

I. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

« WORK AND SELF-RESTRAINT »: THE ANSWER TO UPWARD SOCIAL MOBILITY

Rome, October, 1974

My dear confrères and sons,

I have been taking a close look at the situations that obtain today in the Congregation and I would like to draw your attention to a many-sided phenomenon that has serious implication for our vocation: the adoption of middle-class standards of life.

In defence of the Salesian values that are at stake, not to mention the religious and Christian ones, the Special General Chapter declares uncompromising war on the soft and easy life (v. Orange Book, p. 433). And we are all invited (note the words) "to renew in ourselves that assiduous and enterprising spirit of work" inculcated by Don Bosco. (IBID., *op. cit.*) In other words it is a summons to put into effect the renewal to which we are bound in the spirit of "work and temperance" left to us by Don Bosco. This was to be the distinctive sign of the precious legacy he made to the Congregation. And more: it was to be the absolute condition for the progress, indeed, for the very survival of the Congregation.

In the face of the climate created even among ourselves by the ideas and attitudes of today (at least, under certain circumstances), I see very clearly the wisdom of what the Special

General Chapter had to say, and likewise the vital importance of the subject I am going to deal with.

I would like you to bear with me while we make some reflections together as Salesians. I hope that these considerations will serve to point and clarify certain values to which our consecrated life as sons of Don Bosco, in these days of change and uncertainty, is inseparably bound; and also to pin-point ideas and attitudes that strike at the roots of our way of life.

The dream of Don Bosco

I think that we all remember the dream that Don Bosco had at Lanzo and related to the confrères on the 18th September, 1876, as part of the summing-up of the themes of their retreat. (*BM*, 12, 463-9).

The dreams of Don Bosco contain a marvellous spiritual doctrine, and it would be very harmful to the Congregation to have them lost through ignorance or sheer neglect.

And this brings me to a point of wide relevance. It has been remarked, with sadness, that many confrères, especially the young, know very little about Don Bosco. Some, it is said, have not even read a short life of the saint. I say to all those who can and should be concerned with this state of affairs that this is no secondary consideration in the formation of the Salesian.

Ignorance of Don Bosco, inconceivable in a Salesian, can explain certain aberrations and distortions of his spirit and method that have occurred in our houses.

I know that in some places there is concern about this, and that practical steps are being taken to educate the confrères to the knowledge of Don Bosco and the spiritual riches that have their source in him.

So I applaud these efforts in the fervent hope that they are only the beginning and that they will not be halted before the

inevitable difficulties: this is a matter of vital interest to the Congregation.

And now for the dream of Don Bosco.

Escutcheon, pass-word, badge

In the third part of this dream, the mysterious guide who accompanied Don Bosco invited him to look at the endless plain that surrounded him. There were immense crowds of boys converging on him from every point of the compass under the guidance of Salesians.

Whilst he was gazing in wonder at this marvellous sight, the mysterious personage said: "Look at it all and think for a moment. You won't understand now what I have to say to you, but listen carefully: all that you have seen is the harvest prepared for the Salesians. You see how immense it is? The huge field in which you stand is the field where the Salesians must work. The Salesians that you see are the workers in that vineyard of the Lord's. There are many labourers, and you know them. Now the horizons are widening under your very eyes and people are appearing whom you don't know yet; and this means that the Salesians will work in this field not only in this century, but also in the next and in centuries to come. But do you know what conditions must exist for this to come about? I shall tell you.

Look: you must have these words spelled out: '*Work and self-restraint will make the Salesian Congregation flourish.*' They are to your escutcheon, your pass-word, your badge. You will explain them, repeat them, again and again. Have a book printed to explain them, and make it clearly understood that work and self-restraint are the heritage that you leave to the Congregation, a heritage that will be its glory."

Don Bosco nodded his assent to the word of the guide, who added, "So you are quite persuaded? You have grasped it thoroughly? This is the heritage you will leave to your sons; and

tell them bluntly that, as long they correspond, they will attract followers from north, south, east and west." (IBID., 466-7).

"As long as they correspond . . ." The mysterious guide does not expand the point, but clearly he means it to be taken that the future of the Congregation is conditional, and is, in fact, a problem of fidelity. From the insistence of the guide ("You must have these words spelled out . . . You will explain them, repeat them, again and again . . . So you are quite persuaded? You have grasped it thoroughly? . . . tell them bluntly . . ."), you can judge of the supreme importance of this subject for the life of the Congregation.

Searching questions for the 70's

Don Bosco did not have time to write the book as suggested, but he has done something much better: he has written in into his own life, stamped it into the minds of his sons, instilled it into the life and action of the Congregation. In the past this has been, after the grace of God, the leading factor in the prodigious development of our work; and it still represents, paradoxically enough with all that has happened over the years, a strikingly relevant scheme of life, as we are coming to realize more and more.

In the face of this reality, the question we have to ask ourselves, with a humble and courageous sincerity, is this: "Have we, the Salesians of the 70's, been faithful to the programme left to us by Don Bosco? Or are we perhaps squandering the precious inheritance that has been jealously guarded, unstintingly built up and faithfully passed on to us by our predecessors?"

These are the questions that each one — individual, community, newly professed, seasoned worker — must in conscience find an answer to at this precariously balanced point in the life of the Society, and, having found the answer, he must assume responsibility for it.

The following pages are meant to be no more than an aid

towards this, offered for personal reflection or consideration by the community. It is a matter that involves a set of values essential to our genuine renewal, to our mission in the Church and to our survival as a Congregation. For this reason, I press you with all urgency to bend your mind to these pages, as sons of our mother, the Congregation, whose vitally important interests, dependent as they are on our own attitudes and quality of life, are very much in play.

1. WORK AND SELF-RESTRAINT, THE INSEPARABLES

To understand better what is contained in our spiritual tradition summed up in the binomial expression 'work and temperance', given us by Don Bosco as a motto, as our Congregation's style of life, we must lay hold of his concept of the two virtues as a single entity: they form an indivisible whole.

The expression — pardon the coinage — 'anti-middle-classism', implying the outright rejection of every form of naturalism and enervating hedonism, and of a life conforming to the standards of the consumer society, which snuffs out the vision of better and higher thing — this expression, I say, seems to be a good definition of the negative aspect of the 'indivisible whole' mentioned above. The positive aspect consists essentially in a complete, constant and practical devotion to one's apostolic mission.

"The Salesian does not seek penance in itself . . . His whole life is a mortification and penance: his asceticism and his action are interlocking. His ascesis is identified with the love he shows for others in meeting the demands they make upon him, because there is no love without sacrifice". (JOSEPH AUBRY: *Lo spirito salesiano*, 75). Looking for an easy life is only a sign, a symptom of the weakening sense of mission in someone who, vocationally, "is consecrated to the good of his pupils", and so "must be ready

to face any inconvenience, any fatigue . . ." (*Il Sistema Preventivo*, Chapter III). The life of ease simply advertizes the fading away of the zeal of apostolic love in a man who is supposed to be "prepared to suffer cold and heat, hunger and thirst, weariness and contempt whenever the glory of God and the salvation of souls is at stake." (*Constitutions*, 1966, art. 188).

Don Bosco has pioneered all this himself. For this he gave his life moment by moment; and this he has transfused into the Congregation as a legacy to his sons.

It is hardly to be wondered at, then, that this formidable labourer in the Lord's vineyard should have wished to create a Congregation characterized by work, seeing that he was able to erect a whole ascesis, a mystique, an educational system on the basis of work carried out for love and with love.

"Sleeves rolled up and models of frugality"

"As Don Bosco, son of the people, had gone out with his attractive personality to restore children to their true dignity, so the Salesian Congregation, assuming that same personality and responding to similar needs, directed its efforts towards the working classes and, for that matter, the whole of society, to make its contribution to progress and social justice. Don Bosco confronted a society that regarded religious as useless and idle creatures with the image of the Salesian at work beside the man in the street, and particularly side by side with the needy." (PIETRO STELLA, *Don Bosco*, II, 369-70).

It is in this framework that we can understand what Don Bosco had in mind when he founded a congregation of religious "with their sleeves up", who were also to be "models of frugality" (*BM*, 4, 192). A working-class vocation required, if it was to be any sort of witness at all, a working-class style of life: frugality and hard work. If "the motto of the Congregation, work and self-restraint, was a call to the members for the observance of an individual asceticism, from the point of view of pub-

lic opinion it assumed the significance of apostolic witness.” (PIETRO STELLA, *op. cit.*, 373).

What we are doing, in fact, is to return to our origins, to the circumstances and motivations that led Don Bosco to found his congregation and to characterize it with the particular style of life corresponding to the needs of the mission entrusted to him by God. Now, I think that this reference to our origins must be a recurrent feature of our lives: it should be for us a fruitful source of reflection and inspiration. It is also a standard against which we can judge of the genuineness of our own vocation and the fidelity of our response as individuals and as members of a community.

2. WORK, A SCHOOL AND PRIE-DIEU

According to the mind of Don Bosco, however, this life of joyful austerity and intense activity is not just something “ad extra”, so to speak: that is, there are other values involved besides that of external witness.

Not that I want to minimize the value of work as an act of witness. At the 2nd Vatican Council it was accepted as part of religious poverty and was proposed to all religious in the fulfilment of their duties as obedience “to the common law of labour”. They are invited to procure in this way the “necessary provisions for their livelihood and undertakings.” (*Perfectae caritatis*, 13c) What I want to stress here is that, for Don Bosco, work was not merely this, but still more an educational medium and a form of spirituality.

Life for us is our duty, our work, and our mission

Don Bosco, the saint of boundless joy, who showed his boys that the life of sanctity was “being very happy” (*BM*, 5, 356), was not an accommodating saint. Life for him was a very serious

affair. In his infancy and adolescence he made very early contact with the hardships of life. For him, it was no pastime, and certainly no amusement, but a serious obligation, a 'duty', in the full sense of a term that he held sacred.

Work meant "fulfilling the duties of one's state of life, whether they consist in studying or in learning an art or trade." (Rules for the house attached to the Oratory, in *BM*, vol. 4, 553, Translation ed. D. Borgatello.) Work was a task, a mission that God had entrusted to man, hence it was a "duty". Speaking to the boys, he said: "Man is born to work." (*IBID.*) "The man who does not work has no right to eat." (*BM*, 3, 354) Again: "He who does not do the work that he is supposed to do, steals from God and from those over him." (*BM*, Translation ed. D. Borgatello, 4, 553).

Partly because of his temperament and partly through his profound conviction, Don Bosco held sluggards and parasites in abhorrence, and he detested laziness, holding it to be the "fatal source of all vices" (*Il Giovane Provveduto*, 45), and the epitome of the evasion of duty. He wanted his boys to get used to work, because, as he said again and again: "He who does not accustom himself to work in his youth will become an idler, to the shame of his parents and his country, and perhaps suffer the irreparable loss of his soul." (*BM*, Translation ed. D. Borgatello, 4, 553.)

"He did not rest himself, and he kept everyone else on the move"

For Salesians, Don Bosco's recommendations on work present various facets. It is not only the discharging of a duty, but it is the realization of a mission of salvation received from God. It is collaboration with Him in the work of the Redemption, a tuning-in to His wave-length to maintain a continuous-action programme in the world, the feeling of being constantly spurred on by His love. (Cf. *II Cor.* 5, 14).

Don Ceria could well write: "Inflamed with his zeal, Don

Bosco never rested and he never let others rest either" (EUGENIO CERIA, *Annali della Società Salesiana*, 1, 722).

Work: a mission carried out with joy

Don Caviglia, having pointed out that "ninety per cent" of Don Bosco's talks to the confrères are on "work, temperance and poverty", adds: "austerity of life, then, would seem to be opposed to happiness." (ALBERT CAVIGLIA, *Don Bosco*, 93.) Yet nothing could be more foreign to the spirit of Don Bosco than work done under compulsion or even suffered as something unavoidable: this is work seen as a penalty for sin, work unredeemed by the cross of Christ. For him personally work was not a hard grind, but a passion.

Don Caviglia continues: "Austerity is implicit in our daily round, in the will to sacrifice, the spirit of detachment, the whole tenor of our life: we work, we take our knocks, we cheerfully do without, because it is all a matter of the heart. The spirit is so attuned to high ideals, so strongly disposed to disregard the unnecessary, that we achieve the maximum freedom of action."

The secret of this "servire Domino in laetitia" as Don Caviglia has pointed out, lies in the heart: it is the love that enters into our dealings with God and with our brothers, into the relations between superior and subject, between educator and pupil. It is a real dictatorship of love that does not impose its law from outside, but from within the heart, prompting us to discharge our duties spontaneously, generously and joyfully: in a word, to do our job with love, with all diligence, using all our resources of initiative and creativity.

With the spirit attuned to high ideals

The second aspect of this secret of Salesian joy, even in an austere and demanding life, is the one alluded to by Don Caviglia when he talks about the spirit being attuned to high ideals.

The man who is fired by high ideals — and this goes for revolutionaries, as well — is ready to sacrifice himself, to renounce everything in order to pursue those ideals; and this readiness for anything that is demanded is with him for as long as the ideals remain fresh and unsullied, for as long as he has no doubts at all about their value.

The day these ideals cloud over and their validity begins to be questioned, the Salesian's availability for any duty is diminished and he lapses into a way of life that is flatly "middle-class". This is the sure sign that his ideals are on the wane.

The rhythm of intense, enthusiastic work that Don Bosco imparted to his Congregation is nothing more than the visible reflection of his own high ideals infused into his followers: deep faith, a sincere love for the souls of the young, the calm assurance of being on the path traced out by God.

Inspired by these ideals, the Salesians "became accustomed to killing the pain of the thorns, which often sank in deep, with the anodyne of faith and slogging work as a member of a dedicated team. In spite of inexperience and lack of qualifications, the Salesian Society drove ahead with great enthusiasm. And this derived largely from the quiet assurance of having God on their side, an assurance that, with Don Bosco, stemmed from the certainty of being firmly grafted on to the vine of the Church; and his calmness was infectious." (PIETRO STELLA, *op. cit.*, II, 383).

With the generosity of "I'll do it"

In the family setting, as the demarcation-line between 'mine' and 'thine' becomes blurred over into 'ours', there is also a broadening of the concept of 'duty'. 'Duty' is not just what is imposed by obedience to the rule or to a Superior, but it is what a given situation requires of us as members of a team. Let us get this point perfectly clear: "Oh, it's none of my business!" is pretty well a profanity in a Salesian community; and contrasts sharply with: "I'll do it", which sums up the whole spirit of

willingness to take things on: and this is being a real Salesian. "I've no idea what there is in it for me", adds Don Caviglia canily, "but it's certainly a major triumph for the Congregation, which has grown entirely on the strength of its "I'll do it" attitude, that is, by dint of self-sacrifice: there is no other explanation for the spread of the missions." (ALBET CAVIGLIA, *Conferences*, 62).

Don Bosco wanted to forge religious who would be disposed to make sacrifices "not of health, nor of money, nor of mortifications or penances, nor of extraordinary abstentions from food — but of THE WILL." Religious who would be ready "now to climb into the pulpit, and then to go down to the kitchen; now to take a class and then to sweep; now to teach catechism or to pray in church, and then to assist in the recreation; now to study quietly in their cells, then to go for a walk with the boys; now to command and then to obey." (*BM*, 7, 47) In this sort of school, "there is nothing entrusted to the layman that the priest or cleric would not turn his hand to: they would simply be following the example of their Father who, when necessary, could be a tailor, carpenter, choir-master, juggler, proof-reader, preacher, writer, confessor, priest. It all added up to an interior disposition of availability coupled to a versatility where the keen observer could discern a spirit of abnegation carried to its furthest limits.", writes Don Ceria, "a tradition the like of which was not to be found anywhere else." (EUGENIO CERIA, *op. cit.*, 1, 724).

"Nevertheless", adds Don Ceria, Don Bosco feared "that, as increasing numbers of members brought a greater division of labour, a drift toward the easy life would set in". With this in mind he wrote the following grave warning — indeed, it almost amounts to a threat: "When ease and convenience begin to get a grip among us, then our Society will have had its day." (*IBID.*, 724-5).

If we are sincere, we must admit that his fears were in no way unfounded. With the necessary division of labour, there is now emerging to an ever-increasing extent the demand for a spe-

cific qualification; but that should not militate against the Salesian's versatility, or, more important still, against his availability whenever the need arises. When the indifference of "That's no business of mine" becomes the rule in our communities, the Congregation will be well on its way, as Don Bosco warns us, to its decline.

In communion with the confrères

The term 'communion' is not to be understood as discounting all activities whatsoever carried on outside the community (although Don Bosco did not conceal his preference for communal activity), but rather as excluding any form of individualism.

Don Bosco's conception of his Congregation was strongly unitary. His ideas on this are very clearly expressed in a conference given to the confrères in March, 1869, after the Holy See had given definitive approval to the Congregation. (*BM*, 9, 571-6).

Don Bosco took the evangelical concept of the common life as the basic principle for his own foundation ("How good and how pleasant it is, when brothers live in unity!" *Ps.* 132/3). Hence, the requirement of living "in unity", which, in the final analysis, means living "in one place, in one spirit and with one end in view" (*BM*, 9, 573).

After the approval of the Constitutions, Don Bosco filled in the outlines of his thought on the triangle 'rule — superior — community' as it affected the unity of life which was to be fostered within the Congregation. In the conference for Rectors held in January, 1876, he said: "If you want to work with all good will but outside the framework of the Rule, each one will work, and perhaps work well, but it will be an individual effort and not a collective one. Now the good that is expected to derive from the religious orders lies precisely in the fact that they work collectively . . . If we depart from the strict requirements of the Rule and continue to work, then one will go over there, the other come over here, doing good work, mind you, but

individually. This is the start of relaxation." (*BM*, 12, 80-1).

It should not be difficult, in the light of what has been said, to home in on the fundamental nucleus of Don Bosco's thought. For him, it is not just a matter of the Congregation's having a profoundly unitary structure: it has to WORK that way as well, along the lines traced by God, expressed by the Rule, and embodied by the Superior. For further evidence of his aversion to individual working, we have: "the spectre of individualism", the "quaerere quae sua sunt", and "the first pang of the death throes of religious Congregations". (*BM*, 12, 468).

Don Bosco wanted the action of his sons to be entirely personalized: the robot-Salesian or pharisaical legalism were right outside his line of thought. He wanted his Salesians to be sons and brothers; he wanted them to have a lively sense of the problems and interests of the religious family to which they belonged, he wanted them to share in full its ideals and mission. So he wanted them to carry out the task assigned to them, plying all their personal resources with love and dedication, and ready to give a generous helping hand to any brother in need.

Individualism is the complete antithesis of all this: its manifestation is a sure sign of a fading sense of family, it is symptomatic of a progressive drifting away from one's own religious community, the abandonment of one's ideals and mission. Individualism leads the religious to the pursuit of his own egoistic interests independently of the community he belongs to, or — worse still — to the manipulation of it for his own ends.

The prevalence of such individualism in our communities would certainly mean curtains for the Congregation.

In intimate union with God

Make no mistake about it: the Salesian life, in the mind of Don Bosco, was not possible without a deep spiritual life: a spiritual life that was not tacked on to the work-life but was all one with it; or, rather, that found concrete expression in work.

tenance from contact with him to see us through to the fulfilment of our vocation.

It has been stated by someone whose views command respect that, without the vital contact with God, without His presence in our lives, it is a difficult thing under present-day conditions to keep one's faith intact. How is it possible for anyone to pass on the Good News from the Lord if he himself, for one spurious reason or the other, has no contact with God and does not even bother about it? There is no other source of evangelical action. The Special General Chapter knew what it was about when it stated: "To help people both young and old to encounter Christ through the Salesian communities, it is necessary to have encountered him personally first of all." (*Orange Book*, 306)

We must have the courage to face the truth and ask ourselves: in the course of our working day, how much time do we really spend in direct contact with God? How often do we use the more prolonged periods of prayer as breathing-spaces in which to recover from the lassitude and nervous tension that are the inevitable bi-products of modern life and of the work we do?

When work replaces prayer

In this matter the Constitutions and Regulations offer us good advice and practical guide-lines, the fruit of years of experience not only in the Congregation but in the Church as a whole. To reject, or at any rate neutralize such invaluable aids amounts to a form of spiritual and apostolic suicide.

The effects would be still more serious if this rejection or disregard took place at community level. In this case, there would be every reason for calling to account the superiors of the house, because they are responsible in this very field of creating the conditions in which Salesians "may have life, and have it more abundantly".

We Italians have every reason for calling the superiors of a community "animatori". In fact, it is a matter of the true Chri-

stian life. The Constitutions do not demand any form of formalistic observance of vapid and barren practices of piety, but what they do ask is that the Salesians should have the spiritual provisions that are absolutely necessary not only for the religious or the apostle, but for anyone at all who believes.

To deny this reality with some pseudo-argumentation or to ignore it in practice — this is distasteful, but it must be said — is to stand opposed to the Word of God and the Gospel, to Church and Council, to the Congregation and Don Bosco (who never for a moment dreamed of eliminating the sustenance of prayer from the lives of his sons, so that they dropped from exhaustion in a frenzy of activity bearing no resemblance whatever to the apostolate as he meant it to be).

I know, I hear it said too often: these Salesians cannot pray, they cannot come together for prayer, because they are working flat out all the time. I would like to say in all sincerity that, judging from what I have seen on more than one occasion, this simply is not the case. The ones who give up or neglect prayer are not always weighed down by extra-heavy work-loads; on the contrary, I know some first-class Salesians, tireless workers, true apostles, who can find time for prayer without straining themselves.

There is perhaps another explanation for this flight from prayer, and this has to be said to keep the record straight, without indulgence in vain illusions: sometimes it is a matter of plain laziness. Generally speaking it needs more effort to pray than to bury oneself in external work (this is what Chautard says, and he knows what he is talking about). But it must also be said that not infrequently laziness is engendered by a sickly, atrophied faith. A feeble faith certainly cannot sustain prayer: faith and prayer vary in direct proportion.

Then we have not the courage to admit that such a situation exists at all, and from there it is but a short step to theorizing about the uselessness or impossibility of prayer, which is a

more serious and obvious manifestation of a faith that is languishing, even moribund. In this case the only remedy is a 'conversion' in depth, which involves a review of our current thinking with the object of giving faith a chance to reassert itself.

When work is too absorbing

However, I acknowledge that cases can arise where prayer really is crowded out of a Salesian's life by pressure of work. To the confrères who are affected in this way, I should like to speak frankly, without fear of expressing a merely personal opinion.

A multiplicity of activities, even though they are in line with what is required by obedience, cannot be allowed to overwhelm a Salesian, crushing out his soul, which is one of those he has to save. Work must not, like Saturn, devour its children. St Charles Borromeo, who could hardly be accused of living in a state of cosy, self-centred inertia, had this to say to the priests of his time (and we all know what they were like): "Do not give yourself to other things so completely that there is nothing left for yourself; in fact, you must keep in mind the souls that you guide, but without forgetting yourself" (*Acta Ecclesiae Mediae*, 1559, 1177-8). Looking at it the other way, as a Protestant Pastor says: "Prayer is action, since it gives an opening to the only really effective action, which is the realization of the word of God." This Word-Action, he adds, is realized "when I listen to it, take it seriously, and set it moving across the world through my life of obedience." (S. RIGAUD, in *Vie Spirituelle*, October, 1968, 165).

There are two cases, then: either the work really is too much, and needs to be scaled down and evened out; or the work is badly organized and distributed. What is wanted here is a restructuring of the duty-roster so that the Salesian is not robbed of his sacrosanct right to time dedicated to prayer, which is certainly as inviolable as his right to food, rest and study. (Cf. *Reg.* 53) It was not by chance that the Special General Chapter laid

down in art. 53 of the Regulations: "Each community at the beginning of the year, taking into consideration the various works on hand, shall fix a time-table in such a way as to secure for the confrères their right to time for prayer."

I should like to round off this point with an observation that I found in a work written by a scientist and scholar on the crises of ideology of priests and religious today. The author is a layman who has made a thorough study of over 700 of these cases. At the end of his synthesis, he concludes the work with this unexpected question: "Would it not be fitting to remind ecclesiastics, and laymen as well, of the Grand Absentee of our age: prayer?" And he goes on: "Alexis Carrel pointed out that the fall of the great civilizations has always been adumbrated by the loss of the sense of the sacred and of prayer. Could it be that we have now reached the eve of the break-up of our own civilization?" (MARCEL ECK, *L'uomo prete*, 145).

We may not accept the writer's vision, which is rather pessimistic, but such a question put by a man of his calibre should give us something to think about. On the other hand, it is a source of encouragement for the future to see how many souls there are (and this includes a great number of our own confrères all over the world) who, even in our own troubled times, are living witnesses to the necessity of prayer. They don't make a great song and dance about it, but they work away for their fellow-men without stint; and they cannot do without prayer, because "prayer is life and breath", both for themselves and for those they work for.

3. THE TEACHING OF THE SPECIAL GENERAL CHAPTER

Let us take a look at what the SGC has to say about work. From a quick survey, it is immediately obvious that the accent of renewal in this line falls heavily on the faithful continuity of our tradition. In the new Constitutions, undoubtedly the best thing to come out of the SGC, we find a little compendium of our tra-

dition in the matter. Article 42 states: "(persevere in) 'Work and temperance and the congregation will flourish'", and then goes on: "On the other hand seek comfortable surroundings and a life of ease and we shall cease to exist. The Salesian gives himself to his mission with a ceaseless energy. For these reasons, work in the apostolate for us has a mystic value: it has a divine quality and is urgent. To achieve the end we should be ready to suffer cold and heat, hunger and thirst, fatigue and rejection whenever the glory of God and the salvation of souls requires it."

A contribution to the construction of the world

The Acts, then, after declaring that, for the Salesian, work is the complete gift of himself to his apostolic task and "is at one and the same time a mystical asceticism (in plain language, the acceptance of every sacrifice to further the work of God), and an obligation of consecration in joyous freedom", concludes: "This attitude puts the Salesians in sympathy with the man of today, who is conscious of being 'homo faber', transformer of the world, and actor in history. With his labour, as a workman of the kingdom, he undertakes to do his part to animate in a Christian manner this movement (sic)" (*Orange Book*, 97). It is the briefest of sketches, but it will serve to set our field of operations into the vast context of human labours and of the Church's contribution to the construction of the world so that "in this way the work of building up the earthly city can always have its foundation in the Lord and can tend toward Him." (*LG*, 46).

It was, however, when it came to deal with the high-voltage question of poverty that the SGC really began to turn up new facets, especially with regard to our mission.

Work and solidarity with the poor

Article 87 of the Constitutions declares: "Untiring and self-sacrificing work is a characteristic left us by Don Bosco and is a concrete expression of our poverty. In our daily toil we aim to

be one with the poor, who live by the sweat of their brow and we bear witness to the world of today that work has a human and Christian value."

The theme of 'work-temperance', understood as a witness to solidarity with the poor, which was the way Don Bosco and his early helpers lived, tended to become a little submerged in the old Constitutions. Now it has been brought up into full view because it "is especially expressive of real witness to poverty in a generous service" (*Orange Book*, 593).

It must be first of all a *personal witness*, through "a way of life *on the personal level* that is simple and austere, which refuses those comforts and conveniences that are commonly associated with the middle class; . . . and he (the Salesian) is ready to share in some way that insecurity which accompanies the life of the really poor". This witness is also to be borne through "tireless work, that takes on the appearance of total commitment to the mission." (*op. cit.*, 605).

Then there is his *collective witness*, which in practice means living "*in an austere style of common life*: we must feel that we are closer to the poor by being frugal in food, by refusing all that is superfluous, and by aiming at functional simplicity in our building." (*op. cit.*, 606) This should be a source of joy, of liberation from the slavery of things, and of complete openness to love of our neighbour. The process of true liberation generates its own energies — and who knows how much can be produced by a Congregation whose members train young people to look on life as a serious undertaking, as service, as WORK? This again must be approached in the right way; certainly not as something to be suffered as a punishment or haggled over as a bargaining point, but as a task embraced as an instrument of liberation and social reconstruction, as a wellspring of human progress, as a personal contribution to the building-up of a more humane, more fraternal community.

These are the prospects opened up for us by SGC with re-

gard to the spiritual heritage left to us by Don Bosco. It is by no means a matter of pretentious rhetoric. Not at all. We are dealing here with a life-ideal set up for us by the God who yesterday called Don Bosco and today calls us to carry through the same mission of the salvation of youth.

They can hardly fail to be impressed by "such a witness in the midst of a world that presents the acquisition of money, the satisfaction of the senses and nosing ahead in the rat-race as the normal signs of success." (JOSEPH LECUYER: *Report to the General Superiors on 'Evangelization and the religious life'*, 1974) We have to nourish these grand ideals, which enable us to see the way our mission in the world should go; only these are capable of refloating us off the shoals and sand-banks of the middle-class life so that we can get back on our course with all sails set.

4. INVITATION TO AN HONEST ASSESSMENT

A renewal is always something of a conversion; and a conversion implies a frank assessment of what *is* compared to what ought to be. It needs a clear grasp of a situation that has become muddied up, and a strong resolve to do something about it.

I think, dear confrères, that this whole letter can present an opportunity for making this honest comparison. The question is: seen in the light of our vocation and our tradition, what is in fact our daily life; and then what should it, and could it be? But what I have to say now is meant to be a help in surveying the darker corners of our fidelity.

The fears of Don Bosco

Here again Don Bosco can be of great help to us. Of course, what he shows us how to identify is not so much the evil itself, which lies at a deeper level, but the symptoms. But if the symp-

toms are discernible, there is no doubt about the cause; and the honest recognition of them, in itself a sign that the malady is taking a turn for the better, permits prompt corrective action to be taken.

In a talk with his sons on the evening of the 14th of August, 1876, shortly after the final approval of the Constitutions, Don Bosco was discussing the ruin of religious congregations, and he mentioned some of the causes: "The first . . . is idleness, not working enough. The second . . . is the departure from simplicity and to much food and drink. The third . . . shall we call it egoism, the spirit of reform, murmuring? It is all the same to me." He concluded: "Always remember that if divisions creep in amongst us, things will not go well with the Congregation. United in one single spirit we shall do ten times as much and work better." (*BM*, 12, 383-4).

In the September of the same year, when he was preaching the closing sermon of the annual retreat, Don Bosco brought the matter up again in his account of the dream of the four nails. These represent the four scourges of religious congregations. Each of the nails had one of the inscriptions: "Their god is their stomach"; "They are doing their own thing, not Jesus Christ's"; "Their tongues spit poison"; "They live for their armchair and slippers" (*BM*, 12, 466-7). A comparison with the preceding paragraph will reveal the resemblance.

But Don Bosco treats more fully elsewhere of the dangers that face the Congregation in the famous dream of the mantle (at San Benigno on the 10th September, 1881: cf. *BM*, 15, 183-7). This letter is not the place to make a detailed analysis, but it will suit our present purposes to try, from Don Bosco's description of the syndrome, to penetrate the mysterious malady that threatens the Salesian Society.

Fundamentally, it is a crisis of faith, an eclipse of the sense of God, with a corresponding acceptance of a concept that is entirely horizontal and hedonistic, bound up with the pursuit of self-

interest (“What is on earth is good enough for us”; “They are all out for themselves and not for Jesus Christ”). The rest of the symptoms are only the spin-offs of a life lived without reference to fundamentals. The are:

- distaste for prayer (“negligence of the things of God”);
- sensuality (“concupiscence of the eyes”, “licentiousness, “gluttony”, etc.);
- the easy life (“indolence”, “sleep”, “bed”, “money” etc.);
- pride and self-seeking (“pride of life”, and the absolute negation of obedience). (*BM*, 15, 183-7).

All things considered, it is impressive to note how the various manifestations of the ills described by Don Bosco correspond very closely with our present-day definition of “middle-classism”. This fact should make us think seriously: allowing for the extraordinary nature of the dream, it is still a lesson, a warning, transmitted to all generations by our father Don Bosco, who was undoubtedly inspired by the Spirit of God.

The scene of the struggle

At the back of the move into the middle class, then, is a crisis of values, which for us is a crisis of faith. It is here that we have bring about a profound renewal if we are to take the remedy to the seat of the disease. Conversely, once faith has re-established itself, it sets up, so to speak, an electron-bombardment of our interior attitudes; and, given the deep integration that exists amongst our various parts, there is an inter-action between our faith and our life: faith renews life, the renewed life strengthens faith.

So, to wage war successfully on upward mobility, we must first of all re-discover our sense of mission-vocation, and THAT means a change of attitude at depth.

Now for the second aspect of the matter. Let us pick our way through it, keeping to the practice rather than the theory.

You have seen how Don Bosco presses home his warnings about a number of fatal flaws in the Congregation: eating, drinking, dress, sleep, and all of it extremely topical.

There are certain interpretations of the religious life that are professedly liberalizing but are really permissive, because they distort the following of Christ or drain it of its real content. Then there are the enticements of the consumer society, which, ever more cunning and aggressive, whet the appetite for comforts and pleasures and luxuries, even in the poor countries. In this sort of milieu, it is hardly surprising that, in the religious life itself, it is easy to adopt standards and styles that are in strident contrast with our consecration, not to mention our profession of poverty.

And the consequences of all this? Our work in the Church is turned topsy-turvy and twisted out of all recognition. The very ones who, by their austerity and detachment from worldly goods, should be the shock-troops in the struggle with a society that has for its ideals the comfortable life and material pleasures, are in practice seen to be tagging along with that society's hedonism.

The most important thing here is to have clear ideas about the fundamental realities of the religious life, which can only be a translation into practice of the teachings of Christ. One constant theme of these teachings is 'renunciation', the complete break with the ideas and attitudes of a world entirely taken up with material interests.

The perennial need for asceticism

"If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me." "For whoever would save his life will lose it." ". . . the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and men of violence take it by force." "Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction

... For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life." "If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away." This is tough talking: hardly the formula for a life that dodges every form of renunciation. All these quotations point the same way: the comfortable life is simply not on.

Now surely the words that Jesus addressed to all Christians have lost none of their pertinence, especially for those who have left everything to follow Him closely: and we have done just that. In all reason, there is no escaping from these conclusions.

We would be seriously wrong to think that nowadays we no longer have any need of what our Fathers called asceticism and mortification. "Perhaps never before", says Fr Voillaume, "has asceticism been so badly needed as today." And then he adds: "It holds good at any time, for instance, that we must practice self-discipline in the use of drink, television, and amusements that excite the sensual appetites." (RENÉ VOILLAUME, *La vita religiosa nel mondo attuale*, 221).

The same writer, discussing the compromises, more or less covert, that religious can yield to, makes some very telling points. He says: "They allow themselves any number of little compensations that they shrink from acknowledging to themselves: it happens with shows, reading-matter, riotous imaginings, with friendships in which they seek emotional compensations that are not without a certain ambivalence; and finally it shows in materialistic attitudes. Attention must be paid to these attitudes, because the temptation to materialistic excesses comes to a head at the age when, normally, there is a desire to have children." (IBID., 178).

What we have to do, then, is to make our revision of life, using the Gospel, sound modern doctrine, and especially the advice of Don Bosco. And we must not be afraid of getting down to the details of what is involved in the virtue of temperance, which, as we have seen, has much more to it than meets the eye at first glance.

The practical requirements of the Regulations

Certain articles of the new Regulations need to be reread and digested. It should be noted, in passing, that the Regulations represent the interpretation and practical application of the Constitutions. Instead of toning them down, or, worse still, disregarding them, we have to put them into practice, recognizing the authentic values that they contain. To cut down the Regulations or toss them off lightly would be tantamount to emptying the Constitutions of their contents, accepting all these splendid principles in theory but fighting shy of the logical consequences in the practice of them. I'll give a few examples.

Article 36 is a firm reminder of the moral obligations of confrères and superiors with regard the use of radio, television, and the rest of the mass media.

Article 39 draws the distinction between openness to one's neighbour, and the indiscriminate admittance of people from outside the community, which has the right and the need to enjoy the privacy that is proper to religious.

Article 50 speaks of doing something definite about community mortification. I would like you to take a steady look at article 61 as well. This makes specific and very practical suggestions, couched in the clearest of terms, about the practice of temperance as part of our authentic tradition.

Then there is no. 62, which is about the use of money, and no. 70 on the use of transport. But I think the one that is of special importance is article 71: "The community, whether local or provincial, should periodically examine its own state of poverty." This really is a salutary provision, and should be made operative for the good of the community and of the individual member.

My dear confrères, let us not underestimate the importance of these practical suggestions. Don Bosco used to say that the big things are made up of the little things. Self-restraint, auste-

riety, mortification . . . they all mount up to become the one treasure, evangelical, religious, and profoundly human.

A certain scientist has something worth-while to say about this, and I was much impressed by his words. He is a Nobel Prize winner, and not usually preoccupied with religious matters. Having taken today's young people to task for demanding pleasure instead of searching for happiness, he describes the deficiencies of a "life without pain, a life of pleasure"; it "has no hills and no dales, it is like a plain with no light and no shade, and is therefore boring". And that's not all. The writer-scientist, Konrad Lorenz, concludes, with the historians, that the decadence of rulers and subjects can be attributed to affluence and the lack of something to struggle with.

It is a voice that, from a different viewpoint, confirms the wisdom contained in the call of the Gospel to asceticism, and underlines the depth of realism and insight in the warning of our Father mentioned above: "When the easy life takes root among us, our Society will have finished its course." (*BM*, 17, 272).

5. TIME, AN ASSET AND A LIABILITY

In a life devoted to self-discipline and work for the Kingdom, time is naturally seen as an extremely valuable commodity. We have only to look at the intensity with which Don Bosco filled every moment of his day: "Life is too short", he used to say, "we have to do what little we can before death takes us by surprise." (*BM*, 11, 409) "It is necessary to aim at more than we can manage, then there is some chance, perhaps, that we shall do all we can." (*BM*, 12, 383).

Fill in time "right up to the brim"

In the spirit of our Father, we should be able to repeat every day, not with our lips but with our lives, this beautiful prayer of Michel Quoist:

"There is no need to waste time, fritter it away, kill it.
Lord, time is a gift from You,
but a perishable gift that cannot be kept.
Lord, I have time, I have my time,
all the time You give me.
The years of my life, the days of my years,
the hours of my days: they are all mine.
It is for me to fill them, serenely, without fretting,
but to fill them all, right up to the brim, to offer them to You,
so that You can make their tasteless water
into rich wine,
as you did long ago at Cana for the human nuptials.

(MICHEL QUOIST, *Preghiere*, 10)

What is difficult is not so much filling in the few moments that are solemn or exciting or extraordinary: it is turning all the rest to good account, the ordinary, the humdrum, in fact, most of the time.

Craving for the unusual

In this age of ours, completely under the spell of the mass media as we are, we have lost our sense of wonder in the normal, and, in this state, we bid fair to lose interest in life itself. Our malady is a craving for the unusual and the exceptional. Millions, who are steadily building society by doing their obscure daily duty, are much less news-worthy than a gang of kidnappers or the lunacies of a cellophane goddess or of a song trying to climb the charts.

With a distorted vision of reality such as this, we run the risk of living in a constant state of flight from daily life, which is seen as normal, and therefore dull, and we stand an excellent chance of being caged in by restlessness and dissatisfaction, always on the hunt for something to break the monotony of our day. And so we find ourselves chronically addicted to the puerility of wait-

ing for life to start, with the risk, strange to say, that life will never start.

The Salesian service called « assisting »

A word on assisting is indicated here. This, the most characteristic of Salesian occupations, is (or should be) part of the Salesians' daily service to youth, their "presence among the young."

The Salesian educator is there with the boys as their friend, breaking down the barriers of superiority, age, culture: he talks to them, plays with them, discusses, corrects. This is one of the key constituents of the educational method of Don Bosco and our Family.

It's quite true: to be there among the boys at this time and that time during the day is demanding — it can be a real hair-shirt — demanding in patience, perseverance, and in a sincere love for the young. And it is perhaps here that we have been falling down, with the result that, in some places, the boys have been left alone, deprived of the presence of their educators, with consequences that are certainly not positive.

I know well enough that such negligence is occasionally justified in the name of certain theories. But the best Salesian tradition and experience, based on hard fact, bears out the wisdom of Don Bosco in what he wrote to his Salesians at Rome in 1884. I have the impression that much of the advice of our Father could usefully be repeated today in our various fields of activity, where we seem to be losing the sense of the Salesian identity.

I would invite you, dear confrères, to read that letter again: it appears in the appendix to the new Constitutions. You will find most valuable advice on Christian and Salesian educational theory; and it will convince you of the enormous educative influence, in the richest sense of the word, that the Salesians exert by their intelligent, friendly and pastoral presence, with nothing of Orwell's Big Brother about it, among the youngsters of today.

Many ways of wasting time

The full exploitation of the time available in a day, and assisting is one of many items, demands heroism. It is easy to see, then, why we yield to the temptation to waste our time in one way or the other. And there are so many ways of doing it.

First, taking it easy

The first way is to be work-shy. Quite frankly, I don't think that danger exists in the Congregation today. From what I have seen for myself and from the reports I have received from all over the world, I can state, with considerable admiration and at times with some apprehension, that the Salesians are formidable workers and that this is the image they present to the world. They press on even when, for reasons of health, they ought to ease up a little in their intense round of activities. On the missions and in the schools, in the parishes and the youth-centres . . . if there is any danger, it is from too much work.

Unfortunately, however there may be the exceptions, who, protected by the men in the front line, find various excuses for coasting commodiously along, doing just what they want. This sort of anomaly is thrown up when the confrère is not motivated by charity, which leads us to do from love what others do from the necessity of earning a living. This explains the phenomenon of what may be called "the religious functionary", who downs tools when his hours are up and promptly retires to attend to his own things, completely impervious to the call of community needs and fraternal charity.

It is obviously a form of unjustifiable egotism, evidence of an absolute lack of family sense: the fellow lives in the community and enjoys what it has to offer, not as an active member, but as a stranger.

Second, travels and studies

I wish to make what seems to me to be an apposite remark about this business of work and time: time that is not 'ours', but is at the disposal of the mission we have embraced and of the community we serve. Dealing with the operational trend-lines for the renewal of Salesian poverty, the SGC "recommends . . . that . . . amongst our plans for readjustment in the next six years, a primary place must (sic) be found for the cultural, professional and pastoral qualification of our confrères, who constitute our only riches". (*Orange Book*, 618.) The same SGC, however, on the subject of the administration of temporal goods, affirms that the Salesians "will act as custodians of the goods of the Church and will not allow any arbitrary or personal use of them", and recalls "that what they are administering is the precious fruit of the work of the confrères and a tangible sign of that providence which, through the generosity and sacrifices — sometimes beyond all calculation — of our benefactors enables us to carry on". (*Ibid.* 726.) These are words that the confrères, whatever their line may be, should never forget.

If the Congregation is facing considerable financial burdens (and what is involved here is the labours of the other members of the student's Province), it is certainly not to enable the student to follow his personal bent without any reference at all to the needs of the community or to the openings that are available; or that he can waste time and money on pseudo-cultural travel, or indulge in the luxury of degrees taking years of study that could have been devoted to something much more valuable. Ours is a poor family: this must be kept in mind. And our studies are all part of the mission to which we are sent.

Third, self-service 'charisms'

Don Bosco, as we have heard, enumerating the negative items in the life and future of the Congregation, speaks of those who

“love and seek their own thing, and not Jesus Christ’s”. I think a word or two on this would not be out of place. It may be the case today that we are palming off our desire for personal success as self-fulfilment, or even as the expression of our charisms.

We have to remember that charisms (given that we are dealing with true charisms, and not with self-will or caprice) are in the service of the mission, and that the discerning of them and the right use of them are entrusted to the “superior, with the help of the community” and not to the individual (cf. *Const.*, no. 97).

The fact is that Christian self-fulfilment is simply the perfect fulfilling of the will of God. It is a process of allowing ourselves to be shot through with the love of the Father, which breaks the barriers of our egoism and makes us capable of a perfect gift to God and to our brothers. This gift, stifled by the presence of sin within us, can start to be effective only through close participation in the pascal mystery. For anyone who entertains a programme of self-fulfilment apart from what is proposed by faith, there is the natural tendency to self-seeking and the pursuit of his own success rather than doing the will of God. In such a case it can happen that a confrère, who is engaged on our mission and finds the going laborious, with few perks for the ego and the nagging necessity of working with his brothers, resorts, for various specious reasons, to evasive tactics and branches out into private enterprise.

With such considerations as these in mind, the question that arises is: instead of objecting to certain types of work on the grounds of the validity of the apostolate, would it not be more to the point to object to our own incapacity, inertia and actual counter-witness? So, our work for youth is abandoned, for example, and replaced by the formation of small groups, preferably with a strong female element. This is done without real necessity, without authorization from the competent parties, often without adequate preparation. The results? Often extreme-

ly questionable. And the cost? One casualty, among others, is the community and religious life, which falls foul of conflicting duties and time-tables. This situation is all the more serious when confrères in formation are affected.

In this way, the young people we are responsible for are abandoned whilst we seek out a more congenial apostolate outside, less onerous and yielding more job-satisfaction. We may even abandon the humble, the little ones, the poor people deprived of culture, faith, and motor-cars, to attend to a group where the 'in' things are discussed: under-development, hunger in the world, sex, political involvement, and all this regardless of places, times, persons, situations . . . We are eager to collaborate with everyone, except our own brothers; we jump at the first opportunity to offer our services, provided they are sufficiently 'way out; but just dare to ask us to do the smallest job for the community, and see how many difficulties and excuses we can find.

The tale of such evasions could go on indefinitely, but I think that what has been said already is enough for a serious examination of conscience. Dear confrères, we must be convinced that any apostolate not in line with our mission, not blessed by the cordial 'Amen' of our community (which all too often has to accept a *fait accompli* for the sake of peace in the house), is not the will of God. As such, it will be something or other, but it will no longer constitute an apostolate. The apostle is sent by God; but in these deplorable cases, it is the individual who sends himself, and represents himself: which is a sad state of affairs.

Fourth, spiritless work

I would say quite bluntly: it can well be that some of us finish up with a work that is entirely profane; I'm referring to the confrères who work, certainly, and at times work hard: BUT THEY ARE NOT EVANGELIZING. For example, they conduct their classes, competently, but in such a way that the faith

never comes across: an atheist could do it just as well. To teach in this way shows that they could never have developed the sense of what it means to be a religious. A similar attitude to his work in a non-religious is understandable enough, but it is nothing less than scandalous in a man that has publicly made his religious profession, and in the Salesian Congregation.

The secular mentality today can also penetrate into other types of activity that are supposed to be specifically religious. There is, for instance, the 'lay' catechesis, in which those who take part are introduced to an ideology that is purely humanistic but dressed up as Christianity. And to do this, no scruples at all are entertained on the part of the 'catechists' about mutilating and counterfeiting the Word of God and turning it to their own ends, so as to form false consciences.

Not even the liturgical celebrations have escaped these contaminations. For some the celebration, instead of being the place to meet Christ and their brothers in Christ, is just a pally get-together or a discussion forum, where it has not already deteriorated into a platform for polemics or confrontation. You do not have to delve very far into the profundities of the mystery that is celebrated in the liturgy to see the dangerously misleading absurdities of such celebrations. But there is something of still greater moment on this subject, which concerns individuals as much as communities.

6. THE AIM OF OUR WORK: EVANGELIZATION

I think that everyone will agree, at least in principle, that our whole work is directed towards evangelization, which for us means education and Christian formation. To reach this goal, of course, a number of factors have to be taken into account — places, persons, age, social class, etc. — since they are part of "education to the Gospel." This ought not, however, to induce us to close or retrench our work of general education or character-

training, such as cultural and social activities: which, unfortunately, has sometimes happened. This side-tracking phenomenon would rob our mission of all significance, and it has its causes. Here is something of an ideological one: the essential mission of the Church today, and therefore our mission, is "the liberation of man from the evils of this world". Very true: but the Church on the universal plane and the Congregation at SGC level claim that the two fields of action are not mutually exclusive but must blend harmoniously. Apropos of this, the SGC quotes the felicitous formula of the General Catechetical Directory: "to evangelize is to civilize and to civilize is to evangelize" (*Orange Book*, 276).

The next question is: what do we have to do in our individual works to convert the ideal into reality, given the present-day requirements and, in particular, the needs of the young? It is as well to recall that the SGC made evangelization and catechesis central to our mission: it was not by chance that two documents, the third (Evangelization and catechesis) and fourth (Pastoral renewal), were devoted to it.

Today there is a lot of talk, and for good reason, about courageous ventures, renewal in depth, new experiments, the qualification and requalification of Salesians. All well and good! But is it not precisely in the sectors under discussion that we have to renew, up-date ourselves and put ourselves in the vanguard?

I invite you to reread documents 3 and 4 with their 'guidelines for action': it is along these lines that we have advance with courage and constructive creativity, if we wish to make Christ a reality for the new generation. The readjustment, an operation that has so often been misinterpreted, must set its sights on creating the conditions in which the Congregation will be equal to the mandate of evangelization that is woven into its fabric.

I shall pass on to you now three powerful ideas that will serve as a stimulus for the generation of the urgently needed evangelical 'New Look' in our apostolic activities.

1. "For the Salesian, the existence of young people living without Christ, and a Christ unable to find a welcome among young people, is not just a cause for regret, but is also a challenge and incentive to renew himself and to discover new ways and take any risks in order to proclaim efficaciously the salvation of God . . ." (*Ibid.*, 306).

2. "Our work of renewal should follow the lines marked out for us by the Church, and we must carry it out in the practical way expressed by Don Bosco in these simple words: 'Make upright citizens and good Christians' ". (*Ibid.*, 316).

3. "... Salesians . . . will consider the religious education of youth as the first apostolic activity of the Salesian apostolate; it asks therefore for a rethinking and for a reorganization of all Salesian works so that they may have as their main purpose the formation of the man of faith". (*Blue Book*, 187, quoted in the *Orange Book*, 279).

What importance do we attach to catechetics?

As a matter of immediate practicality in the field of catechetics, we can ask ourselves a few questions to enable us to evaluate the situation in our various circumstances.

What importance do we attach to catechetics at the provincial and local level? What stage have the deliberations of the Special Provincial Chapter reached in this matter? What positive steps have been taken to make catechetics an effective instrument of evangelization? Who is it entrusted to in the various works? What remote and immediate preparations are made for it? What modern methods and aids are used? What scheme has the Province afoot for the up-to-date preparation of men for this job?

And further: what part do the Word of God and the Eucharist play in our formation of the young and of the souls in general that are our responsibility?

I know, and it is a source of great consolation, that in many

places intelligent and generous work is going on to provide the nourishment that is so badly needed. I wish it were like that everywhere.

Woe is unto me if I preach not the gospel!

I don't see how you can possibly call a community 'Salesian' where, through negligence or, worse still, false educational ideologies, the people we are supposed to be working for are left without the nutriment of the Word of God, of the Blessed Eucharist, of the sacrament of reconciliation. I think of our Father, who, wherever he was, in the Oratory, in the train, in the street, with the powerful or with convicts, could always spread the Gospel. With Don Bosco we should take to heart the words of St Paul: "And how terrible it would be for me if I did not preach the gospel!"

I am not unaware of the difficulties that hinder our work of evangelization today. For example, the question is asked: what do you do when you have thousands of boys whose schooling consists of part-time attendance so tightly scheduled that the sessions follow on with hardly a breathing-space in between? Well, I would answer that with another question: given that the object of our mission is not class or games but teaching the Gospel, how much Christian life can get through to these swarms of boys who are in contact with our work for only a few hours before being crowded out by the next shift?

I don't think we can duck this question. In each case we have to ask ourselves: what can we do in these situations to make a concrete reality of the mission to which we have consecrated our lives?

The presence of laymen who have been suitably prepared and who realize that they are collaborators in a work of Christian and Salesian education certainly eases the problem. But we have to look after them, and at the right level, these co-workers who, thanks be to God, are available.

Consideration for parents, who in many ways become collaborators, also helps to make the work a better-integrated effort.

It is also plain to see that the few hours spent in the classroom are quite inadequate if we are to provide Christian education of the effectiveness demanded by present-day conditions.

The supplementary activities of cultural value, such as extra-mural activities, are of the greatest importance in any real educational work of a pastoral nature. As you know, in many countries these activities are obligatory for the schools and form part of the teachers' duties.

I would like to say this, dear confrères: in many cases, we no longer take boarders; and, what's more, school hours are confined to the morning, leaving the whole of the afternoon free. So, freed from the duties of teaching and assisting, what is done for the day-boys in the line of educational and religious activities in the afternoons? What about youth centres and boys' clubs? How is all this free time used apostolically? Again, many countries have the long week-end, with Saturdays as well as Sundays completely free. What do the Salesians do about their apostolate? Honest and realistic answers must be given to these questions.

I know that there are any number of works that are, in fact, being done by confrères on these two days. But it would be a very sad thing to have to report that there are Salesians who spend the time as a middle-class leisure week-end.

How many souls in need of the good Samaritan are left abandoned? How many confrères, already up to their necks in work, are looking for a helping hand on these days? And how can their appeal be left unheeded?

Free time does not mean wasted time

Obviously, even Salesians have to have their moments of relaxation. Don Bosco, the realist saint, alive to human needs, knew that the taut bow can snap. But when his men took a rest,

he did not want them to be idle, carried along spinelessly by the prevailing current. He wanted them to have 'active repose': rather, a change of occupation than a state of vacuity.

Better than abstract description for conveying the idea of what Don Bosco meant by the use of spare time is the account of the highly original and imaginative walks that he used to organize for his boys in the autumn. They were a mixture of apostolate, adventure, cultural enrichment, in which the boys were alternately actors and spectators; and underneath it all was the serene happiness that Don Bosco could infuse into anything he touched.

Free time for the Salesian, then, must not be time wasted. I am thinking, for example, of how the holidays can be enriched by courses for extra qualifications or refresher courses in the various fields of interest to the confrère. I know that not a few Provinces have organized very successful courses offering a good choice of material, which have proved to be most useful and have elicited general satisfaction. So let us see many more of these.

But holidays become time lost when there is a break not only from our daily occupations, but also from our daily duties as religious.

Today, when we absorb secularism and relativism into the subconscious as easily as we breathe, we can just as easily slip into the tendency to treat rest and relaxation as time for free-wheeling, as a parenthesis (big or small, what's the difference?), and sometimes as a complete hiatus with our consecration and the duties that *always* accompany it and admit of no break of any sort.

Dear confrères, I would like you to realize the deep contradiction that this attitude denotes. The religious life has become a dead weight and is made tolerable only by a periodic escape into the lost paradise of the 'world', which cannot be renounced. In this situation, the identity of the religious has

lost definition and he is living, whether he is conscious of it or not, a double life.

And now for the holidays that only the real bourgeoisie can take: first, they must be of a decent length; then, of course, one must see a bit of life as lived by the other, the better half; inevitably this means some travelling around, but then there's no lack of funds; and we all agree how important dialogue is: think of all the people one would never dream of meeting in the ordinary run of things. As for the evening's entertainment, well, one has to be broad-minded: if it turns out to be a little scurrilous or salacious, you know what to avoid next time . . . you see, we are Christians, and religious as well.

Such is the mentality that spawns the desire for social contacts with women, an exercise that strongly resembles, even when the prospects are at their rosiest, the antics of a high-wire acrobat who is so sure of himself that he does not use a net. Hence also the reading of books, periodicals and papers that are anything but sober and constructive. These finish up by fatally blunting the moral sense, or, at the very least, developing attitudes and sensibilities that entertain values quite contrary to those inherent in religious profession or Christian witness.

I hope and pray that these hypothetical situations always remain that way, and that every Salesian feels day by day that "consecration to God is a singular dignity that involves a total commitment. It is impossible to live in mediocrity or compromise; otherwise it amounts to renouncing the total gift and reneguing on the practice of perfect chastity for the love of God. The end-product is a colourless celibacy". (RENÉ VOILLAUME, *La vita religiosa nel mondo attuale*, 178).

We are full-time Salesians

Dear Confrères, we are indeed full-time Salesians. The obligations we took on when we offered our whole heart to Christ are with us every moment of our life.

And it is precisely this gift lived without parentheses or reservations or looking back, seen clearly and interpreted radically, that will make all the time put at our disposal by God a happy time and a constructive one for ourselves and our brothers.

Conclusion

As you have seen, the subject of this letter, summed up in the two words 'work' and 'self-restraint', has shown many facets and been the source of some reflections on the fundamental values of our life as Salesians "consecrated for a specific mission". These values mean that each one of us adopts certain attitudes that, in a certain sense, are the distinctive mark of our identity, as Don Bosco left it to us. This identity we wish to remain intact and unsullied to continue for generations to come the work assigned to the Congregation by Providence.

To this end, I invite you to look back over the pages, even as a community, to make a practical examination: it will be a good thing for everyone.

And, to spur us on to the task, let us look not only at the Salesians who have gone before us but also at the marvellous example of our present confrères, the great and the lowly, many of them very old men. In all sorts of situations, heroically, silently, they live the words repeated by our Father to Don Fagnano for the benefit of his sons in any age: "Constantly remind all our Salesians of the motto we have adopted: 'work and temperance'. With these weapons we shall be able to conquer everything and everybody". (EUGENIO CERIA, *Epistolario*, Letter to Mons. Fagnano, dated 14.10.1877).

I send you my fraternal greetings, which I would give you personally if I could.

Let us pray for each other.

FR. LUIGI RICCI
Rector Major