

SALESIAN CHARISM IN VIETNAM. 39 YEARS OF SOWING AND GROWTH IN THE STORMY HISTORY OF THE COUNTRY

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Prologue

Up to now there is no book published on the history of the Salesian Province of St. John Bosco of Viet Nam. The events of 1975 had destroyed the entire archives of the delegation office and those of the houses. Furthermore, due to security reasons there has been no registration whatsoever of communities or the Delegation/Vice-Province up to the year 1992.

All I can do is offer my personal testimony of first hand quality, being one of the witnesses of the life and mission of the Salesians from the very first days of their arrival in Viet Nam to the present (1952-2008). Having spent practically all my life with the Salesians – an orphan in their care (1952-1958), an aspirant (1958-1960), a novice (1960-1961), a cleric sent to Hong Kong for philosophical studies (1961-1964), a practical trainee at Go Vap Professional School and Orphanage (1964-1967), a student of theological studies at the PAS (UPS) - Rome (1967-1971), back at Go Vap Professional School and Orphanage as catechist (1971-1972), prefect of studies (1972-1973), principal and vice-rector (1973-1974), rector (1974 – 1975), Superior of the Viet Nam Delegation (1975-1984), Superior of the Vice-Province (1984-1991), novice master (1991-1997), Provincial (1997-2003), missionary to Mongolia (2004-2007)... – I believe, my testimony has certain credibility.

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Reflecting on the turbulent events of those years, I have been greatly helped by a sort of autobiographical memoirs written by Fr Andrej Majcen, one of the first Salesian Missionaries who came to Viet Nam (1952) and the last one to leave the country (1976).¹ Further, I still preserve some documents of the Delegation Chapters especially that of 1980, some letters exchanged with the Rectors Major in those difficult years, as well as some letters of confreres in military service and copies of the journal 'SDB' and 'Huynh De', the '*inter nos*' community and Delegation monthly communications. I do hope that my witness and memoirs would help others, in a near future, to complete a more serious and thorough study on the history of this heroic Province of VIE, which our Rector Major Fr Pascual Chavez, during his last visit in 2007 labelled '*the most fruitful in the EAO Region and may be in the whole Congregation*'.²

Introduction

How the Salesian Charism has been implanted and taken root in a country is indeed a very interesting and at the same time a very challenging theme. In the case of Viet Nam the planting and the growing processes seem to be neatly cut, surrounded by the turbulent events of the history of modern Viet Nam. The period of planting (or seeding and incubating) lasts roughly 23 years (1952-1975) with the presence of Salesian Missionaries from various countries. Together with the

¹ This *unpublished autobiography* composed by Rev. Andrew Majcen SDB, corrected by Rev Mario Rassiga SDB (preserved in the Archives of the Chinese Province, Hong Kong), and based on a much larger "polyglot" *dossier* now preserved in the Salesian Central Archives, Rome, is the most precious historical document on the history of the Salesians in Vietnam now available. The Document mostly concerns the period 1952-1975 with the author as the main and most important witness. The events that happened in Vietnam after 1976 (after the expulsion of Fr Andrej Majcen) are notes of an observer from afar. There is a Slovenian version of the *Autobiography* published from Lubljana in 1989. The *dossier* is designated in the foot notes as: Andrej Majcen, *Unpublished Notes of Memoirs* [AM].

² *Acts of the Visit of the Rector Major, Don Pascual Chavez, to Vietnam (09-14.04.2008)* [an *inter nos* document circulated among the confreres]. *Welcome Speech*.

event of the unification of entire Viet Nam (North and South) under the Communist regime (1975) the Viet Nam Salesian history turned a new page – that of silently taking root and budding forth with only Vietnamese Salesians left all to themselves. I would consider this period to last until 1991 when, due to the changing political conditions (the communist regime abandoned its Bolshevik system and adopted the one of free market), the Salesians of Viet Nam came out of their isolation and got again into direct and normal contact with the Salesians worldwide and thus began the third phase of growth and development.

In order to understand the seeding and growth of the Salesian charism in Viet Nam, which is mainly a thing of the '*spirit*' or a '*spiritual*' matter, in my opinion the outsiders should have at least a generic knowledge of the history of the country and of Salesian life in Viet Nam in those turbulent years. A short narrative of Salesian life, touching upon the more important aspects of civil history, would be truly helpful.

As for documentation on the subject, especially concerning the most difficult and obscure period after 1975, luckily we still have at hand some of the original papers which would be very helpful for further studies in the future. However, official documents and registers are by no means in existence or available.

Due to the lack of previous studies on the theme and in order to avoid the reflection being too subjective, I thought it appropriate to consult other witnesses. Luckily we do still have those who lived through all these periods, be they Salesians of Don Bosco, Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, Cooperators, Volunteers of Don Bosco and most important of all Past Pupils. I sent to many of them (120 in all) a questionnaire asking their personal opinion about:

1. The main traits (of the charism) of the Salesians (the Salesian Family as a whole) before 1975 (the main period of the presence of the missionaries)
2. The outstanding traits of the same Salesian charism in the period after 1975

3. The traits now in danger of fading away or being lost
4. The traits which need to be inculcated even more

Although scarcely one-third answered the questionnaire, they did greatly help form a more objective view and judgment on the topic. My thanks to all of them, also for the feeling that this study is a collective one.

1. Brief History of Salesian Presence in Vietnam (1952-1991)

1.1. *Arrival of the Salesians of Don Bosco*

On the feast day of St. Theresa of Lisieux in the year 1952, on the occasion of the Episcopal consecration of Bishop Paul Seitz MEP, the first two Salesian missionaries belonging to the Province of China came to Viet Nam from Hong Kong: Fr Antonio Giacomino, an Argentinian and Fr Andrej Majcen, a Yugoslavian.³ They were entrusted with the running of the 'St. Theresa's Home' or the *Cité du Christ Roi* – a boys' town of about 500 children displaced by war, founded by the newly consecrated himself. The changing of systems of education at this first phase of introduction of the Salesian charism met with a great challenge. This required also a gradual but total change of personnel. Together with the increase in the arrival of Salesian confreres (missionaries), local cooperators as well as vocations to be trained properly in the Salesian spirit was the main concern. Young seminarians coming from Bui Chu Diocese and some older youngsters from the boys' town itself presented themselves for training. For two years (1952-1954) this process went on painstakingly and resolutely.⁴ By the beginning of 1954 the Salesians were in a

³ For a detailed history of the arrival of the Salesians to Vietnam, Cf. John Ty NGUYEN VAN, *The Beginning of the Salesian Work in Vietnam. The Patriarchal Story and Exodus*, in Nestor C. IMPELIDO (ed.) *The Beginnings of the Salesian Presence in East Asia*. Vol. 1. (= ACSSA - Varia, 2). Hong Kong, 2006, pp. 165-177.

⁴ Andrej Majcen, *Unpublished Notes of Memoirs* [hereafter AM], pp.152-170.

position to assume complete charge of the orphanage and run it in a truly Salesian way.

1.2. *Transplantation*

The great turmoil of the Viet Nam history began at that very moment. With the defeat of the French army by the '*Viet Minh*' forces, the country was divided into North given to the communist regime and South to the nationalist. Some Salesians were called back to Hong Kong; but some remained to bring most of the children of the boy's town to the South.⁵ For six months the group was settled temporarily in the midst of the rain forest 30 km from the high land town of Buon Me Thuot where they all lived in hardship and extreme poverty for six months. It was precisely at this time that a solid and genuine Salesian family spirit was built up. These very events tied the young inmates to the Salesians in a particular way. In fact, later on quite a number of them asked to join the Salesians themselves.

Finally the children were settled definitively on a piece of land at Thu Duc, near Saigon, where they had to build their home from the scratch. One year later a group of bigger boys were transferred to their new home, an old railway station at Go Vap, nearer still to Saigon. This center was gradually developed into an orphanage with professional training facilities (later on Don Bosco Go Vap technical school), and an aspirantate for Salesian lay vocations. Thu Duc was then transformed into an aspirantate for Salesian clerical vocations. Hand in hand with the apostolate for the poor children displaced by war, the formation of autochthonous vocations was for many years the main concern of the Salesian missionaries who came from seven countries.

1.3. *Growth*

After some spasmodic professions of the first Vietnamese Salesians in the Philippines, Hong Kong, France and Italy, from 1961 the basic Salesian formation began gradually to be imparted in Viet

⁵ AM, pp.186-191.

Nam itself. The novitiate was opened in 1960 at Thu Duc and then moved to Tram Hanh on the highland, where also a so-called apostolic school (pre-aspirantate for much younger children) was opened. After years of sending post-novices to Hong Kong (1961-1970), Viet Nam opened her own house of studies at Da Lat in 1971. Even the theological formation was done in the country (at the Pontifical Athenaeum at Da Lat) from 1972.

With the rapid increase in the number of the Vietnamese Salesians – 85 in number, excluding the novices, most of them young and still in formation, while missionaries numbered 37⁶ – by the year 1974 new apostolates in the service of the young would be needed. Besides a center for street children opened at Tam Hai, plans were made for expanding Salesian social services (mostly in professional field) to Da Nang, Bao Loc and Vinh Long. There was a project to turn even the aspirantate of Thu Duc into a technical school, for the benefit of other religious congregations as well. A major step forward was taken in 1973, when after due consultations and procedures Salesian Viet Nam was detached from the Province of China and constituted into a Delegation dependent directly on the Rector Major. Fr Aloysius Massimino was appointed the Delegate. A bright and solid development was expected to be the future of this young Salesian Delegation.

The Salesians in Viet Nam by that time were augmented by the presence of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (FMA), who first came to Vietnam in July 1961 and settled at Binh Tay, Saigon. Later their presence was shifted to Tam Ha - Thu Duc where they had developed a well-functioning aspirantate and a kindergarten. They sent sisters to help the Thanh Da parish in educating young poor children. By 1975 there were 20 Vietnamese sisters and two missionaries. They too were well on the road to a very bright future.⁷

⁶ Cf. Andrej MAJCEN – Mario RASSIGA, *Autobiography*, Lubljana 1989, p. 181

⁷ Cf. Maria HOANG NGOC YEN - Maddalena NGO THI MINH CHAU, *Nurturing of Vocations on the Journey of Implanting the Salesian Charism by the FMA in Vietnam* in this volume.

Like the rest of the Salesian world, groups of Salesian Cooperators and Volunteers of Don Bosco were also being trained; but their presence was still in the embryonic state and would bud forth into the light of day only after 1991. As for the Past Pupils Association, there had been some organization and activity before 1975, mostly with those of St. Theresa Boys' Town. A genuine association came into being only after 1992. One of the main reasons was the ban on all private associations decreed by the communist authorities.

1.4. *Communist Revolution*

God's plan for the Salesians in Viet Nam abruptly changed its course radically by April 1975 with the victory of the North Communist army over that of the Nationalist South. The country, after many years of civil war, was finally reunited under the rule of the Communist regime. All the foreign missionaries were asked to leave Viet Nam for good, the last one to leave being Fr Andrej Majcen on 23 July 1976—a special privilege for being a citizen of Yugoslavia, a 'comrade' communist country.

By the end of 1975, just one month before the Communists entered Saigon, there was a total change of leadership in the Delegation. The Delegate and his Council, as well as all the rectors of the houses were to be Vietnamese, though young and lacking in experience as they were. The new Delegate of the Rector Major, Fr John Nguyen Van Ty was then scarcely 30 years old. To him and his council were given all the faculties that ordinarily belong to the Rector Major, with the clear order to keep the Salesian presence in Viet Nam alive as far as possible.

Even before the occupation, during two months of general offensive, there was great chaos in the Salesian houses as well as in the whole country. Under pressure from parents all the pre-aspirants and novices of Tram Hanh had to be evacuated in haste, by sea, to Saigon in the midst of the celebration of the name day of its rector, Fr Joseph Dinh Xuan Hien. On returning 50 days later the house was

found totally looted and ransacked. The same evacuation had been done with the Studentate of Philosophy and Theology of Da Lat – some by sea, others by air, with just few confreres remaining to look after the house. All other houses in Saigon had been turned into refugee centers.⁸

As soon as some sort of communication was re-established the temporary settlement process began. In no way it was possible to come back to Tram Hanh which was eventually abandoned. There was a clear understanding that the fate of other houses too was uncertain. So it was absolutely necessary to look for abandoned parishes along the route Saigon - Da Lat for eventual easy linking and communication among the confreres. Bishops of Saigon, Xuan Loc and Da Lat agreed to confide six parishes to the care of the Salesians: Lien Khuong, Thanh Binh near Da Lat; Duc Huy, Phu Son of Xuan Loc and Ben Cat, Ba Thon in the outskirts of Saigon. In fact very soon the Don Bosco Technical School at Go Vap was confiscated and only the orphanage section was left to the Salesians. Part of Don Bosco Aspirantate at Thu Duc was also “borrowed” by government associations, since it could no more receive aspirants and there were just a handful of the senior ones. The normal running of formation centers such as aspirantates, novitiate and studentates was clearly impossible. All the confreres, even those in formation, had to work in the paddy field or garden to grow their own food and earn their living. Life had indeed become very hard.

In this changing conditions of life, understandably many younger confreres hesitated and vacillated in their vocation. A great number of lay brothers at Go Vap asked to be exempted from the vows in order to keep their teaching job at the school, now run by the state.⁹ So also many clerics from Da Lat and Thu Duc returned home or prepared to leave the country. Those who remained were divided into small groups of five or six and were sent to mostly small and

⁸ Cf. AM, pp. 401-407.

⁹ AM, pp. 410.

isolated parishes. Other confreres had to remain in order to keep the houses, working hard and hoping for the best. In order to cope with the newly established communities the number of Salesian priests had to be increased especially in Da Lat Diocese. Theologians, even those just having finished second year of their studies, were ordained Deacons and Priests by Bishop Bartholomew Nguyen Son Lam of Da Lat diocese.¹⁰

At least for two years (1975 and 1976) practically most of the Salesian works of education came to a stop and the main concern was just the survival of individual confreres, of communities and of the Delegation. New security rules of the Communist military junta imposed severe restrictions on the movement of all citizens, banned all means of communication (even the use of typewriter and *ronéo* printing), purged all books and literature (therefore keeping a library was critically dangerous), and forbade all unauthorized meetings of groups of over five persons. Each Salesian community had to find its own means of survival – cultivating the land, doing all odd and end jobs and productions or joining the cooperatives which were strongly imposed by the State. For trivial reasons a number of confreres were sent to prison and to forced labour camps; some remained there for several years as was the case of Fr Joseph Hoang Van Hinh who served up to 11 years.¹¹

1.5. *Strengthening Efforts*

In order to boost the downcast spirit that was then very much diffused among the confreres, the Delegation decided to celebrate solemnly the 25th anniversary of the arrival of Don Bosco to Viet Nam (1952-1977)¹² and an emergency ‘Delegation Chapter’ was organized at Thu Duc. Spiritually these two events were of great success; the Salesians of Viet Nam found themselves girded up to face the trials and difficulties that were to come. In fact they came

¹⁰ AM, p. 417.

¹¹ AM, p. 418.

¹² AM, p.438.

quickly enough. In 1978 the whole Thu Duc compound was confiscated after an accusation of a staged anti-revolution plot. Its rector Fr Fabian Le Van Hao was sentenced to four years of prison and hard labour, all the aspirants were sent home, and Salesian confreres were dispersed into other communities.¹³ Shortly after that the orphanage and the delegation office at Go Vap were also forcefully occupied. Adding to this, some young confreres of the Saigon region, who had initiated their novitiate and made their first profession just after the revolution were called to military service. They were hastily trained and sent to the battle ground in Kampuchea (fighting the Khmer Rouge of the Polpot regime). In Da Lat region young theologians were enlisted to *Thanh Nien Xung Phong*, a communist association of youth, considered as pioneers who were sent to clear jungles or marshy land in order to establish new state-run agricultural cooperatives 'Gulags'. A year later (1979), deals were made to hand over to the government the land of Tam Hai (formerly a street children center founded and run by Fr Johan Donders and a festive oratory, transformed into novitiate from 1975). In exchange the Salesian confreres could be settled peacefully in new communities at Cau Bong, Hoc Mon, Xuan Hiep, Hien Duc, Tan Cang and *Nong Truong Cu Chi* (the Catholic run agricultural cooperative at Cu Chi).

These events once more shook the whole Delegation. More confreres took leave of Salesian life since it seemed as if there was no future. The number of professed Salesians was reduced to barely 60. For this reason it was thought that a well planned Delegation Chapter would be needed to clarify the vision and to provide badly needed basic directives and regulations to all the confreres and communities. The Delegation Chapter of 1980 was celebrated at Da Lat with all the formalities (undeclared to the authority – "Chui", which means a lot of risk) and with the representatives of almost all of the communities present. During two weeks of discussions it handled the themes of Salesian formation, which focused on the

¹³ Cf. A. MAJCEN - M. RASSIGA, *Autobiography*, p. 195

concrete figure of a Salesian (*Qualis esse debet*) living in a communist country, and of Salesian pastoral work for vocations (how to foster vocations and ensure the formation of confreres in those difficult conditions, in which the running of pre-novitiate, novitiate and post novitiate seemed impossible). The Delegation wanted not only to survive, but also eventually to grow in the future. Furthermore, the Chapter also offered to Salesians some practical guidelines for pastoral services in the parishes, and brief pieces of advice for those who were called to military or civil service.¹⁴

Another unexpected event that boosted up the spirit of the whole Delegation was a sudden and secret visit of Fr Bernard Tohill, the General Councilor for the Missions, who could somehow obtain an entry visa to visit Viet Nam 'incognito', as a tourist-professor. He stayed at the *Hotel Caravelle* and contacted indirectly some Salesians to come to the sacristy of the Saigon Cathedral to meet him. An arrangement was made that he could meet the Delegate, who would come to the Hotel in disguise as an official tour guide. They had their talk while strolling in the open streets of Saigon. On the next day, at greatest risk, he was picked up for a quick visit to some communities in the Saigon region where he came very briefly into contact with the reality of life and work of the Salesians in Viet Nam. To his surprise and delight he discovered what he nicknamed later the '*Aspirantate-Oratory*' in disguise. Just three short days of his presence in Viet Nam had tied the Delegation very strongly to the worldwide Congregation. The Salesians of Viet Nam felt very vividly that they had not been totally cut off from the Salesian body, and that Don Bosco was very close to them.

1.6. *Taking Root in Silence*

Hardships and trials were still the reality that the Salesians of Viet Nam had to face in their daily life; but from then on they had a clearer vision of their presence and mission in the country.

¹⁴ *Acts of the Vietnam Delegation Chapter 1980, Appendix* (the original in Vietnamese in the VIE Provincial archives and typewritten copies circulated among the confreres)

Externally they made some logistical expansion that the scarcely permissible conditions occasionally allowed (the officially declared policy of the regime was to tolerate lawful religious activities but any form of expansion and development would not be permitted). Small new outposts sprung up, which eventually developed into communities such as Bac Hoi, Cam Duong, Suoi Quit, Phuoc Loc. Most of the apostolic services of the communities, except in few cases, centered on parish activities, carried out in a Salesian way. Proper Salesian works would have been either oratory or vocational training and guidance. Some attempts were made at small scale professional training, tutoring and boarding. The Salesians gave support to youth activities promoted and guided by the local civil authority, and thus they gradually gained the sympathy of the public.

But what was more important was the internal consolidation of Salesian life and spirit. Community life and relationships were emphasized. Since in many cases a community had to be split up into smaller groups (or presences) for the sake of pastoral services in many separated localities, Community Day was felt by all to be a must. The Salesians felt also the need of relationship and communication between communities and within the Delegation. To this end a paper '*Huynh De*' meaning 'brotherhood' was started. The monthly or bimonthly issues were typed, carbon copies made and distributed among themselves. When the state's control tightened and communication became even more difficult, the Delegation created three sub-regions – Da Lat, Dong Nai and Ho Chi Minh City – corresponding to the provincial administration of the country. Every sub-region had a representative of the Delegate with his council in order to be able to take appropriate decisions quickly. Efforts at translating Salesian literature into Vietnamese and sending copies to other communities were made very spontaneously.

Community prayer was also one of the main concerns. In fact the theme of prayer life was one of the main topics of the Provincial Chapter of 1983, and a Salesian manual of community prayer was then promulgated. The community spiritual reading and monthly

recollection were strongly insisted on. Even though the gathering of confreres in number could provoke grave security threat, annual spiritual retreats were bravely organized.

The formation of young confreres was also one of the big issues. The study of many confreres was abruptly suspended in the years following the 1975 event. The Delegation had to make all sacrifices necessary in order to resume it and reorganize it. No center of studies was allowed to be opened; so the young Salesians had to re-group themselves quietly in some determined place where they could have their lessons. The Delegation provided teachers who were mostly Salesians themselves and very busy with their personal duties in the communities. Some available non-Salesian professors were also invited. The teaching was done in secret, unknown to outsiders. We could assert that both the study and the teaching were great heroic acts in themselves, although the quality was understandably poor. At times they had to cover great distances by bicycles or motor bikes, putting aside their various works to earn their living in order to have lessons in very miserable conditions. Just imagine, for example, they had to make copies of text books for themselves by no other means than typing day and night (photocopying was prohibited).

Following the directives of the Delegation Chapter of 1980, many communities (such as Ba Thon, Duc Huy, Cau Bong, Da Lat) resumed or began their pastoral work for vocations. High school graduated students were admitted into vocational guidance and follow up groups which functioned mostly on Sundays.¹⁵ Theoretical courses were given in the morning and in the afternoon activities such as group discussions (*sodalities*), sports and theatrical exercises were offered. They were considered 'aspirants' and their number grew steadily. Some communities even started groups for 'pre-aspirants' whose members were younger boys of high school level, sent in mostly by parish priests who wanted the Salesians to train them to be youth leaders in their parishes.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 44-45.

Even though the political condition was very much unfavorable, various attempts were made to reopen the novitiate in a flexible manner: private novitiate with a spiritual director . . . , then small groups of novices with flexible timings and place (living in any Salesian community for at least two months a year and for a period not exceeding three consecutive years).¹⁶ These unusual modes of novitiate lasted until 1991. Understandably, the ceremony of religious profession had to be done in utmost secrecy, with the presence of only one or two family members each.

Public ordinations to the priesthood in those years were few. Any candidate, secular or religious, had to be introduced by the diocesan bishop to the high public authority for approval and permission, which was in reality very rarely given. There had been no public ordinations among the Salesians for many years after 1976. So the Delegation decided to open up the road for secret ordinations (the so called “*chiu chuc chui*” in Vietnamese) for those candidates who had applied for it. As it would have entailed grave consequences not only to the individual but also to the Delegation and to the Church at large, only after due consideration case by case some confreres were given permission to take this step. One must think, for example, also of the limitations of pastoral and sacramental ministry these priests would have had to endure. . .

1.7. *Celebrations amidst Hardships*

All of a sudden like a bolt from the blue, without prior consultation or warning, the Rector Major Fr Egidio Viganò announced by telephone from Rome the decision to elevate the Salesian Delegation of Vietnam to a Vice-Province with its Superior Fr John Nguyen Van Ty. The document signed on 8 December 1982 arrived more than three months later. There had been no public celebration of this great event but just an *inter nos* announcement and silent prayer. The new Vice-Province of St. John Bosco of Viet Nam (VIE)

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.45-46.

quietly continued its course of history as if nothing had changed. It began preparations for celebrating its first Chapter as a Vice-Province in 1986 to study the definitive Constitutions and Regulations, approved and promulgated by GC XXII in 1984, of which one copy had been left behind, as if casually, by Fr Luc Van Looy, the successor of Don Bernard Tohill as Councillor for the Missions, on a bench inside the Cathedral of Da Lat during his quick travel across the country in 1985 (unable though to come into direct contact with any Salesian).

Besides the strengthening work of the Provincial Chapters (1983, 1986, 1989) which aimed at various aspects of the life of the Vice Province such as Provincial regulations, manual of prayer, pastoral and educative work in the parishes, youth ministry with its singular spirituality, formation of young confreres ..., the Salesians of Viet Nam still had to carry on bearing the heavy burdens and facing the dangers of their daily existence. The major part of their time and energy was spent in earning their daily subsistence – food and clothing. In the Communist economic system everything was regulated by the State; there was no free market but only state-run shops in which everything was rationed and inflation sky rocketed. All the communities had to find and change continuously their means of income: cultivation of rice and other crops, growing coffee and hot pepper, raising pigs, cows and goats, making artifacts, producing beansprouts, breeding exotic fish, manufacturing homemade goods such as soap, ice and ice-cream, battery, fish sauce, even beer, to name but some of the odds and ends jobs that occasion and chance suggested.

During this period, the Vice-Province also grieved the loss of some very young and promising clerics – Bro. Joseph Pham Viet Van, Bro. Joseph Le Van Thanh, and Bro. John Le Quang Anh. In most cases the cause of death would have been simply lack of appropriate sanitary and medical care. Even their burial site and ceremony would cause much complication from the side of the authority. However, new entries made the number of Salesians increase slowly but steadily.

Once a year, on the occasion of the feast of St. John Bosco (January 31) which is happily always close to the *Tet* (Vietnamese lunar New Year), the Salesians would gather in one of the communities in order to celebrate Provincial Family Day (which is very much in tune with the Vietnamese tradition). In their midst were present not only all the superiors but invariably also the Bishop of the Diocese. This was the event that all the confreres looked forward to during the whole year. They had much fun together with programmes such as singing competition or gala of newly composed songs or hymns on Don Bosco or on Salesian themes and sports, all aimed at lifting up the spirit of the confreres.

That was why, when they had learned about the solemnity with which the Salesian World had celebrated the Centenary of Don Bosco's death (1988), the Salesians of Vietnam were very much enthusiastic. They knew this was a good chance to consolidate internally among themselves their Salesian identity and to assert and make known Don Bosco and the Salesian mission to outsiders, both Church and civil authorities.

The Ba Thon parish, where the Superior of the Vice-Province resided, had been planning from 1983 to build on this occasion a new Church dedicated to Don Bosco. This enterprise of Church building was the first ever in the country because of the official policy of restrictions on all religious constructions. Notwithstanding all the odds, the building was completed and the church was blessed by the Archbishop of Ho Chi Minh City, Paul Nguyen Van Binh, in October 1987 and was named "St. John Bosco Church".

As for public manifestations, with great encouragement from the Archbishop himself, a solemn Mass was organized in honor of Don Bosco at the great Gothic Cathedral of Saigon. The Vicar and Dean of the Cathedral themselves applied for the necessary permissions from the government. The permission included also the printing of 5000 holy pictures of Don Bosco. Booklets on the life of St. John Bosco and the Preventive System of education were also distributed. What happened on the morning of 31 January 1988 was

very memorable. From very early in the morning onwards more than 2500 young people from Salesian and non Salesian parishes teamed up in the Cathedral from all directions in order to honor their beloved Father. The youthful music and singing was great and overwhelming. *"A scene never seen for more than a decade in Saigon"*, stated later the Archbishop himself. After the Mass, young people went by groups to the different public parks of the city for their lunch and picnic, while religious and civil representatives were invited to a banquet at the Archbishop's House.

The celebration might throw some new light on the relationship of the Salesians with the civil authority. Every where, little by little, they gained the sympathy of the people and that of Communist officials too, through their simple works of service to the young such as sports, music, recreation and popular skill training courses. The confreres were more confident about their vocation and mission. Their number continued to grow and touched the line of 100 confreres by the year 1990, with large groups of university-student-aspirants who were readying themselves to enter the novitiate.

Meanwhile by 1989 the Communists of Viet Nam had started to adopt the *'Mo cua'* (*perestroika* or openness) policy, that seemed to release a fresh breeze in the country. In every field the restrictions were being loosened a bit, especially in economic matters. Contact with other countries (by phone, telegram and letter) were re-established. Some Salesian Superior even began to think of visiting Viet Nam. By 1990 there was such a favourable condition that the Rector Major thought of giving to the Vice-Province a new leadership. By April 1991, Fr Peter Nguyen Van De was nominated Superior of the Vice-Province, and Salesian Viet Nam began to enter a period of normalization. A promising phase of robust growth and healthy fruit-bearing began.

Looking at the prevailing conditions of life and making an overall observation on it, the Delegation Chapter of 1980 wrote as follows:

"The social changes of our conditions of living are influencing profoundly every aspect of our religious life as Salesians. In

the field of formation, these social influences would have particularly important impact on every one of us as individual Salesians, since it obliges us to change even our way of thinking, as well as the mode of carrying out our mission.

"In these past years, as a whole, our Delegation has been present in the midst of this country with a considerable vitality and has continually sought new ways to adjust itself to the changes of the 'environment'. Notwithstanding all that, we have to sincerely admit that we are still infants in many aspects, particularly that of the formation of young confreres."¹⁷

So was the design of the all-merciful Lord.

2. How the Salesian Charism was Implanted and Developed

Any charism, the Salesian being no exception, should be a living reality. Therefore it cannot be contained by books or documents.¹⁸ It is particularly true in the case of Viet Nam where Salesian charism was shaped and nourished and even subjected to trials of all sorts in the vicissitudes of a very stormy history. When the first Salesian missionaries came to the country, their very persons and their Salesian way of life and work touched and inspired the people in general and the youth in particular, especially those who were being attracted to such a kind of vocation. Twenty-three years (1952-1975) of their active presence is to be considered as a time of seeding, of incubating the Salesian charism in the Vietnamese soil. But unlike other countries where in general the continuity of seeding and growth was maintained, in Viet Nam, for better or for worse, similar to paddy cultivation, the seeding and growth were two distinct processes, in two distinct

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁸ Sebastian KAROTEMPREL, *Don Bosco's Charism and Asian Culture. Studies towards an interpretation of Don Bosco's Charism for Asia*, Dimapur, Salesian College Publications 1988, pp. 18-19.

climates and conditions. The abrupt departure of all the missionaries in 1975-1976 and entrusting the heritage of Salesian charism into the hands of young autochthonous Salesians of the first generation had been indeed, humanly speaking, a very dangerous and risky act of Divine Providence. But “nothing is impossible with God”! (Lk 1,37). Even the most unfavorable and severe conditions could not suffocate the Salesian seeds that had been sown. They might hinder the process of growing a little by prolonging the time of incubation (as in the case of sowing just before a severe winter); but may be precisely because of that the eventual growth would be more robust and the harvest more abundant.

2.1. *Predilection for the Young*

As anywhere in the Salesian world, the most outstanding feature of the Salesian charism was giving to the young, especially the poorest and most abandoned ones, priority in the life and activities of the Salesians.¹⁹

The first apostolate of the Salesian pioneers when they came to Viet Nam in 1952 was an orphanage – a boys’ town of over 500 children displaced by war. The institution itself had been previously established by their predecessors, the MEP Fathers, who ran it in their own style. It was the exodus of 1954 that made it hundred percent Salesian.²⁰ In the most difficult circumstances of shifting all these children to the South into the midst of the jungle, the Salesians did their best in order to continue to care for them. By then (and up to 1975) the Salesians in Viet Nam were known as “orphan boys’ fathers”. Don Bosco Go Vap was famous as an institution of first quality in caring for poor and abandoned children. Groups of delinquent boys were sent in by the Ministry of Social Affairs and other associations such as Lions Club. Later on, though in a smaller measure, the center for street children at Tam Hai and the planned professional school at Da Nang strengthened this conviction.

¹⁹ *Constitutions of the Society of St Francis de Sales*, 4

²⁰ Cf. A. MAJZEN – M. RASSIGA, *Autobiography*, pp. 71-72.

In addition to these services the oratories, very much promoted in all the houses of formation, had not only a great influence on local kids and the people but also strengthened the Salesian charism in young confreres. In fact this particular service would at times be the only one possible in the difficult years later.

When as a result of the events of 1975 the Salesians lost all their institutions that until then had served so wonderfully the poor and abandoned children, they realized that, the predilection for the young should start first of all from their heart and mind ... and then and only then, it might be expressed through any kind of service that the situation may propose. Initially they tried to cling at all costs to the most genuinely Salesian work, the Orphanage at Go Vap, which they named "Don Bosco Home". They succeeded in running this institution up to 1978 before forcefully being obliged to hand it over to the government.

Considering the most precarious economic condition of all the communities and particularly the political and anti-religious situation that they were in, we can imagine how great was their effort in order to keep in touch with and be able to offer some kind of service to the young. Fortunately they could still do something through the activities in the parishes (any youth activity was strictly monopolized by the Party). Just think, for example, of the simple catechism class. Details of teachers, pupils and curriculum had all to be submitted to the local authorities before any permission could be obtained. During the most difficult period, being with the young was limited to working together in the field or playing soccer late in the evening.

When and where the conditions of life were a little more favourable, the Salesians would do their best to consecrate more time and means to serve the young. They opened small scale boardings for children in difficulty, both financially and morally (Xuan Hiep, Tan Cang, Phu Son, Lien Khuong, Doc Mo), evening tuition classes and alphabetization (Ben Cat, Da Lat, Thanh Binh, Hien Duc, and Cau Bong), short courses of professional training (Ba Thon, Hoc Mon, and Da Lat). The case of Duc Huy was rather singular. The community

had neither workshops nor personnel to begin training courses. But the needs were there, real and pressing. Some young people needed training so that they could find jobs. Recalling the example of Don Bosco in the early days of Valdocco, the community invited catholic families of the neighborhood to join in the project. So a number of these young people were sent to the various family workshops, where they could learn an appropriate trade. The Salesians themselves would follow these young men through regular visits to the families. In this way young people did get the training and jobs, while many catholic families would be involved in the Salesian mission.

Another moving example was the case of Ben Cat community. The Salesians discovered in the neighborhood a large number of children earning their living (and often that of their entire family) by doing odd jobs on the streets. Among the many initiatives to assist them, the community decided to open evening classes of alphabetization since most of these children scarcely knew how to read and write. The catechism classrooms of the poor parish were used for the purpose. The police then came and closed down the classes and sent the children away under the pretext that the location had been registered with the authorities for teaching catechism only. The Salesians then came out with an original solution; they continued the classes in public parks with the collaboration of student-aspirants. After 8.30 p.m. they would gather the children, have some games with them and then begin the alphabetization and tuition classes in the open air. The sessions would usually conclude with some singing and the 'goodnight talk'.

Sunday and even daily oratories were common in all communities. In some cases the community had to keep on moving their oratory every week to different localities, just as in the first days of Don Bosco's oratory before being settled at the Pinardi's (Ba Thon, Hoc Mon, Da Lat, and Xuan Hiep). The most common form of oratory was gathering together the youth for games (football) with intervals of catechism, sodality meeting and confession, all being done in the open air.

In short, their life of meager conditions could not hinder them from being with the young, catholic and non-catholic alike, and serving them. The Salesians in Viet Nam have kept alive the fire of love for the young which the missionaries had brought and kindled in this land. The fire might not have been blazing bright enough under those circumstances, but it has been tended and kept alive, waiting for a chance to erupt into a great bonfire. They all wanted to translate into action the following recommendations of the Delegation Chapter of 1980:

“Our formation aims at forming Salesians of great apostolic zeal. Our presence in this country, Viet Nam, should be imbued with the value of service only.”²¹

“While serving the young in the environments of Parishes or Cooperatives we should not only aim at sharing with them something that we possess, but at the prospect of elevating their life as a whole, culturally and professionally, so that they can be prepared to enter into the practical life of the society. In concrete every community nowadays has to fight for its own survival; therefore, besides whatever we can offer to the young in material support, we can and must give them precisely our zeal, our total devotion to their salvation, ‘*Da mihi animas*’, and our spirit of total detachment: ‘*coetera tolle*’.”²²

2.2. *Care of Vocations*

In this predilection for poor and abandoned youth, the Salesians of Viet Nam always gave a privileged place to those who showed good signs of a religious and priestly vocation.

Right from the beginning (1953) one of the priorities of the pioneers was to prepare personnel in the Salesian spirit and way of education. They began by recruiting young seminarians from major and minor seminaries of Ha Noi, Bui Chu and Phat Diem dioceses. Even boys from among the orphans of the boy's town were selected

²¹ *Acts of the Vietnam Delegation Chapter 1980*, p.10.

²² *Ibid.*, p.23.

and followed up. Joseph Than Van Hoan was one among them. Being a helper to a Salesian Lay Brother Andrea Bragion in the workshop, he had first been conferred the diploma of Salesian Cooperator and then invited to join the Salesians. He was sent to Hong Kong for the novitiate and became the 'Senior Brother' ("*Anh Ca*"), as the Vietnamese confreres affectionately nicknamed him. During the turmoil of 1954, a group of these selected youngsters and seminarians were sent to Hong Kong, France and the Philippines for formation. In 1956, as soon as the transplanted boys' town was settled at Go Vap, an aspirantate was set up at Thu Duc, of which the core group consisted precisely of boys of the orphanage. Later on even at Go Vap, where the service for the poor and delinquent children developed prodigiously into a professional school, a section was dedicated to train vocations to lay brotherhood.²³

At the expulsion of the Salesian missionaries in 1975 four of the five then existing and functioning Don Bosco institutions were also dedicated to the different phases of formation (Thu Duc – aspirantate for priestly vocations, Go Vap – aspirantate for lay brother vocations, Tram Hanh – Novitiate and Apostolic boarding (pre-aspirantate), Da Lat – studentate of philosophy and theology).

During the years after 1975 the social conditions were most unfavorable to work for vocations and to run houses of formation. In fact all diocesan major seminaries were closed down or confiscated, so also all formation centers of religious congregations. Though the Salesians at first managed to keep their aspirantate and novitiate until 1978, they too then had to follow in line like the others. But the toughness of spirit of the pioneers still prevailed; for the Salesians in Viet Nam *working for vocations was just a must!* Very soon activity in favour of vocations spontaneously sprung up in some newly started small communities (Ba Thon, Duc Huy, and Ben Cat). The initiative always started with the gathering and care of altar boys and choir members of the parish. Eventually it was extended also to other

²³ A. MAJZEN – M. RASSIGA, *Autobiography*, p. 140.

parishes in the neighborhood. In those most difficult years (1975-1985) this was probably the only organized effort for vocations in the country, as stated by Aloysius Pham Van Nam, Auxiliary Bishop of Ho Chi Minh City Archdiocese, during one of his visits.

At the Delegation Chapter in 1980 the Salesians made the following reflection on this problem:

“Our Delegation is paying much attention and effort to religious and Salesian formation. Nevertheless we should never forget to care for vocations because this is one of the main activities and works of ours, and because vocation is always so very important to the life of the Church and of the Congregation. Soon after entering the new course of history, notwithstanding all the limitations and difficulties, the Delegation Chapter 77 has asserted: “The Salesians should give due attention to the needs of caring for vocations which is considered a fertile potential of the Church... This should be the main concern for the sake of the Congregation and of the Church in Viet Nam.

“In the past, under the guidance of Delegation Chapter 77 (n. 9, 62), a number of communities have made great effort to help and guide local vocations. Everywhere we can find young people who show themselves to be generous in their intention to become Salesian apostles in order to serve the Youth in Viet Nam”.²⁴

From Delegation Chapter 1980 onwards, this kind of aspirantates had been reorganized and unified with regard to curriculum of study and ways of following up, as well as criteria of admission to be applied to the whole Delegation. Relationship between various groups has also been insisted on. It has been continuing to the present day making the apostolate of vocations to be evermore flourishing in the Province. That is the precise reason why Viet Nam is now leading in the number of vocations offered to the Congregation and to the Church. In fact it has prepared large number of vocations,

²⁴ *Acts of the Vietnam Delegation Chapter 1980*, p. 42.

not only for Salesians, but also for diocesan seminaries and other religious orders as well. We may consider it one of the characteristics of the Salesian charism in Viet Nam.

2.3. *Work and Temperance*

The first Salesians came to Viet Nam, a war torn country; in the midst of poverty and hardship they had to work hard and certainly live a very frugal life. Against the background of most local priests and religious, who could live a rather comfortable life since they were very much venerated by the faithful, the Salesian figure came out just as striking. After the foundation of both Thu Duc and Go Vap in extreme poverty as a result of the Exodus (1954-1955), for several years (up to 1960) the conditions of life at times were just unbearable. Thu Duc was then an empty desert land, far away from any habitations, 3 km from the small town of Thu Duc. The missionaries set up three military tents and a metal framed house, dismounted and brought down South from the workshop of Thai Ha (North Vietnam), with nothing but an earthen floor and no walls. According to the testimony of Rev. Andrej Majcen the heat of the metal roof and dusty wind had been unbearable to the missionaries. In fact he himself had to have his *siesta* lying on the wet floor of a bathroom.²⁵

A complex of simple houses then slowly sprung up, fruit of the sweat and labour of the children themselves and of the Salesians along with them. Go Vap (the orphanage and trade school) was the first to be built and equipped systematically (1960) out of the barracks and store houses of an abandoned railway station. Thu Duc was built up a little later (1962) – first the chapel, then classrooms and offices, while most of the activities continued to be carried out under the old metal roof sheds up to the year 1975. The Da Lat Studentate was built in 1973-1974, most of the heavy works of construction being done by the young students themselves. Salesian life in general was frugal and simple. We can say that from 1971 Salesian Viet Nam

²⁵ Cf. AM, p.213.

was on the road to development. New projects had been contemplated for Da Nang (in central Viet Nam), Bao Loc (on the highland) and Vinh Long (in the delta of Me Kong River – south). That notwithstanding there was no sign yet of bourgeois or consumerist tendency among the confreres.

The events of 1975 had stripped the Salesians in Vietnam, just within three years, of all their subsistence and reduced them to extreme material and financial poverty. It seemed that the abrupt change of the conditions of life, though painful it was, was accepted by most of the confreres in a spirit of calmness, mingled with a sense of adventure and humour. Cut off from all financial help from abroad, and having no income whatsoever, the communities had to earn their own living by directly cultivating the land and producing whatever they could through farming and handicraft, cooking their own food and doing all the household chores. There were times when the communities were literally reduced to a miserable state, near to starvation. In those circumstances the spirit of poverty, work and temperance became so concrete and so natural that it might have penetrated deep into the Salesians' life as the air they breathed. Surely these ideals ceased to be abstract spiritual values, and though imposed by force of circumstances, they became a concrete aspect of their life.

What is more important is that this condition of life might have been the very source of their zeal in apostolate, of family spirit and of solidarity among themselves. It was touching to see how they shared the products of their works and toils with other communities, even if only small quantities of food at times. On the Delegation Day (Provincial Community Day) communities often brought in their best contributions of home-made food and drink. The sharing of manual labour with the externs – the youth and the people (parishioners) – was two-way: giving and receiving. The confreres not only received the direct labour help from the people but also offered their own to the people who were in need (*'doi cong'*, the Vietnamese term for exchanging labour force). The little time they consecrated to the apostolate properly speaking (games, teaching and catechism) with

the young and common people (both Catholics and non-Catholics) late in the evening or on weekends became very meaningful as it was based on the relationship already established in their daily work together.

In fact the Delegation Chapter of 1980 stated:

“In these times every one of us does understand fully the meaning of the saying ‘living out of one’s own sweat and tears’. The pains and toils of manual labour have taught us many rich lessons. On the other hand, we have given little time to intellectual work; this is especially true in the case of the newly founded communities where the economic conditions are still unstable. There have been efforts made both at community and Delegation level that aim at balancing these two kinds of labour, because we are fully convinced of the value of both of them in the formation and maturation of each confrere.... More than ever our Delegation has to deepen ever more the Salesian spirituality of work, and at the same time find ways and means to develop the competence of its members so that our works and services may be more fruitful...”

“Our present circumstances have placed many confreres who have good qualifications in a situation alien to their talents. Moreover the spirit of service, of initiative and of flexibility will push us on to offer every kind of good service (*fac totum*). We would never abandon the purpose ‘*Da mihi animas*’, and always consider all the rest to be only relative, ‘*coetera tolle*’. This is the genuine Salesian spirit and attitude ‘to become all things to all men’.”²⁶

2.4. *Joyfulness and Optimism*

It is impossible to work for and with the young, in whatever condition they find themselves, without a genuine sense of joy and optimism. This is very much true of the Salesians who worked in Viet Nam, a war torn country with endless destruction and sufferings. But

²⁶ *Acts of the Vietnam Delegation Chapter 1980*, p. 14-15.

it is precisely in this environment that this Salesian charism found its expression in the most striking form.

When the Salesians first came to Viet Nam in October 1952, the Indochina war of partisans was escalating into a full scale war between the French army and the *Viet Minh* coalition forces and the political and social situation was deteriorating considerably. The transfer of the boys' town from the MEP (French Fathers) to the Salesians did infuse a new breath to the work and to the children. Formerly in 1945 Fr Francisque Dupont, a French Salesian chaplain to the French army, looking after a group of Franco-Vietnamese Métis children, had been killed by the partisans. His death continued to haunt for a long time *St. Theresa's Home*. As usual, the Salesians had recourse to music, singing and sport. In particular, with Fr Generoso Bogo, a Brazilian Salesian with his trumpet, this cheerfulness contaminated all the children and personnel. Even during the darkest time after the Exodus, living in a far off jungle with no future prospects, the boys' spirit had been lifted up by this Salesian optimism. As testified by some boys of those times, in the midst of political and social turmoil such as *coups d'état*, sabotages, etc. the Don Bosco institutions at Thu Duc and Go Vap appeared to be safe oases of joy and fun. Some children of Don Bosco Go Vap still recall the summer camp of 1965, when they could enjoy their vacation at Tram Hanh with so much fun, despite the fact that all routes that could bring them back to Saigon had been bombed and ambushed.

As Salesians everywhere also in Viet Nam they were known for their joy and fun, music, sport and drama, not only in peaceful times but also in the most chaotic situations. During the great events of war such as the '*Mau Than offensive*' (1968), '*Red-hot Summer*' (*Mua hè đỏ lửa* 1972), and the '*General Insurgency*' (1975), when many of our schools were transformed into refugee camps, joy and cheerfulness still prevailed. Even during the '*great evacuation*' of March 1975 from Dalat-Tram Hanh to Saigon, laughter could still be heard among the old and young Salesians alike. It was in this atmosphere of calm and hope the transfer of responsibility between the two generations of Salesians took place.

Being heir to such a wonderful heritage, notwithstanding all the difficulties of adjusting themselves to the changing social conditions, the Vietnamese Salesians cherished it and made all efforts to preserve it. Certainly they were fully aware of their critical conditions of life, as Delegation Chapter 1980 stated clearly:

“Living in this special situation as we are: a fast changing and secularized society, completely new conditions of life and activities, small community, pressure of means for survival, no possibility of movement... certainly we would experience moments of loneliness or be prone to mere human decisions. These are simply signs of our weakness and lack of faith.”²⁷

This furthermore proves that the Salesian optimism should have a supernatural rooting. Precisely in the newly founded communities where everything was lacking, the confreres could easily exchange jokes and laughter, while eating pieces of boiled paprika and relaxing around an improvised aquarium made from a brass coffin abandoned by the American army (concrete case of *Phu Son*).²⁸ They all cherished occasions and moments when they could be together.

The celebration of the Silver Jubilee of the arrival of the Salesians to Viet Nam (1977), which they simply called ‘Don Bosco’s arrival’, offered a precious occasion to strengthen their hope and optimism. The great celebration at Thu Duc was typically Salesian in manner and spirit which surprised many of the invited guests (given the financial condition of the country when the national currency had been changed twice and all citizens could possess but very limited amount of money). On this occasion a young cleric (*Pham Trung Chinh*) composed a very touching song of thanksgiving which later was diffused in all the churches of Viet Nam.

Every year all confreres would eagerly come together for the feast day of Don Bosco (baptized “*Day of Salesian Traditions*” for

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

²⁸ *Huynh De* (inter-community journal, *ms.*), November 1977 (copies available in VIE Provincial Archives).

getting permission from the public authorities to hold the gathering). Usually with the presence of either or both of the two Bishops of Saigon, the confreres would spend happy moments of Eucharistic celebration, meal, exchange of gifts between communities, lottery of items offered by the Delegation Economer Fr Marc Nguyen Duc Huynh, gala of singing and music (Salesian songs newly composed by the confreres themselves) and finally football matches.

The people, especially the young ones were very much impressed by the joyfulness and optimism of the Salesians in a gloomy and bleak society of collectivism. A veteran communist who was invited to a meal in a Salesian community (Ba Thon) had tears flowing down his cheeks when observing its joyful atmosphere of jokes and laughter. He confessed that in the more than 45 years of serving the communist cause, never had he witnessed such a genuine spirit of the family anywhere. Many young vocations were attracted to the Salesians probably just because of this typical Salesian characteristic.

2.5. *Creativity and Flexibility*

When one is really driven by apostolic zeal creativity and flexibility would show forth naturally. This Salesian characteristic takes its source from the "*Da mihi animas, coetera tolle*".²⁹ So was the case of the first Salesians of Viet Nam. Here we limit ourselves to mention just two important historical events.

After one year of studying the Vietnamese language, the two Salesian pioneers took over the responsibility of running the boys' town entrusted to them by the MEP Fathers. What they had to figure out was how to blend the Salesian preventive system of education with the existing one applied by the French missionaries. The transition from one to the other was very successful, though not without tensions and trials.

²⁹ Cf. *The Project of Life of the Salesians of Don Bosco. A Guide to the Salesian Constitutions*, Madras, Salesian Institute of Graphic Arts 1987, p. 224.

After the victory of the Viet Minh forces over the French army at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, the superiors of China Salesian Province (intimidated by their own experience of communist occupation of China in 1949) decided to call back all their confreres. Those who were directly sent by the Rector Major to Viet Nam, however, decided not to abandon the boys and to stay on. They ran the risk of being left completely to themselves. The courage and dedication they showed eventually by moving the children to the South, feeding them with whatever they could find, sharing their meager means of survival, and finally settling them definitively was convincing enough to persuade Hong Kong later officially to resume the Salesian work in Viet Nam.

But the greatest show of creativity and flexibility of the Salesians in Viet Nam would be manifested in the actual communist occupation of the whole country after 1975. As it has been narrated above, the confidence and trust that the Superiors in Rome and the Salesian missionaries themselves bestowed on the Vietnamese Salesians of a much younger generation were something that surpassed all imagination. Not only was the Superior of the Delegation appointed by the Rector Major just 30 years of age and without any experience or preparation for the task, but also all his councillors. Out of nine newly nominated rectors, seven had no experience whatsoever and two just one year. Into their inexperienced hands the Rector Major, Rev Luigi Ricceri, entrusted the whole future of the Salesian mission in Viet Nam along with all faculties and powers (including those normally reserved to the Rector Major himself).

The quick and bold practical decisions of this team have surprised many confreres and outsiders. In some cases exceptions even to the requirements of the 'Constitutions and Regulations' themselves had to be made. For example, the famous case of nominating clerics and lay brothers as rectors of some budding communities (Hoc Mon, Cau Bong, Hien Duc, Nong Truong) in the absence of priests due to the impossibility of priestly ordinations and change of residence. The situation could be corrected (*sanatio*) only when priestly ordinations could somehow be organized. In extreme cases this was even done

in secret (“underground” – *chui* i.e., without due authorization from civil authority).

Without entering into details, we may conclude our reflection on the Salesian Charism by quoting the words with which the Delegation Chapter 1980 addressed the confreres of Viet Nam:

“Being sons of Don Bosco, we will follow the example of Abraham who had walked the road of faith, even in the darkest night. We fully put our hope and trust in the hands of Divine Providence and of Mary our Mother, the Help of Christians”.³⁰

2.6. Family Spirit

To the Vietnamese, ‘family spirit’ is one of the most cherished values, but according to the Confucian spirit, ‘familiarity’ is generally not very well accepted, especially in the education of the young.

The Salesian missionaries coming to Viet Nam were of different nationalities: Brazilian, Yugoslavian, French, Italian, Chinese, Scottish, Belgian, Dutch. This international group would certainly have difficulties in expressing their feelings. Happily they had found an ambience of family that welcomed them. In fact their predecessor, Msgr. Paul Seitz MEP and his collaborators, had established, not an orphanage but “*Famille de Ste. Therese*”, not a social center but “*Cite du Christ Roi*”. The children were grouped into 12 families according to their age, each with two senior boys acting as elder brothers. Except the time they spent at Church, school and workshop, they shared their daily life as in a real family. It was into this favourable condition that the pioneer Salesians were first introduced. Their task was now to make this prevailing family spirit to be genuinely Salesian. Through music and sport, but most of all, through their continual brotherly presence among the boys (Salesian assistance), they succeeded in making the Salesian familiarity felt.

The miserable life in the jungle at Buon Me Thuot (1954-1955) and the difficult time at Thu Duc and Go Vap (1955-1957) had offered

³⁰ *Acts of the Vietnam Delegation Chapter 1980*, p. 16.

them concrete occasions to make the boys feel at home. Salesian familiarity became a characteristic trait and made a good impression on the Vietnamese. The President of the Republic of South Viet Nam, His Excellency John B. Ngo Dinh Diem, on the occasion of his visit to Don Bosco Thu Duc (1956), was so impressed by the familiarity and joyfulness of the children that later on several occasions he just dropped in spontaneously, without any pre-announcement.³¹

Up to 1975 this Salesian familiarity had been continually cherished and developed especially in the formation houses. This was precisely the first and lasting impression that many young confreres had when they came into contact with Salesian houses, whether Go Vap, Thu Duc, Tram Hanh or Da Lat. It was even more impressed on the minds of the Vietnamese who in the families are taught to use the utmost respect and veneration towards superiors. The simple sight of superiors playing soccer with the students would be considered by many as revolutionary.

This attitude of familiarity and easy approachableness prevailed among the Salesians even after the socialist revolution. In the parish ambience it had distinguished the Salesians from the others even more strikingly and became perhaps their most noticeable characteristic. Even the communist officials at times had to acknowledge this. They often showed greater sympathy to the Salesians because of their familiarity and friendliness, and that would to certain extent explain how they could have developed so much in such difficult conditions of the country.

2.7. Community life

Ordinarily community life is taken for granted by all Salesians (and the missionaries were no exception). They would live in common just because they are religious. They would spend most of their life and time together with and among the children or in their offices. They were noted to be together only occasionally for some practices

³¹ AM, p.16.

of piety, meals and meetings. It seemed that personal relationships within a structure of community were more important than the community spirit itself.

But with the events of 1975, at the departure of the foreigners, there began a new awareness of the meaning and of the need for community life among the Salesians of Viet Nam. Under the pressure of the new social, financial and political order imposed by the communist regime, preserving and continuing a life in common was practically impossible. In fact many religious institutions had decided to send their members back to their own families ('home-religious' or '*Tu tai gia*' in Vietnamese). Exclaustration became a common practice. It was a very singular fact that the Salesians at the Delegation Chapter 1977 took the official stand to live in common at all cost. Knowing that big institutions would soon be closed and confiscated (as in the case of other communist countries), they moved quickly to split the confreres into smaller communities by sending them to small isolated parishes. Suddenly they had to live in reduced communities of just five or six confreres (sometimes even less). They would share manual work together in order to earn their own living, cook their own food, do all odd jobs by themselves, pray, share their meals, often also have some recreation together. In short a community life that was mostly restricted to themselves.

Some felt suffocated but others would instead discover a new and deeper meaning for their Salesian consecrated life.

"We long for a community life that is genuinely sincere and fraternal, because as the Constitutions no. 49 has asserted "to live and to work together is for us Salesians a fundamental requirement and a sure way of fulfilling our vocation". We would live for each other when we are united in God, and we would share with each other joys and sorrows, pleasures and sufferings, all our fatigue and success."³²

³² *Acts of the Vietnam Delegation Chapter 1980*, p.19.

The community soon discovered the need of sharing everything among them. They would share whatever they had among themselves and even with other communities. Exchanging gifts and communicating news between communities became a must. Since there was neither telephone nor printing, nor any other means of communication, every community wrote down (by typing) news of their daily life, work and apostolate, and 'smuggled' them to other communities. These sheets of communication bore the title "*SDB*" at the community and regional level and "*Fraternity*" at the Delegation level. Besides they likewise also shared with others something much more precious and spiritual: fruits of their long periods of reading and meditation – Salesian books translated into Vietnamese. In this way the Delegation/Province was enriched with Salesian literature in autochthonous language. That provided the communities, after hours of sweat and fatigue, with rich sources of spiritual reading. The Delegation Chapter 80 in fact laid down the following guideline:

"Nowadays, our apostolate in the communities is becoming fragmented: each community decides to do whatever it can, according to the possibility and capacity 'sur-place'. Just because of this, the apostolic outcome might be poor and limited. In order to enhance and improve the service of Salesian mission, it is required that we exchange, study and share experiences with others, as well as provide proper coordination at the Delegation level."³³

Around the years 1978-1980 a number of young confreres had been called to military and civil services. They had to suspend temporarily their vows and community life. These events demanded that the Delegation as a whole revise the motivations for their community life. Delegation Chapter 1980 made the following reflection when it talked about accepting new vocations:

"The figure of the Vietnamese Salesian in the future faces the gravest challenge: fraternal communion. Perhaps he has to

³³ *Ibid.*, p.24

live frequently away from his community – in family, factory or agricultural cooperative... We should understand that this situation (if it happens) is ‘extra-ordinary’, demanded by particular circumstances. It is always alien to the mind of St. John Bosco and the Salesian tradition. Physical communion is always one very important element; therefore we cannot accept a Salesian vocation living outside the community whenever physical communion is still possible. Even though communion in spirit and action has to be stressed in the first place, the Salesian of the future should be deeply convinced of the necessity of fraternal communion, dialogue and sharing with his respective community and superiors about the zeal and commitment with which he carries out in his ambience of life and work the Salesian apostolic mission.”³⁴

Some short extracts from letters written by confreres in civil service (at Tahine, Lam Dong province) would be enough to convince us:

“Here in the midst of the forest we meet each other almost daily. In my platoon C1 there are three Salesians and two diocesan priests. Whenever occasion presents itself we celebrate *Fractio Panis* together. Our altar is a rain-poncho spread on the ground and the liturgical vestment is our working uniform. We sense that Christ is being brought to Tahine... We are finding a way to carry out our SDB mission at Tahine in a practical manner. It is indeed very difficult. Our Salesian prayer life is still based on “*Comunità Salesiana in Preghiera*” and the rosary. We try to make it daily but it’s almost impossible. Whenever there is a chance, generally by night, the Salesians in pairs come into dialogue with each other through the rosary... We are very grateful for the care that our community at Da Lat and others in the region continually bestow on us. ... we feel very much consoled by this family concern.”³⁵

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.43.

³⁵ VIE Provincial Archives, *Collection of letters written by confreres in the service. Letter from Tahine, 27 April 1978.*

2.8. Sense of the Church

The first two Salesians to Viet Nam were sent in obedience to the Church. In fact Bishop-elect Paul Seitz MEP had made known to the Holy See that his condition *sine qua non* for accepting the nomination to the Episcopal See of Kontum was that the Salesians should come to take over his boys' town. From then on, in almost every move, the Salesians would always stay in close contact with the Ordinaries. The 'Exodus story' was a clear proof of it. On account of the imminent occupation of the country by the communists, the superiors in Hong Kong had decided to close down the Salesian work in Viet Nam. Msgr. Joseph Trinh Nhu Khue, Bishop of Ha Noi, and the Apostolic Nuncio to Indochina, Msgr. John Dooley, had to intervene in the name of the Pope, asking the Salesians not to abandon the children without trying to find a good solution.³⁶ Could we affirm that the Salesian work in Viet Nam has always been a joint venture with the Church?

All the developments that followed were strictly 'pontifical', in the sense that as everywhere, the Salesians would make their plans and decisions independently of the Ordinaries, while reserving due respect and maintaining good relations with the ecclesiastical authorities. The Bishops were very much honoured and welcomed in all Salesian houses. The *Sense of the Church* could be identified with the veneration of hierarchical dignitaries.

The communist policy towards the Church brought in radical changes in this regard. The regime recognized none of the legal religious entities. The only one that still had some tacit recognition was the Diocesan Bishop. Schools, hospitals and other charitable institutions belonging to religious entities were all confiscated. If the religious institutes wanted to deal with the civil authorities on any matter, they had to make it through the local bishop and only through him, while he himself had to submit himself to the Patriotic Group, a pro-government Catholic (in name only) association. In this situation

³⁶ J.T. NGUYEN VAN, *The Beginning of the Salesian Work in Vietnam*, p. 174.

the Salesians had to be closely associated with the local Church in everything. They took part in all the activities of the 'Inter-religious Group' created by the local Bishop. Under the Bishop's guidance they came into ordinary contact with other religious congregations for meetings, studies, prayers, even social and political services. In this way their sense of the Church became both practical and spiritual, and deepened day by day. Their activities and courses of action were then taken through the lens of the local Church's interest and mission.

At first the Salesians as well as many other religious congregations felt certain uneasiness because of the dependence and restriction of action. But they had no other choice especially when weightier matters such as property and priestly ordinations had to be taken up with the authorities. In this general situation of the Church in Viet Nam the Salesians too learned in a very practical way the real content of the '*Sensus Ecclesiae*' – always with the Church for the Church's interest and mission. When the Salesian Delegation decided to join along with a number of other religious institutions in the establishment and running of the 'Catholic Agricultural Cooperative' at *Lo 6 Cu Chi*, an undertaking promoted by the Archbishop himself, the reason was precisely to be together with the local Church even in politically disputable matter.

All this was done in a genuine Salesian style. The Bishops came often to Salesian houses (or parishes); there they would be welcomed with familiarity and cheerfulness. At any Salesian gathering (Don Bosco's feast, spiritual retreats, Delegation/Provincial Chapter etc.) the local Bishop would always be present and address his fatherly words. It was clear that the Bishops themselves enjoyed this close relationship. In fact their photos with the Salesians were often enlarged and hung on the walls of the Bishop's house (e.g. photo of Msgr. Paul Nguyen Van Binh, Archbishop of Hochiminh City, and his Auxiliary, both in Don Bosco's soccer team colours with the football in hand).

The Delegation Chapter 80 gave the following directive:

"The community should favour and help the confreres, particularly the clerics, to engage themselves in all pastoral

initiatives of the local Church, as well as to be flexible and creative in social action. This engagement must first of all come from the personal conviction of the confreres themselves.”³⁷

2.9. *The Preventive System*

The first and painstaking effort of the two Salesian pioneers as testified by one of them, Fr Andrej Majcen, was precisely to introduce and to inculcate the Preventive System of education of Don Bosco into the work they had initiated in Viet Nam.³⁸ Is there a place for the educative method of Don Bosco in Viet Nam, a Confucian country? The MEP’s method (of French inspiration) was currently in use at the boys’ town. Slowly and very delicately the Salesians introduced the new method by preparing personnel of substitution. During the exodus and settlement years they succeeded in implanting firmly and practically the Salesian Preventive System in all their institutions. The figure of the Salesian assistant was introduced with the coming of young clerics and brothers from Italy, Belgium and France (from 1958 onwards). Books on Salesian assistance were translated into Vietnamese, and the first Vietnamese Salesians (1960) could learn how to be educators in the Don Bosco’s way.

However, with the closing down and loss of all traditional institutions – boardings and schools – in the crisis of 1975, in order to be able to continue the Salesian mission, the Salesians in Vietnam felt the need of deepening ever more their knowledge of the Preventive System of Don Bosco. But what was more important for them was knowing how to adapt this educative system to all the informal Salesian settings. The task has been very challenging, but the Salesians were very conscious of it. In fact in their reflection on the occasion of Delegation Chapter 1980 they expressed the problem as follows:

³⁷ *Acts of the Vietnam Delegation Chapter 1980*, p.26.

³⁸ J.T. NGUYEN VAN, *The Beginning of the Salesian Work in Vietnam*, p. 172.

“In the new environments in which we find ourselves today, the Preventive System of education could be taken lightly, or even be forgotten completely, while it is the very key of success that Don Bosco has left to us all. In fact, along the history of the Congregation, this System has been diffused and applied amply and has offered optimum results. Therefore we should preserve and apply this traditional Salesian method as far as possible.

“During the process of basic Salesian formation, the formators should take great care so that the Preventive System may be known, understood, and esteemed. They should also guide the young confreres to make practical application of it in their daily life.”³⁹

Whether they had succeeded in this great effort or not, we do not know; but a firm conviction was certainly there.

2.10. *Prayer Life – Union with God*

The Vietnamese Catholics are generally used to long prayers and many practices of piety. The Salesians really surprised them with shorter and simpler forms of prayer. The manual “*Giovane Provveduto*” in Vietnamese version was introduced very early (1958) and was in use in all Salesian houses up to 1980. Sunday services and “*sodalities*” were also introduced. But what really impressed many was the efficacy of the devotion to Mary Help of Christians. It was fostered by all the Salesians, especially Fr Mario Acquistapace.⁴⁰ One can assert that the prayer life of the Salesians by then had been pretty good; but as everywhere else it did not create an impression on the people.

After 1975 things changed drastically. Prayer as a part of everyday routine was no longer possible. All felt the need of strengthening prayer life.

³⁹ *Acts of the Vietnam Delegation Chapter 1980*, p. 23-24.

⁴⁰ AM, p. 392.

"Pressed by apostolic as well as livelihood-earning works our common practices of piety have been gravely disturbed. Therefore every one of us should arm himself with an interior life deeply rooted in the Word of God, individual reflection, solid liturgical and sacramental life, and especially by being faithful to the practices of piety of the community following the traditional Salesian devotions.

"In order to protect the confreres from external disturbances, the community should endeavor to create favorable atmosphere and promote times of silence. It should make all effort to hold regular monthly recollections and to provide other soul-nourishing means.

"The individual as well as the community share the responsibility to promote this spiritual maturity. The goal is to be able to reach a deep spirit of prayer that may be little visible externally like that of Don Bosco our Father, but would transform our life into a continual prayer."⁴¹

Among the practical resolutions taken at Delegation Chapter 1980 was:

"The Community keeps weekly sharing on the Word of God of the Sunday Mass. At any event of certain importance, the community seeks all together the will of God in the light of the Gospel... In this unfavourable situation, the Delegation is responsible for the spiritual retreat of the confreres renewing their vows. Annual retreats for other confreres should be organized by regions (since changing residence from one locality to another is almost impossible), under the supervision of the Delegation."⁴²

A manual of prayers for Salesians of Viet Nam entitled *Cong the Saledieng cau nguyen* (Salesian Community that Prays) was published after the Vice-Province Chapter of 1985 and it (revised editions) is still in use.

⁴¹ *Acts of the Vietnam Delegation Chapter 1980*, p. 19.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 20.

Conclusion

Looking back at past history, gloomy and painful though it was, the Salesians of Vietnam – now a full fledged Province (VIE) – have to express their deep and heartfelt thanks to God and his Blessed Mother. We have gone through a lively experience of the deep meaning of Psalm 126,5-6: “They go out, they go out full of tears carrying seed for the sowing; they come back, they come back full of song, carrying their sheaves”.

Thanks to the toil and sweat of the Salesian pioneer missionaries, thanks also to the steadfast fidelity of those heroic Vietnamese confreres who had cherished their Salesian vocation above all else, and last but not least, thanks to the countless prayers of Salesians all over the world, the Salesian charism has been properly sown and firmly rooted in this soil of trials in an impossible period of the history of modern Viet Nam. It has sprouted and grown into a robust and flourishing “tree, so that the birds of the air can come and shelter in its branches” (Mt. 13, 31-32).

The Salesian charism is a living reality and therefore it should be tended with care and prayer. In fact in these last 18 years of growth the Salesian Province of Viet Nam has shown all the vitality it possesses: in the daily life of the confreres, in the increase of vocations (Salesian and non-Salesian alike) and in the apostolic and missionary spirit. The Salesian charism is yielding abundant fruits. On the occasion of the golden jubilee of Don Bosco’s presence in Viet Nam (October 2002) and during the most recent visit of the Rector Major Fr Pascual Chavez (April 2007), the Vietnamese Province has been highly praised. Nevertheless the Salesians of Viet Nam should always call to mind the admonition that the Rector Major has given them:

“Talking about Salesian formation, I am so glad that the percentage of perseverance among the confreres of Viet Nam is actually very high – may be the highest in the whole congregation... But in order to assure such thing to be continued in the future, you should also ensure the condition and environment of formation in the community as well as

promote the process of personalisation of formation among all the confreres... It is not enough to create a good and fertile community climate, but it is necessary too to inculcate personal conviction".⁴³

To cultivate and develop the Salesian charism in the Province is indeed a very important task of superiors and confreres alike; but it is even more important to make Salesian saints out of the confreres, whose lives should be imbued with the living Salesian charism of Don Bosco. Building up the Salesian charism was a difficult task, but keeping it alive in the young confreres of generations to come is a much more challenging one.

⁴³ *Acts of the Visit of the Rector Major Don Pascual Chavez to Vietnam (09-14.04.2008). Concluding Talk to SDB Confreres of the Province*, p.137.