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Tipolitografia Istituto Salesiano Pio XI - Via Umbertide, 11 - 00181 Roma
Tel. 06.78.27.819 - Fax 06.78.48.333 - E-mail: tipolito@pcn.net
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**«AND PREACH AS YOU GO, SAYING
'THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS AT HAND'» (Mt 10,7)**

Presentation of the America South-Cone Region

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8 September 2005

Birthday of the Blessed Virgin Mary

My dear Confreres,

This letter comes to you with my unfailing affection and the earnest hope that it may reach all of you, wherever you may be. I want you to feel me beside you in all the widely differing contexts and circumstances in which you are living and carrying out the missionary programme of Jesus: proclaiming the Kingdom, which is nothing else but God himself with his desire to meet us, and to build it up through the activities that make it relevant and credible: "heal the sick, bring back the dead to life, cleanse the lepers and drive out demons" (Mt 10,8).

From the very first missionary expedition it was the wish of our beloved Father Don Bosco to respond to Jesus' compassion for the multitudes, which he described as "sheep without a shepherd". In his years at the Ecclesiastical College, he himself had dreamed of being a missionary, and he became the founder of a missionary Congregation. Hardly a year after the approval of the Constitutions he began the American epic by sending out his first missionaries, who took with them not only the proclamation of the Kingdom but also the Salesian gospel of joy, hope and life.

As I continue with my presentation of the Salesian Regions, I want to talk to you in this letter about the American South-Cone Region. Set up during the GC24, it comprises a group of five countries (Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil, Chile and Paraguay) which have always been closely linked, even as regards their civil history.

1. THE CULTURAL, SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS SITUATION AT THE PRESENT DAY

To set the framework for Salesian work and activity in the South Cone, I think it will be useful to offer an overall view of the countries which make it up, and it must be said at once that the present-day situation is a long way from the one found by the first Salesian missionaries; this part of the American continent now has about 248 million inhabitants: 38 million of them in Argentina, 184 million in Brazil, 16 million in Chile, 6 million in Paraguay and 3.5 million in Uruguay.

These countries are also rich in natural resources, but mistaken economic policies have produced a situation in which can be found side by side in the same continent those of the so-called First World (that of the ultra-rich nations) and those of the Third World, characterised by slums inhabited by families and social groups on the margins of society.

On the social and economic front no great progress has been made because the neo-liberal brand of politics clashes head-on with solemn declarations about human rights, and has led to an accentuation of the social polarisation between rich and poor without an equal distribution of wealth; it has brought about, in fact, a concentration of wealth by a narrow social section on the one hand, while on the other hand reducing social spending to such an extent as to produce the marginalisation and impoverishment of growing numbers of workers, an increase in unemployment, the growth of slums in the towns and cities, and want and hunger in rural areas. This has led to the present phenomenon of increas-

ing numbers of children begging in the streets, or living by their wits and becoming delinquents. And to all this must be added the enormous burden of internal and foreign debt which leaves nothing available for investment in social projects or infrastructure.

Lack of an agricultural policy has led to a large-scale movement from rural to ever growing urban areas, resulting in increased poverty in the outskirts of the towns and cities. Every year a considerable number of children drop out from the educational system without completing the obligatory curriculum, and this in turn adds to the problems of unemployment and youthful delinquency. The exploitation of youngsters is seen in child labour, or in their involvement in unlawful and criminal activity such as drugs, robbery and prostitution.

The countries of the Region still have a great Catholic tradition, with strong expressions of popular devotion. The Catholic Church enjoys great prestige: it is one of the institutions that inspire greater trust in the mind of the public because it is deeply rooted in the social context. It lives and suffers with the people. From this point of view Uruguay is the only country that is different. So-called religious freedom is in fact more a declaration of principle, while the attitude of the government seems clearly non-religious and subtly anticlerical.

It must be said finally that in recent years the whole of this area of America has been assailed by a strong movement of secularisation. It should also be noted that, from a historical standpoint, the number of priests has always been insufficient and the laity were and still are today a powerful force in the field of evangelisation and for the preservation of the faith.

2. THE BEGINNINGS OF SALESIAN WORK

It was not by chance that Don Bosco chose these lands; they were the places pointed out to him by Providence for the first mis-

sionary experience of the Salesian Congregation. For their part, the Salesians have always considered Patagonia as the “promised land” given by God to Don Bosco, recalling the dream of 1871 or 1872, in which he saw Salesian missionaries bringing about the conversion of Patagonia, through the young people entrusted to them.¹

In 1875, a year after the approval of the Constitutions, Don Bosco sent his Salesians to Argentina under the direction of one of his best beloved sons, Fr John Cagliero.² Don Bosco loved that country so much that he called it his “second motherland”.

In 1876 it was Uruguay’s turn. A missionary expedition led by Fr Luigi Lasagna founded the house of Villa Colón. From Uruguay the Salesians spread to Brazil in 1883 and to Paraguay in 1896.

In the meantime the Salesians had arrived in Chile in 1887, the year in which the house of Concepción was founded, to be followed in 1888 by that of Talca. In 1891 Salesian work in this country was consolidated by the acceptance of the work “La Gratitude Nacional” in Santiago.

A factor contributing to this rapid development was the fact that the French newspapers, widely read in the countries mentioned above, had a great deal to say about Don Bosco. Nor can we overlook the kindness of many Bishops, such as Archbishop Federico Aneyros of Buenos Aires, the Servant of God Bishop Jacinto Vera of Montevideo, and Bishop Pedro Maria de Lacerda of Rio de Janeiro. Of great importance too was the support of the Conferences of the Society of St Vincent de Paul which were greatly interested in the education of poor and abandoned youngsters.

The Salesian Bulletin, the Catholic Readings, and other Salesian publications were also instrumental in spreading far and wide knowledge of Don Bosco, of his system of education, and of his

¹ Cf. Critical edition of the dream in RSS 28 (1996) pp. 109-117.

² Cf. Mgr. Luigi LASAGNA, *Epistolario* (ISS), vol. II, p. 302.

concern for providing help for young people who were poor and abandoned.

2.1 Argentina

When they arrived in Argentina, at Buenos Aires and at St. Nicolás de los Arroyos, the Salesians began by following up the groups of Italian immigrants, as Don Bosco had recommended.

Though they were a real blessing for those poor immigrants, the Salesians were not always well received by the Buenos Aires clergy and society. With the acquisition of the house and land at Almagro, they came into possession of a site which was their own property. Very soon they had a catechetical campaign in full swing with a catechism competition and the printing of 800 thousand copies of the diocesan catechism. In 1882 they organized the Union of Cooperators, and in 1888 – in memory of Don Bosco – the Work of Mary Help of Christians was founded for vocations. With Fr James Costamagna as Provincial, Salesian work spread to the interior of the Republic. With the agricultural school of Uribelarrea, Salesian work was extended to the sons of the peasants. In the meantime in 1879, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians had arrived in Argentina and soon spread to various parts of the Republic.

In November 1900, to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the Salesians' arrival, the Second International Congress of Salesian Cooperators was celebrated at Buenos Aires. Fr Paul Albera presided over the Congress in the name of Don Rua, and among the participants were six Bishops and the Provincials of Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay and Brazil. Fruits of the Congress were the dedication to Jesus the Redeemer and to Mary Help of Christians of the Church of S. Carlos di Almagro and foundation of the Jesus Redeemer School at Maldonado for Don Bosco's young orphans.

In internal matters of the Congregation, the First Salesian American Chapter also took place, with the participation of the

Provincials of Argentina, Uruguay, Southern Brazil and Mato Grosso. With Fr Paul Albera presiding, matters dealt with concerned religious observance, formation, Don Bosco's system of education, economic issues, relations with the FMA, festive oratorios, liturgical ceremonies, music and the sodalities. "That year" – wrote Fr Joseph Vespignani – "there was a noticeable reawakening of affection and Salesian spirit in all of us."

For the centenary of the birth of Don Bosco (1915), the Archbishop of Buenos Aires published a pastoral letter in which he gave a wonderful description of the work of the Salesians and FMA in the country. He gave the numbers of young people of both sexes who were being educated "using a method and the same spirit of active and patient charity which their wise Founder had been able to impress on his providential work." He said the Salesians could be considered "a new manifestation of the power and kindness of Mary Help of Christians for the salvation of society".

In that same year the "Don Bosco Scouts" were founded, a youth movement thought up by the far-seeing Fr Vespignani, based on the Boy Scouts of Baden Powell but with a clear Christian and Salesian slant. In the course of time these were able to carry out true and proper missions in various cities of the Argentine Republic. By 1940 the Don Bosco Scouts had reached 45 different troops. In 1980 these had become 65, with 9,000 young people from the Salesians, to which were to be added 15 squads with 2,000 members from the schools of the FMA.

Deserving of special mention are the efforts of the Salesians, and first of all of Fr Aquiles Pedrolini, in spreading devotion to Mary Help of Christians in Argentina. A sanctuary was built in her honour at Rodeo del Medio, which soon became the focus for numerous pilgrimages. On 8 October 1916, the Bishop of Cuyo crowned the statue of Mary Help of Christians in one of the city's public parks. Two other Bishops and several ecclesiastical dignitaries were present for the event with a crowd of some 8,000 people.

In Patagonia

After a first unsuccessful attempt, the Salesians arrived in Patagonia in 1879, and in 1880 were officially given charge of the mission in that country. In Rome Don Bosco pursued the process for the creation of an Apostolic Vicariate, and in 1883 John Cagliero was appointed Vicar Apostolic. To overcome legal difficulties, the Archbishop of Buenos Aires, Mgr. Federico Aneyros, appointed Mgr. Cagliero as his Vicar General for Patagonia, with full episcopal faculties, and included in the archdiocesan budget that also of the mission.

The evangelising and civilising activities carried out by the Salesians in the territory were of widely different kinds. They and the FMA made use in their missionary work of many elements typical of their own formation experience: instrumental music, singing, shows and performances, theatrical presentations, and small lotteries all served to bring to those desert places a breath of joy and the hope of a different life. Very often the missionary was able to reach places the civil authorities could not reach. The inhabitants of small centres got together and formed communities around the mission.

Religious associations were set up for both men and women, so that the faithful would not feel isolated or abandoned to their own devices. Whenever financial and economic conditions required it, mutual aid and lending societies were also set up. Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, to Mary Help of Christians and, after his death, to Don Bosco himself spread widely among the people.

In the field of scholastic education, the missions provided what should have been supplied by the State when such aid was non-existent. Schools of arts and trades were launched and practical training was given in agricultural skills, making use of land that the mission had acquired. At Viedma it was possible to build the first and only hospital in the territory. The FMA, for their part, visited the sick and the dying in their own homes and even the

indians in their tents. They had schools of their own and also an orphanage for the daughters of the indians.

To commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Salesian Missions (1925) a Salesian College was opened at Comodoro Rivadavia and the annexed Church of Saint Lucia was blessed. At Buenos Aires a Professional Teaching Exhibition was organized, the IX International Congress of Salesian Cooperators and the II International Past-pupils Congress took place, presided over by Fr Joseph Vespignani, representing Fr Philip Rinaldi. A march-past of 12,000 young men and women, pupils and past-pupils of the Salesians and the FMA, crowned the solemn celebrations. As a result of the Congress it was decided to build a new house for poor and abandoned youngsters.

On the occasion of the beatification of Don Bosco, civil and religious authorities joined the whole Salesian Family in solemn festivities that took place at Buenos Aires. At La Plata, the Province of Buenos Aires erected a monument to the great educator, on the initiative of the Provincial Government. At Buenos Aires, a bust of Don Bosco was given a place of honour in the hall of the National Education Council.

2.2 Uruguay

The arrival of the Salesians in Uruguay was quite fortuitous. The country was being modernised by the government of Lorenzo Latorre, and rapid development was taking place with the help of foreign capital, especially British. As a result new housing projects were being built in Montevideo and surrounding areas, as for example at Villa Colón.

This locality hoped to have a college that would be second to none in the Eastern Republic. While building was in progress, its promoters – they were Protestants – asked the “Society of Friends of Education of the People” for a plan of studies to be used in the new school. This led to the production of one of the classics of Latin-American pedagogy, José Pedro Varela’s book *La Educación del Pueblo*.

At this point they began to look for some way to implement these educational proposals, and it fell to the Salesians to put them into effect. From 1875 Fr John Cagliero had been at Buenos Aires. He made a visit to Montevideo and on 24 May 1876 was able to inform Don Bosco that he had accepted the new college. On 26 December of the same year Fr Luigi Lasagna with other Salesians disembarked at Montevideo and took possession of the new house.

The missionaries found themselves immersed in a refined cultured society, which required from them considerable ability in maintaining the corresponding scholastic and educational level. Anticlerical circles dominating the scholastic scene in Montevideo did not like the changes made by the Salesians to the plan produced by Valera. The crisis however was brilliantly overcome by vigilance and firmness on the part of Fr Lasagna. The trust and the hearts of the majority of the pupils and their families were won over, and it was in fact the students themselves who rose in defence of the college which they already considered their own.

When Fr Lasagna became Provincial of Uruguay and Brazil in 1880, he followed the directions given by Fr Francesco Bodrato and by Don Rua. He began to look for new fields of work. The schools of San Francesco de' Paoli, belonging to the Conference of St Vincent de Paul, the parish of Las Piedras with its annexed house of formation, and that of Paysandú-Rosario with the college alongside, were all given to the Salesians. Then came Mercedes, Paysandú-San Ramón, Montevideo-Sacred Heart and Talleres Don Bosco. For the outskirts of Montevideo the idea of the Society of the Festive Oratories was launched to coordinate the ten oratories opened by Fr Lasagna. After the death of this great pioneer and missionary, the Province of Uruguay and Brazil was divided into two parts, with Uruguay and Paraguay combining to form a separate Province.

Mgr Lasagna had strongly supported the foundation of the Catholic Workers' Circles. To Fr Andrea Torrielli, who was looking after the first circle and wanted to become a Salesian and place

himself under obedience to him, Lasagna gave as his first task that of not abandoning the Circles. The Salesians helped the Circles to become established in the cities in the interior, especially where there were Salesian foundations.

In 1905 the formation house of Las Piedras was transferred to the "Juan Jackson" Agricultural School, which Mgr Soler had given to the Salesians in 1898. In 1910 the "Christopher Columbus Centre" was set up for the care and animation of the Past-pupils, and finally in 1915 a monument was inaugurated at Villa Colón to Mgr Luigi Lasagna.

On the occasion of the golden jubilee of the College, Fr Héctor Sallaberry had the idea of celebrating the jubilee by promoting the work of spiritual retreats. The project was taken up by the Past-pupils and in a few months at Villa Colón the Congregation's first Retreat House was set up. Later came the proposal for Radio Retreats, an idea that met with great spiritual and apostolic success.

As regards devotion to Mary Help of Christians, in 1898 the Archbishop of Montevideo had asked that at Villa Colón, in the College church, a National Votive Temple might be erected to Mary Help of Christians. On 14 December 1901 the Archbishop inaugurated the Sanctuary of Mary Help of Christians, and in October 1904 the statue venerated there was solemnly crowned.

2.3 Brazil

In 1877, Bishop Pedro Maria de Lacerda, of Rio de Janeiro, wrote to Don Bosco asking for Salesians for his diocese.³ Later he went himself to Turin and left money there to pay for the journey of the missionaries who would one day come to his country. In the State of Southern Rio Grande, the Capuchins had given a lot of publicity to the Salesians whom they had known in Uruguay, and the Bishop of Porto Alegre asked the Provincial Fr Luigi Lasagna to send Salesians to work in his diocese.

³ Cf. *Fondo Don Bosco*, 175 C 3.

Fr Lasagna, sent for the purpose by Don Bosco, went to Brazil in 1882. He made a long journey along the country's coast as far as Belém do Pará, and decided to begin Salesian work in that country in Niterói, with the Santa Rosa College. On 14 July 1883 he himself arrived at Rio de Janeiro with the first Salesians; then came the houses of São Paulo (1885) and Lorena (1890). In 1891 he accepted the house of Recife, which was opened however only in 1894. Appointed Bishop of Oea-Tripoli, Mgr Lasagna founded the house of Cuiabá and the Teresa Cristina Colony, the first mission among the Bororos Indians (1894).

At that time the houses of Brazil depended on the Province of Uruguay-Brazil, and that is how the situation remained until the death of Mgr Lasagna. The Brazilian houses were then erected as a separate Province, and soon afterwards from that first Province was born the Province of Mato Grosso.

The two houses already accepted by Mgr Lasagna were opened immediately: Campinas, in the State of São Paulo, and Cachoeira do Campo in that of Minas Gerais. Then came the turn of the College of Corumbá in Mato Grosso, of Salvador at Bahia, of the Agricultural Colony of Jaboatão in Pernambuco, and of the Agricultural School of Tebaida at Sergipe.

Development was so fast that already in 1901 three Provinces could be erected: those of Southern Brazil, Mato Grosso and Northern Brazil which stretched from Bahia to the Amazon area.⁴ A year later the Salesians, after losing the Teresa Cristina Colony because of a political change of policy by the government of Mato Grosso, set up a new mission in the eastern part of the State with the eastern Bororos.

Very soon the Salesians found themselves without adequate economic resources to sustain all their educative structures, and

⁴ From the Southern Brazilian Province came later that of St John Bosco, which today has headquarters at Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, and that of St Pius X with headquarters at Porto Alegre, Southern Rio Grande. From the Northern Province was born the Province of St Dominic Savio, with headquarters at Manaus, Amazonian region.

were obliged to give way to social pressure and dedicate their schools to courses at higher level, leaving the professional schools in second place. Since then the Congregation in Brazil has breathed with the two lungs of schools and oratories.

As in Argentina and Uruguay, so also in Brazil the Salesians tried from the outset to foster devotion to Don Bosco's Madonna. Fr Luigi Zanchetta, through the "Catholic Readings," of which he was director, and many propaganda leaflets, spread this devotion all over Brazil. It became possible to erect the monument to Mary Help of Christians on the hill overlooking the Santa Rosa College at Niterói, which soon became a place of pilgrimage and the first religious symbol in the Guanabara Bay area, before the construction of the great Christ of Corcovado.

To solemnize the centenary of the liturgical feast of Mary Help of Christians, instituted by Pius VII for his liberation from Napoleonic captivity, and the centenary of the birth of Don Bosco, there took place at São Paulo, from 28 to 30 October 1915, the VII International Congress of Salesian Cooperators on the theme "Social restoration in Christ", to be achieved (according to the relevant documents) through work and education. One of the results of the Congress was the foundation in the Bom Retiro area alongside the parish church of a new Salesian house for the instruction of poor youngsters in various trades.

2.4 Chile

In Chile, Don Bosco and the Salesians were well known and greatly appreciated in Santiago, Valparaíso, Talca and Concepción. The book *Don Bosco y su Obra* by the Titular Bishop of Milo, the Spanish Mgr. Marcelo Spínola, was widely read in the country. A leading light in Chile, he had been in Italy between 1869 and 1887, where he had got to know the extraordinary greatness of the Saint of the young; one of the latter, Fr Blas Cañas, founded at Santiago at Don Rua's behest in 1872 the work of the "Patronage of St Joseph".

Nevertheless it was only in 1876 that Don Bosco began to think deeply about the Chilean mission. He wrote to the Bishop of Concepción asking for information about future work, and at the same time suggested the opening of three houses in Santiago, Valparaíso and Concepción. The first Salesian in Chile was Fr Dominic Milanese, who wrote an account of his journey to Concepción in the Salesian Bulletin of March 1886. The Salesians began their apostolic work with trade schools for poor boys, festive oratories, the pastoral care of people in poor areas and missions among the natives of the Magellan Straits.

At Don Bosco's death there were three Salesian Houses in Chile: in Concepción, Punta Arenas and Talca. A highly competent group of Salesian Cooperators had prepared for the arrival of the Salesians in Concepción and Talca, and were awaiting them in Santiago and Valparaíso. No one, on the other hand, had prepared for their arrival in Punta Arenas.

At the death of Don Rua the number of houses in Chile had increased to 14. Four of these – La Serena, Santiago, Talca and Concepción – were Schools of Arts and Trades for poor youngsters who could also be accommodated in a boarding annexe. In the St Joseph College of Punta Arenas there was also a small group of boys being trained in shoemaking, carpentry, printing and book-binding. There were three commercial institutes: Iquique, Valparaíso and Valdivia. In Linares and Punta Arenas there were elementary schools. The "Patronage of St Joseph" was a boarding school with courses at elementary and middle level. The aspirantate and novitiate had been started up at Macul, Santiago. The Salesians had parishes only in Punta Arenas and Porvenir. Deserving of special mention is the house of "La Gratitude Nacional" in Santiago, which housed the National Infant School and the National Thanksgiving temple of the Sacred Heart.

The missionary work carried out at Magellan and the care given to poor youngsters, together with the characteristic dynamic optimism so typical of Don Bosco and the Salesian spirit, had

prompted support by the civil and religious authorities and by Catholics in general. The press too contributed to the spreading of the knowledge of and esteem for the Salesian world. In 1907 publication began of the leaflets *El Mensajero de María Auxiliadora* and of the "Catholic Readings".

At that time thought was being given to the possibility of two Provinces in Chile. The works in the Prefecture Apostolic of Magellan had Mgr Joseph Fagnano as their Provincial from 1887 until his death. Then in 1892 the Province of St Gabriel was erected, with headquarters in Santiago. It should be remembered that until 1902 the Salesian works in Peru and Bolivia depended on this Province.

In this period too the FMA came to Chile, both in the missions of the south and in the central and northern regions of the country. By 1910 they had ten houses. In 1896 the Mother General, Mother Caterina Daghero, visited the mission of Dawson Island.

The Prefecture Apostolic of Punta Arenas

In 1882, Fr Concha suggested to Don Bosco the foundation of a House at Punta Arenas, launching in this way the missions among the Indians of Tierra del Fuego. In 1883, following on negotiations with Don Bosco, the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith created the Prefecture Apostolic of Southern Patagonia, with headquarters at Punta Arenas. It also included Tierra del Fuego, the Falkland Isles and other islands of the area.

Fr Joseph Fagnano was appointed Prefect Apostolic, and in October 1886 he left from Buenos Aires with a scientific and military expedition to explore Terra del Fuego. In the process of evangelising and baptising the natives he became convinced that the headquarters of the Prefecture should be in Punta Arenas. For the missions among the natives, Mgr Fagnano preferred the "Reductions" system, like that used by the Jesuits in Brazil and Bolivia, to that of travelling missionaries, the customary system in Patagonia. In March 1889 the mission was begun in Dawson Is-

land. Mgr Fagnano went personally to Santiago in 1880 and obtained the concession of the island for twenty years. In their mission the Salesians received the *Alakaluf* Indians and later the *Onas*.

Meanwhile the FMA were taking care of the women and girls. In addition to catechism lessons, they taught them how to read and write, cook meals, wash and repair clothing, sing and sew and make sandals, together with elementary norms of cleanliness and hygiene.

The leader and tireless animator of just about everything was Mgr Fagnano himself, who made frequent visits to the missions as well as travelling to Santiago or to Europe to give an account of what had been done, to solve particular problems with the help of the competent authorities, or simply to collect the help he needed for the missions.

Later disagreements arose with the diocese of Ancud over the ecclesiastical administration of Punta Arenas. The question was submitted to Rome, and in this way the Vicariate Apostolic of Magellan was created, independent of the diocese of Ancud and with the Salesian, Mgr Abraham Aguilera Bravo, as Vicar Apostolic.

There were great festivities for the beatification of Don Bosco (1929), celebrated in May at Talca, at Punta Arenas and with a solemn triduum at Santiago. The Press contributed to the creation of a climate of admiration for the figure of the Apostle of Youth and for his work. As a mark of their loving allegiance to the new Beatus, the Past-pupils celebrated their Third Congress, in which they studied Don Bosco's educational method.

In Chile too, as in the rest of Latin America, one of the chief characteristics of Salesian activity was devotion to Mary Help of Christians, as can be seen from the numerous churches and chapels dedicated to her. Today the Salesians have four parish churches with her as the titular, while a further four public churches are similarly dedicated to Mary Help of Christians.

2.5 Paraguay

It was in 1879 that Don Bosco replied to a request from Cardinal Nina, Protector of the Congregation, and promised to send some Salesians to Asunción to help in the formation of the local clergy. Fr John Allavena went to offer his priestly ministry during Holy Week and remained in Paraguay for two months. But it was not possible to fulfil all that had been promised and, in fact, the Lazzarists went to Paraguay in 1880 while the Salesians took their place in Patagonia.

Ten years later another Salesian missionary, Fr Angelo Savio, arrived in Asunción. He travelled up the river as far as Bahía Negra, on the border with Brazil. He was able to make a first contact with the natives of the Chaco region and, on his return to Buenos Aires, took with him some letters for the Salesian Superiors and for the Propaganda Fide Congregation in Rome, asking for missionaries for Paraguay.

In November 1892 the Paraguayan Consul in Montevideo, Mr Matías Alonso Criado, wrote to the Holy See pointing out the needs of young and older children in Paraguay and the deplorable state of the Indians in the Chaco area of the country. Cardinal Rampolla passed on to Don Bosco the Holy Father's wish that the Salesian Superior in the area should study the possibility of founding a mission in the Chaco area and a school of arts and trades at Asunción. Fr Lasagna, who had come to Italy to take part in the General Chapter, went to Rome and, after being made Titular Bishop of Oea-Tripoli, returned to America. The following year he reached Asunción in Paraguay, and immediately won the hearts of all.

On the death of Bishop Lasagna, Fr Ambrose Turriccia was appointed Rector of the new college at Asunción. The new missionaries left from Montevideo on 14 July 1896. In 1900 a second foundation was made at Concepción, a town that served as gateway for the Chaco missions. In the same year, in what was then the somewhat distant suburb of Vista Alegre, another small house and chapel was begun dedicated to the Sacred Heart, the one now

known as the "Salesianito".

But in 1902 disagreements between the Rector and the Government resulted in the latter ordering the closure of the College at Asunción. Since the buildings had been given to the Salesians by an act of Parliament, this led to a clash between the legislative and executive bodies of the State. After much negotiating a solution was reached. Fr Turriccia was sent to Chile. The Salesians moved to a new property where they remain to the present day, the College was reopened and the former hospital building was returned to the Government.

Meanwhile work had been going on since 1919 in the setting up of missionary residences in the Chaco villages. In 1924 the agricultural school at Ypacaraí was opened, and Salesian work developed to such an extent that in 1954 Paraguay became a separate Province.

It was Fr Dominic Queirolo who made devotion to Mary Help of Christians a characteristic dimension of the Paraguayan people. He was outstanding in the building of churches and chapels dedicated to Don Bosco's Madonna, and gave added social popularity to the feast of Mary Help of Christians through a weekly publication "El Mensajero de María Auxiliadora". As Superior of the Salesian missions in the Chaco area, he made the Help of Christians their titular.

The years 1932-1935 proved to be a difficult period. The Chaco war decimated the male population of Paraguay and several Salesian colleges were taken over as hospitals. Fr Queirolo, Fr Ernesto Pérez and other Salesian chaplains were able to infuse in the soldiers and in the Paraguayan people in general total confidence in the protection of Mary Help of Christians, who was proclaimed the protectress and patroness of the Paraguayan army. Devotion to the Help of Christians became deeply rooted in the soul of Paraguay.

Another well remembered name is that of Fr Guido Coronel, who built the great temple of Coronel Oviedo and of the High

Paraná in honour of Mary Help of Christians, and was instrumental in having her proclaimed as patroness of the whole High Paraná countryside.

With equally zealous commitment the FMA worked to spread devotion to the Help of Christians among the nation's women.

3. THE SALESIAN CHARISM

The Salesian presence in the Southern Cone Region stems from Don Bosco's missionary dream and zeal. This led to the charism becoming deeply rooted in Latin America, to such an extent that it became part of the continent's culture. Proof of this is the prodigious growth which has made the Salesian Congregation the greatest religious force in this continent at the present day.

In fact, after 130 years, Salesian work in North and South America includes 26 Provinces and 2 Vice-provinces in 23 countries from Canada to Argentina and Chile. In the South Cone Region there are 14 Provinces: 5 in Argentina, 6 in Brazil, and 1 each in Uruguay, Chile and Paraguay. For better coordination the Region is divided into two Provincial Conferences. The *CISUR* comprises the Spanish-speaking Provinces: Buenos Aires, Bahía Blanca, Córdoba, La Plata, Rosario in Argentina, and the Provinces of Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay. The *CISBRASIL* is made up of the Portuguese-speaking Provinces of Belo Horizonte, Campo Grande, Manaus, Porto Alegre, Recife and São Paulo.

In the Region at the present day there are 1,788 SDBs and 96 novices in 312 foundations. But it must be said, unfortunately, that despite the prevalently youthful population of these countries, their Catholic and religious social background, and the considerable number of vocations and confreres in initial formation, there is a persistent and progressive fall in the number of Salesians in the Region.

With this diminution in mind, but seeking at the same time to achieve a better quality of formation, the Provinces have begun to develop interprovincial collaboration and to give effect to a reshaping process. The result is that some works no longer have a religious community, but are managed entirely by lay people. On the other hand, there are Provinces where there is only a small decrease in the number of foundations, and the pastoral activities have multiplied.

3.1 Religious Life

In matters of religious life it must be said that there is a substantial fidelity among the majority of the confreres, who live their religious vocation with joy, conviction and contentment, committed to pastoral and educational service, fraternal life, fidelity to the vows, the life of prayer and ongoing formation.

On the one hand, worthy of note is the generosity with which many confreres, though advancing in years, willingly take on work in colleges and parishes. But on the other, it must be said that the number is limited of confreres who are capable of taking on the responsibility of significant roles such as rector, economists and parish-priests. In many houses the rector has to take on the responsibility for the administration, to the detriment of his main task as spiritual guide of the confreres and charismatic animator of the mission. The disproportion between the number of works and the number of Salesians, and the diminution in numbers of confreres often leads to the same person bearing an accumulation of responsibilities which has a negative effect on the life of the work and on the quality of service, with a consequent individualistic pastoral style.

Vocation and vocations

Vocational resources in the Region are not lacking. The average age of the population in these countries, the religious background, the Catholic and cultural substratum, and also the pover-

ty of large groups of the people, are all elements that contribute to the fact that vocations to the priestly or religious life are still plentiful. There is absolutely no comparison with what is happening in the countries of western Europe, where such a proposal finds no response among many young people but rather a positive rejection.

On the one hand therefore it is consoling to note that in Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil, Chile and Paraguay, young people are still numerous, generous and open to Christian values. Every year many young candidates begin their formation process with generosity and enthusiasm for Don Bosco and the Salesian mission. On the other hand, a critical element is the fact that all too often these candidates reveal their vocational motivation to be weak, with a shaky human foundation and a poorly assimilated Christian formation.

And so the result is that although the young people attending our works are numerous, as also are those in the various youth groups that form part of the Salesian Youth Movement, or who explicitly express their openness to the Salesian vocation, recent years have continued to demonstrate a persistent falling off in vocations. The Provinces suffering most from this decline are those of Argentina and Uruguay. Brazil, on the other hand, is witnessing a period of vocational revival, which deserves to be studied more deeply so that the reasons can be identified. Chile, in general, is characterised by specific and fruitful work in this field. And Paraguay is gathering the fruits of its commitment to youth pastoral work and work for vocations.

The Salesians are aware of, and concerned about, this reduction in personnel and are trying to discover the causes of the problem and how it can be solved. In particular an attempt is being made to produce a plan for pastoral youth work that will lead to the maturing of life plans and to constructive vocation work, including practical experience in social and missionary volunteer movements, with careful follow-up, a strong sacramental life and a serious process of discernment.

3.2 *Fraternal life of the communities*

The Provincial Chapters celebrated last year and the Team Visits to the two Provincial Conferences of the Region have all pointed to the fact that the main ideas of the GC25, "The Salesian Community at the present day", have provided a frame of reference and reflection; this is particularly suitable for the improvement of the life of the communities. Although with different degrees of application and success the communities have taken up the five main points of the General Chapter, and have tried to realise the model of community desired by Don Bosco and expressed in the phrase: *"To live in one place, in unity of spirit, and with one and the same objective"*. In this way they have tried to overcome the false dilemma between "common life" and "fraternal life" by getting back to the fundamental intuitive notion that ours is a "common fraternal life". And so they have avoided giving way to the temptation of considering that the supreme value consists in being together even though there is no deep interpersonal relationship, or that it consists in "wishing to each other well" even though the conditions for being together are not verified in practice.

All this has led to an improvement in the "community day", in the functioning of the councils of the various works, in the community assembly, and in the role of the community in the EPC as an animating nucleus. As far as this last element is concerned, the EPC is coming to be regarded as ever increasingly valuable, even though there may still be a long way to go before it becomes the leaven that instils dynamism and transforms a whole work.

The objectives chosen by the Rector Major with his Council in their programme for the six-year period 2002-2008 have been taken up by the majority of the Provinces, and in fact figure in their present plans. There are also other activities which show that these objectives are being achieved. The appeal to make communities more meaningful, as regards both the quantity and quality of the confreres, has found a response in the efforts made by numerous Provinces to increase the number of confreres in the individual

communities and to promote a rhythm of life that fosters ongoing formation and pastoral effectiveness. In some cases the number of works has been reduced; some of them have been entrusted to lay people with the advantage that the confreres have been able to devote themselves more directly to their specific mission.

But despite these efforts, there remains a great disproportion between apostolic commitments, fields of activity, the complexity of works and the number of confreres. The danger is that our very identity may be put at risk, together with the quality of our educational and pastoral projects, the visibility of our witness, and our spiritual and vocational fruitfulness. We must find and maintain a balance between our pastoral sensitivity which urges us to tackle all the needs of the young, especially the poorest of them, and the conviction that we are not called, nor is it possible for us, to solve every social and pastoral problem.

3.3 Salesian mission

We know that the Salesian mission is not to be identified with, nor can it be simply reduced to, our works and activities. It is first and foremost Don Bosco's zeal for the good of souls, and especially the souls of the young! The task of our youth ministry, therefore, is to maintain this missionary zeal and make it systematic, well-structured and practical.

At the level of the American South-Cone Region the "Secretariado de Pastoral Juvenil de Plata" (*SECPLA*) was set up in 1985, which changed to *SEPSUR* with the integration of the Chilean Province. It has shown vitality, organisation and practical efficiency as is evident from its consulting groups, updating courses, seminars for the preparation of pastoral material, the "Cuaderno de PJ", special meetings with local and area animators, and meetings with the young people themselves.

In the Brazilian Provincial Conference this task is entrusted to the "Youth Coordination Committee" (*AJS*), which coordinates all youth activity. It is a national consultative team which has func-

tioned well and produced some interesting and helpful material, such as the "Salesian Notebooks" which have proved very useful to local animators. At the present time the team also includes the FMA, though the integration – valid in itself – has given rise to some problems because of the different ways of approach in the two Congregations, different ideas about how to work with young people, and the difficulty of maintaining a stable group. I emphasize nonetheless the great value inherent in this collaboration and in the will to create synergy.

A study-group was also set up within the *CISBRASIL* to coordinate everything connected with youth ministry and to respond to questions submitted by coordinators, animators and confreres working in the pastoral field. Every year there is a general meeting with all the provincial delegates for youth ministry. The data that has emerged reveals that with regard to the young there is a growing number of young volunteers willing to work in the missions, and that with regard to the confreres there is a reduction in the number available to follow up the youngsters, especially in a journey of faith.

The School Sector

The school sector remains one of the strongest and most significant services in the Region. In recent years, despite the fall in number of the Salesians, there has been an increase in the works of formal education, especially those operating at a higher level (*IUS*). All the Provinces of Brazil, Argentina and Chile have high schools of various kinds. We shall refer to them later.

Perhaps the thing most deserving of emphasis in the field of formal education in the *CISBRASIL* is the creation of a network linking the individual schools, and in collaboration also with the FMA. The main aim of this is to ensure the Salesian identity of our schools, to train teachers in Salesian principles, and to produce scholastic texts in line with Salesian pedagogy, especially for schools operating within the national framework. Here we may recall that as regards the production of school texts, for years

Argentina and Chile have collaborated in a business arrangement with the EDEBE Salesian publishing house of Barcelona, Spain.

From the financial point of view, the situation of the schools varies very much from one to another. While the Salesian schools in Chile are financed completely by the government and those of Argentina are supported by the State in such a way that the parents of the pupils pay a quota they can afford, those of Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay receive no subsidy at all. And so families lacking the necessary financial resources are penalised and unable to choose for their children a high-class school with a clear educational policy.

Agricultural schools and Vocational Training Centres

One of the works that has enjoyed most success in these countries of the South-Cone Region is the agricultural school. Though they are less numerous than in times past, the Provinces of Argentina, Uruguay, Chile and Paraguay still have such schools well known for their high quality. It seems rather paradoxical on the other hand that in a country so highly agricultural as Brazil, the agricultural schools are little esteemed by children and their families. And so with the closing of the boarding departments all such schools in Brazil have been closed.

On the other hand Vocational Training Centres have multiplied, not least because various organisations, especially of European origin, have given them strong financial and material support. Today, as in Don Bosco's own time, many adolescents and young men need to work to support their families, and in the training centres they find the possibility of the formation necessary to equip them for an active and professional entry to the world of work. In my opinion this is a area of our work that should be strongly supported and maintained. It gives us contact, in fact, with the poorest youngsters and provides a link with the world of work. And this is all the more important at a time like the present when the cultural model tends to emphasise the primacy of higher and university studies which have a certain aura and confer a

particular social status. I am convinced, moreover, that the work of our vocational training centres can offer a valuable contribution to these countries which are still in the process of industrial development.

Sector of the marginalised

This sector is one in which the South-Cone Region has worked with most courage and efficacy. The Salesian presence alongside youngsters with problems is nowadays very significant, not only because it is an activity which enables us to work for the benefit of those most in need, but also because it keeps us in contact with the government and administrative organisations that formulate social policies. It is also an important strategy for bringing influence to bear for a change of mentality on the part of those in government. They are the people who have the ability to change, or at least improve, the social and cultural situation of so many poor youngsters who are at serious personal and social risk. Fortunately we have at present various confreres and members of the Salesian Family in organisations that plan social policies for children and adolescents.

Encouraged by the experience of Fr Javier De Nicolò (COB), founder of "Bosconia", the Centre for the care and attention of street-children, and by that of Bro. Raymond Mesquita (BBH), founder of the "Salesian Care Centre for Juveniles", this kind of work has developed to some extent in every Province. There are new truly outstanding foundations of this kind which, in the spirit that gives them life, take us back automatically to the original experience of the Oratory at Valdocco. I mention, just by way of example, the work at Itaquera (BSP), where Fr Rosalvino Moran has created a genuine Salesian Boys Town for the benefit of the poorest youngsters. The work has many different expressions: reception, board and lodging, elementary training in some trade for the youngest ones, and rapid or more lengthy vocational courses for those who are older; finally work placements for the bigger ones. A significant work in the field of marginalisation can be seen

in the family-houses for youngsters in difficulties: there are 91 of them, with some 3,000 residents. One point of interest is that the new generations of Salesians are more inclined and open to this kind of work, but I must add that to work with needy children like these, good will alone is not enough: a solid motivation in faith is needed, together with specific preparation and a thoroughly professional approach.

Parishes sector

The work of Salesians in parishes is quite striking, both for the number of Salesian priests involved, and the generosity with which they devote themselves to pastoral care, catechesis and the preparation and administration of the sacraments. The parishes, with public churches and sanctuaries, number more than 300, and there are more Salesians working in them than in the schools.

In this work the challenges that emerge are: the need to ensure the Salesian identity of the parish, the coordination of apostolic forces (movements, groups, associations) by means of a pastoral plan that unifies the task of evangelisation, human advancement and Christian formation. Nowadays the collaboration of lay people is necessary for all of this, the creation and fostering of ministries for the different apostolic activities, and also for the proper functioning of Parish Councils.

Services to the Church

Our participation in the life and activity of the local Church is certainly not limited to the implementation of the Salesian mission and the administration of the parishes entrusted to us. There is a further way of making our presence significant: through all the Salesian forces we put more directly at the service of the Diocesan Church. At this moment I am thinking of the 110 Bishops in our Congregation. 43 of them are in the South-Cone Region: 25 in Brazil, 9 in Argentina, 4 in Uruguay, 2 in Paraguay and 3 in Chile. Without wishing to diminish our "sensus Ecclesiae" and our adherence to the Holy Father, it must nevertheless be said that the

appointment of Bishops has deprived some Provinces of extremely important confreres in the field of animation and in the directing of communities and works. Sometimes this has led to a lack of continuity in plans already in progress or the weakening of some sectors, formation for instance. We are happy nonetheless to be able to give to the Church well-prepared pastors who are particularly sensitive to the problems of the young.

Collaboration with the local Churches is also evident from the considerable group of Salesians involved in ecclesial and educational structures at national level. We can think, for example, of the various Conferences of Religious, of the Associations of Catholic Educators, and of the various services provided for Bishops' Conferences, such as offices for youth pastoral work and catechesis, centres for social communication and various other initiatives at a diocesan level.

Involvement and formation of lay people

The 24th General Chapter led the entire Congregation to adopt a new kind of approach and an understanding of the lay people who work with us. They were there before, but from the GC24 onwards they have been invited not only to collaborate with us but to share permanently the spirit and mission of Don Bosco. They are asked to live and work as true Salesians, educators by their words and example, sharing fully in responsibility for the Salesian mission. To achieve this objective a change of mentality was needed on the part of both confreres and laity.

On the part of the confreres, though a certain progress has been made in all Provinces, there still remains some resistance, sometimes because this new kind of relationship between SDBs and lay people has not been properly understood, sometimes because we have been over-hasty in delegating responsibility to persons not adequately prepared for it. Other difficulties arose from the lack of a clear understanding of the new role to be played by the individual Salesian and the community in this new relationship. It was found also that the choice of lay people, based more on their pro-

fessional ability than on their Salesian qualities, while on the one hand it might help in improving the quality of the service provided, could on the other have a negative effect on the general educational atmosphere. It has to be accepted also that restrictions imposed by time available, family commitments and social activities place a practical limitation on the continuity of the presence of our lay collaborators among those for whom we work. Finally there is the delicate financial relationship that may sometimes cause the rapport between confreres and laity to descend from a dialogue between collaborators to a merely formal relationship (or worse still to tension) between employers and employees.

In an effort to resolve the difficulties met with, the Provinces of the Region have drawn up a "Plan for the formation of lay collaborators" in our schools and other works. The Don Bosco University of Campo Grande, Brazil, offers a post-graduate course in the field of Salesian spirituality for both confreres and laity; the IUS of the Region have also developed an *on line* course of Salesian formation for university teachers.

3.4 Initial and Ongoing formation

Initial formation

Initial formation in the Region deserves special attention because on it depends, to a great extent, the charismatic identity, spiritual strength, apostolic drive and pastoral quality of our confreres. At the present time there are pre-novitiate houses in all the Provinces. These are in the process of moving more decisively towards interprovincial collaboration so as to ensure consistency among formation personnel, a good number of those in formation, a formation plan of high quality and, especially, study centres with a Salesian identity. All these elements should concur in fostering in candidates to the Salesian life the personal assimilation of a spiritual experience and of Don Bosco's apostolic project.

From this standpoint the best structured phase is the Novitiate, generally shared between different Provinces. This leads to

a better sharing of the responsibility for formation, in particular where the *Curatorium* functions well.

The structure of the Post-novitiate shows different shades of emphasis: in some Provinces (BPA, ABB) it forms a single community with the prenovitiate, given the fact that during this first phase there is a year of philosophy studies. In Argentina there is collaboration between the Provinces of Buenos Aires and of La Plata, with a single postnovitiate at Avellaneda. The other Provinces have their own structure. Uruguay has the phases of novitiate and postnovitiate in the same community with a single Rector.

As regards theology, the two Provinces of Brazil-São Paulo and Argentina-Buenos Aires have their own studentate. The other Provinces have communities of theological students who study in various centres, diocesan or belonging to other Congregations. The students of Paraguay share the study-programme of the Chilean Province. The Provinces of Argentina-Córdoba and Argentina-Rosario have communities of students who pursue their theological formation at study centres of the Diocese. The Provinces of Bahía Blanca and La Plata keep their students together in Buenos Aires. Five Provinces of Brazil have their students at our own studentate at São Paulo. The Province of Belo Horizonte shares responsibility with other Religious Institutes for a Centre of Studies of Philosophy and Theology for Salesian students and those of other Congregations.

So far there is nothing specific for the formation of Brothers. To help in finding a satisfactory response in this regard, during the Team Visit to the two Provincial Conferences of the Region, I made a personal request that a solution be found for this in collaboration with the Interamerica Region.

Ongoing Formation

In addition to what has been said already about the effort to consolidate communities and reshape works, the two Provincial

Conferences of the Region have multiplied their endeavours to find an adequate plan for the ongoing formation of the confreres, so as to ensure a common and fraternal life that will foster spiritual renewal, professional updating, and pedagogical competence.

Outstanding so far have been specific courses for Rectors and for confreres in different age groups with regard to religious or priestly life. I want to refer again to the meetings for young priests in the first five years of their ministry and for Brothers in their first years of perpetual profession, to courses for confessors and courses of various kinds for parish priests. The presence of a stable coordinator in the *EFOSUR* has ensured continuity and unity of approach in these formative meetings.

Since 1997 through the initiative of the *CISBRASIL*, a specialised course in Salesian education has been given in the Don Bosco University of Campo Grande; it is coordinated by the National Formation Commission. A formation course is also given for SDBs and lay people.

3.5 Salesian Family

Among the main resources available for the carrying out of the mission in the Region must be included the Salesian Family. Its importance lies not so much in the fact that we make use of the different groups as though they were there at our disposal, but in the awareness of the fact that we are called to work together in the same locality as a spiritual and apostolic movement, always with due regard to the autonomy of the different groups and Congregations. From this standpoint the first concern will be to form the Consulting Group of the Salesian Family and have it functioning at both local and provincial level.

The America South-Cone Region has been blessed with many groups of the Salesian Family. In addition to the Salesians there are the FMA, Salesian Cooperators, Don Bosco and FMA Past-pupils, the Don Bosco Volunteers and their male counterparts – the Volunteers with Don Bosco, the Damas Salesianas, the Sister Apos-

tles of the Holy Family, the Daughters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, the Sisters of Jesus Adolescent, the Sisters of Charity of Miyazaki, and the Congregation of Priests of St Michael Archangel.

There are also other groups, not yet officially members of the Salesian Family, but close to us and to our spirit nonetheless: the parents of professed Salesians, the Pious Union of Mary Mazzarello, the Josephine Sisters, the Missionary Sisters of Jesus, the Missionaries of the Risen Christ, the Contemplative Community of Nazareth, the Family of the Domus Mariae, the Sociedade Joseleitos de Cristo, the Congregação das Irmãs de S. Teresinha, the Congregação das Irmãs do Divino Mestre, the Comunidade Canção Nova.

Collaboration between the SDB and FMA for the carrying out of the mission is very good, especially in the fields of formal education and youth pastoral work. They work together also in the coordination and animation of Cooperators, and Past-pupils.

The Cooperators, whose Association is at present engaged in a renewal of the Regulations of Apostolic Life, are making good progress in the mission. Unfortunately the Provinces cannot always provide them with a stable Salesian delegate.

The SDB and FMA Past-pupils are present in all the Provinces and many of their local centres collaborate in our works of education. In the Region there are about 115 Unions in all, though not all show the same degree of vitality. Here, as in other parts of the Salesian world, efforts are being made to get young past-pupils more involved.

In the parishes the ADMA group normally takes the responsibility for keeping alive devotion to Mary Help of Christians, so widespread in these countries as we have seen. The DBV are present in nearly every Province, but in contrast with the other Region in the continent the Damas Salesianas are few and their growth is slow. Their groups are very active nevertheless in providing social assistance to the very poor, and particularly in matters of health.

I think that the Salesian Family is a field in which we should make efforts to bring about a much greater growth – and this beginning from the Salesians who, apart from their role of animation and coordination, often do not manifest a real awareness of being members of a wider Family. It is necessary to have a better understanding of the Salesian Family as a true spiritual and apostolic movement and recognise its importance in the context of the Salesian mission.

3.6 Social Communication

Social communication has always been a field of activity to which the Salesians of the South-Cone Region have given priority. Today every Province has its provincial delegate for this sector, though not all of them are full-time; they have other duties as well. In almost every case they are qualified, with various degrees of specialisation in the subject. In the Region there are two Higher Institutes of Communication, one in Buenos Aires and the other in Bahía Blanca; both of them are particularly esteemed for the excellent quality of the technicians they form. There are also courses of good calibre at the Universities of Campo Grande and of Brasília, and at the University Centre of São Paulo.

As regards information, the most common channel is the Provincial Newsletter, printed or on line. Many colleges too have their own website and their own periodic information bulletin. Lack of sufficient coordination has meant that so far no common lines and policies have been followed in this sector. It is necessary to be more aware that a coordinated system of communication can be set up, avoiding the dissipation of energy and resources and making information a more effective element at the service of the mission and of plans for provincial and worldwide animation.

There are five editions of the Salesian Bulletin published in the Region: in Brazil with a circulation of 65,000 copies, Argentina 51,000, Chile 10,000, Paraguay 7,500 and Uruguay 3,500.

In the field of the production and circulation of educative and pastoral material the Salesians have developed numerous programmes and initiatives of various kinds. Among the main ones are 2 Communication Centres (ABA, BCG), 7 publishing houses (ALP, ARO, BSP, CIL, CISBRASIL, PAR), 12 printing establishments and schools of graphic arts (ABA, ABB, ARO, BPA, BRE, BSP, CIL, PAR, URU), 4 centres producing audiovisuals (ABB, BBH, BCG, PAR), 15 bookshops (ABB, ACO, ALP, BCG, BRE, CIL, PAR, URU), and 13 radio stations (ABB, ALP, ARO, BCG, BRE, PAR). In addition the Salesians produce a considerable number of programmes for other radio stations and are directly responsible for 11 educational TV channels (BBH), and one TV university channel (BCG).

The handling of all these enterprises is becoming a great challenge for the Provinces, which do not have sufficient personnel adequately trained; moreover these operations are not always part of the Provincial Structural Plan, and this means that sometimes personal initiative is the prevailing factor, with the consequent risk of compromising a proper administrative and professional management. Synergy between all these communication initiatives is therefore a policy still to be implemented or perfected with a view to a more professional approach.

3.7 Missionary animation

The Salesians arrived in Argentina with a programme designed to meet the needs at that time. They found in fact that the countries of this part of the world were moving towards a greater development and consolidation of their own nationality. The beginnings of the process of industrialisation and the urgent need for instruction led our confreres therefore to open workshops of arts and trades and agricultural schools, and to organise true and proper technical exhibitions. They chose a kind of propaganda language suited to the emerging mentality of the time: the emphasis on work, a youthful style in various forms of education, musical bands and marching, stage productions. At the same time in the

course of a few years, they set up a chain of meteorological observation stations between Uruguay and Cape Horn. It is significant that when in 1885 religious congregations were banned from Uruguay, the Salesians were allowed to remain, thanks to their meteorological observatory.

The South-Cone Region has therefore been characterised from the beginning by its educative and apostolic commitment to the Missions. And this missionary work still continues to a significant extent at the present day. In the territory there are still whole groups of indigenous peoples with various degrees of assimilation of western civilisation, but also others who have had practically no contact at all with the social life of their own country. There are Salesian missions in Patagonia, in the Chaco region of Paraguay, in the Amazon area and in Mato Grosso in Brazil. According to the results of a census reflecting the situation at the end of the year 2000, in Brazil alone there were 734,131 natives, belonging to 225 ethnic groups with 180 different languages. Four of the Provinces are typically missionary: Manaus (for the various peoples of the Rio Negro), Campo Grande (for the Bororos and Xavantes), Bahía Blanca (for the Mapuches), and Paraguay (for the peoples of the Chaco territory).

In Patagonia the political, social and economic situation has undergone considerable change in these 130 years of our missionary activity, but the Salesians are still courageous defenders of the rights of the natives and of their culture and social organisation, and evangelisation is conducted with great care for the inculturation of the Gospel. And here I must point to the boarding establishments for young Mapuches at Junín de los Andes and Zapala, as centres for advancement and vocational guidance. The Mapuches live in an inhospitable region, often isolated in winter by the snow. The Salesians, as faithful missionaries, share the people's poverty – and also their rich qualities.

As we have said already when speaking of the beginnings of Salesian missionary work in these countries, the first Salesian community reached *Chaco Paraguay* in 1920, and in 1948 the Holy

See created the Chaco Vicariate Apostolic, entrusting it to Salesian bishops. The majority of the population still live along the banks of the Río Paraguay and the Salesians continue to provide them with religious care and assistance.

The missionary dimension of the Campo Grande Province is most clearly evident in *Mato Grosso* with activity among the Bororos and Xavantes, but also among the Kaiowá and the Terenas. The Don Bosco Catholic University has made a great contribution to the study of the customs and usages of these peoples by the preservation of valuable ethnographic and cultural documentation. It should also be recalled that it was the presence of the Salesians that averted the extinction of the Bororos. The eight native reserves of Mato Grosso still receive Salesian support in the areas of health, education, livelihood and evangelisation. The Salesian history among the Xavantes, which now goes back more than a hundred years, has at times been marked by blood: Fr Fuchs and Fr Scarlatti were killed by these Indians in 1934. More than twenty years later in 1956 the Xavantes arrived at Mercury looking for missionaries; one group settled in São Marcos and another in Sangradouro. In this way the two residential missions among the Xavantes people were established.

In those days there were only a little more than a thousand of these Indians; now, on the other hand, they number more than 15,000. With the well organized presence of the Salesians and the FMA, infant mortality has been reduced, the population has been taught to read and write and evangelisation has gone ahead with the appropriate inculturation. Teaching is by native teachers and is bilingual; this facilitates fidelity to the native culture with a process of conservation of ethnic customs and traditions. Thanks to all these stratagems, the natives have not lost their culture, customs and traditions despite constant bombardment by the mass media.

As well as all this the Salesians have taken care to preserve scientifically the cultural patrimony of these peoples. In fact the "Centre for Missionary Documentation" of the Campo Grande Province collects and preserves books, films, photographs, docu-

ments and original copies of all publications about the natives that describe the history, content and praxis of missionary work. And the Don Bosco Museum, with its typical native objects, animals and birds of the region, and precious stones, is under the care and responsibility of the Catholic University of Campo Grande. It is visited each year by some twelve thousand people, mainly tourists from all countries, including the USA and Europe, and by pupils from the schools of Campo Grande and the State of Mato Grosso.

As far as evangelisation is concerned there is nowadays a serious catechumenate period, inculturated regarding content and method, and punctuated by stages that coincide with the same stages normally followed in the initiation process of the natives. Deserving of emphasis is the effort to inculturate the liturgy among the Bororos and Xavantes and the training of lay ministers, catechists and pastoral workers. There is sensitivity in the discernment and follow-up of native vocations to a committed lay life and also to the obligations of the religious and Salesian life. Recently one of the Xavantes was ordained priest and there are others in the period of initial formation. Two Bororos are at present in their year of prenovitiate.

Among the many initiatives employed in missionary work among the Bororos and Xavantes I would like to quote the following. In 1970 the missionary brothers Franz and Luis Würstle began their *Project of Mobile Missionary Assistance (AMA)* for the social development of native communities and as a support for the missionaries. After the death of Fr Franz, his brother Luis – a Salesian Brother – is continuing this valuable work. Together with his collaborators he works with the natives in the development of projects for the production and use of electrical energy, aqueducts, the making and maintenance of roads, the building of bridges, and the construction of artesian wells.

The Salesian missionary presence in the *Amazon* region continues to be very significant: it involves a third part of the foundations in the Province of Manaus and a third part also of the Sale-

sian personnel. There are seven missionary centres in the territory, but what is outstanding is the generous and painstaking work of the travelling missionaries carried out by the Salesians along the banks of the Rio Negro. Numerous initiatives for human advancement and evangelisation are in progress, but it is interesting to note that among the Jauareté natives there exists also a Centre for vocational guidance which has already produced important fruits: the ordination of the first native diocesan and Salesian priests, and the profession of young native Salesians in formation. There are already four native priests, while the missionary presence of the Church among the Yanomami of Maturacá is still in the phase of initial foundation.

As regards support structures, the *Mission Office* "União pela vida", with headquarters in Brasília is functioning well. The Province of Bahía Blanca maintains a Mission Office in the city of Buenos Aires for the purpose of giving help to the missions. The missionary dimension is also present in our works wherever there exists a missionary group promoting different kinds of activity such as formation, campaigns for the financing of various initiatives, and the volunteer movement.

The São Paulo Province (BSP) shares editorial and financial responsibility with the Combonians for the Review "Missões", and the Campo Grande Province maintains the Review "Noticias Misionarias" (BAKARU).

4. IMPORTANCE OF THE SOUTH-CONE REGION FOR SALESIAN WORK IN AMERICA AND IN THE WORLD

Without any claims to greatness, but aware also of what the Lord has given us through our work in the southern part of Latin America, I would like to point out its importance in the Salesian world, not only because it was here that the Congregations' great missionary adventure began, but also for other reasons that make it very significant.

From it have emerged the founders of Salesian work in Bolivia, in Peru, in Ecuador, in Colombia and in Central America. When it was decided to appoint a Delegate of Don Bosco for America, the person chosen was Mgr John Cagliero, Vicar Apostolic in Patagonia, and the first Salesian Bishop. And when Don Rua needed to appoint a second delegate, so as to leave Cagliero in charge of only the South Atlantic Region, the one chosen as Delegate of the Rector Major for the Pacific Region was Mgr James Costamagna, with headquarters in Chile.

In Argentina, thanks to the initiative of Fr Joseph Vespignani, the idea of aspirantates for adolescents took shape, and subsequently spread to the whole world. And we can never forget the importance, before Vatican II, of the Salesian Publishing House in Buenos Aires for the work of evangelisation carried out by the Salesians in all Spanish-speaking America.

Then it was at Buenos Aires in 1900 that the First Regional Chapter for the whole of America was held. In Uruguay was born the custom of celebrating Mary Help of Christians on the 24th of each month. From Chile came the Special General Chapter's idea of the great Salesian Family, a title subsequently officially adopted.⁵ From Chile too came the Salesian Youth Movement, based on an earlier Brazilian experience.

Holiness in the South-Cone Region

Also in the field of Salesian holiness God has blessed this Region and enriched the mosaic with significant figures like Blessed Laura Vicuña, Blessed Artemides Zatti, the Venerable Rodolfo Komorek, the Venerable Zeferino Namuncurá and the Servant of God Mgr. Antonio de Almeida Lustosa.

Salesian social work in the Region

Assistance to immigrants, especially Italians. This was one of the fields of work recommended by Don Bosco to the first mis-

⁵ In documents preceding the SGC, whenever there is a reference to the Salesian Family what is to be understood is always the Salesian Congregation of the SDB.

sionaries. In both Argentina and Uruguay efficient secretariats were organised for the reception and follow-up of new immigrants.

In Brazil the Provincial, Fr Peter Rota, was President of the *Italica gens*, recommended by Don Rua. Similar assistance was extended also to immigrant Poles, Germans and others.

In Chile in November of 1915, the Salesians accepted responsibility for three ethnic parishes for the care of Italian immigrants resident in Chile: Talca, Valparaíso and the "Gratitud Nacional" of Santiago.

Assistance to small-scale farmers. The Salesians have done a great deal of work for the benefit of farmers. As an example we can point to the work of Fr Oracio Meriggi for small farmers in Uruguay. When Christian trade unions began to function in the agricultural sector in the diocese of Salto, the Bishop wanted the Salesians to take over such work. With the approval of the Provincial Fr Meriggi was assigned to continue and develop the work. Eventually there were 73 Christian agricultural unions organized in three Union Federations and a General Confederation; there were 6,000 families associated with the work, with 19 agricultural colonies and 27 cooperative banks. When he died after 25 years of work, Fr Meriggi's last words were: "I die happy to be a Salesian and to be totally consecrated to the Congregation".

For the working classes. As an example of those who have worked in the Region for the benefit of the working classes we may take the Salesian Carlo Conci in Argentina. Under the direction of the Rector of the Pius IX College of Buenos Aires, he took over the assistance of the Past-pupils and gave to the Association a particular boost in the field of social studies. The work kept him fully occupied for the next thirty years.

Together with some leading members of the clergy of the Archdiocese he struggled to establish Christian social order everywhere. In 1911 he cooperated in the spreading of the "Social As-

sociation of Argentina". In 1920, at the request of the Apostolic Nuncio and the Bishops, and with the permission of the Superiors, he took on the post of National Secretary of the Catholic Peoples' Union of Argentina, which subsequently provided the best members for Argentine Catholic Action.

In 1925 he was appointed by the President of the Republic as delegate to the Seventh International Conference on Work at Geneva, where he competently defended the principles of *Rerum Novarum*. In 1931 he was president of the Argentine Delegation at the commemoration of *Rerum Novarum* held in Rome.

Carlo Conci used to spread Christian ideas also through the press. He was a contributor to numerous reviews, periodicals and leaflets. He became director of the Catholic newspaper "El Pueblo". He founded and edited the Review "Restauración Social", and published various manuals to make Catholic doctrine easily available to all.

Contribution of the Salesians to knowledge

The locating of the first works and missions in the South American continent was such that the Salesians were able to make a name for themselves for the contribution of a geographic, ethnographic, and more generally of a scientific nature that they made to the exploration of those territories to which they had been sent primarily as missionaries.

It is interesting to recall that as regards *Meteorology*, the Geographical Congress held at Venice in 1880, entrusted to Don Bosco the service of making better known the climate of the southern parts of America.

The network of Salesian meteorological observatories began with that of Villa Colón in Uruguay. It provided a useful service for navigators on the River Plata, and this was later extended to all the most southerly parts of the continent, wherever there was a missionary station. The same took place at Punta Arenas and in Mato Grosso, in the Amazonian region and in other parts of Brazil.

It cannot be denied that such a meteorological service has made a notable contribution to accurate scientific knowledge of the climate of those regions.

With regard to *Geography*, the Salesian Fr Albert De Agostini explored the southern Andes and the mountains of Tierra del Fuego, in an era when little or nothing was known of those territories. His work was also of help in bringing about peace between Argentina and Chile who, thanks to the work of this Salesian "explorer" were able to accurately establish their frontiers in that region.

In the field of *Biology* we find the discovery of the *Myrmecophilus Badariotti*, named after the Salesian who discovered it. Moreover in the missions of Mato Grosso a variety of cereal was developed, the *grano Sales*, which proved to be very suitable for grain cultivation on the Brazilian high plateau.

A great contribution was made in connection with *Agriculture*. When Patagonia was still a desert, the Salesian Fr Alessandro Stefenelli introduced into the agricultural colony he was directing a system for the irrigation of the lands on the banks of the Rio Negro. With the approval of the Government he developed the work in a way that was to transform the Patagonian desert into a region of thriving agricultural production.

Worthy of particular note is the contribution made by the Salesians in the fields of *Ethnography*, *Anthropology* and *Linguistics*. In Argentina recognition is now being given to the value of the work of Fr Lino D. Carbajal on the natives of Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego. In Brazil we have the monumental *Enciclopedia Bororo* of Fr Cesare Albisetti and Fr Angelo Giacomo Venturelli, an example of scientific work which drew the following encomium from Levi Straus: "The Bororo Encyclopaedia is a monument without equal in any society of Tropical America". Of inestimable value also are the Basic Mapuche Dictionary of Fr Francisco Calendino, the works on the Bororos of Fr Gonzalo Ochoa Camargo and the studies of Fr Alciniilio Bruzzi Alves da Silva on the natives of the Rio Negro in the Amazonian region.

With regard to history a great service continues to be offered, and not only in the field of Salesian history, by the Salesian Documentation and Research Centre of Barbacena, Minas Gerais, Brazil. The same can be said of the Salesian Historical Archives of Northern Patagonia, at Bahia Blanca, Republic of Argentina.

Finally I want to put on record that in the various Museums of the Region an extraordinary patrimony has been collected of geographic, ethnographic and historical material. Among many others I recall in particular the Salesian regional Museum *Maggiolino Borgatello* of Punta Arenas in Chile, and the *Don Bosco Museum* of the Salesian mission of Mato Grosso, at Campo Grande in Brazil.

Institutions at University level

As the works gradually became consolidated, various motives led the Salesians to dedicate themselves to activity in University institutions of the Region. The first need was for the Salesians to obtain the necessary degrees and qualifications required by law for work in schools and other activities with the young. A second point prompting the development of work in these institutions was the fact that the average age of those entering Universities had fallen considerably; nowadays it is common to find in Sixth-form Colleges pupils who are little more than *adolescents*, while the *young men* are mainly to be found in Universities. A third factor was the need felt by those working in schools to have the theoretical and technical support of specialists who have made a deeper study of problems connected with the education of young people and can offer useful suggestions and solutions for the current situation.

Among the more outstanding University Centres of the Region, I recall the "Cardinal Raúl Silva Henríquez" Catholic University of Santiago, Chile, the Don Bosco Catholic University of Campo Grande in Southern Mato Grosso, and the UNISAL University Centre, with a *campus* distributed over several cities of the State of São Paulo, Brazil. Also in Brazil we have University Faculties in the cities of Porto Alegre, Manaus, Recife and Vitória.

In Argentina a study is in progress that will lead to the unification of various Institutes of higher studies into a National University.

5. CHALLENGES AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

After presenting the cultural, social and religious situation of the different countries of the Region and noting how the Salesians have responded so far to the needs, circumstances and expectations of the young, I would now like to indicate some challenges and prospects that I think are of special importance. The words of John Paul II would seem particularly applicable to this Region; speaking of consecrated life, he said: "not only does it have a wonderful story behind it, but there are many fine pages still to be written".

5.1 Challenges

The panorama we have described seems to lead to the following as the main challenges:

- In the first place, *community life*. There are signs of a weakening at local level, a natural consequence of the disproportion between the workload, the complexity of the works and the number of confreres in each community. All of this fosters individualism on the one hand and departmentalisation on the other, to the detriment of a true community project.

- Equally important seems *evangelisation*. It is becoming ever clearer that we must go more deeply into the area of popular devotion, purifying it and inculcating in those for whom we work, both young and old, a faith profoundly linked with life, and at the same time capable of responding to the present inroads of secularism and the increasing phenomenon of the sects.

- Thirdly, *education* remains the focal point as regards our charismatic commitment and prophetic contribution. In the face of a neo-liberal society and culture that fosters an individualistic lifestyle and widens the gap between rich and poor, we need to

promote an education that will transform mentalities and lead to a culture more open to others and an active citizenship in the field of social and political activity.

■ And finally, I want to emphasise the importance of the *challenge regarding vocations*. The fundamental problem has two important aspects: the scarcity of vocations and a poor rate of perseverance. Despite the large number of generous and active young people who express and cultivate enthusiasm for Don Bosco and the Salesian mission, the number of vocations continues to fall and, more particularly, perseverance is weak.

5.2 Future prospects

As we try to make the best use of our available energies and resources and confront in a positive manner the challenges from within and without to which we have just referred, my proposal is to concentrate our attention on certain future prospects in line with the conclusions of the Team Visits to the two Provincial Conferences of the Region that took place in Brasilia and in Buenos Aires in the first part of April 2005.

■ **The first main suggestion is that of strengthening our charismatic identity as consecrated persons, apostles and missionaries of the young, through evangelisation and education.**

The era in which we live is so complex that we must continually return to our origins to rediscover our particular vocation as a plan of life centred in Christ and animated by a great zeal and enthusiasm for our mission: “to be signs and bearers of the love of God for young people, especially those who are poor” (C 2). The GC25 has highlighted the fundamental elements of this charismatic identity: a religious life that clearly manifests the primacy of God, who makes of us a prophecy of communion through a fraternal life in a family spirit, and which sends us among the young as an effective educative and evangelising presence.

To live all this we must continue to deepen our understanding and the application of the practical guidelines of the GC25 with respect to the following points:

- Take on board the real meaning of the Salesian vocation in the Church and reassert the central position of God in personal and community life.
- Make our witness to the evangelical counsels through the apostolic force of “Da mihi animas” and the free and unconditional giving of our life to those to whom we are sent a visible reality.
- Know and love the spirituality of the preventive system as the source of new relationships in fraternal life. Everything that on the one hand presupposes the presence of Salesians among the young, and on the other provides occasions for the sharing of life and mission with lay people.
- Foster the process of human and vocational growth in community life, by ensuring that living and working together is a real possibility.
- Lay down for the community the times, manner and criteria for assessing the witness of their life and apostolic zeal among the young.

■ **A second suggestion is that of ensuring a youth pastoral work animated by the missionary zeal of “Da mihi animas” and able to lead young people towards vocational options of Christian life.**

Today’s circumstances call for an overall project for effective Salesian work in the various Provinces and in the individual countries. Fresh attention must be given, therefore, to the needs, possibilities and requirements of education, and also to the number of Salesians that is required for the work involved. And all this while keeping in mind the people, the expectations of the young, the new lay out of towns and cities, and the changed mentality of the new generations.

To this end we must continue the study and application of the Salesian youth ministry frame work and, in an effort at discernment, establish certain strategic priorities for evangelisation and education to the faith that will respond to the urgent needs of the youth situation.

In more concrete terms:

– *In the field of formal education*

The educative work of Salesians in schools is still considered important, provided that the school has a cultural and prophetic ethos in line with the decisions made in the meetings at Cumbayá (1995, 2001).

This implies a serious preparation of Salesians so that they can pursue this project with renewed vigour.

In addition care must be taken in choosing collaborators, and more particularly coordinators, and in providing continuity to their formation; in other words we must prepare them in such a way that, if necessary, they can take on the responsibility for certain works with appropriate educative and Salesian competence. Throughout all the work of formation we have to keep in mind the future prospects for our schools and institutions.

– *As regards work for the poor*

The preference for young people who are poor, abandoned and at risk, has always been at the heart of the Salesian Family and central to its life from the time of Don Bosco right down to our own day. The changed situation of modern society is a challenge to us as Salesians to find new and fresh ways of responding.

In particular:

- In all our works and activities, through a new style of action and a welcoming acceptance of everyone; by offering an integral educative service centred on the individual; by the promoting of a culture of solidarity and commitment to justice and the transformation of society. In consequence, care for

the poor will not be reduced to a single sector in some of our works but must be an element running transversely through all of them, bringing about a deepening of the kind of culture inculcated in the schools, parishes, reception centres, and in the help given to those who are weakest.

- We will be present and active especially in specific works undertaken as a response to disadvantaged youth, by offering to young people in difficulty practical and coordinated initiatives within a process of integral growth. Such services require professional competence, specialised programmes, collaboration with other civil institutions, and the overcoming of an individual style of action. This will require a greater coordination of such initiatives and of the confreres assigned to such work in the provincial plan.

- As regards vocation work

The proposal is to give special attention to young people who already share the Salesian mission and spirit, through a more personal follow-up and explicit vocational advice to help them in their process of discernment.

In addition the promoting of specific vocational guidance as an expression of the fruitfulness of the life of the community and of the mission.

■ **A third suggestion of great importance is that of forming Salesians in such a way that they can meet the new challenges.**

This means forming Salesians to take up the challenges of today's youngsters, and be a new and significant presence among those for whom we have chosen to work. Salesians with a strong faith are needed, able to risk their lives for Christ and respond with vocational enthusiasm and professional preparation to the demands of the mission. At every stage of formation there is a need to personalise and internalise the fundamental motivations,

to develop a concept of life and attitudes that enable the new situations in religious life and pastoral work to be lived with serene autonomy. For this it is necessary to:

- Prepare formation guides, and especially organise and maintain them in teams of sufficient number; they must be qualified and left in office for the optimum period that will enable them to put their formation experience and academic competence at the service of others.
- Unify the criteria that guide the discernment process; ensure personal follow-up and collaboration between Provinces, so as to create the best possible conditions at every stage of formation.
- Help candidates from the outset to aim at a human maturity and Christian formation that will enable them to make a responsible option for the Salesian life. Help them furthermore to discern and purify their vocational motivation and to adopt attitudes and habits conformable with the kind of life to which they aspire.

■ **The final suggestion is that of continuing the reshaping process within the Provinces and also at the level of the Region itself.**

This process is fundamental, in the first place to make the implementation of the above-mentioned suggestions possible, by carrying out a courageous enquiry into strategies, significant initiatives and the many varied forms of resources at the service of the mission to the young.

A necessary preliminary operation will be that of completing the Provincial Structural Plan (POP), by presenting a reshaping plan for every individual Province, so as to gain a renewed overview of the traditional works, and so be able to incorporate the new activities in the provincial plan. We must also be on our guard against adopting a policy of uncontrolled growth in some particular kinds of work.

An important decision to be made by each provincial centre will be that of ensuring the existence of a consistent group of people for the animation of provincial services: the Provincial, Vice-provincial, Economer and Delegate for Youth Ministry should be able to guarantee by their presence and availability this central animating nucleus.

Other aspects that need to expand will be interprovincial solidarity and collaboration in the various fields linked with service to the mission, so that a combined group working in communion and in line with a pre-agreed project is set up.

The formation and guidance of Rectors and other key personnel in the animation and government of the communities and of the Province will ensure the development of the renewal processes in a constant and organised manner.

Some other more specific points have been set out and incorporated in the conclusions of the two Team Visits to the Region.

Conclusion

I began this letter saying that Salesian work in America stemmed from the dream of our Father Don Bosco. His sons have been courageous in bringing his dreams to life. They have not disappointed him and have fulfilled his highest expectations.

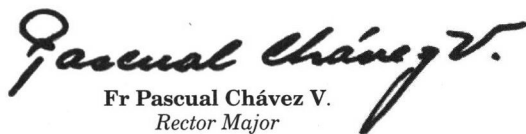
This year we shall be celebrating the 130th anniversary of the first missionary expedition. It will be an appropriate moment for renewing Don Bosco' dream. Young people of the present day need the Salesians to go on dreaming and to believe that a better world is possible. The conviction must grow in them that today more than ever before, the world has need of people with an intense interior zeal, full of fire and vision. Only in this way will they be able to back young people, to make use of education as a specific expression of our charism. And their enthusiasm will be a kind of magnetic attractive force enabling them to involve in

their cause innumerable others who want to share in our spirit and mission.

When Jesus saw the multitudes he was sorry for them because they were like “sheep without a shepherd”, and so he chose disciples and sent them with the same words and programme that he addresses to us today: “*and preach as you go, saying ‘the kingdom of heaven is at hand’*”. Heal the sick, raise the dead to life, cleanse lepers, cast out devils. Freely you have received, freely give” (Mt 10,7-8).

These words of Jesus are certainly in the mind of the numerous missionaries in this Region, who have given their lives so that young people, their families and the whole population of towns and villages could have the opportunity of a fuller life illumined by the proclamation of the Gospel. This missionary mandate continues in our own day. Despite the great deal that has been done in the past, there are still numerous sheep without a shepherd who are still in need; they invite us to be generous and to an ever fuller self-dedication. Within our heart, in our prayer and mission, the Holy Spirit, the soul of the building of God’s Kingdom, ceaselessly makes intercession with the Father with the words of Don Bosco: “*Da mihi animas, coetera tolle*”.

To Mary Help of Christians, the true guide of our Congregation, we entrust this moment in our history. Let us leave ourselves open to her guidance in the process of fidelity to our vocation and in the offering of our lives.


Fr Pascual Chávez V.
Rector Major