

I. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

Rome, July 1974

My dear Confrères and Sons,

I have just returned from my long journey to Latin America. This time, instead of treating of one important subject, I shall pass on some family news culled in the course of my recent visits to the Provinces. In this way you will have time to think through some of the serious matters discussed in the preceding letters; and you will also get to know some of the more interesting aspects of life in the Congregation today. I think that such information can serve to foster the sense of unity which is life and strength for the whole Congregation.

With regard to the letter on vocations, which was sent out to you last January, it has given me great pleasure to hear that certain groups and communities have given it serious thought and have reached some solid conclusions. But I think that this is just what the Rector Major's letter is supposed to do: to present a set of principles that will be clear, up-to-date and definitely Salesian; and at the same time to offer to our communities not only reading matter for private and public use, but also points to study, ponder and discuss, so that the broad trend-lines may be translated into practical terms, a process so necessary if we are to carry through the renewal that the whole Congregation — with the Church — is expected to effect.

So I would like to invite you all to work hard on these ideas, to explore them in theory and exploit them in practice, because,

in their content, they play no minor part in building up that unity which the Congregation, if it is to be a congregation, needs as much today as ever.

A sad loss

To start with, there is the sad affair — sad, but at the same time a source of holy pride for us — of the death of Cardinal Trochta, that son of the Congregation, of whom we can be justly proud whilst we remember him in our prayers. You may have already received the obituary letter: I recommend that you make its contents as widely known as possible. He was, as one informed source has stated, a martyr of the modern history of the Church.

At about the same time as we received the news of the death of Cardinal Trochta, we also received notification of the appointment of the successor to the late Mons. Boric in the see of Punta Arenas in Chile. The new bishop is our own confrère, Tomás Gonzalez, who is already Vice-Provincial and Vicar of the diocese.

As we all know, Punta Arenas is "Salesian" country, and so is the whole of Patagonia. On the threshold of the Centenary of the first missionary expedition to Latin America in 1875, which was to develop so rapidly with the realization of Don Bosco's dreams for Patagonia and the Straits of Magellan area, the appointment of the young bishop carries with it a rich fund of hope for the new century in the life of the Catholic community, born of the tears and sacrifices of so many Salesians and Salesian Sisters.

The Meetings with the Provincials

In the last few months, following a plan previously worked out by the Council, I have visited many parts of Latin America and a number of Provinces there. I was able to meet hundreds

of the confrères, Salesian Sisters, Co-operators, Past Pupils and numerous groups of youngsters. I think the best thing to do is to take things as they happened, without going into too many details, which you can find in this number of the Acts and in the News-letters of the various Provinces.

As I mentioned above, the meetings followed a plan which had precise aims thrashed out in a series of plenary sessions of the Council.

The focal point of these visits has always been the meeting with the Provincials of the Regions. The meeting for the Pacific-Caribbean Region, held in Mexico City in October, 1973, was the first of the series; and it was followed by meetings in Rome for the English-speaking Provincials, and then for the Provincials from North-West and Eastern Europe. In April it was the turn of the Provincials from the Atlantic Region of Latin America. This one was held in the beautiful and peaceful house of the Salesian Sisters at San Miguel, near Buenos Aires.

To round off this account of the programme of work for 1974, I must include the meetings for the Iberian Region, and for the Italian Conference, held in the first fortnight of June. Next October there will be the meeting for the Far East, to be held in Hong Kong, and this will complete the series.

The business on the agenda of these meetings was all much the same, and is best represented by the reports of the Provincials, which really got down to the nitty-gritty, to use the current cliché. These were followed by exchanges of experiences and views, which made for a full and free discussion. The overriding consideration was the search for the basic ingredients of a genuine renewal, after the mind of our Special General Chapter. In those days of intense activity, the agendas covered the vast gamut of the Congregation's vital interests, including those arising from local situations. And the meetings were thoroughly Salesian in spirit, to which the liturgical celebrations — devout, dignified and well-prepared — contributed in no

small measure. Straight away there was a familiarity and friendship among those taking part, and a serene happiness — old songs, ay, and new ones too: we were all caught up by the spirit of the thing.

More than once, as these occasions drew to a close, I heard expressions of regret, almost of pain, that it all had to come to an end. How richly rewarding to the human spirit is an atmosphere of genuine comradeship.

But, while it is true that the peak occasions are the study-sessions with the Provincials, nonetheless when such meetings take place outside Rome, both the Rector Major and the Departmental Heads, who always take part in these meetings, embark on a round of visits and meetings arranged by the Regional Superior. In this way contact is made with the men on the job.

So Fr Viganò was busy with the problems of formation in the field, meeting the responsible men in the different Provinces; Fr Dho, with catechetics, the youth apostolate and vocations, and in particular with the aspirantates and minor seminaries, so important for the life of the Congregation. Fr Raineri worked on the problems of the laity with those responsible, especially in regard to the Cooperators, who are today coming into ever greater prominence as a key sector in the Salesian mission. With the Past-Pupils he studied ways of utilizing the mass media in the following fields: communications within the Congregation, publishing, and the use for our apostolate of audio-visual aids, which are becoming really essential.

I shall give you the more interesting and useful items of the visit.

Missions in Ecuador

My first stop was Ecuador, where I spent some days in April. The kindly insistence of the Provincial, echoing the general wishes of the confrères, the fact that in my various

journeyings in America I had never been to the country, the recent reuniting of the two Provinces, including two important missionary areas, were all contributory reasons for the visit, which, for all the weariness it involved, brought consolation and joy.

I shall give the main points of interest in the visits to the missions at Pastaza, Macas, Yaupi and Santiago. These enabled me to find out the work done by the Salesians, the Salesians Sisters and the VSO's in areas where they had to start from scratch under the most discouraging circumstances: areas that seemed positively resistant to any sort of civilizing action, either cultural or religious; this is the famous "cultivating dry sticks" that the late Mons. Comin used to speak of.

The present situation fully vindicates the faith and sacrifices of these tough brothers of ours, whose work is continued with the same sort of dedication by the present generation. All these confrères — and this is true of all the missions — are happy in their extreme poverty, in their simple, often primitive, way of life deliberately chosen in place of the familiar ways back home. It is obvious that behind this choice, made by so many of our confrères who have taken on the divine adventure, lies a deep faith and the call of Don Bosco: "Da mihi animas".

In the homeland of Zeffirino Namuncurà

I also visited the Missions at Bahia Blanca and Fortín Mercedes in Patagonia, Argentina. In the few days I was there I was able to realize how much had been achieved in a century's work by our confrères and our Sisters. To describe it as heroic would be no exaggeration — the facts speak for themselves. Generation after generation of missionaries in these lands of Don Bosco's dreams have merged into the social scene; indeed, they have become one with the people, in whose lives Don Bosco has become a close and firm friend, present everywhere.

At Bahia Blanca, which today is a modern town, I was much impressed by the wide range of business concerns, from bakery to garage, from farm to brick factory, that bore the name of Don Bosco. It is evidence enough of how deeply Don Bosco and his men have penetrated in these parts and of how much they have done, quietly and efficiently, for the cultural and social welfare of these good people in the process of bringing the Gospel to them. As we enter the Centenary year of the first expedition to Latin America, let us honour all those members of the Salesian Family who, over the last hundred years, have built in this territory a city of Christian culture.

And mention must be made of a characteristic development that I met with in the area of Salesian Patagonia that has Fortín Mercedes as its power-house of activity. It is hardly a village — a little Salesian village, if you like. It is the Mother House of the district. Many Salesians have received their initial formation there and regard Fortín Mercedes, and the little world that turns around it, as their home.

Today the fine Sanctuary of Mary, Help of Christians, in so many ways reminiscent of the original at Valdocco, is a centre of devotion to Our Lady and to the Venerable Zeffirino Namuncurá as well. His mortal remains are preserved there, and pilgrims flock to the sanctuary from all over Argentina. It is most impressive to see the love and fervour shown by so many people from all walks and classes of life and of all ages to this "flower of the Pampas". For good reason Zeffirino has become the symbol of the apostolic activity of our brothers among the people of the Grand Pampas.

It is everyone's fervent wish that the Lord will glorify this young Patagonian. We all hope that such an event, besides being the reward of a century's labours, will provide the stimulus for a continuation of the cultural and Christian development that will cope with the changing situation in the territory.

At the Brothers' Convention in Quito

Returning to Ecuador, I had the impressive experience of attending the Provincial Brothers' Convention. A good number, a wide age-range but with many younger men, and representing as wide a diversity of occupations as ever: mission-Brothers, technicians, agriculturalists, teachers, and the Brother who is a member of the Provincial Council.

The things that struck me most at the meeting were: the serious and careful preparation, and the fact that pretty well all the Brothers took part in the proceedings. Then there was the harmony and understanding between the priests and the Brothers, the sincerity and practicality in the handling of the material, and the absence of axe-grinding. In fact, there was a general preoccupation with the effort to rediscover and reactivate the vocation of the Brother in the light of the Special General Chapter and of recent experience. Overall there was an atmosphere of Salesian joy.

The experience at Quito confirmed the impression that I had received at the Provincial Conventions in Europe. Let us hope that the outcome of the other Provincial Conventions and of the World Congress will be in accordance with the desires of the Brothers and of the Congregation.

Vocations: signs of recovery

There is one thing I did observe in some Provinces, and I mention it because of the implications: I don't want to seem to be indulging in groundless optimism, but I can honestly say that in Latin America I found not only a general concern for vocations, but that in many Provinces the problem was being tackled methodically, and with dedication; it was felt to be a community responsibility.

And these efforts are beginning to bear some fruit. More than once I was told: "Vocations are beginning to pick up". All the more reason for renewed application to the task, while the errors of the past are corrected and the negative aspects ironed out.

One thing is sure: there is an increase in the number of novices, and still more in the number of aspirants. The signs are good, too, with regard to their age (round about twenty) and their studies (many have completed their pre-university course). A notable feature of the situation is that most of them are young men with a strong sense of spiritual commitment from our own schools and youth-clubs.

God grant that these signs of recovery may spread wider and wider, not only in Latin America but to other Provinces, where the signs are not yet discernible. It is certain, however, that developing a vocations' strategy is an obligation deep-set in community life and activity, and we cannot ignore the clear warnings that are provided by the absolutely negative results of the so-called "experiments" of the past few years.

Primary formation

A subject that has not failed to come up in the meetings with Provincials, Provincial Councils, Rectors and Formation Teams has been the primary formation (novitiate, preparation for perpetual profession and ordination). In many ways it is one of the most delicate problems affecting the life and future of the Provinces. The situation has been made all the more difficult by the closing of a number of our studentates and the dispersion of the students among a diversity of institutions, which has created problems both for the academic establishments they have been attending and for the communities they have been living with.

The problem is still with us; but obviously such situations cannot be allowed to continue, because they contribute nothing constructive towards the serious and solid formation that is to answer to the needs of the day. The bare fact of staying in one's own Province solves nothing: there are so many other considerations, and all too often the Provinces have not the men or the means to make adequate provision. The General Chapter did not mean to say that formation takes place almost of its own accord by the very fact that it is all done within the Province: it just does not make sense.

At Buenos Aires the Provincials of the Mar del Plata Group, recognizing that lasting solutions must be found to this problem, have undertaken a joint study of the practical ways of establishing one seminary which will be central to the Group and will be attended by the clerics from the member Provinces. All the problems that are inherent in such a foundation will, of course, be studied, especially the community-life of the students. One point of particular importance: the implementation of such a plan presupposes that the individual Provinces pull together, and it is incumbent on the Provincials to see that they do.

Whilst we all earnestly desire that the decision of the La Plata Provinces, through the effective co-operation of all concerned, should be realized on the ground, I think that I have the duty of reminding those responsible that the sure way — possibly the only way — of solving problems such as these is through the practical collaboration of the Provinces that are involved. The only way that plans like these can be carried through is by combining resources. But they must be made to work because they are essential to the life of the individual Province and amply repay whatever sacrifices are put into them. Solidarity means to give as well as to take: when the accounts are finally balanced everyone will show a profit.

Youth with an ideal

In some countries I had the pleasure of meeting young people, who, for all their differences, left me with much the same impression. These youngsters had committed themselves to an intense life of prayer and study of the Word of God. At the same time they had a lively desire to deepen their knowledge of Don Bosco, not only in his apostolic activities but still more in his method of education and in his spirit; and this is shown by their highly constructive apostolic work in the wide field covered by our mission. Some groups, as, for example, in Brazil, are already gaining useful missionary experience in many ways, employing their spare time to do all sorts of jobs: catechizing, teaching, social work etc. The consoling sight of so many young people actively sharing our work made me realize two important truths.

The first is this: there are very many young people who are longing to be involved in a seriously Christian life, and who are full of generosity and dedication to others; and, given the right guidance, they come to discover the richness of Don Bosco's spirit and the immediacy of his educational method. I would say, moreover, that they finish up by giving him and his system their whole-hearted loyalty. I remember the long and interesting exchange I had in Santiago, Chile, with more than fifty youngsters of the *Movimiento Juvenil Salesiano*. They were between sixteen and twenty-two years of age, and I was strongly impressed by their knowledge of Don Bosco and by their eagerness to learn more of the man and his mission.

The other point is: behind and beside these young people, there is always the Salesian, fired by faith, love and enthusiasm. And here you have it: the flourishing of these groups of youngsters, as of every other pastoral work in our mission-field, is bound up with the personality and work of the Salesian.

The confrère who is culturally and spiritually prepared, who can understand the needs of modern youth and feels the respon-

sibility of bearing the message of Christ in the Salesian apostolic spirit, has an immense field of useful labour.

Of course, things do not run smoothly all the time: there are always difficulties, and it must always be so. What activities are easy and trouble-free, especially nowadays? Faith and love, for us as for Don Bosco, will be our powerful means of overcoming every obstacle. Without these we are reduced to the negative states of immobility, futile complaint, frustration and destructive criticism; and then instead of forging ahead towards renewal, we succeed only in wasting time and in losing the ground already gained.

The children on the street

In the countries I visited I found many interesting examples of work for poor boys: some recently started, others well established, and all in line with the policies of our Special General Chapter.

In the big population-centres afflicted with the mushrooming of the favelas, it can be claimed that the Salesians are there. They are working right at the heart of this higgledy-piggledy agglomeration of wretched huts and hovels, sharing in the extreme poverty of these lowly people, stretched to the limit of endurance in their efforts to save the children, who see in these "fathers" so many sincere and disinterested friends who are seeking only their good. These Salesians, with a spirit of true apostolate and joyous dedication in the face of this heart-rending display of human misery, are striving to improve the conditions — cultural, social, and spiritual — of the boys for whom they work. This goes for Rio de Janeiro, Caracas, Port-au-Prince, Guatemala City, Guayaquil, Belém and many other places.

But in Latin America, apart from the slum areas, the Salesians are doing works of rescue in a large number of cities and settlements, such as Bogotá, Medellín, Managua, Belo Horizonte, Panama, Quito, La Paz.

I had the opportunity of visiting a number of these highly popular works; where so many poor boys are rescued, through constant, patient love, from idleness and vice, and from the exploitation to which they are subjected in countless ways. They are turned into good Christians by the Salesians, who send them out to jobs as apprentices and workers.

As I say, I have seen a number of many such places, which are obviously held in high regard by officialdom and by the people; but there is one establishment — or rather, educational complex — that I wish to cite as being, so to speak, very much on the agenda: the “Ciudadela de los niños” at Bogotá in Colombia. This, incidentally, is one of many works of social and moral rehabilitation that the Province is justifiably proud of.

In this Boys’ Town I saw our confrères in action: the sort of action, based on carefully elaborated methods of organization and education, that is completely in line with Salesian theory and practice. It is action that requires great courage and great tact in the rehabilitation of hundreds of “gamines” (street-arabs), unwanted, without family, home, or schooling; boys who literally live on the street, addicted to crime and to drugs, victims of prostitution: wretched creatures, in the strictest and saddest sense of the word, who have suffered the most incredible experiences.

During the night the Salesians go down the squalid streets where these poor boys drag out their existence, and invite them, with the aid of enticements after the style of Don Bosco, to spend the night in the house, where everything is arranged to provide for their rehabilitation. It is not, however a traditional hostel. The boys find food, toilet facilities and medical care (many are suffering from serious infectious diseases), and above all there is the friendly, peaceful atmosphere created by the Salesians and their helpers. There are also Sisters, who do invaluable work. The boy is free to stay if he wishes. In fact, I was deeply affected by the sight of some of the new arrivals begging me to

obtain their permanent acceptance in this house of new horizons.

These boys pass on to other houses as their rehabilitation gradually becomes more and more complete; until, at about the age of eighteen, equipped with vocational qualifications and a thorough Christian education, they are in a position to be integrated with dignity into the society on whose fringes they once stood as disorderly and subversive elements.

But before arriving at this happy outcome, how much work is needed, how much patience, and particularly — I use the confrères' own words — how much Christian and Salesian love, how much self-sacrifice in loving assistance in order to win their hearts, bruised and often corrupted.

With prayer and the Salesian way

Two reflections arise spontaneously from this account of my moving experiences. Thanks be to God, the Congregation has a large number of activities in which the Salesians are working in different ways and at an uncommon level of self-sacrifice, on behalf of boys who are poor, needy and literally abandoned by their practically non-existent families and by society itself.

Such work requires generous souls with a powerful fund of love and faith: they feel the need, something necessary and not merely desirable, to sustain their gruelling way of life by contact with God in personal prayer and community prayer. Without prayer, they say, we would not find the strength to do this work and the stamina to carry it through. Handling these boys and winning their hearts can never be work for the mere pedagogue or the mere psychologist, but is the task of true apostles and missionaries, who see and love God in souls.

In fine — and I pass on what these confrères repeated so often — the method of Don Bosco, involving the loving-kindness and assistance of a friendly, intelligent and continuous presence among the boys, is the indispensable key for opening and winning

the hearts of these poor boys, who, although they are dressed in rags and are prematurely perverted, are not insensible to love expressed in deeds, which was precisely Don Bosco's way.

Faced with these facts, I remain firmly convinced that the educational method of Don Bosco, thoroughly understood and put into practice, cannot be bettered. Perhaps it is we who need to rediscover it by serious study, and, more particularly, by living it with pastoral charity, the essence of Salesian education. Furthermore, apart from these "deprived" situations, current educational theory itself proposes, albeit with a different terminology and different perspectives, methods and techniques that, without any bother, we can find not only proposed but widely and successfully applied in the educational work of Don Bosco.

Communion-building

To conclude: on this journey to Latin America I have met many Salesians from various Provinces and I have never failed to hammer a point that I regard as supremely important, not only in America but everywhere in the Congregation: and that is, unity.

In my letter on this subject I dealt with another aspect; now I wish to invite you all to become builders of unity and communion.

A full and fruitful life needs unity and communion. How important it is then, that, in our love for the Congregation and in our desire to ensure its continuing harmony and effectiveness, we should make every effort, even at the cost of personal sacrifice, to build up day by day this vital spirit of community.

Anything that makes for tensions, cold-shoudering, suspicions, and, worse still, clashes and confrontations, prejudices the unity that we all deeply yearn for. We know that we simply cannot do without it and that we do harm to the souls entrusted to

us when we fail to achieve it. And who in a community will have the nerve to become Chief Disrupter and Trouble-maker?

But there is no such thing as unity without good will: the good will that is seen in action either passively, in the avoidance of anything that is in any way prejudicial to unity, or actively, in the fostering of unity. This is the good will that breaches the barriers, helping us to understand and feel for each other, so that everyone accepts everyone else, for all his faults and differences of age and ideas. In effect, we have to make every sincere effort to “dwell together in unity”, to realize this major tenet of faith, and of the Christian and Salesian life, so often stressed by Don Bosco and the object of that great prayer left by Christ as his last testament: “that they may be one”.

Let us turn to the new Constitutions and recall what Article 61, which is about the Eucharistic celebration, the central act of every Christian community, has to say: “There the Salesian community celebrates the paschal mystery in all its fullness and partakes of the Body of Christ, offered in sacrifice, in order to rebuild itself in him as a ‘communion of brothers’”.

Dear confrères, may the faith with which we celebrate the Eucharistic mystery and the love that wells up there transform us day by day into willing and efficient workers for communion in our own communities. If we do, the Congregation will be beholden to us.

Best wishes to you all in the Lord. And say a prayer for me.