the new millennium" (NMI 16). And so, reliving that extraordinary event, we commit ourselves to

**Rejuvenate the face of the Church,  
the Mother of our faith.**

**Rejuvenating the Church: a gift and a task**

We could not fail to commemorate with grateful hearts this anniversary of the conclusion of Vatican II, a great event of the Spirit that was a real Pentecost for the universal Church. Already my predecessor, Fr Egidio Viganò had declared that it would be our guiding compass for the third millennium. Today our task is to take up and bring to fruition the dynamism stemming from the Council, an authentic blast of fresh air which filled with the Holy Spirit the lungs of the Church, in whose continued renewal we commit ourselves to collaborate. The Council's Constitutions *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes*, enriched by the recent reflection of *Novo millennio ineunte*, will be our point of reference.

Unlike the previous Strenna this new one will not be followed by a *pastoral proposal*. At the time I explained that such a proposal would be with us for several years; it was impractical to think that the commitments it suggested could be put into effect in a short time. And so for this year too it continues to be the objective and point of reference for the pastoral initiatives to be realised in the different places where the Congregation and the Salesian Family carry out their service to the Church and to the young. This is true to an even greater extent with regard to our commitment for youthful holiness, which finds in our pastoral plan its focus and in the present Strenna a great incentive.

*Rejuvenating the Church* is both an exciting gift and a demanding task; but what does rejuvenating mean? I will begin from the negative point of view of what it does *not* mean. It is

not a matter of a face-lift or cosmetic surgery, such as would be well suited to today's consumer culture of the ephemeral and the transitory, but hardly in harmony with the renewing power of the Spirit. Nor is it a question of making a few external changes or superficial adjustments, so as to make it seem that the Church has been updated to modern times in the manner of other social institutions. To make her beautiful and attractive we have to provide her with new vigour as does the Holy Spirit; we must do what Jesus does: love the Church and spend ourselves for her.

The theme of this year's Strenna is best explained by the passage in the Letter to the Ephesians, which says: "*Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her.... So that he might present her to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish*" (Eph 5,25-27). This beautiful text is both constructive and intriguing; it needs to be studied, contemplated, and lived out. The fundamental meaning is evident: Christ loves the Church, he purifies her, sanctifies her and nourishes her. He loves her out of his goodness and not for his own satisfaction. The Church spoken of here is not an ideal or something abstract but the concrete Church in history. Christ transforms her to make her beautiful, resplendent, true and holy. He takes the initiative in her regard, and spares himself nothing to remove from her every spot and wrinkle.

This is our task: to love the Church as Christ loved her, to the extent of giving ourselves completely for her. The beauty of the Church's countenance must reflect the beauty of her Lord, the Crucified and Risen Christ. It is the beauty of the love revealed to us by Jesus in his passion, "the fairest of the sons of men" (Ps 45,3), "a man of sorrows, despised and rejected by men" (Is 53,3), "by whose stripes we are healed" (Is 53,5c). It is the beauty of the love that in the resurrection could roll back the stone that closed the tomb and sit upon it, with the cloths that



were wrapped round the crucified one left on the ground and the veil covering the face folded and set aside, thus inaugurating the new creation (Mk 16,2; Jn 20,6-7). This is the beauty that will save the world and that we are called upon to make shine out in the Church. It is not vanity; it is the beauty of love.

Our task is also to bring it about that the Church resembles ever more the “*new Jerusalem*” (cf. *Rev 21, 10-23*), coming down from heaven and adorned like a bride for her husband; to ensure that she may be a community renewed by the breath of the Spirit which animates her and makes everything new; a community enriched by multiple charisms and ministries which keep it alive and dynamic; a community open and welcoming, especially to the poor, to whom it is sent and among whom it becomes credible and a beacon of light; a community that lives passionately for freedom, justice, peace and solidarity – values to which men and women of today are particularly sensitive; a community which is the leaven of hope for a society worthy of man and for a culture rich in ethical and spiritual values, to ensure that the Church becomes ever more a youthful Church, in which young people feel themselves at home as in a family.

The new Jerusalem “is an image that speaks of an eschatological reality, that is, one that touches on the last things, that goes beyond what man can do by his own efforts. This heavenly Jerusalem is a gift of God reserved for the end of time. But it is not a Utopia. It is a reality that can begin to exist here and now... Wherever there is an effort to speak and work for peace and reconciliation, even temporary, in every kind of human community life corresponding to the values of the Gospel, there is a break through which even now gives grounds for hope”.<sup>1</sup>

*Rejuvenating the Church* means making her return to her original youthful state; like the Churches of the Acts of the

<sup>1</sup> C.M. MARTINI, *Perché la Bibbia è il libro del futuro dell'Europa?*, Cesano Boscone, 9 May 2004.

Apostles, of the Letters of St Paul, of the Book of Revelation, she lives by the strength of Easter and the power of Pentecost, she realises the truth of Christ and freedom of the Spirit; she recalls the "first love" (cf. Hosea 2,9). A Church which returns to her apostolic roots is courageous in *martyria*, that is in bearing witness to Jesus and his Gospel even to the extent of giving up life itself. She is characterized by the *euangelia*, that is, the communication of the Gospel to all; evangelization is the reason for her existence, as is explicitly stated in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, the most important document on evangelization, promulgated by Paul VI ten years after the ending of the Council. She is brought together by *leitourgia*, because salvation is not just a victory to be gained but a reality to be celebrated with gratitude and made present and effective in every time and place. She is committed in *diakonia*, the significance of which is clearly dealt with in *Gaudium et Spes*: the Church is not the mistress of the world, but its servant.

*Rejuvenating the Church* means making it a home for the young. The Church will be young when it includes young people, especially nowadays when – at least in some parts of the world – there is a growing disaffection because of the Church's visible appearance. In consequence a mystagogic and pedagogical process must be devised to bring in young people and lead them to become Church. At this point the enlightening image of the disciples of Emmaus comes to mind once again: it helps us to understand the Church as mother and teacher, the travelling companion of all men and women who are looking for the meaning of life. She opens them to the revelation of God in Scripture, enlightens their minds and warms their hearts, offers the communion of the Body of Christ and so become community. It is a matter of making the Church the home of all who believe in the risen Christ and want to testify to their faith in him. The *Strenna*, therefore, is an invitation to make the Church young, and to make young people the Church.

John Paul II, in his message for the Fifth World Youth Day in

1990, wrote to all the world's youth telling them amongst other things: "Take your place in the Church, which is not only for those to whom pastoral care is directed but especially for those who play an active part in her mission. The Church is yours and, indeed, you *are* the Church". It is an invitation to the young in every place and time.

### A testimony, a model, an image

In an effort to explain the meaning of the Strenna I want to offer you a testimony, a model and an image or icon.

First a *testimony* which has always remained vivid in my mind and heart. I was greatly impressed by the witness of *Fr Vecchi* during his illness, not so much because he was the Rector Major but because of the sign it gave of the identification of a man with God's will when it least coincided with his own. When the cross of his sickness was suddenly presented to him without any warning, he accepted it as something that deserved his love, His attitude was that of a true believer, of one who had many times consoled others afflicted by suffering and who, when his own faith was tried, showed himself a true son of Abraham, the father of all believers.

After his operation, *Fr Vecchi* had nourished the hope of a complete recovery, supported by the prayers of the whole Salesian Family who entrusted him to the intercession of his uncle, Blessed Artemides Zatti. As a good administrator he had many plans in mind, but he had to learn the significance of the words that Jesus said to Peter: "When you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and another will put a belt around you and lead you where you do not wish to go" (Jn 21, 18b). And so he willingly accepted his illness as a new message from God; and it found him ready; as the tumour developed, he came to realize that the Lord was preparing him for the great encounter.

While we were together for the retreat, he asked to be given the sacrament of the sick, after making his confession to Fr Brocardo. On that occasion he made his profession of faith in the presence of the members of the General Council, the Rector of the Generalate and a small number of other confreres. "I thank God", he said, "for giving me a mother in the Church. She has brought me to birth as a son of God. She has helped me to grow and mature through the Word and the Sacraments. She enabled me to find my vocation, my role in the Church and in society. She has accompanied me in every moment of my life, and is waiting for me as a true mother in heaven". Then he added: "now I entrust the Congregation to you. Take it in hand and carry it forward".

This was the testimony of a believer, of one who had experienced the Church as a Mother, who had given proof of his faith and who, at the moment of entrusting himself to God, had said with Paul: "I am certain that neither death nor life... nor any creature whatsoever will ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8, 38-39).

And now I suggest a *model* for you. Last summer I was in Annecy, a place rich in significance for us because it speaks to us of *St Francis de Sales*, the model from whom Don Bosco drew certain spiritual and pastoral features. We recall his love of the Church, which made him prudent but decisive with the Calvinists who would not even let him take possession of his diocese; we remember the zeal of the good shepherd, who offered rest to the faithful in the green pastures of the gospel and went in search of the lost sheep; the well known kindness which he adopted as a pastoral method and for which he became known to everyone, and even to his opponents; his optimistic humanism which convinced him of the goodness of creation and the force for good to be found in every individual, even though he was aware of the wounds of sin; the conviction that holiness is open to all and must be lived according to the particular calling of each one.

By studying St Francis de Sales, we discover his sense of Church, derived from his spirituality and his pastoral ministry. For us he is an example to be imitated in being Church and in building the Church, decisive in his choices but at the same time magnanimous in manner. He is the holy patron given us by Don Bosco as an intercessor and model from whom to draw inspiration. And so in the various places I visited I prayed intensely, asking him to obtain for us the grace of the same love for the Church that he had, together with his ability to overcome its opponents with faith and kindness.

And finally I offer you an **icon** or image. It is the *Redemptoris Mater* Chapel, the masterpiece in the apostolic palace in Rome which represents the homage of the Cardinals to John Paul II on the occasion of the great jubilee of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, Saviour of the world. In eloquent fashion it presents the Church to us as Mother. It is conceived in the Byzantine style, full of colour, light and movement. How I would like everyone to have the opportunity to visit the chapel and admire this beautiful representation of the Church as Mother.

Everything in her acquires dynamism and splendour. The cosmos is rich with life and meaning, thanks to the realization of God's saving design, from the creation of the world to its consummation when we shall all be everything in Christ. In it is presented the story of salvation, as narrated in the letter to the Ephesians (1, 3-14). The originality of this chapel lies precisely in the fact that it was conceived as an icon, telling us of God's saving plan and of its realisation in the Church as its sacrament. Mary, Mother of the Redeemer, is our Mother from the beginning of the world in Eve to the foot of the Cross, to the birth of the Church in the Cenacle, right down to the end of the world as the woman in glory. She is an icon of the Church our Mother.

## **Church, the *light of all nations*, mystery and sacrament of salvation**

The Church is called to reflect the splendour of Christ, who is the “light of all nations,” to enlighten humanity which on the one hand is dazzled by its own scientific and technical discoveries and its own economic power, to the point of thinking that it can do without God, and on the other hand is enveloped in the darkness of poverty, social, racial and inter-ethnic conflict, relativism and moral confusion. The Church has still an essential role to play even in the changed circumstances of the present day; she is no longer, as some would have us think, in that phase of history in which science and human knowledge were incapable of responding to many questions, and in consequence the Church had to supply for the lack; the Church’s task is to enlighten humanity with the Gospel.

The first words of *Lumen Gentium*, the dogmatic Constitution on the Church, are significant and express the Church’s role at the present day: “Christ is the Light of nations. Because this is so, this Sacred Synod gathered together in the Holy Spirit eagerly desires, by proclaiming the Gospel to every creature, to bring the light of Christ to all men”. Pope John XXIII had spoken of the Church as the “light of all nations”; using the same expression the Council applies to Christ who is the “light of all nations” and shines on the Church’s countenance. In this way the Council takes up the oracular words of Simeon attributed to the Saviour (Lk 2, 32).<sup>2</sup>

According to the teaching of the Council the origin of the Church precedes history because she already existed in the primordial design of the Father, who wanted her to be the *sacrament of salvation*. The Son, at God’s side from all eternity, entered his-

<sup>2</sup> Cf. J. GALOT, *Il Cristo Rivelatore, fondatore della Chiesa e principio di vita*, in *Vaticano II - Bilancio e prospettive, venticinque anni dopo 1962-1987*, ed. R. LATOURELLE, Cittadella, Assisi 1987, pp. 343-360.

tory by means of the incarnation, and so gives a beginning to the Church in time. But nevertheless it is in returning to eternity that he becomes the principle of the life and development of the Church; the resurrection, in fact, made it possible for him to send forth the Spirit, who is the Church's soul.<sup>3</sup> The Church therefore comes from the Trinity: "*Ecclesia de Trinitate*".

"The structure of the Church is based on two foundations, both of them equally essential: Christ and the Holy Spirit: Christ is her origin, end and limit; the Holy Spirit is the light which makes Christ resplendent to the eye, and the strength that leads her on her path to the Father. Without Christ the Church would not *be* what she is; without the Spirit the Church would not *know* what she is".<sup>4</sup> Christ is the foundation of the Church; the Spirit is the memorial of Christ and the awareness of the Church. The Spirit has a triple ecclesial function: he is the *consoler* during the time that Jesus is physically absent, fostering the expectation of the Church which as a bride awaits the return of her Spouse; he is the *advocate* in our struggle against personal and social sin; he is the *teacher* who reminds us of the words of Christ and reveals him to us.

The vitality of the Church is proportionate to the fidelity with which she listens to and follows the voice of the Spirit. The latter, living in her, leads her unceasingly to Christ because, meeting herself in him as she does, she becomes renewed through lovingly contemplating him in attentive meditation on his words and fearless implementation of his message. The Spirit continues to mould the Church, conforming her to Christ; and the Church finds fulfilment by becoming aware of being founded on Christ.

"The first characteristic of the Church's self-awareness therefore is that of being a mystery, insofar as she has God him-

<sup>3</sup> Ibid p. 347.

<sup>4</sup> O. GONZÁLEZ, *La nuova coscienza della Chiesa*, in *La Chiesa del Vaticano II*, Opera collettiva diretta da G. BARAÚNA, Vallecchi, Florence 1965, pp. 238-239.

self as constitutive element and source of life. Down through the centuries the Church will try to be ever more deeply immersed in this her constitutive reality, knowing that she can never exhaust it even though she is ever more drawn towards it.<sup>5</sup>

This kind of awareness was present in Paul VI at the inauguration of the second session of the Council. "From where does our process begin, what path do we intend to follow and what goal do we intend to reach? These three questions have a single response that we must proclaim here and now to ourselves and to the world. Christ is our beginning, Christ our guide and our way, Christ our hope and our goal... The Church is mystery, that is a reality imbued with the divine presence and hence always capable of new and deeper exploration... The awareness of the Church is clarified in her faithful adherence to the words and thought of Christ, in the reverent recalling of the authoritative teaching of ecclesiastical tradition, and in docility to interior enlightenment by the Holy Spirit".<sup>6</sup>

The Church does not stop at self-contemplation; she always refers herself to Christ, from whom she receives life and of whom she knows she must be a living reflection, and to the Spirit who gives her this knowledge and by means of Christ leads her to the Father. Her contemplation is a conscious "act of thanksgiving – Eucharist – to him who lives in her, awaiting acceptance and vital response."<sup>7</sup> This is the message of the author of the Letter to the Hebrews to encourage the community of believers, afraid as they were because of difficulties and tempted to give up, urging them to keep their mind on Jesus, "the Apostle and High Priest of our faith" (Heb 3, 1), and to "look to Jesus the founder of our faith, who will bring it to completion" (Heb 12, 2a).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid p. 240.

<sup>6</sup> PAUL VI, *Opening address, second session of the Council*, 29 September 1963, in *Enchiridion Vaticanum 1*, EDB, Bologna, 1993, nn.143-145.150.153.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. O. GONZÁLEZ, *La nuova coscienza della Chiesa*, op. cit., p. 241.



The same point was made by Cardinal John Baptist Montini, when he was Archbishop of Milan: "The Church does not exist to be a thing of beauty looking at herself in a mirror and saying to herself: 'how beautiful I am as spouse of the Lord'; the church exists *propter nos et propter nostram salutem*... For this reason she seeks to update herself, discarding if necessary an old regal mantle for a simpler kind of dress more in keeping with modern tastes".<sup>8</sup> From this derives the Church's duty in every age to make clear more precisely the awareness she has of herself, and discover the aspects that need to be reformed for the salvation of all.

When in the Creed we say that "we believe in the Church", we do not mean that we have faith in the human reality of the Church, which as such is limited and imperfect, but we believe that God reveals himself in this human reality which is sanctified by the Spirit and made by him the "Body of Christ" and an instrument of salvation. Hence to believe in the Church is to discover her true mystery, to believe in God who reveals to us what the Church is: it implies welcoming her as the place of salvation and loving her as such".<sup>9</sup>

### **The Church, at one with *the joys and hopes of humanity***

The Church lives her mystery in every period of history, and endeavours to provide a response to the burning questions of the day, in the light of the past and with an eye to the future. She knows she is at the world's service, because she was born from Christ, "who came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk 10,45). Pope Pius XI used to say: "The world does not exist for the Church, but rather

<sup>8</sup> G.B. MONTINI, *Discorsi e scritti milanesi*, vol. III: 1954-1963, ed. G.E. MANZONI, Istituto Paolo VI, Brescia, 1997, p. 930.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *Seguir a Jesucristo en esta Iglesia*, Pastoral letter of the Bishops of Pamplona and Tudela, Bilbao, San Sebastián and Vitoria, Lent - Easter 1989, pp. 13-16.

the Church for the world". The Church in fact must relate to the Lord who calls her, to the world to which she is sent, and to the Kingdom she promotes in the heart of the world.

It is of interest to point out some elements, internal and external, that have contributed to the direction of Vatican II's ecclesiology. I think they are well summed up in the following theological reflection: "Over the past 25 years society and the Churches of the Christian West have seen transformations that cause serious problems for western Christianity in the spreading of the Christian message. Economic and scientific development has taken place at a dizzy rate. The classical model of society is undergoing a crisis. The rebellion of the Third World against any form of neo-colonialism has called into question the superiority of the West. The Churches cannot be deaf to the emancipation of women, to the widespread diffusion of a new kind of culture among the young, and to the enormous problems of an economic, demographic and ecological order. Within them there is an ever growing tendency towards a greater participation of all the members at the two moments when decisions are formulated and taken, and at times of effective dialogue with other Churches and religions. The Church's commitment to what is good for man means she must defend his rights wherever they are violated. In the Latin-American continent, bishops, theologians and other men of the Church have made a preferential option for the "poor", understood in a wider sense than that of economic poverty alone. In recent years the "poor" have begun to participate in a real way in the political and ecclesial lives of Latin-American countries. From being objects of evangelization they have become transformed into evangelizers".<sup>10</sup>

Certainly the political, social, economic, cultural and even religious situations have changed even more over the last 15 years,

<sup>10</sup> A. ANTON, *L'Ecclesiologia postconciliare: speranze, risultati, prospettive*, in *Vaticano II - Bilancio e prospettive venticinque anni dopo 1962-1987*, ed. R. LATOURELLE, Cittadella, Assisi 1987, p. 363.

that is, since the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989. With the ending of the cold war a new supremacy appeared and a neo-liberal economy was imposed. The situation took a new turn on 11 September 2001 when Islamic terrorism first made its dramatic appearance on the international stage, leading some people to speak of a "clash of civilizations", but no one at present would venture to forecast how the present conflict will develop. Nevertheless the approach of the Church to the human situation is still valid: humanity is still the objective of and challenge to her activity, and ever more valid is the perspective, inaugurated by the pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, of speaking of faith not in the abstract but starting from human lived experience and historical events.

Two new aspects of today's Church were presented by *Gaudium et Spes*; they reveal a new awareness of being not the mistress but the servant of the world: the attitude of dialogue and the message of optimism.

*The attitude of dialogue* stems from the recognition of the fundamental union between the order of creation and that of redemption. The Church fully recognizes the dignity of human nature and human rights; she defends authentic human values and cooperates with all men and women of good will in the building of a more human world. With this attitude of dialogue the Church takes part in the common search for solutions to the grave problems causing so much anxiety at the present day. In this collaboration her objective is not to *make sacred* civil society, and still less to '*ecclesialise*' it, because she recognizes the autonomy of the temporal order given it by its Creator. By her action the Church makes the inestimable contribution of the light of the Gospel, with which she is able to speak of eternal values when human knowledge can go no further.

Nowadays the Church knows that dialogue is absolutely necessary for her, as an expression of her mystery of communion and of unity in diversity, as a perceptible sign of her commit-

ment to create synergy with other religions and other Christian churches, with all men and women of good will, to collaborate in the building of a "civilization of justice, love and peace".

This involves a rethinking of the content and style of pastoral service. Its content is the proclamation of Jesus Christ as the sign of the new humanity, to collaborate in the transformation of society with all who do good, and to denounce whatever threatens harm to the dignity of the human person. Its style is that of respect for diversity without seeming to want to impose anything on anyone, of openness and honesty with all, and of the wish to be of service without compromising principles.

The *message of optimism*, in turn, seeks to embody the Gospel in the sense magnificently summed up by John: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him may not be lost, but may have eternal life" (Jn 3, 16). Love of the world; love of humanity. This is in effect the message of optimism that *Gaudium et Spes* has proclaimed in the post-conciliar world, and to which post-conciliar theology has not remained indifferent. The Church has opted for total solidarity with humanity and its conquests, offering the ultimate meaning these have in the divine plan of the Creator.

The spreading of this message has been the principal task of the post-conciliar Church at universal level and especially at the level of the Churches of the Third World. For its implementation pastors, theologians and simple faithful have worked together; tensions that have arisen have never led to the questioning of this fundamental collaboration; on the contrary, such tensions have been the source of fresh energy.

The result of these processes of dialogue and optimism is the awakening of new ecclesial awareness among the great masses of Christians, who now feel themselves to be participants and, from certain points of view, leaders of ecclesial life in their communities. Moreover the Christian is beginning to learn to make himself a man among men, without on this account renouncing

his divine vocation. This obliges him to harmonize his tasks in the world with his eternal destiny. His Christian faith prompts him to place himself at the service of men and to see in the most deprived a brother needing help to free himself from oppression and live as a son of God.<sup>11</sup>

Today the *Preface to Gaudium et Spes*, still remains both beautiful and inspiring, because it preserves all its freshness and its active force; and so I will not resist the temptation to transcribe it, not least because new generations may not know it or be less familiar with it. I will not hide from you my joy and enthusiasm for this vision of the Church, which I want to share with all the members of the Salesian Family, so that they can pass it on to our young people, that they in turn may love her and spend themselves for her.

#### *Union of the Church with the entire human family*

“The joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community composed of men. United in Christ, they are led by the Holy Spirit in their journey to the Kingdom of their Father and they have welcomed the news of salvation which is meant for every man. That is why this community realizes that it is truly linked with mankind and its history by the deepest of bonds.”<sup>12</sup>

#### *To whom is the Council addressed*

“Hence this Second Vatican Council, having probed more profoundly into the mystery of the Church, now addresses it-

<sup>11</sup> Cf. A. ANTON, op. cit., pp. 386ss.

<sup>12</sup> *Gaudium et spes*, n. 1.

self without hesitation, not only to the sons of the Church and to all who invoke the name of Christ, but to the whole of humanity. For the Council yearns to explain to everyone how it conceives the presence and activity of the Church in the world of today.

“Therefore, the Council focuses its attention on the world of men, the whole human family along with the sum of those realities in the midst of which it lives; that world which is the theatre of man’s history, and the heir of his energies, his tragedies and his triumphs; that world which the Christian sees as created and sustained by its Maker’s love, fallen indeed into the bondage of sin yet emancipated now by Christ, who was crucified and rose again to break the stranglehold of personified evil, so that the world might be fashioned anew according to God’s design and reach its fulfilment.<sup>13</sup>

#### *At the service of men*

“Though mankind is struck with wonder at its own discoveries and its power, it often raises anxious questions about the current trend of the world, about the place and role of man in the universe, about the meaning of its individual and collective strivings, and about the ultimate destiny of reality and of humanity. Hence, giving witness and voice to the faith of the whole people of God gathered together by Christ, this Council can provide no more eloquent proof of its solidarity with, as well as its respect and love for, the entire human family with which it is bound up, than by engaging with it in dialogue about these various problems. The Council brings to mankind light kindled from the Gospel, and puts at its disposal those saving resources which the Church herself, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, receives from her Founder. For the human person deserves to be preserved; human society deserves to be renewed. Hence the

<sup>13</sup> *Gaudium et spes*, n. 2.

focal point of our total presentation will be man himself, whole and entire, body and soul, heart and conscience, mind and will.

“Therefore, this sacred Synod, proclaiming the noble destiny of man and championing the Godlike seed which has been sown in him, offers to mankind the honest assistance of the Church in fostering that brotherhood of all men which corresponds to this destiny of theirs. Inspired by no earthly ambition, the Church seeks but a solitary goal: to carry forward the work of Christ under the lead of the befriending Spirit. And Christ entered this world to give witness to the truth, to rescue and not to sit in judgment, to serve and not to be served.”<sup>14</sup>

There, dear confreres, you have the reason why the presence of the Church in the world is so precious. She is the light that helps us to discover God’s plan for humanity and leads the intelligence to solutions that are fully human. She is the leaven working for the deep transformation of humanity by engrafting energy for what is good. She is the unifying force in the task of raising up today’s society. If it is true that the Church has need of humanity, of which she is a part and with which she shares joys and hopes, anxieties and suffering, it is equally certain that humanity, in which she is called to be “the salt of the earth”, the light of the world”, and “the city on the mountain-top”, needs the Church.

The Church exists to be a sign of the Kingdom of God. For this sign to be visible and credible the Church must be renewed and converted, rejuvenated and purified. For this she must deepen her own fundamental options: zeal for God, who frees her from any conformation to the world in her criteria, values, attitudes and behaviour; she must deepen fraternity and ecclesial communion, so as to become a point of reference for the world and be attractive and convincing; she must deepen her missionary endeavour which helps her to overcome the fear or timidity

<sup>14</sup> *Gaudium et spes*, n. 3.

of the disciples gathered in the Cenacle behind closed doors, and lead her to proclaim the Gospel to all; she must deepen her commitment to service, developing sympathy and solidarity towards all and especially the poor, who are the benchmark of her identity, quality and fruitfulness.

### **Towards a youthful image of the Church**

It is especially from the *Acts of the Apostles*, which present the origin of the Church to us, that we can draw inspiration, purpose and dynamism for firmly committing ourselves to the task of rejuvenating the Church. As I said at the beginning of this reflection, in the Acts are found the specific and essential traits of a Church which wants to remain faithful to her Lord and be fruitful in her dealings with the world.

#### *A witnessing Church*

In the first place the Church manifests a “martyrial” nature, that is, she can explain the reason for her faith, why she is called to bear witness to the Crucified and Risen Lord. For this reason the Church is frequently *countercultural*, in the sense that she brings a Gospel that clashes with the mentality of the world. It is in this paradoxical aspect which appears very clearly in the sermon on the mount in Matthew’s gospel and in the discourse in the plain in that of Luke; that all her prophetic force and effectiveness are to be found.

Certainly the courage to oppose the prevailing mentality, to denounce ways of acting that are widespread but not less unjust on that account, can lead to isolation and rejection, and in certain cases to persecution and even death, as many of our brothers and sisters have experienced for themselves in various parts of the world. In line with what Jesus said in the sermon on the mount and particularly in the Beatitudes, it could be said that when believers are not persecuted, despised or marginalized in



some way, they must ask themselves whether they are failing in their prophetic role. Anyone who is an accomplice in the sins of the present-day world, who does not cause trouble and crises, who does not speak out against the dramatic problems that afflict us but which no one wants to talk about, such a one is a betrayer of the Gospel.

An authentic faith, on the other hand, is always accompanied by martyrdom, by the witness lived out in the daily routine, in the fulfilment of duty one's, in commitment in the Church and in society. It should not be forgotten that the martyrs of yesterday and today, those canonized and those not officially recognized, are not only the glory of the Church but also a point of reference for all believers, called to bear witness to their faith in every circumstance of life.

### *A liturgical Church*

Secondly, the Church is a "liturgical" community, which celebrates its faith, helps new children grow through Christian initiation, and leads the believer to the full configuration to Christ. The liturgy is a true school of holiness, because it transforms personal and community life into prayer. Even though disaffection for the Church may often seem to originate in the lack of attractiveness of so many liturgies, neither the need nor the value of an authentic life of celebration can be ignored. In addition to the need for a liturgical catechesis which introduces us to the mysteries and helps us to mature in faith, this implies taking care over the quality of the celebrations, so that they may be simple but dignified, beautiful and fruitful.

In our celebrations we must recover the sense of gratuity and of mystery, the reasons for the celebration and its community dimension. We are urged to give to the liturgy its due place as the "source and culmination of Christian life" (SC 10). Here I want to refer in particular to the *Eucharist*, the supreme sacrament of the love of Christ and of union with him. In the Eucharist each one receives Christ and Christ receives each one.

We must never forget, as De Lubac used to say: “the Church makes the Eucharist, and the Eucharist makes the Church”.

This makes the *Sunday Eucharist* of capital importance: it is an encounter that strengthens our awareness of being members of a people travelling through the world with its gaze fixed on heaven. Taking part in the Sunday celebration means taking the life of the whole week to make of it an offering to God, and a witness in society to the fact that for us God is God and that Jesus Christ is alive and working in our community. Fidelity to the command “*Do this in memory of me*” (Lk 22, 19) refers to the liturgical action, but also to the task of making it relevant and prolonging it in the offering of one’s own life for the salvation of the world.

We must learn to live *Sunday* as the day of the Church, the day of man, the day of the Lord. Particularly relevant is Preface 10 of the Sundays of Ordinary Time, which presents this day as an anticipation of the “endless Sunday” when man will find himself finally free from all work and toil, from tears and death itself, and will enjoy peace, love and life without end.

John Paul II has proclaimed October 2004 to October 2005 the *Year of the Eucharist*, in the framework of the pastoral project of *Novo millennio ineunte*, in which he asked every Christian to “start again from Christ”, to “measure up to the high demands of the Christian life”, and to be assiduous in the “art of prayer”. For us it is important to live this year in harmony with the whole Church, The Eucharist “is the privileged place where communion is ceaselessly proclaimed and nurtured. Precisely through sharing in the Eucharist, *the Lord’s Day* also becomes *the Day of the Church*, when she can effectively exercise her role as the sacrament of unity” (NMI 36).

### *An evangelizing Church*

The third characteristic element of the Church concerns her evangelizing force and ability to proclaim Christ and his Gospel.

Tertullian said that “*Christians are not born; they are made*”.<sup>15</sup> This “is an assertion particularly relevant to our own times, because today we are in the midst of widespread processes of dechristianisation that give rise to indifference and agnosticism. The usual means of passing on the faith has proved impracticable in many cases. It cannot be taken for granted that people know who Jesus Christ is, that they are aware of the Gospel, that they have some experience of Church. This is true of children, young people and adults; it is true of our own people and obviously true of so many immigrants coming from other cultures and religions. There is need therefore of a *renewed first proclamation of the faith*”.<sup>16</sup>

It should be kept in mind that, at least in Europe, there is a growing number of families who no longer ask for their children to be baptized, with a corresponding increase in the number of baptized children who do not proceed to other sacraments and in those who after receiving the sacrament of Confirmation no longer attend Church.

The appeal becomes the more pressing therefore for a serious process of evangelization. This is achieved nowadays through a free and cordial welcome that makes people receptive to the proclamation of the Gospel, with the explicit declaration of Christ as Saviour of the world, listening to God’s word, and a personal follow-up which helps people to mature “until Christ is formed in them” (Gal 4, 19).

The purpose is to form disciples who are in love with Christ and faithful imitators of the Lord Jesus, who know that their vocation consists in being “*salt of the earth*”, “*light of the world*” and “*a city on the mountain top*” or, in other words, men and women who make the Gospel their programme of life and are

<sup>15</sup> TERTULLIAN, *Apologetic*, 18, 4.

<sup>16</sup> ITALIAN BISHOPS CONFERENCE, *Il volto missionario delle Parrocchie in un mondo che cambia. Nota pastorale*, Notiziario della Conferenza Episcopale Italiana, Numero 5-6, 1 July 2004, p. 140.

conscious of the responsibility they have "before men." For Jesus the disciple is as necessary for the world as salt is for the preservation of food, or light for seeing. The possibility exists of the disciple denying his faith. In this case what Jesus says about salt retains all its force which could be expressed as follows: "You are my disciples, but if the disciple loses his characteristics, who can give them back to him? He is no longer of any use to the world. He is like an object that can be thrown away, because it is scorned and trodden underfoot by men".

### *A serving Church*

Finally the Church has a 'diaconal' characteristic; she knows that her mission is one of service to the people of God and to the world. This is not a task exclusive to the Pope, bishops, priests, religious or committed lay people; it is a duty of all the baptized who by reason of their baptism share the mission of their Lord and Master. This means they must learn to serve, be attentive to the needs of others, take the initiative in meeting them, being generous in giving help, and in general become apostles.

Christians are called to help men and women to overcome disenchantment and apathy, to enjoy the finer aspects of life, to be able to dream of a future made to man's measure, to establish new relationships between individuals and States, to respect nature, to put an end to war once and for all. It may be that even among believers lurks a certain scepticism whether a world better than the present one is possible. The Church cannot disappoint legitimate expectations and aspirations, especially those that are deeply rooted in populations well-to-do or penniless, hungry or sated, of West or East, North or South.

A serving Church is at one with the poorest of the poor, with those who have no one else but God to defend them and take up their cause. When hope animates the life of the poor, God and man have already met, because it is only with God's help that the poor can continue to hope when the future seems hopeless. The hope of the poor is already a living faith. Of this today's

prophets are also aware. Their task is to recognize the faith of the poor and bear witness to the gospel of God's total solidarity with them.

### **Ecclesial sense in Don Bosco and in Salesian tradition**

Don Bosco knew how to be faithful to the Lord Jesus, while suffering each day from his experience of the situation in the church of his time. His vivid sense of Church was mainly expressed in an attitude and experience of collaboration with all those elements and resources that were contributing to her good. He showed his love for the Church in a deep but simple threefold way: *love for Jesus Christ*, mainly as present in the Eucharist, the central action of the Church; *devotion to Mary*, Mother and Model of the Church; and *fidelity to the Pope*, Peter's successor and the Church's centre of unity.

The three elements are mutually inseparable; they throw light on each other and converge in the person of Christ. Don Bosco's dream of the "two columns" is an immediate and positive exemplification of these dynamic elements, of Don Bosco's three "loves" which build up the Church: Eucharist, Mary, Peter. Don Bosco's Church is Eucharistic in form, with a Marian figure and a Petrine foundation.

This "sensus Ecclesiae" is found in a wonderful form in the fusion Don Bosco made of the titles of "Mary Help of Christians" and "Mother of the Church".<sup>17</sup> It is interesting to note how well he had understood that the renewal of the Church must take place through mature Marian devotion, convinced as he was that the sense of the Church as a Mother is lost without the motherly vocation of Mary. This enables us to see the close

<sup>17</sup> J. BOSCO, *Meraviglie della Madre di Dio invocata sotto il titolo di Maria Ausiliatrice*, Turin 1868, in *Opere edite*, vol. XX, Editrice Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco, Rome, pp. 198-199.

relationship between Mother Church and evangelization – between Mary, the Church and apostolic activity. It means that the “sense of Church” must be translated each day into a deep sense of membership and responsible commitment as believers.

In his *Edifying Letter*, written on his return from Rome on 14 June 1905, Don Rua spoke of Don Bosco as a model of attachment to the Church; he wrote: “Those who knew Don Bosco while he was on earth, or have read about his wonderful life, while admiring his extraordinary virtues will have become convinced that he lived only for God, that always and everywhere his least action was always guided by the Holy Spirit. For us his sons it seems almost impossible to visualize Don Bosco without his face aflame with holy zeal and on his lips the motto he liked so much: *Da mihi animas, caetera tolle*.

“I think it true to say that you too cannot imagine him other than as the perfect model of the priest, unmindful of himself and intent only on promoting God’s glory and leading many souls to heaven. And if we felt prompted to ask him how he had managed to overcome so many difficulties and obstacles, and continue unruffled along the path indicated to him by Providence and found his Pious Society, it seems that he would reply to us with that gentle look that radiated kindness and charity with the words of St Paul: *nos autem sensum Christi habemus*, as though to tell us that never did he think or act by worldly principles, but always and everywhere by trying to reproduce in himself the divine model, Jesus Christ, and it was this that enabled him to fulfil his mission.

“Nor was there any danger that he would stray from the practice of this spirit of the Lord, because in everything he wanted to follow the guidance of the Church which is the *column and foundation of truth*. If we examine his interior life, we shall find a Don Bosco determined in the first place to be a most obedient son of Holy Church, and ready for any sacrifice to spread her doctrines and uphold her rights. Not only did he observe her laws,

he even anticipated her desires. And the result is that we his sons have the ineffable consolation of seeing endorsed by the infallible authority of the Sovereign Pontiff many things Don Bosco did years ago by, a man with a deep knowledge of his times and a sure interpreter of the spirit of the Church which he inculcated in us with tireless zeal. The facts show this to be true".<sup>18</sup>

In the same connection Fr Luigi Ricceri, speaking of the ecclesial sensitivity of Don Bosco wrote: "His practical concept of religion and pastoral criterion of action are a supra-political and supra-cultural view of Christianity, made concrete in the Church which he loved seeing as founded on Peter and the Apostles and their successors, the Pope and the Bishops: *"No effort should be spared when the Church or the Papacy are at stake"* (MB V, 577). His was a vision rooted in the certainty of the living presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church, in the conviction that the Pope is Christ's Vicar on earth, and in the awareness of, and devotion to, our Lady as the Help of Christians. In harmony with this approach he initiated projects, made enlightened decisions, undertook difficult tasks, and also suffered misunderstandings and injustice".<sup>19</sup>

And later, in the same letter, Fr Ricceri denounced as *"a practice of ecclesial dissent"* the attitude of those who disregard the guidance of the Magisterium, even by occasional public contestation of various kinds. Their actions disregard the "gift of enlightenment attaching to the ministry" of the Pope and the Bishops. At the root of this kind of attitude – to which Don Bosco was completely opposed – there is usually to be found a sociological interpretation of the mystery of the Church, which saves neither its divine institution nor its distinction from the world. In such a perspective the "people of God" become simply the people, and

<sup>18</sup> M. RUA, *Lettera Edificante. Lo spirito di D. Bosco – Vocazioni – Buona Stampa*, 14 June 1905, from *Lettere Circolari*, Edizione Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco, Rome, pp. 384-385.

<sup>19</sup> L. RICCERI, *I Salesiani e la responsabilità politica*, in *Lettere Circolari di don Luigi Ricceri ai Salesiani*, Edizione Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco, Rome, p. 942.

the basic assembly replaces the initiative of the Holy Spirit, doing away with any institutional role. This attitude too would appear to be in open contradiction of Don Bosco's practice, and far removed from the clearest salesian tradition".<sup>20</sup>

Later, among the criteria for the guidance of salesian activity, Fr Ricceri puts alongside the task of ensuring the relevance of our mission that of *solidarity with the Church's option*. "In the first place she has opted permanently and definitively for Christ her Lord, as the bride for her Spouse. In this is expressed the absolute primacy of love and truth which sheds light on her entire mission and guides her activity. But against the background of this fundamental option there are pastoral choices formulated by the Church in differing historical situations. Faced with the crucial phase through which the world is living, she has made her concrete choices in the Second Ecumenical Vatican Council. In this she has "turned towards and not away from" the man of the present day; she has looked at him through the eyes of God, after considering herself as a 'sacrament' that must serve for his salvation. The Council wanted a Church presence that would be useful and liberating for human advancement, but a presence too that would take concrete shape in a commitment of a religious kind".<sup>21</sup>

"Our love for Christ necessarily gives rise to our love for his Church", says art.13 of the Salesian Constitutions. From our father Don Bosco we have received a particular sensitivity as regards the Church's ability to build "unity and communion among all the forces working for the Kingdom". The salesian spirit makes us centres of communion of many other forces; it makes us builders and promoters of the Church among the young. For this reason we must express and demonstrate an outstanding love of the Church through a dynamic and responsible

<sup>20</sup> Ibid p. 951.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid pp. 951-952.



adherence to her teachings, a generous effort of communion and collaboration with all her members, and especially an unconditional commitment to opening the Church to the young and the young to the Church, so that all can discover in her the face of Christ and the treasures of salvation.

Perhaps no one has developed this "sensus Ecclesiae" in reflection and action so well as Fr Egidio Viganò. He spoke of it explicitly in his presentation of the ecclesial dimension of devotion to Mary Help of Christians.<sup>22</sup> In the letter on "The animation of the Salesian Rector" he wrote: "The Rector, because he is a priest, must develop in an ecclesial manner the significance and objectives of his own pastoral activity and of that of the community; he must live and get others to live in harmony and collaboration with the Pope, the Bishops and priests; he must foster relationships with them: friendship, esteem and collaboration; not simply for diplomatic reasons or to make life easier, but because all of this is an important aspect of his service to the Salesian community".<sup>23</sup>

In the letter "Our fidelity to Peter's successor", Fr Viganò told us that "among the components of Salesian youth spirituality there is a strong 'sense of Church', with specific attitudes to be created, developed and translated into lived experience".<sup>24</sup> In the same letter he explained some particularly strategic points in greater detail: the concept of the Church as a "Mystery" that helps in the overcoming of ecclesiological ideas that are deviant or too restrictive; the image of the Pope as the first and supreme Pastor, against all sociological notions; the including of the contents of the Pope's 'magisterium' in our evangelizing activities, as against a simply affective or sentimental adherence with no practical results; the willing acceptance, in view of the pastoral and pedagogical character of the Salesian vocation, of the moral

<sup>22</sup> E. VIGANÒ, *Mary renews the Salesian Family of Don Bosco*, AGC 289, Rome 1978.

<sup>23</sup> E. VIGANÒ, *Animation of the Salesian Rector*, AGC 306, Rome 1982, p. 12.

<sup>24</sup> E. VIGANÒ, *Our fidelity to Peter's Successor*, AGC 315, Rome 1985, p. 26.

and social teaching of the Pope, to challenge the selfishness and permissiveness of modern culture.<sup>25</sup>

As the Salesian Family we pray with and for the Church; we try to “sentire cum Ecclesia”; we belong to the Church; we live in the Church; we *are* Church. We could express this “sensus Ecclesiae”, which is an essential element of our charism, in an ecclesiological doxology: “*For the Church, with the Church, in the Church, to you almighty Father, through the Son and in the Spirit, be all glory and honour for ever and ever. Amen*”.

### **For a pedagogy of being Church and living with the Church**

I said at the beginning that our task is that of making others fall in love with the Church, especially the young people. This is a challenge that has become even more important at the present day, when a growing tendency can be observed in some places to live a Christianity without the Church. There are Christians who have not given up their connection with the Church, but who are not members of nor identify themselves with any community; they are like shoppers in a supermarket who stroll about choosing items here and there that appeal to them.

We know that identification with Christ always implies identification with his Body, with his Church, and with those who belong to it. This is a criterion for verifying the authenticity of Christian identity. But at the same time membership of the Church only makes sense as a means for belonging to Christ: when we say yes to her we say yes to him. Now according to what Paul wrote to the Ephesians this identification is brought about through baptism and the sacramental life, is summed up in the profession of faith, is shaped by a Christian life and is expressed in prayer.

The crucial question therefore is how to educate young peo-

<sup>25</sup> Cf. E. VIGANÒ, *Our fidelity to Peter's Successor*, AGC 315, Rome 1985, pp. 26-30.

ple to be Church and to live with the Church. In a world becoming ever more pluralistic, relativist and secularised, the formation of believers calls for a clear and significant *witness by the Christian community*, so that young people may be offered an evangelical image of the Church's identity and of her mission in the world. It also requires a *journey of faith* and in particular a sound catechesis that will help them to mature their conscience so as to be able to open themselves to all that is human, harmonise their options with those of Mother Church, bear witness to their own faith, and in general identify themselves with Him who identified himself with us so as to be sons of the Father and brothers among men.

We know that the *witness of the community* is a strong element of support and credibility; education to the faith takes place through what one is and one lives, rather than what one hears and is taught. The process of the education of young people to the Church begins with a sincere commitment of the ecclesial community to deepen its fundamental choices, that is, its passion for God which brings it together through Christ in the Spirit, fellowship between all the baptised, concern for evangelisation, the will to serve society, and priority for the poor.

By making these major options the Christian community finds ways to be converted and to resist the various temptations of the present day: the temptation to accept without evangelical discernment the criteria, values, attitudes and behaviour of a society which tends to set itself up as a seductive idol for believers; the temptation to be afraid, which often keeps us closed within the Church's walls in an attitude of distrust and even of taking it out on society; the temptation to selfishness and passivity, to the seeking for honours and wealth, to the fear of being set aside with the marginalised.

In this effort at conversion our ecclesial identity must be ever more clearly transparent if it is to be effective and make visible and credible what we proclaim. And so in all our works

(schools, vocational training centres, universities, reception centres, parishes, oratories, youth centres and 'boys towns') the primary objective must be evangelisation, the proclaiming of the good news of the salvation God wants to give to all through his Son Jesus.

The professional management of the works and the serious approach to the programming of our activities must never obscure the primacy we give to evangelisation. "Without a zealous yearning for the true God, theology and pastoral work would be nothing more than activities of a purely technical or administrative nature. The Church must always cast out the buyers and sellers from the temple: *"Take all this away and stop turning my Father's house into a market-place (Jn 2, 16)"*.<sup>26</sup>

We should never forget that structures necessary for the mission often run the risk of obscuring it, unless there is a spirit that makes it quite evident. I sometimes wonder whether the growing difficulty of identifying oneself with the Church is not a consequence of the fact that in some places the Church is not perceived as being seriously concerned about solidarity with those in need and with the suffering of the world, and as being too closed in and self-secure.

In the process of making the face of the Church more effectively significant, we must foster the *signs* that express it and make it manifest. Many people discover and experience the Church through its signs they find in daily life; these can forge new bonds or strengthen those already existing, but as well as relaunching movements that bring people closer to the Church they can also freeze or weaken them. And so it is important that the Christian community helps the signs of the Church to grow.

There are some particular signs that help young people in their attachment to the Church: the sign of a cordial and evangelical welcome, that shows an attitude of gratuitous openness,

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<sup>26</sup> K. LEHMANN, *Vale la pena rimanere nella Chiesa e vivere per essa*, in J. RATZINGER - K. LEHMANN, *Vivere con la Chiesa*, Queriniana, Brescia 1978, p.36.

of unconditional listening, of the sincere wish to be of service; the sign of the human and Christian quality of welfare services, education and pastoral care; the sign of the truth of the liturgical and of the prayer life of the Christian community, expressed in a celebration that is prayerful, with participation, well-prepared and in harmony with the current problems and situations of society; the sign of pastors living an evangelical life filled with a zeal for God and an ability to welcome and express their fellow-feeling for the people, especially the young and the poor; the sign of service freely given, and a sincere concern for communion. Through these signs young people can be introduced to the experience of Church and helped to open themselves to her.

Together with the witness there is an urgent need to promote among the young a *journey of faith* that will lead them to a personal meeting with Christ, to the living of a sacramental life, to a more conscious insertion in the Church, to knowing and loving her, to commitment to her and living for her. One of the areas of this journey of faith of the young is concerned specifically with growth towards an intense sense of belonging to the church; Salesian youth spirituality too proposes an experience of ecclesial communion. This is the fundamental duty of the Christian community, and specifically of our educative communities; attention to the journey of faith of young people is an expression of the maternal role of the Church who takes care of her children and helps them to grow. It is something that calls for some specific options.

### *Making the Church known*

The young must be helped to overcome a merely partial image of the Church, often seen only in its institutional aspects as though she were a social and political organization similar to others, or else identified with the hierarchy, or, on the contrary, reduced to a purely spiritual reality, individual and ideal. This requires a careful catechesis on the Church following the lines of

*Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes*, but also an introduction to her practical life, making known her plans and concerns, her leading initiatives and significant persons and communities. The continual provision of positive and trustworthy information will certainly contribute to the development of a knowledge of the Church that is more real and effective.

*Making the meaning of Church more widely known*

Here it is a matter of developing in young people the sense of belonging: we belong to the Church and she belongs to us. We have been called together by Jesus to form his family and together continue his mission in history. It is not possible to be fully aware of one's own Christian identity without the living sense of membership of the Christian community. This requires us to develop attitudes of openness, dialogue and fellow-feeling towards mankind, as the Church has done in Vatican II; the Council tried to understand the situation of humanity and collaborate with all men and women of good will in the task of building a more human world.

This is learned and found to be true in family and social life; the individual family as it lives its own life must be a school and workshop of communion. "Being Christian implies a *new way of being human*; it demands a conversion, the conversion specifically asked for by the Gospel, by Christ. From this standpoint the contribution of the Christian educator, of the pastor of souls, is aimed at the formation of a certain spiritual attitude which is not just knowledge but one in which to knowledge are united attitudes such as the inclination of the will, and the emotions, the sensitivity of the whole person in bringing together experience and a fixed or habitual point of reference; it is the adherence in faith to God's loving plan of salvation in Jesus Christ".<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup> L. MACARIO, *Appartenenti a Cristo nella Chiesa - Note di pedagogia ecclesiale*, in AA.VV. *In Ecclesia*, LAS, Rome, 1977, p. 487.

This explains why, in the process of education to the meaning of Church, it is important to form the social conscience of the young through the social teaching of the Church, so that they may learn to live the social and political dimension of the faith, develop their solidarity with problems that beset the lives of so many men and women living in inhuman conditions, and offer themselves as volunteers, apostles and missionaries.

### *Gaining experience of Church*

The meaning of Church and of membership is not created in the abstract but through the experience of Christian life in different personal situations, beginning with the family – rightly called by Paul VI the *domestic Church* – and continuing in the parish in which normally one has the experience of communion of faith, hope and charity. In our case we experience the Church with the young in the various kinds of educative and pastoral communities, which must be a signs and schools of faith and centres of communion and participation, “so that it can become a living experience of Church” (C 47).

It is a question, therefore, of strengthening our own faith community in all its educative and pastoral aspects so as to make them the leaven of social change. To this the brief descriptions in the Acts of the Apostles bear witness: “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And fear came upon every soul; and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved” (Acts 2, 42-47). Starting from the life of the communi-



ties they adopted a culture that differed from that of the Roman empire, a social model characterized not by the eagerness to amass goods, to possess and take the first places, but by the will to share, to serve and to live in solidarity with others.

This requires also that we mark in a special way moments of church life such as baptism, catechesis, participation in the Eucharist, listening to the word, celebrating the sacrament of Reconciliation, group and community meetings, retreats and the celebration of the high points of the liturgical year, fraternal community gatherings, contact with the neighbourhood, etc. None of these things should be trivialized. Everything can and must foster the maturing of the sense of church.

### *Leading others to find vocation in the Church*

The process of education to the faith must help people to pass from good dispositions of mind to firm convictions, from these to persuasive motivations, then to plans of life and eventually to total dedication of oneself to God and to others. This is what is meant by loving the Church and giving oneself for her. Love of the Church is shown also in the ability to let oneself be taken over by Christ to the extent of renouncing personal plans and interests and putting oneself completely at God's disposal to take part personally in the work of building the Kingdom. Adherence to the Church is made possible by knowing what it is; it develops through a progressive sense of belonging to it; it grows through practical church experiences and matures in vocational commitment.

"Anyone who places himself at the service of the Church nowadays must be convinced, even to the very depths of his being, of the possibility of showing to mankind – even in the midst of a secularised and atheistic world – the hand of God in history and in his own life. This duty to be living witnesses to the experience of God in our world must animate and pervade the various fields and activities of pastoral work in which every ministry



or service is expressed... Today, more than in times past, it is true to say that *God has need of men.*"<sup>28</sup>

I hope we may all be able to love, follow and imitate Jesus with the zeal, conviction and fidelity of those great columns of the Church St Peter and St Paul, so that we may be able to publicly confess our faith and love as they did: "*Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you*" (Jn 21, 17); "*I know in whom I have believed*" (2 Tim 1, 12); "*The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me*" (Gal 2, 20). Then our faith will be expressed in practical charity and become a credible and convincing witness.

It is my earnest hope and prayer that we may all attain the same goal as St Teresa of the Child Jesus: "Yes, I have found my proper place in the Church, the place that you have given me, my God. In the heart of the Church, my mother, I shall be love and in this I shall be everything and my desire will become reality".<sup>29</sup>

### **By way of conclusion: like the colours of the rainbow**

I finish with a native American legend, *All the Colours of the Rainbow*, which to me seems to be an appeal to bring together whatever is best in each of us to create something beautiful, enlightening and entrancing, and at the same time meaningful as a rainbow can be.

The Church is the community of Jesus' disciples, who recall and make present his love for man and the promise of the fullness of life. But to be credible and effective we need to set aside our self-sufficiency and to place in common our powers and resources, and so become a young Church without spot or wrinkle or anything like that, but beautiful and resplendent.

<sup>28</sup> K. LEHMANN, *Vale la pena rimanere nella Chiesa e vivere per essa*, in J. RATZINGER - K. LEHMANN, *Vivere con la Chiesa*, Queriniana. Brescia 1978, p.33-34.

<sup>29</sup> *Manuscripts autobiographiques*, Lisieux 1957, 229.

*"Once upon a time the colours of the world started to quarrel: all claimed that they were the best, the most important, the most useful, the favourite."*

Green said:

*– "Clearly I am the most important. I am the sign of life and of hope. I was chosen for grass, trees, leaves - without me, all animals would die. Look over the countryside and you will see that I am in the majority."*

Blue interrupted:

*– "You only think about the earth, but consider the sky and the sea. It is the water that is the basis of life and drawn up by the clouds from the deep sea. The sky gives space and peace and serenity. Without my peace, you would all be nothing."*

Yellow chuckled:

*– "You are all so serious. I bring laughter, gaiety, and warmth into the world. The sun is yellow, the moon is yellow, the stars are yellow. Every time you look at a sunflower, the whole world starts to smile. Without me there would be no fun."*

Orange started next to blow her trumpet:

*– "I am the colour of health and strength. I may be scarce, but I am precious for I serve the needs of human life. I carry the most important vitamins. Think of carrots, pumpkins, oranges, mangoes, and pawpaws. I don't hang around all the time, but when I fill the sky at sunrise or sunset, my beauty is so striking that no one gives another thought to any of you."*

Red could stand it no longer. He shouted out:

*– "I am the ruler of all of you - I am blood - life's blood! I am the colour of danger and of bravery. I am willing to fight for a cause. I bring fire into the blood. Without me, the earth would be as empty as the moon. I am the colour of passion and of love, the red rose, the poinsettia and the poppy."*

Purple rose up to his full height. He was very tall and spoke with great pomp:

*"I am the colour of royalty and power. Kings, chiefs, and bishops have always chosen me for I am the sign of authority and wisdom. People do not question me - they listen and obey."*

Indigo spoke, much more quietly than all the others, but with just as much determination:

*"Think of me. I am the colour of silence. You hardly notice me, but without me you all become superficial. I represent thought and reflection, twilight and deep water. You need me for balance and contrast, for prayer and inner peace."*

And so the colours went on boasting, each convinced of his or her own superiority. Their quarrelling became louder and louder. Suddenly there was a startling flash of bright lightning - thunder rolled and boomed. Rain started to pour down relentlessly the colours crouched down in fear, drawing close to one another for comfort.

In the midst of the clamour, RAIN began to speak: *"You foolish colours, fighting amongst yourselves, each trying to dominate the rest. Don't you know that you were each made for a special purpose, unique and different? Join hands with one another and come to me."*

Doing as they were told, the colours united and joined hands. The rain continued: *"From now on, when it rains, each of you will stretch across the sky in a great bow of colour as a reminder that you can all live in peace. The rainbow is a sign of hope for tomorrow."*

And so, whenever a good rain washes the world, and a rainbow appears in the sky, let us remember to appreciate one another.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>30</sup> *All the Colours of the Rainbow*, based on an American legend, presented by Leon Orb, 2 June 2004.

To Mary, Mother of God, under whose protection we begin this new year of 2005, I entrust each of you, dear members of the Salesian Family, educators and young people of the world. As Mother of the Church may she teach us to be and to form beloved disciples and joyful proclaimers of her Son. May she help us to recognize the Church as our Mother through whom we are always born and reborn in the faith.

With affectionate gratitude in Don Bosco.

*Pascual Chávez*  
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