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“100 YEARS FOR GOD AND FOR THE WORLD”

Letter of the Rector Major to the Volunteers of Don Bosco on the Centenary of the Foundation of the Institute

1. A LOOK AT THE ORIGINS. – 2. AROUSED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE NOVELTY OF CONSECRATED SECULAR LIFE. Some hints on how to live the VDB identity. – 3. AS MEMBERS OF A BEAUTIFUL CHARISMATIC FAMILY. *Your Salesian Spirituality. - Recognizing yourselves as living members of the Salesian Family. - Recognized in the Family. Conclusion.*

Rome, May 20th, 2017

Dear Confrères,

The publication of each number of the Acts of the General Council is for me a very good opportunity to meet each one of you.

On this occasion I wish to draw your attention on an important family event such as the celebration of the Centenary of the beginning of the Institute of the Volunteers of Don Bosco.

Last May 20th and 21st, in Valdocco, in the presence of many of you and of the representatives of the 31 groups of our Salesian Family, our sisters, and we with them, could celebrate their great centenary feast.

The location they chose was the best possible one: Valdocco, where the first sisters pronounced their vows in the presence of Msgr. Giovanni Cagliero.

As I stated at the beginning of the letter I wrote on this occurrence, also my predecessors, Fr Egidio Viganò, Fr Juan Edmundo Vecchi and Fr Pascual Chávez, marked their spiritual presence on the 60th, 80th and 90th anniversary of the foundation of the Institute. On the celebration of the centenary, I thought that the entire Salesian Family all over the world, and we Salesians as part of it, should do all we can to better know the Institute of the Volunteers of Don Bosco.

Reflecting on their interesting history, which is not exempt from difficulties, and on their identity, will help us to better understand the richness of their consecrated lay status with which they complete the vitality of the great tree of the Salesian Family as a charismatic family.

Dear Confrères, I offer you this letter, trusting in your attentive reading as well as in the expressions of affection for and closeness to our VDB sisters. The celebration of their Centenary greatly concerns our charism, our spirituality, our mission and our being Salesian Family in the Church and in the world.

* * *

My dear sisters in Don Bosco, dear sisters of the Secular Institute of the Volunteers of Don Bosco. I am happy and honoured to have the opportunity of writing this letter to you on the occasion of your jubilee year 2017, in which you celebrate the 100th anniversary of the foundation of the Institute.

I have in my hands the letters addressed to you on the occasions of your significant anniversaries, by my three latest predecessors: Fr Egidio Vigano (September 1979) on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the first professions “of the Group of the first seven *Zelatrici* of the Society of St. Francis of Sales and of Mary Help of Christians¹; Fr Juan Edmundo Vecchi (1997) on the occasion of the 80th anniversary of the foundation of the Institute, and Fr Pascual Chavez Villanueva (2007) for the celebration of the 90th anniversary of the foundation.

This year, 2017, as President General Olga Krizová writes, is a jubilee year in which “*on May 20th, all the regions and Groups dependent on the Centre will be united in thanking God for the gift of our Institute: it is He who aroused this vocation in the heart of the world; it is the Holy Spirit who guides history and who makes something extraordinary flourish even in simplicity and concealment*”².

¹ Quaderno Carpanera, QC, October 26, 1919.

² OLGA KRIZOVÁ. *Crescere*. No. 1 - 2017.

1. A LOOK AT THE ORIGINS

Although your beginnings are very well known to each one of you, my dear VDB sisters, yet we of the Salesian Family, who accompany you in this moment with true fraternity and affection, we feel the need of *knowing to Love*. And in this knowledge, we cannot ignore your origins or your history, with the motions of the Spirit, with the decisive role of some persons and with the difficulties and conquests experienced by the protagonists of the time.

It was, certainly, on that October 26th, 1919, in the chapel adjoining the rooms of Don Bosco, in the presence of Cardinal Cagliero, who presided over the celebration, of Fr Philip Rinaldi, who was then director of that group of *Zelatrici*, and of one FMA sister representing the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, that seven *Zelatrici* commenced a new experience of Salesian consecration, making their first profession of the evangelical counsels.

There is something in this event that to me is not only important, but also beautiful and moving. This group of the ‘*seven cheerfulnesses of the Madonna*’ pronounce their consecration for three years, before Cardinal Cagliero, who points out that “*today, you begin your new life of Zelatrici*”, and that the new Institution “*had the great fortune of being born in the place sacred to Venerable Don Bosco, where He himself had received the first vows and the first promises* (sixty years before, Cagliero himself was there), *of those who had given life and development to the great Salesian Work*”... And defining this happy coincidence as a “*sign of predestination*”, he added: “*The Daughters of Mary Help of Christians have their cradle in Mornese, where Sr. Maria Mazzarello lived and pronounced her vows. You must give importance to this sign of a most special predestination!*”³.

The history of those who will later be the first VDBs has its roots in the birth of the female Oratory No. 1 of Turin - Valdocco

³ Quaderno Carpanera, October 26, 1919.

in 1876. Precisely here, in the Oratory of the FMAs, the Pious Union of the Daughters of Mary Immaculate Help of Christians was born in 1895, on the feast of the Immaculate. There are several young people who in this Association of the Daughters of Mary have a certain gift of leadership.

In 1903 there is the first official meeting of the Daughters of Mary with Fr Philip Rinaldi who provisionally replaces Fr Francesia as Director of the Oratory; a figure of special significance is Mother Felicina Fauda, FMA.

One of the first interventions of Fr Rinaldi will consist in reconfirming in the directive council of the Association of the Daughters of Mary the seven oratorians who already composed it. Among these we find four of the first future *zelatrici*: Amalia Pios, Cristina Milone, Caterina Borgia and Celestina Dominici.

Fr Rinaldi will re-enter in a definitive way as Director of the Oratory of the FMAs in the year 1907. In 1910, two other young ladies will enter to be part of the directive council of the Daughters of Mary: Giovannina Peraldi and Luigina Carpanera. Their names, and especially the latter one, will tell us in future the importance these persons had.

Already in 1908, Fr Rinaldi shows a special leading role in constituting, among the Daughters of Mary, 'the *Zelatrici of the Oratory*', i.e. an association in the Association, with the aim "*of maintaining peace among the members of the oratory and leading back to the Oratory and to the sacraments those who were going astray... You do* – he used to tell them – *what nuns and priests cannot do*"⁴. In 1916, he informs Fr Albera, Rector Major, of the reality of some pious persons who follow a rule of seven points – which he brings to his knowledge – and which is a first draft of the Statute for the future *Zelatrici* of Mary Help of Christians.

In all these years, until 1922, when he was elected Rector Major, Fr Rinaldi lives the most fruitful period of his pastoral activity in favour of lay people, with a great sensitivity of responding to the urgency of the most needy. In this perspective,

⁴ E. CERIA, *Life of Servant of God, Fr Philip Rinaldi*, SEI, 1951, p. 196-197.

one can perfectly understand why in these moments he said to the Daughters of Mary “*that in our times, piety alone is no more enough: action is required*”⁵.

The great moment that will mark a before and an afterwards, will be that May 20th, 1917, when three of those Daughters of Mary and *Zelatrici* – Maria Verzotti, Francesca Riccardi and Luigina Carpanera – will commence what will be recognized, after many years, as Secular Institute. At that time, the *Provida Mater* of 1947 had not yet been promulgated and it was not known that this type of life could be the one of consecrated people in the world⁶. They started a Society of Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in the world. These three will be joined by two more ‘Oratorians’ in the month of June, for the feast of the Sacred Heart (Celestina Dominici and Giovannina Peraldo), and by another two on the first day of the novena of the Immaculate (Caterina Borgia and Teresa Salassa); and so, at the end of 1917, the *Zelatrici* of Mary Help of Christians are seven, thanks also to the commitment of Mother Felicina Fauda FMA who, transferred to Catania, can see before her departure the fulfilment of this dream of hers.

And in the journey of consolidation, on January 29th, 1921, the first local council was constituted and they themselves will ask the Mother General of the FMAs, Mother Caterina Daghero, to give them a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians as their assistant, as was Mother Felicina.

The *Zelatrici* of Mary Help of Christians advance with their associated life and work, and participate in an assiduous manner to the formative encounters with Fr Rinaldi and the sister-assistant of the moment. Fr Rinaldi will accompany them spiritually, even though in a limited way because of his duties as Rector Major, until the end of 1928. His death on December 5th, 1933, truly leaves them orphans. The good will of Fr Calogero Gusmano, SDB, to whom the Association is entrusted, cannot fill the

⁵ Cf. CASTANO L., *Blessed Philip Rinaldi, 1856-1931, living image of Don Bosco, his third successor*. Elledici, 1990, 106-107 and 148.

⁶ Quaderno Carpanera, May 20, 1917.

void that Fr Rinaldi has created. We can see in those years an attempt to “turn them into religious people”, an attempt outlined in a new rule, probably drafted by Fr Calogero and Sr. Clelia Genghini, but this was not shared by all the *Zelatrici*.

It is easy to imagine how in this situation, the future of the Association might seem seriously compromised. Worth mentioning is the commitment of Luigina Carpanera in continuing to maintain frequent contacts with the other *Zelatrici* and the great effort of being faithful to the initial dream.

After the death of Fr Rinaldi, for more than ten years, the *Zelatrici* live a great uncertainty regarding their future. They do not find sufficient support in the SDBs, or in the FMAs. With the unity Luigina Carpanera had created, in 1943, they turn again, as a group, to Salesian Fr Domenico Garneri, imploring him to show concern for the Association. And he, after having reflected and consulted with some of his superiors, accepts and becomes aware that, even in the context of the terrible Second World War, there is a group of women – sixty five *Zelatrici* according to the list of 1945, eleven of whom of the times of Fr Rinaldi – who in spite of difficulties and their feeling orphans, continue to live with great fidelity.

Fr Garneri points out to Fr Ricaldone that this work, attributed to Fr Rinaldi, with a history not lacking of difficulties, needs a definition regarding its future. Four months later, the response of Fr Ricaldone seems to suggest that, “*without taking any commitment, the embers must be kept lit, even if they are under the ashes*”⁷.

This part of the story is long and is not yet exempt from difficulties. The superiors did not give a definitive response. The context of the war was not at all favourable. Good Fr Garneri asks the help of an FMA assistant and it is in this period that, despite precariousness, with the pronouncement of vows for six months or one year, another Salesian, Fr Gerolamo Luzi, will show interest in the Association, founding two new groups, one in Bagnolo Piemonte and one in Milan, this latter in the Provincial House of

⁷ S. MAGGIO, *Fr Rinaldi Founder in half-light*, p. 241.

the FMAs. The presence of an FMA sister who had already been assistant of the *Zelatrici* with Fr Rinaldi, helps to better understand how these new groups could be formed with three *Zelatrici*.

In the height of the war, on October 29th, 1944, the *Zelatrici* celebrate the 25th anniversary of the first professions of the Association, which *date back to October 26th, 1919*. Those who could not participate in the celebration, either for family reasons or because of distance, were invited to renew their vows in private in the presence of a priest, or else to turn in another moment to Fr Garneri.

Difficulties would not be finished yet. Fr Garneri has a very poor health and in 1946 he was transferred to another house; the same thing happens to Fr Luzi who leaves Bagnolo and returns to Turin, where he unfortunately dies in December of that same year at only 42 years of age. In September of the same year, significant Luigina Carpanera also dies.

Fragile health does not allow Fr Garneri to closely accompany the *Zelatrici*. To this difficulty was also to be added the discontent of a great part of them, because of the lack of response from the Rector Major concerning their situation. The same *Zelatrici* insist with Fr Garneri, who already feels old and worn out, to write anew to the Rector Major. Fr Garneri does it on May 1st, 1948, asking clarification regarding the *Zelatrici* and suggesting to change the Assistant so as not to ruin the work of Fr Rinaldi. However, no response comes from the Rector Major. In the month of August 1949, one of the *Zelatrici*, presumably Maria Fassione, writes to the SDB superiors, asking them to give a juridical form to the work of Fr Rinaldi and to give them a greater spiritual preparation. Meanwhile, the *Zelatrici* know that in the Church some institutions with a secular trait are being born. In fact, Secular Institutes had been officially recognized in the Church in 1947 with *Provida Mater* that affirms, for the first time, the possibility of living a total consecration in a full secularity in the world, within the world. Luigina Carrpanera had died one year before the promulgation of *Provida Mater*.

It seems that in the Salesian environment, the change takes place with the publication of the biography of the Servant of God,

Fr Rinaldi, written by Fr Eugenio Ceria, SDB and the Salesians get to know the *Zelatrici*, admire their history and be interested in them. In 1950, there is the celebration of the priestly jubilee of Fr Garneri, which is attended by all the *Zelatrici*; the Eucharist is presided over by Fr Renato Ziggiotti, then Prefect of the Salesian Congregation. It might be said that with him appears, for the first time, the person who would have had a very important role in the transformation of the Association of the *Zelatrici* into the future Secular Institute. After the death of Fr Piero Ricaldone, Fr Renato Ziggiotti succeeds him in the summer of 1952. Immediately, Fr Garneri informs him of the journey done by the Association of the *Zelatrici* of Mary Help of Christians who in that moment are eighty-six, with ages ranging between 22 and 76 years. A definitive systematization of this work is being felt as necessary.

The life of the Association moves on, despite difficulties, between renewals of the vows and encounters held whenever possible. In this period, Fr Garneri leaves the Association in the hands of Mother Melchiorrina Biancardi, since he, because of his state of health, has to be transferred to Cumiana.

We are in 1953. The moment is not easy. Some *Zelatrici* are discouraged because of the general climate of uncertainty; some are afraid that the Association will not call at any harbour; some members abandon the association to join other associations of lay consecrated people, and some others profess as FMAs.

In this moment, another SDB will be very significant. It is Fr Stefano Maggio who, after listening many times to Teresa Frassati, speaks to the Rector Major Fr Ziggiotti of the Association of Fr Rinaldi. The Rector Major listens to him with great interest and a positive attitude, but being aware that in this moment the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians are involved with great responsibility, he adds that the problem will be dealt with if one day it will be submitted to him. A few days later, Fr Maggio has a meeting with Mother Linda Lucotti and presents to her the opportunity of re-launching the Association of the *Zelatrici*. According to the existing writings, the Mother shows not to be in favour, but she promises that she will speak with her Council and

will give him an official response. This response arrives on October 19th, and is not positive.

The journey of the story is still long. I invite you to read the historical description in the various existing publications. There certainly are dialogues, encounters and clashes, there are SDBs and FMAs who are motivated and enthusiastic in the accompaniment of the *Zelatrici* and others who do not see any future for them. A moment comes when the dialogue is held between the Rector Major Fr R. Ziggiotti and Mother General Linda Lucotti. They requested canonists to produce some studies. Other episodes follow, until on December 5th, 1955, on the 24th anniversary of the death of Fr Philip Rinaldi, the *Zelatrici* have the new Rule of Life approved by the Superior Council of the Salesians of Don Bosco and by the General Council of the FMAs⁸.

On January 6th, 1956, the Association of the *Zelatrici* assumes the new name of "Cooperators Oblates of St. John Bosco". In the course of the meeting of their central Council, on March 19th, 1959, the change of the name with the current one of "Volunteers of Don Bosco" is discussed and decided, and is later accepted by the Rector Major.

So far, this long pilgrimage that tells us, certainly, of a journey in which only what comes really from God can last in time to date, despite difficulties; and this because, as we well know, it is the Holy Spirit that inspires and guides. The same Constitutions of the VDBs attest this in the first article: "*The Volunteers of Don Bosco (VDB) live in the Church the spiritual and apostolic heritage of St. John Bosco, transmitted to them by Fr Philip Rinaldi. Illumined by the Holy Spirit and led by the maternal presence of Mary, he set afoot an original evangelical experience with a group of young women to become in the world leaven of Christian life*".

The historical moment we are living on the occasion of this Centenary is an opportunity of thanking God in the first place

⁸ Central Library VDB, Cooperators Oblates of St. John Bosco, Rules, Scuola tipografica private, Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, Turin, Cfr. Chronicle, Vol 1, pp. 24, 25, 26.

and the persons who have rendered possible, with great human efforts, this project that comes from Him. What words are more pertinent than those of the very President General who, knowing all this historical pilgrimage, feels that the Institute of the VDBs can say: *“Our thanks go then to those first three Sisters who had the courage of launching themselves in a then all new spiritual adventure, who generously responded to the call and with their living and effective fidelity, even in moments of great difficulty kept the lamp of their vocation alight. Our gratitude goes also to our founder **Fr Philip Rinaldi**, who let himself be guided by the Spirit, giving a start to a new journey in the Salesian Family, just as to all those **Salesians and Daughters of Mary Help of Christians** who in the course of our history helped us to grow and be aware of the gift that we had received from the Spirit.*

*In this regard, I would like to remember Fr Garneri who followed us from 1943 to 1955; Fr Ziggotti, Rector Major, who gave a start to the juridical recognition; Fr Stefano Maggio, who accompanied us until the approval as Secular Institute, dedicating all his life to make our vocation known also in far away countries; Fr Frontini who directed us in being aware of our secularity and to whom we are greatly indebted; the **many SDB Assistants** who were fathers and brothers to us and all the many FMA sisters who in the first times accompanied us as affectionate sisters”⁹.*

2. AROUSED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE NOVELTY OF CONSECRATED SECULARITY

You, sisters, are the first to have this firm conviction: consecrated secularity is not an invention of yours. It was the Holy Spirit who aroused it in an historical moment of the life of the Church. In a moment in which it was being discovered with more clarity that we are all People of God and that the call to holiness is not the privilege of someone in particular, but a proposal and a goal for all the disciples of Jesus.

⁹ OLGA KRIZOVÁ, *Crescere* No. 1 – 2017.

Thus we read in your Constitutions and in the Regulations, where it is affirmed how the Holy Spirit inspired Fr Rinaldi (cf. C 1), and through the action of the same Spirit, God consecrates you to himself in Christ (cf. C 3), and drives you, through a profound need of love, to offer your life totally to God and to the brethren (cf. C 8).

The consecration is not, in the first place, an action of the same consecrated person, but of God, of the Spirit of Christ who guides the Church, and the consecrated person responds, offers and gives their self. So, the VDBs live it according to the Constitutions: *"With a particular initiative of love, God calls the Volunteers and consecrates them to Himself in Christ through the action of the Holy Spirit in order to send them in the world to evangelize it according to the charism of Don Bosco"*¹⁰.

You live this consecration as lay people who are in the world by vocational choice, like leaven in the dough. Secularity is something specific of your consecrated vocation and, from it, you realize your mission, express fraternal communion and your being part of the Salesian Family¹¹.

History enlightens us on how the foundation of your Association, such as the one of other similar realities that were being born, does not coincide with the moment of the recognition of Secular Institutes in the Church (Pope Pius XII promulgates the Apostolic Constitution *Provida Mater Ecclesia* on February 2nd, 1947), but historically precedes it by several years even if with it is enriched, developed and consolidated. Celebrating the 60th anniversary of this apostolic Constitution, Pope Benedict XVI has underscored in a clear way how such promulgation was not a point of arrival, but of departure of a new journey, of a new form of consecration for lay people and priests called to live with evangelical radicality, totally immersed in secular reality¹².

¹⁰ SECULAR INSTITUTE VOLUNTEERS OF DON BOSCO, *Constitutions and Regulations*, art 3, Rome 2009.

¹¹ Cf. C. art. 4.

¹² Cf. BENEDICT XVI, *Address on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of "Provida Mater Ecclesia"*, February 3, 2007.

What I find very beautiful in this long journey of yours, my dear VDB sisters, is that from the beginning there is something in the vision and the inspiration of Fr Rinaldi that *gives a proper imprint* to the consecration of the first sisters, different from the consecration of the religious men and women of the time. Fr Rinaldi, in his generous dedication to the formation of those young 'oratorians' chosen among many, thinking of their consecration in the world, proposed to *bring to completion the work Don Bosco had left unfinished*. Thus, he expresses himself on May 20th, 1917, when he says: "*For some time, the Most Reverend Superiors have been receiving various requests to institute a Society of Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in the world... The Superiors always accepted favourably these aspirations, all the more because this was truly something existing in the mind and programme of venerable Don Bosco. In the report he wrote of his work, he spoke precisely of two distinct categories of people, observing the same rule, one of which might form Communities, and the other would live in the world, there to promote the spirit of the Congregation in the practical exercise of their activity*"¹³.

Ever since your beginning, dear sisters, beyond all the vicissitudes and situations, beyond the changes of names of the Association, always and in all the years gone by, the **defence** of this "proper way" of being visible signs of Christ and servants of the others, with a style that is very close to Salesian spirituality, has been a constant feature of yours. As Fr Egidio Viganò magnificently affirms in the letter he addressed to you at the time, "*this way of yours of being in the Salesian Family distinguishes you from the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians for the "secularity", and from the Salesian Cooperators for the "consecration"*"¹⁴.

¹³ Quaderno Carpenera - May 20, 1919.

¹⁴ E. VIGANÒ, *Letter of Fr Egidio Viganò, Rector Major of the Salesians, to the Volunteers of Don Bosco*, September 24, 1979.

Some Hints on How to Live the VDB Identity

Besides the explicit reference I will make to your *Salesian spirituality* and to your being part of the Salesian Family, let me offer you some hints that can illumine your concrete way of living the VDB identity in the context of the Church and of the world today. In harmony with the Church and the pastoral guidelines we receive in it, I propose:

- Continue to be, with your particular secular consecration, **true yeast** that leavens all the dough (cf. Mt 13:33). *"You are not called – Pope Benedict says in the above-mentioned anniversary of Provida Mater – to establish special forms of living, of apostolic commitment or social intervention, but rather, forms that can come into being through personal relations"*. For this, it is desirable that you may truly be this yeast, with your lifestyle, good, sometimes silent and hidden, but also with a positive and encouraging outreach capable of generating hope¹⁵. Your Constitutions explicitly affirm that you want to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world so as to participate in the evangelizing mission of the Church that sends you (cf. C 6).
- Sisters, **be close** to the life and story of joy and of sorrow of every person you encounter in your existence. With the Salesian spirituality that is proper of your charism, this sensitivity becomes educative and evangelizing passion, it becomes charity and fraternity when it comes to little boys and girls and to the youth. With great strength, Pope Benedict XVI asks this of all Secular Institutes, when he says: *"May you feel challenged by every suffering, every injustice and every search for truth, beauty and goodness. This is not because you can come up with the solution to all problems; rather, it is because every circumstance in which human beings live and die is an opportunity for you to witness to God's saving work. This is your mission"*¹⁶.

¹⁵ Cf. BENEDICT XVI, o.c.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

- Do not fall into the very frequent and very human **temptation of individualism**. Dear Sisters, no one is exempt *a priori* from the danger of this temptation. Your Salesian apostolic passion must lead you to be always apostles and missionaries among the people (cf. C 6), with an apostolate that is concretized in the availability to the brethren (cf. C 19), and where life itself is the mission in which your consecration is the most efficacious way of being salt, light and leaven in the world (cf. C 12). As Pope Francis says: “*The missionary passion, the joy of the encounter with Christ that urges you to share with others the beauty of faith, reduces the risk of becoming stuck in individualism*”¹⁷.
- **Live a beautiful experience of fraternity** as an experience of constant communion and unity in the Spirit. Continue to be very sensitive “as Salesians” – this most beautiful expression you use in your Constitutions – to remain united in Christ (cf. C 38), in communion of life, with a strong sense of belonging to the Institute and with strong fraternal relations in the group to which you belong (cf. C 40).
- **Do not remain indifferent** in front of the life of every man and woman whom you encounter. It is not I who say it. It is the Pope who asks you in a very beautiful way. Your vocation of consecrated people in the world demands of you to stay in the heart of human vicissitudes. In such a complex world like the present one, the circumstances of human life, the stories of efforts, of struggle, of sorrow, of overcoming, and also the stories of fraternity and love of the men and women, the boys and girls and of the youth whom you encounter in your life, in your environment, *are today the field of your mission and of your prophecy*. Because of this, the Pope tells you: “*If this does not happen, if you are distracted, or worse still, if you do not know today’s world but you know and experience only the world which suits you best or that you feel more drawn to, then*

¹⁷ POPE FRANCIS, *Address to the General Assembly of the Italian Conference of Secular Institutes*, May 10, 2014.

conversion is urgently needed! Yours is an outward-reaching vocation by nature, not only because it brings you into contact with others, but also and especially (because) it demands that you live where every human being lives”¹⁸.

- **Live your vocation with radicality**, with the courage of knowing and feeling that faith gives form, content, strength and light to your whole existence. In your consecrated secularity you have found, as the Gospel says, the precious pearl, the hidden treasure that frees you from the idolatries of power, of possessing and accumulating superficially, it frees you also from the search for prestige and vain recognition. But Jesus makes you discover, as he does with all of us, that the true richness is not to be found in possessing, but in donating and in donating oneself; it makes you discover that the true richness implies stripping oneself of power and even more of a power that aspires to have and to possess. It is, ultimately, proposing this wisdom that derives from Love, this Truth that makes us really free, that is the creator of an authentic life that it keeps and fills.
- Be also, dear sisters, as Pope Francis recently requested all Secular Institutes, ***the advanced wing of the Church in the New Evangelization***. According to his words, this mission demands of you that you learn to interpret the signs of the times and that you move with liberty of spirit, living a spirituality capable of harmonizing the criteria that come from “above”, i.e. from the grace of God, with those that come from “below”, from history, the Pope says. This being *the advanced wing of the Church in the New Evangelization* will only be possible if you are women of prayer, of intimate friendship with Jesus, if you take care at the same time of family life, of brothers and sisters, up to being, with your way of living, as Secular Institute of the Volunteers of Don Bosco, a ***true school of holiness***¹⁹.

¹⁸ POPE FRANCIS, o.c.

¹⁹ Cf. POPE FRANCIS, *The Secular Institutes, advance wing of the Church in the New Evangelization*, World Conference of the Secular Institutes (CMIS), Rome, August 21-25, 2016.

3. AS MEMBERS OF A BEAUTIFUL CHARISMATIC FAMILY

A beautiful gift with which the Holy Spirit blessed your Institute, dear sisters, is precisely the one of your spirituality and of your belonging to a great religious family that shares, in the whole, the charism of Don Bosco. To this I want to refer briefly in this last part of the letter.

Your Salesian Spirituality

Fr Viganò, Fr Vecchi and Fr Chavez spoke of this in their letters. This means that this is not a circumstantial or casual element, but an essential one. Since this point was dealt with in the preceding anniversaries, I will not linger excessively on it, but I will just highlight some points.

This very important element is very well expressed in many passages of your Constitutions, in particular when you indicate that you live your vocation making your own the Salesian charism that characterizes you in the Church and in the world (cf. C 5). The Salesian spirituality is for you something essential that gives an identity of its own to your consecration. Your consecrated secularity is by no means limited by your Salesian spirituality, but rather, in the diversity and abundance of the Secular Institutes the Spirit has produced, and in which all participate in consecrated secularity, Salesian spirituality is your specific character against any type of genericism. Your Institute is distinguished from all the others precisely because of its *Salesian spirituality*: your very name tells it. You are characterized by living in the Church the spiritual and apostolic legacy of Don Bosco transmitted by Fr Philip Rinaldi, illumined by the Spirit (cf. C 1). Hence emerges the clear consciousness of being raised in the spiritual Family of Don Bosco and of having, as something essentially constitutive of the Institute, the will to live in profound harmony with the consecration, secularity and Salesian spirituality (cf. C 2). You feel sent to the world to evangelize it, according to the

charism of Don Bosco (cf. C 3), making your own the Salesian charism that characterizes you (cf. C 5), and addressing your apostolic action, above all, to those who were the main objective of Don Bosco's mission (cf. C 6). You recognize yourselves as living members of the Salesian Family (cf. C 5 and 7), and like Don Bosco, you totally trust in Mary because VDBs know that She continues to be always Mother and Helper (cf. C 5).

Recognizing Yourself as Living Members of the Salesian Family

Naturally, the Institute of the Volunteers of Don Bosco is recognized as a living part of the Salesian Family and the rest of the Salesian Family is aware of this. This, however, is not sufficient, and here we reach a point where my message is not only for you, dear sisters, but for all the other groups and branches of the big tree of the Salesian Family.

The Charter of the Salesian Family, in article 38, requests the knowledge of the specific identity of the different Groups; we are not Family by simply sharing a common charism and the same mission. The knowledge and appreciation of all the other Groups is also required.

This knowledge passes, in our case, through an ever greater awareness of the contribution implied, for our whole Family, by the wonderful originality of the Secular Institute of the VDBs. Its originality is very significant as far as harmony between the choice for evangelization and insertion in the various human contexts are concerned²⁰. However, the contribution of the Institute is, first of all, special in what refers to your being, even more than to the mission. Your life, your witness, undoubtedly indicate the presence of God in the world, *remaining in the heart of the world with the heart of God*. Your authentic witness as consecrated women who live the lay status of the world undeniably arouses

²⁰ Cf. JUAN E. VECCHI, *A novelty of the Holy Spirit, The Volunteers of Don Bosco (VDB)*. Letter of the Rector Major of the Salesians on the occasion of the 80th anniversary of the foundation of the Institute. CCS, Madrid, 1997.

questions; at times it provokes curiosity and the desire of discovering what profound motivations are nurtured in your hearts. Questions like the reason of your way of acting, of being for the others and in the midst of the others. Your family, the families and the labour world, starting from yours, will always be the vital space in which to illumine in a simple way, with the light of being each one of you *entirely of God so as to donate yourself entirely to the brothers and sisters*.

Recognized in the Family

I have no doubt of the affection with which the rest of our Salesian Family in the world welcome and recognize the Institute of the VDBs. Nevertheless, the celebration of the Centenary of the foundation is a golden opportunity for *all to grow as Salesian Family*, helping one another to have a greater **knowledge** of the Institute, as I have tried to do here for our VDB sisters and for our entire Family. This knowledge must open us up to **joy, affection and esteem** for this beautiful work of the Spirit, so as to finally come together to **support** the Institute in all that is possible.

A support that is offered with the prayer and help of all the other members of our Family, which can be concretized also in presenting this specific vocation to the youth who may feel called to live this secular consecration in the most diverse contexts of the world; and for us, SDBs, also in guaranteeing the assistance we must provide. We should also succeed in turning into reality what is stated in the Charter of the Salesian Family regarding shared formation and methodology of collaboration among all of us (Art. 39 and 41).

Conclusion

I wish to address these last words in a very direct way to you, my dear VDB sisters. Before recommending you to our Mother Help of Christians, let me invite you to be what Pope Paul VI

requested at the time from Secular Institutes: Be true "*mountaineers of the spirit*". And this, sisters, because "*the Church also needs you to give completeness to her mission. Be seeds of holiness scattered by the handful in the furrows of history. Rooted in the freely given and effective action with which the Lord's Spirit guides human events, may you bear fruits of genuine faith, writing with your life and your witness trajectories of hope*"²¹.

I entrust you to Mary Help of Christians, our Mother. Let us put in front of her the past, the present and the future of the Secular Institute of the VDBs. She will always be the model of a woman completely consecrated to God with her unconditional YES that she has lived as spouse and mother in the world of her time, always attentive to the voice of God and docile to His Spirit.

May She accompany with the maternal Love that characterizes her, the Institute and each one of you, her daughters, together with the look of predilection that Blessed Philip Rinaldi has for you.

With true affection in the Lord and in Don Bosco



Fr Ángel FERNÁNDEZ ARTIME, sdb
Rector Major

²¹ POPE PAUL VI, *Address to the participants in the 1st International Congress of the Secular Institutes, September 26, 1970.*

²² BENEDICT XVI, o.c.