

acts

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

OFFICIAL ORGAN OF ANIMATION AND COMMUNICATION FOR THE SALESIAN CONGREGATION

year XCIII **N. 413**
may-august 2012

1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR	1.1 Fr Pascual CHÁVEZ VILLANUEVA «WITNESS TO THE RADICAL APPROACH OF THE GOSPEL» <i>Called to live in fidelity</i> <i>Don Bosco's apostolic project.</i> <i>"Work and temperance"</i>	3
2. GUIDELINES AND POLICIES	2.1 Calendar of preparation for the 27 th General Chapter 2.2 An outline for reflection and work on the theme of the CG27 2.3 The Provincial Chapters 2.4 Norms for the elections	56 59 68 74
3. RULINGS AND DIRECTIVES	(none in this issue)	
4. ACTIVITIES OF THE GENERAL COUNCIL	4.1 Chronicle of the Rector Major 4.2 Chronicle of the General Council	86 95
5. DOCUMENTS	5.1 Decree regarding the heroicity of the virtues of the Servant of God Laura Meozzi, FMA 5.2 Relevance for the Church of the message and the witness of Antonino Baglieri, Volunteer With Don Bosco 5.3 Decree for the canonical erection of the "Blessed John Paul II" Province of Silchar (India) 5.4 Decree for the canonical erection of the "Mary Help of Christians" Greek-Catholic Special Statute Circumscription of the Ukraine 5.5 New Provincials 5.6 Mons. Costelloe Timothy, Archbishop of Perth (Australia) 5.7 Salesian personnel at 31 December 2011 5.8 Our dead confreres	103 109 116 118 120 126 127 129

Editrice S.D.B.
Edizione extra commerciale
Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco
Via della Pisana, 1111
Casella Postale 18333
00163 Roma

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
Finito di stampare: maggio 2012

1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

«WITNESSES TO THE RADICAL APPROACH OF THE GOSPEL»

*Called to live in fidelity
Don Bosco's apostolic project.
"Work and temperance"*

1. CONVOCATION OF THE GC27. 1.1 The steps taken in deciding on the theme. 1.2 Fundamental purpose of the theme. 1.3 Fruits to be hoped for from the implementation of the theme. 1.4 Other tasks. 2. SALESIAN LIFE AND MISSION IN TODAY'S GLOBAL CONTEXT. 2.1 Cultural challenges. 2.2 Ecclesial challenges. 2.3 Institutional challenges. 2.4 Personal challenges. 2.5 Young people as a challenge. 3. THE RADICAL APPROACH OF THE GOSPEL IN SALESIAN CONSECRATED LIFE. 3.1 The radical approach of the gospel in consecrated life. - *Vocation* (C 22 and 25; 97 and 98). - *Spiritual experience: disciples of Christ and seekers of God*. - *Disciples of Christ* (C 61-84). - *Seekers of God* (C 85-95). - *Fraternal life: in fraternal communities* (C 49-59). - *Mission: sent to the young* (C 26-48). 3.2 *The radical approach of the gospel: in the Salesian terms of work and temperance.* - *Work and temperance.* - *Work - Temperance.* 3.3 Requirements to make the theme concrete. *Processes to be set in motion.* - *Mentality to be changed.* - *Structures to be changed.* 4. CONCLUSION. 5. PRAYER TO SAINT JOHN BOSCO.

Rome, 8 April 2012
Solemnity of the Resurrection

Dear Confreres,

We have just finished the plenary session of the General Council at which we have reflected on the theme and on the aims of the next General Chapter. Even before the Team Visits, as a Council we had examined the challenges which are facing us in the Congregation; the Team Visits provided us with further elements to help us understand the situation. Now the choice of the theme for the General Chapter is meant to be a response to such challenges so as to help the Congregation to follow the paths which the Spirit is pointing out to us at this time in our history.

1. CONVOCAATION OF THE GC27

On the day on which we celebrate the Solemnity of Easter I am happy to be writing to you this letter, through which it is my intention to **convoke the XXVII General Chapter**, according to the norms of article 150 of our Constitutions.

As its theme it will have: **“Witnesses to the radical approach of the gospel”**. It is a particularly important occasion for us since the Chapter is «the principal sign of the Congregation’s unity in diversity» (C. 146). We shall be able to strengthen this unity by reflecting together on how to be «faithful to the Gospel and to their Founder’s charism, and sensitive to the needs of time and place» (C 146). From this moment we entrust ourselves to the Spirit of the Risen Christ so that he may enlighten and accompany us, and to Mary Help of Christians so that she may be our teacher and guide.

I invite you to see this event as a new and promising stage in the life of the Congregation, which since the Second Vatican Council has undertaken a continual and profound spiritual and pastoral renewal so as to be able to respond to the will of God, for the purpose of rendering the Church better service, in dynamic fidelity to Don Bosco and for the needs and expectations of the young (cf. C 146).

The next General Chapter will be the 27th in the history of our Society. It will take place in Rome at the “Salesianum” in the Generalate. It will begin on Saturday 22 February 2014 in Turin, the cradle of our charism; we will go there to breathe the air of our home, to meet our Father Don Bosco, to draw on the sources of the charism of our founding, as we did at the previous General Chapter. We will open the Chapter with a concelebrated Mass in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians and with a visit to the places of our Salesian beginnings. Then we will leave for Rome, the seat of the Chapter. As Moderator of the GC27 I have appointed Fr Francesco Cereda, who from this moment has the

responsibility for accompanying its preparation and celebration.

The theme chosen concerns the witness of the radical approach of the gospel, which finds in the motto “*work and temperance*” (cf. C 18) a practical application in life and activity of what Don Bosco expressed in “*da mihi animas cetera tolle*”. It is aimed at helping us understand better our charismatic identity making us aware of our call to live with fidelity Don Bosco’s apostolic project. Often referred to during the Team Visits, the theme appeared to me and to the General Councillors to be an essential element of our spirituality; a radical style of life in fact represents Don Bosco’s inner frame of mind; it was the support of his untiring work for the salvation of youth and enabled the Congregation to flourish.

It is a huge topic and for this reason in the GC27 we want to focus attention especially on four main areas: living in the grace of unity and with joy the Salesian consecrated *vocation*, which is a gift from God and a personal plan of life; having a strong *spiritual experience*, taking up the way of life and action of Jesus obedient, poor and chaste and becoming seekers of God; building up *fraternity* in our communities of life and action; generously dedicating ourselves to the *mission*, walking side by side with the young so as to give hope to the world.

1.1. The steps taken in deciding on the theme

In choosing the theme of the GG27 we started from the life of the Provinces. In fact in preparation for the Team Visits the Provinces carried out an assessment of the extent to which the GC26 had been assimilated and offered some future prospects; they also identified the main achievements of recent years, the important challenges, the resources available to face up to the future, the difficulties they were encountering.

In this way the Team Visits became the first steps in the preparation for the GC27, since they made us aware of the state of the Congregation in its various contexts: its strong and its weak points, the opportunities and the challenges.

A recurring and evident theme was the need to live our Salesian life and mission to the young with greater dynamism, credibility and fruitfulness. All this once again pointed to the need to return to that radical approach of the gospel, which belongs to our apostolic consecration and finds a typical Salesian expression in the motto so dear to Don Bosco “work and temperance”. At the same time, though with different emphases, other topics emerged such as inculturation, vocations, formation, the renewal of our educative pastoral presence, the rethinking of youth ministry, social communication.

At the end of the plenary session of the General Council June-July 2011, each Councillor gave me his suggestion with regard to the GC27. In this case too the theme mentioned most, with a variety of motives and different emphasises referred to the need to ensure more conviction with regard to our identity («who are we?»), our activity («what are we doing?»), our educative pastoral project («what are we offering?»), all aspects which refer to a radical approach to living the vocation of consecrated apostles.

The process for choosing the theme has now concluded with the shared reflection which took place in an extraordinary meeting of the General Council between 26 March and 4 April this year. The result was the choice of the theme as indicated above.

1.2. Fundamental purpose of the theme

The fundamental aim of the GC27 is that of helping each confrere and community to live the apostolic plan of Don Bosco with fidelity; in continuity with the GC26, the GC27 therefore is meant to further strengthen our charismatic identity. This aim is explicitly presented in the opening articles of the Constitutions: we Salesians in fact are called to «carry out the Founder’s apostolic plan in a specific form of religious life» (C 2); and in this specific form of life, «our apostolic mission, our fraternal community and the practice of the evangelical counsels are the inseparable elements of our consecration, which we live in a single movement

of love towards God and towards our brothers» (C 3).

Our *Ratio fundamentalis institutionis et studiorum*, in presenting “our identity as Salesians as the starting-point and goal of formation”, summarises it, highlighting some fundamental features. It says: «In Don Bosco and in the Salesian Constitutions we find the elements which define that “original style of life and action” (C 10), which the Holy Spirit raised up in the Church, that “specific form of religious life” (C 2) in which “we find our own way to holiness” (C 2)».¹ This vocation is the basis of all our formation (cf. C 96).

Still according to the “Ratio”, the fundamental hallmark of our vocation is for it to be **“a project of apostolic consecration”**, distinguished by five features which define the profile of the Salesian as:

- educator and pastor of the young inspired by pastoral charity (nn. 30-32);
- responsible member of a community (n. 33);
- witness to ‘gospel radicalism’ (n. 34);
- animator of communion in the spirit and mission of Don Bosco (nn. 35-36);
- a part of the Church, open to the flow of events and in touch with reality (n. 37).

The recent General Chapters – and obviously this is not mere coincidence – have developed these different aspects, recognising that they are fundamental. In particular, the GC XXII and XXVI dealt with the “project of apostolic consecration”: the first by drawing up the definitive text of our Constitutions and Regulations; the second aimed at «strengthening our charismatic identity with a return to Don Bosco, by reawakening in the heart of every confrere the passion of “da mihi animas”».² In these two Chapters we find all the other elements which characterise the Salesian apostolic project: the GC XXIII outlines the features of

¹ FSDB, n. 26.

² P. CHÁVEZ, *Da mihi animas, cetera tolle*, in AGC 394, Rome 2006, p. 8.

the Salesian as educator and pastor of the young; the GC XXIV as animator of communion in the spirit and in the mission of Don Bosco; the GC XXV as a responsible member of a community.

The last characteristic, “a part of the Church...” is not so much a specific item, as the actual *context* in which the Salesian lives and works. In any case, each General Chapter finds its place and takes place within the ecclesial and cultural context.

From this simple analysis emerges a realisation: the only feature of the profile of the Salesian that has not been the object of deeper examination on the part of a recent General Chapter is the third: “witness to ‘gospel radicalism’”. In the past a radical approach referred mainly to the evangelical counsels of obedience, poverty and chastity; nowadays the theology of the consecrated life emphasises the fact that this is a call and not a freely made choice; it has its foundation in God and its roots in the Lord Jesus; it refers to all the aspects of the consecrated vocation, including fraternal life and the mission. Our Rule of Life too identifies the root of our vocation in God and in Christ, when it declares that we Salesians, «surrendering ourselves totally to God whom we love above all else, we commit ourselves to a form of life based entirely on gospel values» (C 60).

Evidently, witnessing to radical gospel values at personal and community level is not a feature which takes its place at the side of the others, but rather a fundamental dimension of our life. For this reason it will be important for us to develop the theme of the radical approach of the gospel, beyond that of a reference to the following of Christ obedient, poor and chaste, and also bearing in mind the other aspects of our apostolic consecration.

1.3. Fruits to be hoped for from the implementation of the theme

As fruits from the GC27 we want to make our Salesian life even more authentic and therefore *visible, credible and fruitful*. This will be possible when it is based profoundly and vitally on

God, when with courage and conviction rooted in Christ and in his Gospel, its charismatic identity is strengthened. It is for this reason that during the last six-years period we committed ourselves to returning to Don Bosco, re-awakening in the heart of every confrere the passion of “*da mihi animas, cetera tolle*”. Living with fidelity the apostolic project of Don Bosco, in other words living our charismatic identity, will make us more authentic; from the living out of this identity will flow visibility, credibility and vocational fruitfulness.

Six years ago in the letter convoking the GC26, I wrote: «More than a crisis of identity, I think that what we Salesians are experiencing today is a crisis of *credibility*. We are in a stalemate situation. We seem to be under the tyranny of the “status quo”; there is resistance to change, unconscious rather than deliberate. Even though we are convinced of the efficacy of evangelical values we find it difficult to reach the hearts of the young, for whom we should be signs of hope. We are shocked by the fact that faith is irrelevant to them in building their lives. We feel ourselves out of tune with their world and remote, if not completely excluded, from their plans and projects. We find that our signs, actions and language are no longer effective; we seem to make no impact on their lives».³

In the same letter I continued: «Alongside the vital momentum that can lead to witness and self-sacrifice even to the extent of martyrdom, Salesian life is not immune to the “the insidiousness of mediocrity in the spiritual life, of the progressive taking on of middle class values and of a consumer mentality”.⁴ In the documents known traditionally as his “spiritual testament” Don Bosco wrote: «When signs of an easy life appear among individuals, in rooms or houses, the decline of our Congregation will have also begun [...] When the desire for ease and comfort grows up amongst us, our pious Society will have run its course”⁵».⁶

³ P. CHÁVEZ, *Da mihi animas, cetera tolle*, in AGC 394, Rome 2006, pp. 9-10.

⁴ CIVCSVA, *Starting afresh from Christ*, n. 12.

⁵ P. BRAIDO (ed), *Don Bosco educatore, scritti e testimonianze*, LAS, Rome 1997, pp. 409, 437.

⁶ P. CHÁVEZ, *Da mihi animas, cetera tolle*, in AGC 394, Rome 2006, p. 10.

If we believe in our vocation and live it with conviction, then we are credible; in fact I also wrote: «The lack of vocations and vocational frailty make me think that many of us are perhaps not convinced of the social, educative and evangelising usefulness of our mission; others perhaps find that the degree of our commitment to work falls short of their aspirations because we fail in our efforts at renewal and the taking up of new work; some may feel themselves hemmed in by ever-growing emergency situations».⁷

Visibility is not primarily taking care of our image, but the beautiful witness of our vocation. If we bear witness with fidelity and joy to the apostolic project of Don Bosco, that is to say the Salesian consecrated vocation, then our life will become attractive, especially to the young, and therefore we shall have a new *flowering* of vocations. If the Lord Jesus becomes our life's fascinating focus then our vocation will become attractive; on this account we need to cultivate our witness to the beauty of our vocation.

I am convinced that in order to achieve the objectives of the GC27 a *spiritual and pastoral conversion* is required. New contexts, cultural challenges and the difficulties within consecrated life require us to continue to seek paths of renewal and of growth which make our lives more significant. In the face of the current situation in which we are living it is urgent that we change our strategy. What will be really decisive will be the living out of our identity as consecrated persons at the service of the Kingdom. This is also what gives us significance: centring our lives on God, the only Absolute, who is calling and inviting us to follow his Son in giving our lives in love; living the prophecy of communion and fraternity; re-discovering our mission among the young as the place *par excellence* to meet the God who continues to speak to us.

We have to continue to deepen and acquire an ever better *knowledge of Don Bosco*: it is necessary to study him, love him, imitate and invoke him (cf. C 21). We must know him as a teacher of life whose spirituality we absorb as sons and disciples; as the

⁷ *Ibidem.*

founder who shows us the path of vocational fidelity; as the educator who has left us the precious heritage of the preventive system; as the legislator, because the Constitutions, which have come to us directly from him and then through subsequent Salesian history, provide us with a charismatic reading of the gospel and of the following of Christ.⁸

It is necessary to enkindle the fire of *spiritual and apostolic passion* in the heart of every confrere helping him to motivate and to unify his life with the commitment to giving himself totally to the “glory of God and the salvation of souls”. This aspect too as the previous one is in continuity with the GC26, which still needs to be fully implemented.

The approach of the year 2015, the bicentenary of the birth of Don Bosco, represents a grace for the Congregation, which is called to embody his charism in the various contexts, or in other words the spirit and mission of our founder and father. Such a celebration will constitute a goal for the GC27.

Visibility, credibility and fruitfulness are the fruits we hope to obtain as a result of putting into practice and achieving the fundamental aim of the GC27; we must be aware of this. So we have to act in such a way that these fruits are sown and developed; for this reason we can say that, in addition to being fruits, they are also secondary aims to be achieved of the GC27.

1.4. Other tasks

As well as the examination of the theme, the GC27 has other particular tasks. First of these is the election of the Rector Major and the members of the General Council for the six year period 2014-2020. There is also the carrying out of an assessment of some requests made by the GC25 and the GC26 or of changes these introduced.

⁸ Cf. P. CHÁVEZ, «But who do you say that I am?» (Mk 8,28). Looking at Christ through the eyes of Don Bosco, in AGC 384, Rome 2003.

First of all a re-think regarding the organisation and structuring of the Departments for our Salesian mission: youth ministry, missions, social communication is considered important (cf. the GC26, 117, 118).

Then it is also necessary to reflect on the grouping of the three Regions of Europe (cf. the GC25, 124, 126, 129); this is becoming even more necessary following the decision to re-shape the Provinces in Spain, which after the GC27 will become two instead of six.

In addition the need is also felt, following the change which took place to the Constitutions, to evaluate the decision to entrust the Salesian Family to the Vicar of the Rector Major (cf. the GC25, 133 and the GC26, 116).

Finally, “such a review directs attention to the overall structure of the General Council”, with the need for the GC27 to carry out an evaluation of the structures for animation and central government of the Congregation (cf. CG26, 118).

2. SALESIAN LIFE AND MISSION IN TODAY’S GLOBAL CONTEXT

We can find the secret to renewal in the Congregation in article 3 of our Constitutions, where we read: «our apostolic mission, our fraternal community and the practice of the evangelical counsels are the inseparable elements of our consecration, which we live in a single movement of love towards God and towards our brothers. Our mission sets the tenor of our whole life».

The Salesian mission is not to be identified with our works or activities; rather it is the expression of our zeal for the salvation of the young, arising from the passion of “*da mihi animas cetera tolle*” it is nourished by a mysticism the source of which is “in the very heart of Christ, the apostle of the Father” (C 11).

The world in which we are living and in which we carry out the mission of Don Bosco on behalf of young people is not only the stage on which we appear and act. Rather it represents the place where we respond to the young and through them and with them we also respond to God. It is therefore opportune to examine even if only briefly the global challenges of the present time in which we are living throughout the world recognising that these challenges are at the same time opportunities for the renewal of our Salesian life and of our mission.

2.1. Cultural challenges

A typically western phenomenon, the first challenge without a doubt is *post-modernism*, which brings with it positive features with regard to the dignity of the human being and to his wellbeing, but also counter-values. The influence of post-modernism, it is true, is not to be found everywhere, but where it is, it is felt as a serious oppressive conditioning, but slowly and progressively it is taking over the way of thinking and the life styles of the social élite and is putting down its roots also unfortunately in the hearts of some Salesians, influencing their way of life.

A second challenge is *inculturation*, marked also by an increasing *intercultural mentality*. Globalisation, increasing migration and the fusion of cultures create possibilities for encounters which produce a certain purification of cultures and the invitation to appreciate the differences. At the same time this can lead to the relativistic positions of multiculturalism, with a watering down of differences and in constant levelling down of values; but they can also lead to a rejection of diversity, to the defence of special interests even to the extent of reaching a point of opposition to and the exclusion of those who are different.

The third challenge regards *secularisation*. «Living one's faith in Jesus becomes increasingly difficult in a social and cultural setting in which that faith is constantly challenged and threatened; [...] The impression is given that unbelief is self-explanatory,

whereas belief needs a sort of social legitimization which is neither obvious nor taken for granted». ⁹ If in fact it is true that this process can encourage a certain growth in maturity in the autonomy and sense of responsibility in people and a more aware participation in the social dynamics and cultural processes, it is equally true that sometimes it becomes immanence and makes it impossible to make room for God. The process of secularisation, constantly on the increase has become a real danger for us Salesians too, and not only for those working in the developed countries but also for those living among peoples who still have a profound religious sense.

2.2. Ecclesial challenges

The current situation means that the *new evangelisation* is not something 'optional' but a missionary obligation. Even in continents for many years evangelised "the faith cannot be taken for granted, but must be explicitly proposed in all its breadth and richness". ¹⁰ We are therefore in a situation in which many have still not yet heard of the gospel, and those who have need to realise that the links for the transmission of the faith consisting of the family, the Church and society are not broken. This reminds us of the problem of the language we use which often is not understood. What we have to say often appears irrelevant in cultural and social contexts marked by ideological pluralism and by religious scepticism.

The Church and more especially consecrated life is "tempted by a dimming of hope". ¹¹ This unease in consecrated life arises almost naturally, since its main task is 'the affirmation of the primacy of God and of eternal life' whereas nowadays it has to live in a cultural climate "where it often seems that the signs of God's presence have been lost from sight". ¹² This unease does not arise

⁹ JOHN PAUL II, *Ecclesia in Europa*, n. 7.

¹⁰ JOHN PAUL II, *Ecclesia in America*, n. 69.

¹¹ JOHN PAUL II, *Ecclesia in Europa*, n. 7.

¹² JOHN PAUL II, *Vita consecrata*, n. 85.

solely from outside causes nor from its natural incompatibility with certain worldly ways of thinking; it also arises from within since, among other things, consecrated life has unexpectedly found itself deprived of those particular roles in society which for so long had given it a sense of security and of social importance.

Pluralism which can slip into *relativism*, presents us with an even greater challenge. It is true that there is an ever compelling need to encourage and maintain intercultural and inter-religious dialogue in order to collaborate in the building of a single human family from the diversity of peoples, cultures, languages and religions; but it is necessary to do this without neglecting to give witness that salvation comes from Christ. For this reason we have to learn and teach to reject «nothing in them which is true and holy» and to reject as alien to the spirit of Christ any discrimination or persecution directed against persons on the basis of race, colour, condition of life or religion».¹³

2.3. Institutional challenges

Looking at initial formation we observe a greater weakness in two fundamental areas: *vocational discernment and personal accompaniment*. The “Criteria and Norms” of the *Ratio* are not known. There is no clarity regarding how accompaniment needs to be planned so that its practice has fallen into disuse. And to this can be added the discontinuity and fragmentation of the phases of our formation, with a negative impact especially on the two procedures mentioned, and in general on the formation of the confreres as individuals sufficiently mature to take up the Salesian vocation and mission.

Also evident is a lack in the *assimilation of the guide-lines of the Congregation regarding pastoral work*. These are a means to assist in the understanding and carrying out of the Salesian mission in the various fields of missionary animation, youth ministry, social communication and vocation ministry.

¹³ JOHN PAUL II, *Ecclesia in America*, n. 51.

Finally we note in the Congregation a weakness in *direction and animation*. Government and animation do not always foster a change of mentality; they do not promote the necessary procedures nor succeed in breaking down resistance to change: nor do they help the individual to accept personal responsibility and the task of shared responsibility.

2.4. Personal challenges

Sadly one has to mention *some failings* in the life of the Salesian: *individualism* in taking pastoral decisions, the way in which free time is spent, the place given to personal wellbeing at the expense of availability for the mission; but also an *activism* which leaves little room for the spiritual life, for regular study, for constant learning, for the practice of reflection. Confreres are not accustomed to *self-formation*, and some do not even feel the need for it.

Often there is no real awareness of the *identity of our vocation* as consecrated Salesians, so that personal identification with the vocation itself is compromised. Rather than being dedicated to one's vocation, what seems to be of more interest is being at ease with oneself and with others. The affective and effective separation from the world of youth is on the increase; often they are not understood or recognised as being the sole reason for our existence.

Last but no less important, is the *affective dimension* of the Salesian, which is little appreciated. Emotions, sentiments and affections are neglected if not ignored; education to an interior life and forms of emotional expression is defective, through a lack of appropriate formation and of skilled formation personnel. All this is reflected in the educational attitudes we take up and in the pastoral work we undertake, especially as regards the education of the young to love, the care given to engaged couples, and attention to married and family life.

2.5. Young people as a challenge

Finally – as I have already written on another occasion¹⁴ – I seem to observe in the Congregation a quite worrying phenomenon: here and there I notice a more or less conscious unwillingness and sometimes a clear inability to be sympathetic towards, to learn about or understand and to accept graciously the new forms of expression which are a feature of today's young people, not least since the collective experiences with which they formulate their 'spectacular' life styles,¹⁵ those which they normally exhibit in their free time, are almost always on the fringes of the usual social institutions.

The GC26 throws light on this situation when, speaking about the new frontiers, it states: «We also acknowledge the expectations of young people who are spiritually and culturally poor, and who ask us to be involved: young people who have lost meaning in life, lack affection because of family instability, those left disillusioned and empty by the consumerist mentality, the religiously indifferent, those lacking motivation because of permissiveness, ethical relativism, the widespread culture of death».¹⁶

This affective loneliness is not the only kind, nor would I say the most widespread form of poverty which today's young people experience. The large majority of those living in the developing countries are very well acquainted with economic poverty with family life at risk, racial discrimination, a lack of educational and cultural opportunities, the absence of preparation for work, the shameless exploitation by third parties, illegal employment as labourers, a life hemmed in, with various addictions and other social ills.

¹⁴ Cf. P. CHÁVEZ, *The inculturation of the Salesian charism*, in AGC 411, Rome 2011.

¹⁵ Cf. J. GONZÁLEZ-ANLEO - J. M. GONZÁLEZ-ANLEO, *La juventud actual*, Verbo Divino, Estella 2008, p. 44. For a description of young peoples' life styles in western society consult the monograph *De las 'tribus urbanas' a las culturas juveniles*, in "Revista de estudios de Juventud" 64, 2004, pp. 39-136.

¹⁶ GC26, n. 98.

The current picture of the confusion of the young is such a desolate one that calls for an urgent conversion, for compassion (cf. *Mk* 6,34; 8,2-3), no less than for action (cf. *Mk* 6,37; 8,4-5). Like and with Don Bosco, through education and preventative measures the Congregation is engaged in helping them to find themselves, to accompany them with patience and confidence in building up their personalities, offering them the means to gain their livelihood; but at the same time offering something suitable for them to have a relationship with God.

To recreate the Salesian charism in the most varied situations where we find ourselves it is not enough to adapt it to the different youth contexts; even more it is necessary to invest in the young, making them become the protagonists and trusted collaborators without ever forgetting that they are the reason for our consecration to God and for our mission. We want to do this while living in their world, speaking their language, standing side by side with them not only as those to whom we are especially sent, but above all as companions on the journey.

3. THE RADICAL APPROACH OF THE GOSPEL IN SALESIAN CONSECRATED LIFE

During the Team Visits we have been able to observe that there are many *positive features* in the life of the Congregation. In general the confreres are aware of the identity of Salesian consecrated life and reflect its values. In addition the establishing of the charism in the various countries, places and contexts where the Congregation is to be found has been good. In several parts of the world the increase in the number of presences and in vocations has been very satisfying. In recent times positive experiences of fraternal life have become normal. Above all following the GC26, the awareness has grown in everyone that a deeper knowledge of Don Bosco is an essential element in the real renewal of Salesian life. In some Regions the Provinces have seen a

promising expansion and new types of works have been started which make fidelity to Don Bosco's charism visible.

Besides these positive aspects, nonetheless *significant difficulties* are being experienced: in some parts of the Congregation the ageing of the confreres, the shortage of vocations and the complexity of the works are making the hoped-for renewal difficult; in others it is a struggle to organise pastoral activities with the choice of the young as the primary focus. Problems remain in finding the necessary space for community life and difficulties are also found in trying to arrange valid and effective procedures for ongoing formation. Here and there there is a lack of enthusiasm in living the vocation and there are weaknesses in animation on the part of the confreres who are Rectors.

To face up to current and future challenges to Salesian consecrated life and to the mission throughout the Congregation, the need arises to trace out the *profile of the new Salesian*; nowadays he is called to be:

- a *mystic*: in a world which is feeling ever more clearly the challenge of secularism, we need «to find a response in the *acknowledgment of God's absolute primacy*», through the «total gift of self» and in «permanent conversion in a life offered up as true spiritual worship».¹⁷
- a *prophet*: «In today's multicultural and multi-religious world, there is also a demand for the witness of that *evangelical fraternity*». Our religious communities are being called to be courageous in living the gospel as an alternative life style and «a stimulus to purifying and integrating different values through the reconciliation of divisions».¹⁸
- a *servant*: «The presence of new forms of poverty and marginalization ought to call forth that creativity in *the care of those most in need*»;¹⁹ which marked the birth of our Congregation

¹⁷ JOHN PAUL II, *Ecclesia in Europa*, n. 38.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

and will result in the rebirth of our Provinces, to the benefit of poor young people and those marginalised for economic, sexual, racial or religious reasons.

All of this requires a change both of mindset and of practice: to begin a process of real conversion, progressing from a closed mentality to one open to and ready for change, looking to the future with hope and optimism. It is necessary therefore to consider certain strategies.

3.1. The radical approach of the gospel in consecrated life

Observing the current situation of the Church and within it of our Congregation, we cannot ignore the fact that the call to “the radical approach of the gospel” constitutes an urgent need and a theme of great relevance starting from the practice of the evangelical counsels. For example, with regard to consecrated *chastity*, the problems of pedophilia and of sexual abuse which have arisen in recent years creating a great scandal;²⁰ as Benedict XVI himself has written, «have obscured the light of the Gospel to a degree that not even centuries of persecution succeeded in doing»,²¹ even though it needs to be recalled that the problem is not one of the present day only.

However, it is not just the issue of consecrated chastity which raises problems; very often, in fact, difficulties in this area are the consequence and the expression of other negative situations related to the evangelical counsels of poverty and obedience. In particular, the practice of *poverty*, which is one of the central points of the GC26 (cf. nn. 79-97), has become more compelling following the world-wide financial and economic collapse. As religious we cannot reduce poverty to being more careful in the management of resources important though this is; in fact poverty is the way of understanding and living a gospel value fundamental to our con-

²⁰ Cf. P. CHÁVEZ, «*I am the vine, you the branches*» (Jn 15,5a). *The vocation to remain always united to Jesus to have life*, in AGC 408, Rome 2010.

²¹ BENEDICT XVI, *Pastoral Letter to the Catholics of Ireland*, Rome 19 March 2010, n. 4.

secration. In this regard the Holy Father Benedict XVI has expressed himself very strongly and with insight on the moral roots of the current economic crisis.

In one of my first letters, «You are my God, my happiness lies in you alone»,²² I wanted to undertake a serious analysis of this situation, provoked by a “liberal model” of consecrated life, which in particular undermines *obedience*. In fact I am convinced that one of the points mentioned there can be recognised as one of the roots of this current problematic situation; it is the issue of individualism, which sometimes is hidden behind the right to “privacy”, something which often, paraphrasing the biblical text, “covers a multitude of sins”. All of this is linked indissolubly to difficulties with obedience; I noted this link in fact in the letter just mentioned: «So came into being a great deal of *individualism*, that made obedience well-nigh impossible».²³

However, the radical approach of the gospel in consecrated life cannot be limited to the practice of the evangelical counsels. It involves one’s whole being, touching its vital elements: the following of Christ and the search for God, fraternal life in community, and the mission. Every one of these areas is imbued with the spell of the vocation, and therefore called to express the radical attitude of the gospel.

This radical approach was proclaimed by Jesus himself throughout his prophetic ministry, which finds its most explicit expression in the “Sermon on the Mount”, with the proclamation of the Beatitudes, which turn the world’s logic on its head, as well as the subsequent statements which point to the interior aspect of the law and to love as the supreme law (cf. *Mt* 5-7). Once again, the radical approach of the gospel appears with the full light of the sun when Jesus speaks about the consequences of following him, sharing with him a life that is not comfortable or planned, wher-

²² Cf. P. CHÁVEZ, «*You are my God, my happiness lies in you alone*», in AGC 382, Rome 2003.

²³ P. CHÁVEZ, «*You are my God, my happiness lies in you alone*», in AGC 382, Rome 2003, p. 21.

ever he goes, subordinating everything to the Kingdom (cf. *Lk* 9,57-62). And, above all, when, following the first announcement of the passion and in response to Peter's objection, addressing not only the disciples but the whole crowd he says: «If anyone wants to be a follower of mine let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me. For anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it» (*Mk* 8,34-35).

Vocation (*C 22 and 25; 97 and 98*)

As religious, we Salesians are called to this radical approach of the gospel in consecrated life. If in fact it is true that the radical approach of the gospel applies to every disciple of Jesus, it is equally true that we are called to live it in a practical way in consecrated life. For us the radical approach is first of all a call, a vocation. Unfortunately, in our reflection, in our way of living and acting in practice reference to God's call is rather poor. A vocation is not chosen but given; we can only recognise it and welcome it; so too with the radical approach of the gospel, before being a commitment and a task it is gift and grace.

A vocation does not come from personal initiative, since it is a call to a specific mission, which is not determined by us but by the One who calls. We read in Mark's gospel that Jesus «summoned those he wanted. So they came to him and he appointed twelve; they were to be his companions and to be sent out to preach with power to cast out devils» (*Mk* 3,13-15). The gospel of John too confirms that being a disciple and an apostle is not a personal choice, but a selection on Jesus' part, a vocation: «you did not choose me, no I chose you» (*Jn* 15,16a); and the mission is «remain in my love» (*Jn* 15,9b). Only in this way can those who are called obtain the fulness of joy: «I have told you this so that my own joy may be in you and your joy may be complete» (*Jn* 15,11); becoming his intimate: «You are my friends if you do what I command you» (*Jn* 15,14); being fruitful: «I commissioned you to go out and bear fruit, fruit that will last» (*Jn* 15,16b).

This anthropological and theological dimension of vocation is fascinating/enchanting. There is a Person who gazes on you, loves you and calls you and you can accept or refuse the proposal. To a personal appeal one can reply “yes” or “no”. All this happens with the greatest freedom. Rightly we can say that handing over one’s life, one’s only life, all one’s life represents the highest level of human consciousness. In Sacred Scripture we find the story of the great “friends of God”: Abraham, Moses, David, Elijah, the prophets, Joseph, Mary the apostles; they give up their own plans and allow God to take over their lives so as to write, with Him, the history of salvation. However, not all those who were called accepted the call. For example we may recall the meeting of Jesus with that rich man who asked him: «Good master, what must I do to inherit eternal life?»; but to Jesus’ invitation «Go and sell everything you own and give the money to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven; then come follow me» (*Mk* 10,17-22), he went away sad.

In the past the religious vocation was often presented as a single event in a person’s life. Even though among the numerous calls which occur in life there are some events which indicate the future, the Christian vocation needs to be understood more than ever as an uninterrupted dialogue between God who calls and the disciple who responds. Great freedom therefore is required to give of oneself totally and hand oneself over to the person beloved. Obviously, in order to leave everything and to give oneself totally to someone one needs to be very much in love. Not by chance the most eloquent image used to describe this relationship is covenant. From this it can be seen that we cannot be consecrated and not be at the same time mystics, full of passion for God and for man.

Our specific vocation is to Salesian consecrated life, which places us as disciples and apostles of the Lord Jesus in the footsteps of Don Bosco. It is described in synthesis in article 3 of the Constitutions, which speaks about our vocation as a call to follow Christ obedient, poor and chaste, to fraternal life in com-

munity, to dedication to the mission, in dialogue with God at the service of our brothers. These are the constitutive elements of a vocation to be given space in personal and community life. In our life there needs to be space which is “balanced and harmonised” for *spiritual experience, fraternal life in community and the mission*.

Among these features of our vocation the “*grace of unity*” is a fundamental challenge to be faced seriously and with determination, at the risk of fragmentation, dissipation, activism, spiritual superficiality, a generic approach to pastoral work, the loss of the sense of vocation, emptiness. For this reason I now deal with these fundamental elements of our apostolic consecration, which need to be lived with the radical approach of the gospel: the spiritual experience, fraternal life, the mission.

Spiritual experience: disciples of Christ and seekers of God

It should not surprise us that the spiritual experience which is the foundation of consecrated life and which makes us seekers of God and disciples of Jesus is characterised in the Spirit as all-embracing, unifying and dynamic:

- *all embracing*, because it places us in the presence of a God full of zeal who admits of no rivals and with a all-consuming presence; there is no room for half-measures in our giving of ourselves to Him: since, «Anyone who prefers father or mother to me is not worthy of me; anyone who prefers son or daughter to me is not worthy of me. Anyone who does not take his cross and follow in my footsteps is not worthy of me» (Mt 10,37-38);
- *unifying*, because it gathers together all aspects of life around the one thing that is important and necessary, the Absolute, as is seen in the reply of Jesus to Martha, who was so preoccupied with the many things to be done for Him except the important one, which Mary on the other hand had discovered (Lk 10, 41-42);

- and *dynamic*, because it gives us “a new heart and a new spirit”; what one has to do, the law that has to be fulfilled, is not outside ourselves but within us; the Holy Spirit becomes in us the driving force in life, as Saint Paul says: «the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death» (*Rm* 8,2).

Only a spiritual experience like this can be the source of a religious life that is dynamic and significant, of a living prayer, of a fraternal community, of an apostolic zeal, of a fruitful ministry; it transforms a person's life and that of a community from within, giving rise to new forms of interpersonal relationships and of behaviour, to a new kind of prayer and of worship, a typical form of ministry and above all to an alternative cultural model, which is the sign and the fruit of our waiting for the Lord who comes.

Disciples of Christ (C 61-84)

The religious vocation once accepted leads to the decision to give oneself entirely to God who consecrates us to Himself. In fact consecrated life is a pathway that starts from the Love of God, who has fixed his gaze on us, has loved us, has called us, has seized us; and it is a pathway that leads to Love in so far as it is a sure way to reach the fulness of life in God. This means that the whole of consecrated life is marked by love and needs to be lived under its emblem, so that it can only be lived in happiness even in times of trial and difficulty, with the conviction and enthusiasm of someone who sees love as the driving force of life. From this flow the serenity, the luminosity and the fruitfulness of consecrated life, features which make it so attractive.

Consecration therefore makes us become people who are unconditionally handed over to God and in more practical terms makes us “the living memorial of Jesus' way of living and acting” obedient, poor and chaste,²⁴ transforming us into signs and bear-

²⁴ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Vita consecrata*, n. 22.

ers of the love of God for all mankind. This, in fact, is the first contribution that we as religious can and must make. Unfortunately this is not recognised when a reductive anthropological model deprives life of its religious dimension, basing it on short-term projects of life; for example the myths of science, technology and the economy, with the illusion that their progress is unlimited, condemning life to the immanence of this world without any horizons of definitive transcendence, since in the end everything comes to an end with death. To a world focused on efficiency and productivity, the economy and on well-being, the religious presents himself as a *sign of God*, of his grace and of his love. It was God and his Love that Jesus came to bring to us. This is the good news! God is the first contribution we can make to mankind. This is the great hope to be offered. This is our first prophecy.

Speaking with young people who hope to be Salesians, I am convinced that basically in consecrated life they are looking for an answer to three great desires: a deep thirst for spirituality, even though not always identified with a clear experience of the God of Jesus Christ; a life of communion, even though not always associated with the community, especially when this does not stand out for its welcome, a deep interpersonal relationship, the family spirit; and finally a decisive commitment on behalf of the poor and needy, even though they are not always ready to give themselves definitively, which is easy to understand in a culture characterised by short-term or at least not permanent commitments. It is the role of formation to provide ways of coming to a mature expression of those values to which young consecrated persons show themselves more sensitive, helping them in addition to recognise and also accept those aspects that they experience as difficulties.

The vocation to follow and imitate Jesus Christ implies a progressive modelling of ourselves on Him so as to become precisely "the living memorial of his way of acting and being obedient, poor and chaste" as He was.

Certainly, a life centred in this way on God and on giving oneself to others is clearly 'countercultural', going against the absolute value given to the economy and to materialism, against hedonism and the worship of the body, against individualism and every kind of authoritarianism. We are living in an historical, cultural and social context in which the evangelical counsels are not appreciated; indeed they are considered inhuman and responsible for producing diminished people, something from which we ought to free ourselves. For example, obedience seems an attack on fundamental human rights: the freedom to decide for oneself, self-determination and self-fulfilment. Chastity is considered as the deprival of the benefits of married life: giving up having someone on whom one can rely in good and bad times alike, and with whom to share joys and sadness, the successes and the trials of life; giving up the possibility of becoming a father and of having children; giving up the pleasures of married life, with the bodily joy which the spouses give to each other, without obviously reducing everything to physical pleasure; giving up tenderness, ordinary intimacy, knowing that there is someone close to you, the pleasure of shared glances, of saying to someone "it is great that you are here". Poverty is even less appreciated in a world which has made well-being and the economy the supreme values; which means that it is seen as an evil to be conquered, something from which to free oneself in order to be fully autonomous, not depending on anyone; what matters is to possess in order to be, not wanting to deprive oneself of anything, the search for ways of living the easy consumer culture life-style, which makes us insensitive to the poor and incapable of serving those most in need.

This more and more wide-spread way of thinking which does not make a life according to the gospel attractive can also infiltrate among consecrated persons who feel tempted in their personal life to withhold from God what they publicly gave Him through their profession.

Without idealising the ordinary way of life, it is important to emphasise that the vows are not merely the renunciation of val-

ues. They respond to the three great forces which endanger human life and which the first letter of John censured in masterly fashion as follow: «The love of the Father cannot be in any man who loves the world: because nothing the world has to offer – the sensual body, the lustful eye, pride in possessions – could ever come from the Father but only from the world» (1 Jn 2,15b-16). In his own person Jesus has inaugurated another fully human way of living life, totally consecrated to God and entirely vowed to Man. This is only possible if God is acknowledged as the Absolute in one's life, making His Will our plan of life, dedicating ourselves with generosity to collaborating with Him in the carrying out of His design for the salvation of mankind: free from everything and from everyone to make ourselves the servants of all. Precisely because this is not an inhuman life, but rather charismatic, in the full meaning of the word, the fruit of the action of the Spirit, who prepares someone for this form of evangelical life, it requires suitability in human terms, the result of nature and of the education received, and maturity, the work of the formation process.

On the other hand, the radical approach of the evangelical counsels is not only a tradition of the Church, it is also found in the context of biblical revelation. I am referring, in particular, to the obedience which in the Sacred Scriptures, starting with the Old Testament is combined with the fundamental attitude of the believer, that is to say faith. In the Scriptures, in fact, genuine believers are radically obedient; we can think of Abraham, David, Moses and the prophets. We could even say that in their way of seeing things neither poverty nor celibacy appear yet as values. Nevertheless it is not a question of extraordinary personages since the experience of Israel was described as: an enslaved people liberated to become a holy people which knows the joy of serving God in freedom.

This Old Testament view finds its most perfect incarnation in terms of obedience in the Son of God, Jesus. Both the Letter to the Hebrews and the Letter to the Philippians highlight the fact

that the believer by his very nature and by definition is obedient. Again I would say that one of the most fascinating features of modern Christology is this recovery of Jesus' freedom which can only be explained by his radical obedience to the Father. Obedience represents the attitude *par excellence* of the Son of God. It seems to me that this helps a little to overcome the prejudice there is in today's culture against obedience. The biblical outlook helps us to understand the difference between 'submitting oneself,' which implies a certain servility, and which is unworthy of a human being and the act of 'obedience' which in all the biblical languages has as its root the act of listening. In practice, the one who listens well is precisely the one who accepts what he hears; therefore there is no authentic listening which is not accompanied by obedience.

This understanding makes the *living of the values of the gospel* possible, joyful and fruitful, as we make ever more our own Jesus's way of living obedient, poor and chaste, becoming his disciples. Only a progressive modelling of oneself on Christ brings about the *sequela Christi*.

Seekers of God (C 85-95)

Speaking to those taking part in the Assembly of the USG (Union of Superiors General) and of the UISG (International Union of Women Superiors General, in the Clementine Hall in the Vatican, on 26 November 2010, Pope Benedict XVI told us: «Your last two Assemblies were dedicated to reflecting on the future of the consecrated life in Europe. This has meant rethinking the very meaning of your vocation which entails, first and foremost, seeking God, *Quaerere Deum*: you are seekers of God by vocation. You devote the best energies of your lives to this research. You move from what is secondary to what is really essential to what is really important: seeking God, keeping your gaze fixed on him. Like the first monks, cultivate an eschatological orientation: behind the provisional seek what remains, what does not pass away (*cf. Address at the Collège des Bernardis*, Paris, 12 Septem-

ues. They respond to the three great forces which endanger human life and which the first letter of John censured in masterly fashion as follow: «The love of the Father cannot be in any man who loves the world: because nothing the world has to offer – the sensual body, the lustful eye, pride in possessions – could ever come from the Father but only from the world» (1 *Jn* 2,15b-16). In his own person Jesus has inaugurated another fully human way of living life, totally consecrated to God and entirely vowed to Man. This is only possible if God is acknowledged as the Absolute in one's life, making His Will our plan of life, dedicating ourselves with generosity to collaborating with Him in the carrying out of His design for the salvation of mankind: free from everything and from everyone to make ourselves the servants of all. Precisely because this is not an inhuman life, but rather charismatic, in the full meaning of the word, the fruit of the action of the Spirit, who prepares someone for this form of evangelical life, it requires suitability in human terms, the result of nature and of the education received, and maturity, the work of the formation process.

On the other hand, the radical approach of the evangelical counsels is not only a tradition of the Church, it is also found in the context of biblical revelation. I am referring, in particular, to the obedience which in the Sacred Scriptures, starting with the Old Testament is combined with the fundamental attitude of the believer, that is to say faith. In the Scriptures, in fact, genuine believers are radically obedient; we can think of Abraham, David, Moses and the prophets. We could even say that in their way of seeing things neither poverty nor celibacy appear yet as values. Nevertheless it is not a question of extraordinary personages since the experience of Israel was described as: an enslaved people liberated to become a holy people which knows the joy of serving God in freedom.

This Old Testament view finds its most perfect incarnation in terms of obedience in the Son of God, Jesus. Both the Letter to the Hebrews and the Letter to the Philippians highlight the fact

that the believer by his very nature and by definition is obedient. Again I would say that one of the most fascinating features of modern Christology is this recovery of Jesus' freedom which can only be explained by his radical obedience to the Father. Obedience represents the attitude *par excellence* of the Son of God. It seems to me that this helps a little to overcome the prejudice there is in today's culture against obedience. The biblical outlook helps us to understand the difference between 'submitting oneself,' which implies a certain servility, and which is unworthy of a human being and the act of 'obedience' which in all the biblical languages has as its root the act of listening. In practice, the one who listens well is precisely the one who accepts what he hears; therefore there is no authentic listening which is not accompanied by obedience.

This understanding makes the *living of the values of the gospel* possible, joyful and fruitful, as we make ever more our own Jesus's way of living obedient, poor and chaste, becoming his disciples. Only a progressive modelling of oneself on Christ brings about the *sequela Christi*.

Seekers of God (C 85-95)

Speaking to those taking part in the Assembly of the USG (Union of Superiors General) and of the UISG (International Union of Women Superiors General, in the Clementine Hall in the Vatican, on 26 November 2010, Pope Benedict XVI told us: «Your last two Assemblies were dedicated to reflecting on the future of the consecrated life in Europe. This has meant rethinking the very meaning of your vocation which entails, first and foremost, seeking God, *Quaerere Deum*: you are seekers of God by vocation. You devote the best energies of your lives to this research. You move from what is secondary to what is really essential to what is really important: seeking God, keeping your gaze fixed on him. Like the first monks, cultivate an eschatological orientation: behind the provisional seek what remains, what does not pass away (cf. *Address at the Collège des Bernardis*, Paris, 12 Septem-

ber 2008). Seek God in the confreres or sisters he has given you, with whom you share the same life and mission. Seek him in the men and women of our time, to whom you are sent to offer the gift of the Gospel with your life and your words. Seek him particularly in the poor, the first to whom the Good News is addressed (cf. Lk 4:18). Seek him in the Church, where the Lord makes himself present, especially in the Eucharist and in the other sacraments, and in his word, which is the main road for seeking God. It introduces us into conversation with him and reveals to us his true Face. May you always be enthusiastic seekers and witnesses of God!».

He then immediately added: «The profound renewal of the consecrated life starts from the centrality of the word of God, and more practically, from the Gospel, the supreme rule for all of you, as the Second Vatican Council states in the Decree (cf. n. 2) and as your Founders understood well: the consecrated life is a plant with a mass of branches whose roots are sunk in the Gospel. The history of your Institutes in which the determination to live Christ's Message and to configure your own life to it, was and remains the fundamental criterion of vocational discernment and of your personal and community discernment. The Gospel lived daily provides the element that gives fascination and beauty to the consecrated life and presents you to the world as a reliable alternative. Contemporary society stands in need of this, and the Church expects this of you: to be a living Gospel».

Therefore consecrated persons take on their sanctification as their main life's task. And this is also true for our Congregation, as the minutes of the Founding of the Salesian Congregation clearly affirm.²⁵ Not by chance our Rule of Life concludes the first

²⁵ «The gathered group then decided to form a society or congregation with the aim of promoting the glory of God and the salvation of souls, especially of those most in need of instruction and education, while providing the members with mutual help towards their own sanctification" from the *Minutes of the Act of Founding of the Salesian Congregation*, Turin, 18 December 1859. Critical text by the Salesian Historical Institute, translation by Fr A. Lenti.

part, immediately after the formula of profession, affirming first of all that «the confreres who are living or have lived to the full the gospel project of the Constitutions are for us a stimulus and help on the path to holiness», and, then, that «The witness of such holiness, achieved within the Salesian mission, reveals the unique worth of the beatitudes and is the most precious gift we can offer to the young» (C 25).

In his Letter "The Father consecrates us and sends us", Fr Juan E. Vecchi wrote: «Consecrated persons are seen as experts in the experience of God. Such experience is at the origin of their vocation. Their plan of life and what they usually do tends to cultivate this and foster it. All Christians, on the other hand, should want to have a certain experience of God; but they can give their attention to it only at intervals and in less favourable circumstances, and so they run the risk of neglecting it altogether. Those who are consecrated offer themselves as confidants for all in the world who are in search of God. To those who are already Christians they offer the possibility of having a new religious experience in their company; those who are not believers they join in their process of searching.

Nowadays this kind of service is becoming widespread and much sought after, as is shown by the opening of convents and monasteries to those who want to use them for days and periods of reflection. We, on the other hand, are called to provide a similar service among young people. There is a law of life which is applicable in all circumstances: no value will survive in society without a group of people who dedicate themselves completely to promoting it. Without medical personnel and the organization of hospitals good health would not be possible. Without artists and the corresponding institutions the artistic sense of the population would decline. The same kind of thing happens with the sense of God: religious, whether contemplatives or not, form the group of mystics who are able to help those at least who are close to interpreting life in the light of the Absolute and experiencing it.

This applies to all the essential aims of religious life. And so the Founders placed the sense of God above all the features and activities of their institutes. Believers and non-believers alike see mediocrity in consecrated religious as a deformity, and the religious themselves feel an unfillable void if this dimension disappears». ²⁶

The affirmation of the Absolute nature of God requires from us a prophetic leap: this is the task of religious life today, this is the best service we can offer to our brothers and sisters, since only faith, hope and love have the great power to overcome mediocrity and absorb the decadence of our culture, fragmented by individualism, hedonism, relativism, nihilism and every kind of immanentistic ideology.

If in the past the danger to religious life was that of losing a firm grounding on the earth and in history, concentrating primarily on its role of reminding people of the transcendent, nowadays it runs the risk of enfeebling itself in an earthliness which forgets any other dimension. This happens when we think that salvation is our work, when we give in to the temptation of Prometheus and without wishing to make an idol of activism. The religious life loses the purpose for its existence, forgets its mission and turns itself into a paradoxical form of secularism. Thinking we shall acquire more relevance in society for what we are doing, we lose our identity and deprive the world of the hope it is looking for from us!

This then is why we have to carefully cultivate our spiritual life, at both personal and community level. Undoubtedly it will be necessary to overcome an idea of the spiritual life which is of an intimistic nature, extraneous to or on the fringes of the life of the world; but at the same time it will be necessary to give greater importance to the experience of prayer, to improve the quality of community life, and in a professional manner and being well-prepared carry out our service of evangelisation, so as to

²⁶ J. VECCHI, *The Father consecrates us and sends us*, in AGC 365, Rome 1998, p. 25.

be able to be prophetic signs in the face of the current values which this world canonises, and to be irrefutable witnesses to the God of Love.

Fraternal life: in fraternal communities (C 49-59)

In a society where individualism reigns, in a culture where selfishness prevails, in families where loneliness is on the increase it is natural that people should see communication as a fundamental need. Nowadays on the one hand, this is becoming easier and encouraged by the means of communication; one only has to think of the use of the mobile phone and all the other forms of communication such as *youtube, facebook, twitter...* But on the other hand, it can find an obstacle in the virtual world. It is true that one can be in contact with very many people, in any part of the world and all at the same time; but the use of these channels of communication does not guarantee communion, since this is always the result of a personal link, of a real relationship with someone who seeks to be acknowledged, recognised and respected in their own individuality, and of the acceptance of one's own and other peoples' limitations, of the effort to share and to live together. All these are elements which are the foundation of any kind of genuine family or community experience.

For us Salesians, community life is a very important factor in our religious choice. In fact for us to "live and work together" is a fundamental requirement which ensures a sure way of fulfilling our vocation (cf. C 49). It is impossible to imagine Salesian religious life without that communion which is realised in the common life and in the shared mission. The requirement for fraternity arises from the fact of our being sons of the same Father and members of the Body of Christ; religious life creates a real family made up of people who share the same faith and the same project of life. From the typically Salesian standpoint, we are called to create and to live the family spirit as Don Bosco wanted it and lived it.

Obviously, as in other areas of religious life, here too we can identify some dangers, for example, that of organising a style of relationships which are merely functional or hierachical or falsely democratic. Rather, our relationships ought to be fraternal and friendly, which lead us to love each other to the extent of sharing everything. This criterion helps us to see that the community is well understood and lived, when it is nourished by communion and leads to communion. A community without communion, with all that this implies with regard to acceptance, appreciation and esteem, mutual assistance and love, is reduced to a group in which people may have a place but where in fact they are left isolated. On the other hand, in religious life, communion without community is a narcissistic way of living and consequently a contradiction, since it is a subtle form of individualism.

Nowadays religious have to make a great shared effort in order to create community, where the spiritual dimension, human qualities and apostolic commitment of each member means that life is really good, beautiful and happy. In other words, without the human dimension, the quality of spiritual life and apostolic commitment there is no real fraternity.

In addition at a time when the presence of lay people in the Congregation is increasing so that they form the majority, and not only as employees or co-workers but also as those who are co-responsible or even as the directors of our works, so much the more do the communities need to stand out for their life of communion, so that this spreads out in concentric circles to the groups of these with co-responsibilities and the co-workers, and all those people close to our communities.

Another not indifferent aspect of religious life nowadays needs to be pointed out: that of the multicultural nature of the communities, in a society more and more pluricultural. The witness given by communities made up of people of different ages, backgrounds, languages, cultures, formation and traditions but united by faith, hope and charity is of real value even more so

since the temptation to xenophobia is being felt more and more strongly. In addition the religious community is a great contribution which we offer in a world divided by social injustice, by inter-ethnic conflicts and by certain social, cultural and economic models which are destroying solidarity and putting fraternity at risk for ever. God is community. God is love. That is the good news! How much then are we being called to offer to make the world more human.

Looking specifically at the profession of the evangelical counsels, we can recognise that a high quality community life is of great help for us to observe our religious vows. In fact it helps us to be more easily open to the demands of obedience; it makes us aware of the value of sobriety and of sharing the use of possessions; it strengthens our commitment to a chaste life and to oblationary love and assists our fidelity, protecting us from affective retreats or from other negative experiences (cf. C 83).

The profound renewal of our religious and Salesian life will therefore be achieved also through a profound renewal of our fraternal life in community. Of particular importance in this is the style of animation and government of the *Rector*, in his role of spiritual authority, which helps the confreres in their vocational journey, by means of a lively and intelligent form of community animation and attentive personal accompaniment; an authority which builds unity, which creates a family atmosphere able to foster fraternal sharing and co-responsibility; a pastoral authority which guides and directs all the people, the activities and the resources towards the objectives of education and evangelisation which are the special features of our mission; an authority which knows how to make the necessary decisions and to ensure their implementation.

Mission: sent to the young (C 26-48)

While fraternal life does not have the same importance and the same ways of being practised in all the Orders and Congrega-

tions, even though, as we have seen, the religious vocation by its very nature is a coming together and therefore a creator of fraternity, the mission has always been recognised by everyone as an identifying element of religious life. It could not be otherwise given that the mission of religious is a participation in the mission of the Church and this, in its turn, a continuation of the mission of God. «He summoned those he wanted. So they came to him and he appointed twelve; they were to be his companions and to be sent out to preach with power to cast out devils» (*Mk* 3,13-15).²⁷ Indeed, in the eyes of the world it is the mission that makes religious life relevant and effective.

However, it is necessary to distinguish between mission and the specific aims of an Institute of consecrated life. The mission does not consist in doing things but essentially in being signs of the love of God in the world. The specific aims on the other hand reflect the identity, especially for apostolic consecrated life, with the pastoral or promotional activity which the religious undertake in the various areas of human life. Being is not to be identified with doing; even though it is the activity which ought to be the consequence of the being and its clear manifestation.

In fact, the mission is nothing other than the historical expression of the saving love of God, made manifest in the sending of the Son by the Father and the mission which with the gift of his Spirit Jesus gives to the apostles. The awareness of being sent puts us on our guard against the temptation of wanting to take charge of the mission ourselves, of its contents, its methods and to run it instead of being at its service.

Precisely because we proclaim an Other and we offer his salvation, we cannot proclaim ourselves and our plans. Our task is to make God's salvation present, becoming his witnesses. This mission involves our whole lives and frees us from the not imaginary danger of a purely functional approach, activism and self-centredness.

²⁷ Cf. P. CHÁVEZ, *Spirituality and mission*, in AGC 410, Rome 2011.

John's gospel expresses in an incomparable manner the love of God in the mission of the Son when following the meeting of Jesus with Nicodemus he says: «God sent his Son into the world not to condemn the world, but so that through him the world might be saved» (*Jn* 3,17). Mark's gospel then concludes the passage about the heated debate of the apostles regarding the problem of authority with the clear explanation Jesus gives of his human life: «The Son of Man himself did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many» (*Mk* 10,45).

This is the mission of Jesus and also that of the consecrated person. This is the gospel, this is the good news which we are called upon to proclaim and to incarnate to fill the world with hope. This is why consecrated life still has a future in today's world! There can be no doubt that tomorrow we shall be less numerous but certainly we need to be more significant than yesterday.

Sometimes it can happen that we are sent to a community to undertake some mission that does not correspond with our expectations; or else sent to a place where those for whom we are working seem not to be interested in what we are or what we are doing. This is the time when we are being offered the chance to come to a more mature view of the significance of the mission, for the simple fact that we are faced with questions which help us to purify and to raise to a theological and not simply sociological level our motivation: «who am I? who sent me? Who are those to whom I have been sent? What should I do?». It is then that I become aware that what is at stake is my life but also theirs.

Only if at that moment I have the ability to understand that I am a person consecrated to God and vowed to the young, that it is He who has sent me, that they have been entrusted to me, that my mission is to make myself their travelling companion so as to help them to give meaning to their lives and to make life

choices will I find the reasons and the strength to spend my life for them: *«I offer myself totally to You. I pledge myself to devote all my strength to those to whom you will send me, especially to young people who are poorer»* (C 24). To do this a very simple thing is necessary: to open the doors of one's heart so that little by little their hearts may be gained and shaped and guided towards Christ, the Only One who can fill their lives with meaning and with happiness.

Then the days won't be long enough, we shall spend less time watching TV or on other 'hobbies' and much more being available to them: to welcome them, listen to them and to guide them. Then and only then, their world will become more comprehensible and we shall make our own their difficulties, their doubts, their motives, their fears, their expectations, their needs so that they can learn to listen to themselves, accept themselves, decide for themselves, in short not be simply negative or reactionary but act positively banking on those things in which they believe.

The radical approach of the gospel in the apostolic mission has meaning/ sense, and is present and can be measured in the growth of pastoral charity, like that of Don Bosco: *«For you I study, for you I work, for you I live, for you I am ready even to give my life»*.²⁸ This radical attitude would make us ready to go to those places where the mission is calling us and in which all the creature comforts, the opportunities, our circle of dear ones are not to be found.

3.2. The radical approach of the gospel in the Salesian terms of work and temperance

Having come to this point we can ask ourselves a question: if consecrated life is the soul of the Church and represents a human resource and a cure for this society, then what kind of consecrated life is necessary and significant for today's world?

²⁸ DON RUFFINO, *Cronaca dell'Oratorio*, ASC 110, Quaderno 5, p. 10.

The reply can only be that which is a *mystical, prophetic and servant religious life* with the radical approach of the gospel both personal and communitarian, a life therefore full of humanity and of spirituality, the source of hope for mankind. Our Congregation too is being called today to pursue this path and to find ways to express, according to our identity, how every Salesian can be a mystic, a prophet and a servant, and consequently that every community might be so.

The mission of consecrated life has a specific prophetic role in the Church and in the world. Above all I like to say that consecration itself is already prophecy, to the extent that it witnesses to the Absolute God and to gospel values which nowadays more than ever go against the current, in a society marked by secularism, religious indifference and practical atheism. Gospel values are a prophetic rejection of the idols, which this world has made and proposes for man to adore. In addition consecrated life is always going to challenge those people – the young in particular – whose sights are limited to this earth, with a fruitless immanentism without a future.

For this reason, when it is lived to the full and with joyful gratitude, religious life is a prophecy of the ultimate realities, of the final destiny of the whole of creation, of history and of the universe. It is a question of a prophecy nowadays more than ever necessary precisely because our post-modern era is characterised by the loss of human hope and the lack of utopias, condemning mankind to the inferno of pragmatism, of over-efficiency and of a purely functional approach, without faith, hope or charity.

Consecrated life is a prophetic sign when it makes present, visible and credible the *primacy of the love of God* and bears witness to it, with a strong sense of communion and of fraternity, with a style of life at the service of the poor and the abandoned of the world who are a sorry reflection of society and obscure the loving presence of God. We are aware and we are convinced that

«without faith, without the eyes of love, the world is too evil for God to be good, for a good God to exist».²⁹

The primacy of the love of God keeps the consecrated person from the temptation to just doing a job and being a perfectionist. He doesn't work because he *has* to reach perfection understood in abstract terms or under his own full control. His work and daily efforts are the way in which he *responds* to a love infinitely greater than his activity and his efforts. Because he has been and still is constantly and unconditionally loved, he responds with generosity. The radical approach, therefore is always the expression of the *sequela*. The «go, sell everything» was said in the context of a meeting and a dialogue which began with a loving glance («looked steadily at him and loved him») and concludes with an invitation to share and to be together («follow me») (cf. *Mk* 10,21).

At the heart of our project of life as consecrated persons is not that of being perfect or of being radical, but of being «signs and bearers» of a love which preceded our response, which fascinated us and is the basis of our “yes”, for ever (cf. *C* 2). The safest test to distinguish between merely doing one's duty and a *sequela* is the presence of joy. It is also the way to assess the quality of the work and of temperance. A sad austere way of life and a commitment to work which destroys the look of serenity on the face and extinguishes the smile are symptoms that something needs to be looked into. This also has a profound effect on the “face” of a community: a joyful community is a clear and evident sign of its vocational “good health” that makes it “attractive” and welcoming.

Work and temperance

Since GC27 is in close continuity with GC26, I think their relationship could be described through one of the most vivid and well-known Salesian “icons”: the **dream of the personage with ten diamonds**. This dream was also considered by the

²⁹ B. LONERGAN, *Metodo in teologia*, Sígueme, Salamanca 1988, p. 118.

GC25, which studied the theme of the Salesian community. Then the GC26, with the intention of “starting afresh from Don Bosco in order to reawaken the heart of every Salesian with the charismatic identity and the apostolic passion”, *contemplated* the mantle of this personage especially from the front, that is to say its witness to God through the three diamonds “of extraordinary size and splendour”: faith, hope and pastoral charity. Speaking in fact about the five key issues of the GC26, I wrote that really it was a question of «just the one theme: Don Bosco’s programme of spiritual and apostolic life»,³⁰ which the theological life intends to foster and bring about.

We cannot forget that the mantle is in two parts. The three diamonds on the chest refer to the Salesian mysticism, centred on “*da mihi animas*”, that is on pastoral charity accompanied by the vitality of the other two theological virtues. The five diamonds on the back constitute Salesian asceticism. The two diamonds of work and temperance, clearly placed on the shoulders support the entire mantle and «act as hinges between the mystical and ascetical aspects by translating them together into daily life».³¹

In presenting this dream, Fr Egidio Viganò wrote: «Don Bosco considered [the contents of the dream] an important frame of reference for our Salesian vocation. The careful choice and presentation of the special characteristics must be seen as an authoritative identikit of a true Salesian, and Don Bosco tells us that as long as we cherish these characteristics the future of our vocation in the Church is assured, however if we neglect them the Congregation will face total extinction».³²

Article 18 of the Constitutions, which has as its title “Work and temperance”, presents these two things, “for us inseparable”,³³ as

³⁰ CG26, Presentation, p. 10.

³¹ E. VIGANÒ *Be on the watch with your robes hitched up* in AGC 348, Rome 1994, p. 26.

³² E. VIGANÒ, *The Salesian according to Don Bosco’s dream of the ten diamonds* in AGC 300 Rome, 1981, p. 5.

³³ E. VIGANÒ, *Interioridad apostólica. Reflexiones acerca de la gracia de unidad como fuente de la caridad pastoral*, CCS, Madrid 1990, p. 68; cf *Don Bosco, saint* in AGC 310 Rome 1983 p. 14.

an essential element of the Salesian spirit, *«the watchword and badge of the Salesian»*:³⁴ «the two weapons armed with which, Don Bosco wrote, we will succeed in winning over everything and everyone».³⁵

With regard to the theme for the GC27, one could say, that it represents the Salesian way of understanding and putting into practice the “radical approach of the gospel”, «in which in a practical manner they incarnate, hour after hour, day after day, the ideals and the dynamism of our faith, of our hope and of our charity».³⁶ Don Bosco only wanted to found «a Congregation of religious ‘with their sleeves rolled up’ and which would also be ‘a model of frugality».³⁷ In fact, the text of the Constitutions says: «Work and temperance will make the Congregation flourish»;³⁸ «the seeking of an easy and comfortable life will instead bring about its death».³⁹

«For Don Bosco work was not simply occupying time with any kind of activity even exhausting, but *dedication to the mission with all one’s ability and full-time*»,⁴⁰ «it is a means to holiness».⁴¹ «The Salesian gives himself to his mission with tireless energy, taking care to do everything with simplicity and moderation. He knows that by his work he is participating in the creative action of God and cooperating with Christ in building the Kingdom. Temperance gives him the strength to control his heart, to master himself and remain even-tempered. He does not look for unusual penances but accepts the daily demands and renunciations of the apostolic life. He is ready to suffer cold and heat, hunger and thirst, weariness and disdain whenever God’s glory and the salvation of souls require it» (C 18).

³⁴ MB XII, p. 466.

³⁵ DON BOSCO, *Lettera di a Don Giuseppe Fagnano*, 14 novembre 1877, in E. CERIA, *Epistolario*, Vol III, Torino 1959, p. 236.

³⁶ E. VIGANÒ, *Don Bosco, saint* in AGC 310 Rome 1983, p. 14.

³⁷ L. RICCERI, *Letter to Salesians* in AGC 269, Roma 1973, p. 41.

³⁸ C 18 - MB XII, p. 466.

³⁹ C 18 - Cf. MB XVII, p. 272.

⁴⁰ J. VECCHI, *Spiritualità salesiana. Temi fondamentali*, LDC, Leumann 2001, p. 101.

⁴¹ L. RICCERI, *Work and self-restraint* in AGC 276, Rome 1974.

The commentary on this article in "The Project of Life of the Salesians of Don Bosco" says that «The text of the Rule first highlights the role that work and temperance have in the Congregation's life and mission. For Don Bosco they were a programme of life (a "motto" to be put alongside "da mihi animas, cetera tolle") and a guarantee for the future».⁴²

And it continues: «In our tradition the two elements are inseparably linked. In the dream of the ten diamonds, the diamonds of work and temperance on the two shoulders, seem to support the mantle of the personage. In the make up of the Salesian and in his apostolic life work and temperance cannot be separated one from the other: they have complementary functions of incentive and support. The reality of life calls on the one hand for enthusiasm and on the other for renunciation, on this side for commitment and on that for mortification.

It should be noted that from a Salesian point of view "work and temperance" represent a positive reality. *Work* gets an individual moving, stimulates his creativity, prompts him to a certain self-affirmation and sends him into the world; the qualities of Salesian work, for example, are alacrity, spontaneity, generosity, initiative, constant updating, and, naturally, union with one's fellows and with God. *Temperance*, as a virtue that leads to self-control, is a "hinge" around which moderating virtues turn: self-restraint, humility, meekness, clemency, modesty, sobriety and abstinence, economy and simplicity, and also austerity; this complexus adds up to an overall attitude of self-control. In this way temperance becomes a preparation for the acceptance of many difficult or unpleasant requirements of daily work... For us – wrote Fr Viganò – "temperance is not the sum total of what we give up but a growth in the practice of pastoral and pedagogical charity"».⁴³

⁴² *The Project of life of the Salesians of Don Bosco*, A guide to the Salesian Constitutions, Rome 1986, p. 216.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, quoting E. VIGANÒ, *An evangelical project of life*, LDC, Turin 1982, pp. 118 ss.

It also seems important to point out the connection between work and temperance. Work also has an ascetical dimension; disorganised work which creates tension in a confrere should be avoided; self-discipline and the ability to rest is needed. Likewise, to avoid the danger of it being merely an effort of the will, temperance has a relationship with the mystical, in other words it goes hand in hand with the mission.

Trying to find a link between Don Bosco's plan of life "da mihi animas, cetera tolle" and this motto of the Salesian "work and temperance", we could say that work is the visible sign of Salesian mysticism and the expression of the passion for souls, while temperance is the visible sign of Salesian asceticism and the expression of "cetera tolle". In this too we see a continuity between GC26 and GG27.

Work

Don Bosco's great regard for work is well known, even to the point of a certain "scandal" according to the words of Fr Alberto Caviglia, who speaking about Don Bosco said: «Here is the scandal of a saint: he says "let us work" much more often than "let us pray"». ⁴⁴ In fact there are many quotations that we can find in which he encourages people to work: «Speaking to the FMA at Alassio in 1877 he said: «When I visit your convents and am told that there are piles of work I feel at ease. Where there is work there is no devil». ⁴⁵ On another occasion: «A candidate for Salesian life must love work... If you join the Congregation you will want for nothing, but you must work... No one should enter if he intends to sit around twiddling his thumbs...». ⁴⁶ For this reason he was able to offer his Salesians «Bread, work and heaven» and dared to say that «Whenever it may happen that a Salesian succumbs and dies while working for souls, then you will say that our Congregation has gained deservedly a great tri-

⁴⁴ Cf. E. VIGANÒ, *Un progetto evangelico di vita, o.c.*, p. 102.

⁴⁵ BM XIII, p. 89.

⁴⁶ BM XIII, p. 333.

umph». ⁴⁷ He himself worked so much as to die not from illness; he was “simply worn out because of too much work”, according to the words of the doctor attending him. ⁴⁸ These few quotations are sufficient for us to be sure that work is the badge of the Salesian, a characteristic of our nature, which takes us back to our origins.

For this reason for Don Bosco those he used to call “loafers”, have no place in the Congregation. In other words those who do not know how to take the initiative, are lazy or idle, who don’t know how to work hard; and for us Salesians this is a criterion for vocational discernment.

We understand that the one-sided emphasis on work, as confirmed by the isolated quotations from Don Bosco, could be used to justify the not infrequent behaviour of confreres excessively concentrated on their “own” work or who make work, even apostolic, the only factor in their consecrated life. This is not Don Bosco’s way of thinking. He associated work with “union with God” and an uninterrupted tradition from the first generations of Salesians coined the expression “sanctified work”. ⁴⁹ Work is the “apostolic mission”. If one loses sight of who is the One who sends and supports with the strength of his Spirit, and what is the purpose of the mission, one runs the risk of turning work into an “idol”. Not any kind of work therefore is apostolic work.

Work “in autonomy” is not for us Salesians; on the contrary we are called to “live and work together” (C 49), knowing very well that that does not mean always working “side by side”, in the same places and at the same time, but rather according to a shared community project sustained and verified together, since “In an atmosphere of brotherly friendship... we are partners in our apostolic plans and experiences” (C 51). The local and Provincial communities are the areas within which one generously spends one’s energies.

⁴⁷ BM XVII, p. 250.

⁴⁸ Cf. BM XVIII, p. 424.

⁴⁹ Cf. J. VECCHI, «*When you pray say: Our Father...*», in AGC 374, Roma 2001, pp. 33-39.

In addition we can add something about “a professional approach” to work, about the sense of responsibility which ought to accompany every kind of work, and even more what we call the “apostolate”. A ‘more or less’ approach, improvisation, the monotonous repetition of what is no longer suitable for those for whom we are working, an allergy for reflection and planning are not signs that show an “apostolic passion”, but rather “idleness”.

Making a habit of discussing things with the confreres and lay people, identifying some possible aims, devoting time to the preparatory stage, carrying out careful and accurate evaluations, improving in the light of experience, considering the proposals of the Congregation and of the local Church, carefully recognising the signs of the times, making use of the means which the human sciences offer us are only some of the things which indicate a serious and honest approach in our work.

The reflection made by Fr Viganò on the subject is still valid and to the point: «We come from the poor, from a working class culture. And this is God’s plan, since we are for the poor, for the working class people [...] We are at the dawn of a new culture which is stimulated by the world of work; now is the hour of technology, of industry, in which work occupies a central place. Well then: when we speak about our work, we ought to feel that we are “prophets” and not simply “ascetics”. We ought to speak about work in depth and extensively. It is not just a way of behaving in a correct manner, it should be a religious prophecy where there is also considerable room for asceticism, but where there is a whole form of witness for the people of today, useful in gospel terms for the world of work».⁵⁰ Precisely, and as has been said, Don Bosco knew how to respond to the educational and social needs of his time, in an imaginative original way, educating *through work and for work*; he made work a means of education but also a way and a part of life.⁵¹

⁵⁰ E. VIGANÒ, *Un progetto evangelico di vita*, o.c., pp. 106s.

⁵¹ Cf. P. BROCCARDO, *Don Bosco. Profondamente uomo, profondamente santo*, LAS, Roma 2001, pp. 119-120.

Obviously we are interested in reflecting on how faith, hope and charity stimulate the Salesian to be a person not only engaged in changing the world through his work but also a great worker in the Church. From this point of view, that which identifies the Salesian is not any sort of profession, but his vocation as a consecrated apostle; it is not surprising therefore that one speaks about the "professional quality" of the "work of the Salesian", precisely because it is seen in relation to the mission, it truly is work that is pedagogical, pastoral, educative, qualified and uptodate with the backing of the human sciences and the theological disciples according to the Salesian style of «taking care to do everything well with simplicity and moderation». «This is the kind of work that contributes to shaping the spiritual personality»⁵² of the Salesian.

In fact the Constitutions point out that with his work the Salesian cooperates in the creative action of God, making the world more human, and also collaborating with Christ in the work of Redemption. In this way the Salesian identifies himself not only with his profession but above all with his vocation. This is why «tireless energy» which article 18 speaks about, does not mean either restlessness or activism, but apostolic work for the salvation of souls and his own sanctification.

Spirituality and commitment to work are the characteristics of every Salesian, whether priest or brother; work is a feature of the common charismatic identity. On the other hand, each of the two forms of the Salesian consecrated vocation has its own specific way of undertaking the work, with the main attention given to the area of either the ministry or lay involvement, without on this account emphasising in an exclusive manner one or the other. Precisely for this reason every Salesian whatever may be the form his vocation takes, does not disdain the manual work with which he takes care of the house, makes the educational setting beautiful and educates the young to manual work.

⁵² J. VECCHI, *Spiritualità salesiana*, o.c., p. 102.

Temperance

Commenting on the dream of the ten diamonds Fr Egidio Viganò gave quite a profound and up-to-date interpretation of temperance: «It is to be understood as self-control, a moderation of one's inclinations, of the instincts of the passions, being reasonable, cutting off from worldliness, not fleeing to the desert but remaining among people with one's heart under control: being in the world without being of the world. This sort of temperance is a basic attitude to life, of self-control... Rightly theological tradition speaks about temperance as one of the "cardinal virtues": an axis on which hinge various other and complementary attitudes of self-control. In fact, these are the virtues which rotate around the central nucleus of temperance: *continence*, against the tendency towards lust; *humility*, against the tendency towards pride...; *meekness* against bursts of anger...; *mercy*, against certain inclinations towards cruelty and revenge; *modesty*, against vanity in showing off one's body (fashion!); *sobriety* and *abstinence*, against excesses in food and drink; *economy* and *simplicity*, against easy waste and extravagance; *austerity* in the tenor of life (Spartan-like), against the temptation to comfort».⁵³

Basically it is a matter of the necessary *Christian asceticism* so little appreciated in today's society, so strongly conditioned to hedonism and ethical relativism, in the name of absolute freedom, which rejects every limitation, and in the name of natural and ideological spontaneity, considers it to be an alienating neurosis. The lack of asceticism is the consequence and an expression of the rejection of God. The meaning, the justification for, and the fruitfulness of Christian asceticism is to be found in fidelity to the mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ.

Nor should it be forgotten that working among the poorest, drawing close to those who are suffering, «the joys and hopes, the

⁵³ E. VIGANÒ, *Un progetto evangelico di vita*, o.c., pp. 119s. Interesting is his application of temperance, in addition to work, to fraternal life, to one's personal life style, to prayer and to contemplation, which is found in J. VECCHI, *Spiritualità...*, o.c., pp. 105-106.

griefs and anxieties»⁵⁴ of so many women, men and young people who struggle to live are a strong stimulus to reject every kind of softness and free and easy life-style for each one of us and for our communities and therefore to live frugally, with the essentials and with temperance. The poor can become our genuine "educators", since every day they demand from us that we be faithful to the promise we have made to give our whole life for them.

It is true that asceticism «ought to be related to the cultural anthropology of the times in which one is living. So nowadays temperance has to take account of a more developed concept of man, of the discoveries by the human sciences (especially of psychology), of the characteristics of our bodily existence, of the profound value of sexuality, of the process of personalisation, of the reality of pluralism, of the importance of the community dimension, of the demands of social life».⁵⁵

A Christian asceticism therefore which takes into account the harmonious integration of soul and body; which makes people open to oblation love; which is capable of dealing in a Christian manner with the tensions which modern life implies: 'stress', the monotony of work, the superficiality of relationships. An asceticism of silence is necessary in this noisy civilisation, so as not to lose oneself in an over-abundance of information; an asceticism which knows how to be disciplined with regard to the means of social communication, sleep, recreation, food the senses, etc... The value of asceticism is not measured by the suffering caused by giving things up or by the amount of effort made but rather by the progress made in exercising charity or by its gospel-style effectiveness. Like the ascetics of all times, Don Bosco underlined the essential connection between mortification of the body and prayer: "He who does not mortify his body cannot pray!" Temperance is indispensable for holiness, precisely because it produces that freedom of spirit that makes us ready to love even to the extreme.

⁵⁴ VATICAN COUNCIL II, *Gaudium et spes*, n. 1.

⁵⁵ E. VIGANÒ, *Un progetto evangelico di vita, o.c.*, pp. 125s.

Reflecting on the asceticism of Don Bosco, over and above the circumstances which characterised it, has much to tell us today. Don Bosco was a holy educator who loved deeply and who knew how to make himself loved by practising temperance to an heroic degree. What Don Bosco asked Don Rua to do sending him as a young Rector to Mirabello, "study how to make yourself loved", is only possible with a strong asceticism that comes from the practice of temperance.⁵⁶ For Don Bosco this is always in view of the 'mysticism' of "da mihi animas", because it is a discipline in the education to the gift of oneself in love: "Lord, make me save the young with the gift of temperance!" Therefore Salesian temperance ought to be cheerful, daily, kind, simple, intelligent, heroic, pleasant and something which can be seen in the serene, radiant, joyful face of the Salesian.

3.3. Requirements to make the theme concrete

In order to more easily make the theme concrete and achieve the aim of the GC27, it is necessary to observe certain requirements, setting in motion some procedures, encouraging a change of mentality, making changes to some structures.

Processes to be set in motion

The GC27 proposes the aim of helping each confrere and community to live in fidelity the apostolic project of Don Bosco, and that is to say to continue to strengthen our charismatic identity.

This will enable us to make our Salesian consecrated vocation visible, credible and fruitful; in particular it will make it possible for us to propose Salesian life convincingly to the young as a plan of life worth taking up and in this way giving vocational fruitfulness to our presence.

⁵⁶ Cf. E. VIGANÒ, *Study to make yourself loved. Commentary on the Strenna*, Rome 1984.

From these objectives follow some procedures that need to be given preference, which are the basic paths to be followed to facilitate the achievement of the objectives.

The first process regards the way of living nowadays our *Salesian consecrated vocation* in the grace of unity and with joy, as witnesses to the radical approach of the gospel and of our particular expression of work and temperance.

The second process regards *knowledge of Don Bosco*, which needs to be constantly improved so as to make it the inspirational motive of our spiritual life and of pastoral activity from both the personal and the community points of view.

The third process regards the *lived, personal community attitude towards the Constitutions*, which are Don Bosco's apostolic project and constitute our charismatic identity to be lived faithfully and with joy in our vocation.

Mindset to be changed

Here are taken up again those attitudes already described among the institutional and personal challenges, which need to be changed, both in the living out of the vocation and in the carrying out of the mission.

Above all attention needs to be given *to culture and to cultures* so as to create a common mindset which is able to seize the opportunities which the cultural challenges offer, in particular as regards post-modernity, inculturation, relations between cultures, secularisation.

In addition the *ecclesial challenges* need to be further considered so as to find ways of responding to the requirements of the new evangelisation, to the renewal of consecrated life, to overcoming relativism.

Care needs to be taken to increase the *culture of the Congregation*, in particular with regard to the formation demands of a serious vocational discernment and of a effective personal ac-

companiment, to the sharing of agreed criteria in connection with our pastoral activity, to the formation of the leaders of the confreres, the young and the lay people.

Finally there is a mindset to be changed at the *personal level*, so as to foster the overcoming of various forms and style of individualism, the deepening of the identity of consecrated life, the acquiring of affective, sexual and emotional maturity.

Structures to be changed

There are also some structures to be changed, which concern our way of living and of organising ourselves, in order to achieve the fundamental objective of the GC27, in other words so that we can really live to the full Don Bosco's apostolic project.

Above all the style and organisation of *community life* need to be changed; it needs to be strengthened, ensuring the right number and quality of its members, the right balance between the community and the work, a simplification of the complexities of the works, a re-definition of roles, a redesigning of the presences.

In addition what needs to change is the form taken of the presence and the exercise of the *role of the Rector* of the community; the quality of the Rectors needs to be assured, promoting for all the confreres already in initial formation preparation in "leadership", enabling the Rectors to carry out their task of accompaniment, helping them to animate and to motivate the religious community and the educative pastoral community, making sure that they have the help necessary so that they can carry out their fundamental duties.

Finally the way of managing *human resources* needs to be changed; there needs to be a strengthening of the co-involvement and the charismatic use of the resources, looking for new forces, increasing a sense of the Salesian Family, fostering the co-responsibility of lay people, ensuring the charismatic development of the presence in the area.

4. CONCLUSION

Dear confreres, I conclude this letter convoking the GC27 inviting all of you, and indeed all the communities and Provinces, starting from now to cultivate those attitudes and that atmosphere which are conducive to making "work and temperance" a concrete reality. In this way we can be "witnesses to the radical approach of the gospel" that the Church, society and young people expect, and return to the essentials in the spirit of the Gospel, so loved and desired by Don Bosco.

This is the credible response to give to someone such as the novice who wrote to me some months ago who hopes that our daily life may not be a real obstacle to Jesus having young disciples and apostles ready to be joyful and credible witnesses to the radical approach of the gospel. It is a question of young people who come to our communities, convinced and enthusiastic about their vocation and who sometimes then have a different experience of religious life; one which does not coincide with that offered them in their vocation animation and in initial formation.

Someone might wish to justify himself by saying that sometimes these young people create an idealistic image of consecrated life, a life that does not exist in reality. However, when they hear the words *poor, chaste and obedient* or the call to make their own "*Jesus' way of being obedient, poor and chaste*" they would expect to find a faithful following and a generous imitation of Jesus, as have so many men and women from the times of the primitive Church, who captivated by the person of the Lord left everything and everyone to become his disciples and witnesses.

At this point the question usually comes up, «but is it possible to live like Christ?» It is certainly not a rhetorical question. It arises from that image of consecrated life that we project through our style of life (food, drink, clothes, use of time, etc.),

our experience of prayer, our interpersonal relationships in the community, our dedication and professional approach in carrying out the mission. There are confreres and communities who live with great joy, generosity, fidelity and with a radical approach, and others on the other hand whose lives are based on the easy life, individualistic, unconcerned about others, about the young or about the poor.

It is evident that precisely because the most precious gift that we have is life, denying ourselves, giving up having a wife, children, a house, and organising life according to one's own plans, and handing over everything to Christ in the Congregation for poor and abandoned young people, is worth while only if one takes seriously the commitment to faithfully reproduce in ourselves his image and to be his witnesses. We cannot reduce the Congregation to an institution of social or pastoral services. We are a family, not born from flesh and blood but generated by the Spirit who calls us together and unites us in communities of disciples and apostles of Christ for young people in the footsteps of Don Bosco.

Today as yesterday God is calling us to holiness in Salesian life. And this is possible if we live as Christ did, as our beloved founder and father lived with great joy, attractiveness and a smiling face, but with the great radical approach of the gospel, expressed in his twofold motto "work and temperance".

We are drawing close to the bicentenary of his birth and we have to reach it having recovered the joy, the enthusiasm and the pride of being Salesians, so as to be able to put before today's young people in all honesty the beauty of our vocation.

To Mary, the Immaculate Help of Christians I entrust this GC27 and above all, all and each one of you dear confreres, whom I love with the heart of Christ Jesus.

5. PRAYER TO SAINT JOHN BOSCO

Bearing in mind that on the one hand the GC27 is a point of arrival in this period of preparation for the Bicentenary of the birth of our beloved father and founder, and on the other a point of departure for a new period in the history of the Congregation, I ask you to use the prayer to Don Bosco that I already suggested to you for this three year period 2012-2015. It is the evening prayer that corresponds to the morning prayer of entrustment to Mary Help of Christians.

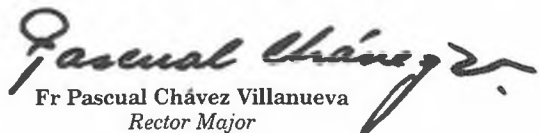
Saint John Bosco,

*Father and Teacher of youth,
docile to the gifts of the Spirit and open to the reality of your times
you were for the young, especially the little ones and the poor,
a sign of the love and the special care of God.*

Be our guide as we walk the path of friendship with the Lord Jesus,
*so that we may discover in Him and in his Gospel
the meaning of our lives
and the source of true happiness.*

Help us to respond with generosity
*to the vocation we have received from God,
so that in daily life we may be
builders of communion,
and may collaborate with enthusiasm,
and in communion with the whole Church,
in creating a civilisation of love.*

Obtain for us the grace of perseverance
*in living a high standard of Christian life,
according to the spirit of the beatitudes;
and grant that, guided by Mary Help of Christians,
we may one day be with you
in the great family of heaven. Amen*


Fr Pascual Chávez Villanueva
Rector Major