

I. THE LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

Rome, January 1976

Dearest confreres and sons,

First of all, I would like to express once again my sincerest thanks for your fraternal and affectionate participation in my Golden Jubilee celebration. I was deeply moved by your good wishes, gifts, prayers, and most of all by your promise of renewed fidelity to Don Bosco. May I ask you to continue to assist me with your prayers and good Salesian spirit. At the same time I assure you of a remembrance in my daily prayers.

The Centennial of the Salesian Missions: the Opening Celebrations

We began the celebration of the Centennial of our Missions last November in Turin. You will find a full account of the events of those beautiful days in this issue and elsewhere.¹ Here I would only like to remark that those days were characterized by an exuberant enthusiasm shared by all the participants, and in particular by the the veteran and the young Salesian missionaries. The latter had been preparing themselves during the preceding month at the Salesianum in Rome, and received the crucifixes during the concelebrated Mass presided over by Cardinal Agnelo

¹ See *ANS*, December '75 and below, pp. 53-57.

Rossi, thus re-enacting in a way the same ceremony that had taken place one hundred years earlier in the same place with the first ten Salesian missionaries. This time there was also a group of Salesian Sisters, accompanied by their Superior General Mother Ersilia Canta and members of her Superior Council.

Days later all these missionaries were granted a special audience by Pope Paul VI, who addressed them with great affection and expressed his sincere appreciation for the missionary work done by both Congregations. His thoughts and feelings are reported below, in the eighth section of this issue.² I hope that we will all be inspired by them to be as grateful and loyal to the Holy Father as Don Bosco was.

The official commemoration of the Centennial was held on December 11 in the Salesian Pontifical University (UPS) Auditorium in Rome, in the presence of Card. Baggio, who delivered the keynote address, of the President of the Italian Republic, of distinguished personalities of the Italian government and of the Church, and many friends.

Significant and pleasing as these celebrations were, we, of course, cannot stop at them. Our Centennial could only be fittingly celebrated by doing our best to promote the missionary spirit at all levels, with all means available, beginning with our own boys. The reports that are beginning to pour in from the periphery are a proof that this desire to promote the missionary spirit is alive among us and is expressed through various initiatives. This should create a climate which is suitable for the growth of new vocations. For it should never be forgotten or doubted that the missionary spirit is for us the tradition-honored high road to new vocations.

Let us therefore, my dear confreres, carry forward this missionary enthusiasm and express it in every way we can think of.

² See below, pp. 81-86. The official text appeared on the *Osservatore* Nov. 23, 1975, Ital. Ed.

And now to the “traditional” letter, which will deal with a topic of special significance nowadays, inasmuch as it affects the very future of our beloved Congregation. Besides, certain theories and praxes have been developed on this subject, which are at variance with the teaching of the Church and with the explicit will of our Congregation. The topic of our letter is:

PERSONAL SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

We need men of God to guide us

I will take the clue from an event in the life of Don Bosco which happens to be chronologically related to the Centennial we are now celebrating, but is of a totally different nature.

In those extraordinarily busy months of 1875, Don Bosco had to endure a most distressing situation, which struck at the very root of his role of priest and guide of souls. In fact, in the Fall of that year, his faculties for confession were revoked by his Archbishop. I invite you to read the story of this incident — considered by Fr. Ceria as “the sad case about hearing confessions” —, as is told in the 9th volume of the Biographical Memoirs.³

It was the kind of trial that humiliated him in his priestly honor and hampered him from exercising the ministry of the confessional, which was a key factor in his educational system and a major function of his role as priest and superior of his community; yet, Don Bosco did not lose his self composure. He did what a Saint would do. Not to cause “scandal and gossip”, he quietly left the Oratory and retired to Borgo San Martino. In a very respectful letter to his Superior he wrote: “I humbly beg you... to deliver me from this situation which, if it is sad for everyone, it is much more so for the Superior of a community,

³ MB 9: 478-483.

who is the minister of confession and communion in many houses".⁴ The matter was straightened out soon enough. To those who would have preferred a more energetic reaction to the unfair treatment received, Don Bosco would only say: "It is better for us to bow our heads, keep silent and suffer".⁵

At the conclusion of the account of this most regrettable episode, Fr. Ceria wrote: "The spiritual heirs of Blessed Don Bosco were to gain many souls to God in the years to come. Therefore the Lord enriched him with the treasures of his grace, and helped him grow in perfection through most grievous trial, which led him to the apex of holiness and made his Congregation expand so widely".⁶

The recollection of this trial of Don Bosco as a confessor and spiritual guide, presents me, as I said above, with the opportunity of sharing some reflections on this timely and important topic with you.

Two basic statements

The topic of confession and spiritual direction is extremely wide, and could be considered from various points of view. We will consider it this time only from the viewpoint of *personal* or *individual* formation, leaving the community aspect of direction to another time and place. We will develop our topic on these two basic statements: there is no spiritual formation unless it is personal; in Don Bosco's style, personal spiritual formation was achieved through confession and spiritual direction.

As you can see, we are here dealing with a vital matter, that touches the lives of all of us, since all of us are sinners, all of us have limitations, all of us need spiritual help. But to a greater degree it interests those who are responsible directly for formation

⁴ MB 11: 481.

⁵ MB 11: 469.

⁶ MB 11: 489.

and those who are in formation, that is, among the latter, novices, students of philosophy and theology, those in *tirocinium*, Coadjutor Brothers in the second period of professional training, and young priests. These are the future of our Congregation; and, in the words of Vatican II, the future of religious Institutes “depends very largely on the training of their members”.⁷

1. FORMATION MUST BE PERSONAL

In my letter of July 1975 I expressed my great pleasure at the signs of recovery I saw during my visit in Latin America. I told you about the “splendid and original new developments for poor boys; fresh and lively modes of prayer among the young confreres; ... the influx of very mature young men trying their vocation” — things that I found there.⁸ Now I am going to add that the reasons for my hope and optimism go deeper still.

I see that not a few confreres are acquiring a keener awareness of the truth so clearly stated by the Special General Chapter: “In order to work out this necessary discernment and renewal, historians are not sufficient, nor theologians nor politicians, nor organizers: we need *spiritual* men, men of faith, sensitive to the things of God and ready to work with courageous obedience as our Founder did”.⁹ More and more among us come to realize that is not enough to get excited and get involved in discussions, projects and activities... “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain”.¹⁰ Without the Blessed Mother every work of ours is sterile, because, as Don Bosco said, “it is because of her that our Congregation exists and prospers”.¹¹

⁷ *Perfectae caritatis*, 18 (W. Abbott, *Documents of Vatican II*, p. 478).

⁸ ASC No. 279 (July-Sept. '75), 5.

⁹ *Acts of SGC*, 18.

¹⁰ *Psalm* 126, 1.

¹¹ MB 12: 578.

Many initiatives on spiritual formation

This awareness is at the root of the many initiatives concerning spiritual training, which were hardly conceivable in times past, but can be seen all around us today.

To mention just a few of them:

— the international Courses on On-going Formation being held since 1974 at the Salesianum in Rome, with very encouraging results;

— the “Roman Encounter” of all the Masters of Novices of the Congregation, which lasted over a month and helped reach an agreement on practical guidelines on the training of novices;

— the very important “Days of Reflection on Salesian Priestly Formation”, held July 6-19, 1975 in Rome and attended by over forty Directors and Confreres in charge of our studentates of philosophy and theology;

— the long-awaited and well-attended “World Congress of the Coadjutor Brothers”, in which problems on formation were often at the center of debates;

— the “Intercontinental Meetings” of the European, Latin American and Far-Eastern Provincials, where the topic “The Province as a Formative Community” was discussed;

— the “European Salesian Symposium on the Renewal of the Spiritual Retreat”, which was most favorably rated by the participants and has already produced fine results;

— the first “Two-year Course on Spirituality” at the Salesian Pontifical University in Rome, which has recently ended (July '75) with gratifying results;

— the “Course on On-going Formation for the Coadjutor Brothers of Latin America”, which is now on its second cycle.

I only mentioned the initiatives on international scale; the national and provincial ones would make the list too long for this letter. All this gives us good reasons to hope for the future.

But initiatives are not enough...

We would, however, only fool ourselves unless we realized that we are going through a cultural and religious crisis, that is shaking the very fiber of our existence. The initiatives to which I referred are certainly necessary, but are not enough. Rather, they cannot achieve their intended purpose, unless the supernatural values which they are meant to convey, are not fully accepted by the confreres, especially the younger ones, and made part and parcel of their living experience.

The intellectual, psychological, social, cultural and technical elements and aspects of formation, useful as they are for the harmonious development of the person, are inadequate for the job of formation, until they are brought back to their original and unifying principle, that is, one's conscience, understood as one's interior awareness of values and free assent to them.

The spiritual formation of the young confreres becomes, then, essentially the issue of forming their consciences. Since the conscience of a Christian — and *a fortiori*, of a Religious — is necessarily shaped by the action of the Holy Spirit living in it, it follows that his personal spiritual formation is actually nothing but his habitual capacity to freely respond to the action of the Holy Spirit within him.

This is the thought of our Special General Chapter. “(The young Salesian’s) formation,” it says, “must be centered on the person and mystery of Christ, and founded on the mystery of the Church and a living experience of faith. It must be carried out in a spirit of prayer and nourished at the genuine sources of Christian spirituality”.¹²

¹² *Acts of SGC*, 664.

Training one's conscience

Fr. Ceria tells us that this was Don Bosco's constant concern: "The Christian training or shaping of the consciences of the young has been the goal of Christian educators in all ages: Don Bosco undertook this task at a moment in history when the need was most urgent".¹³

Our "moment in history" demands just as urgently that we accomplish this same task. We only need to look about us to see that in this secularized world of our, in which our boys have to live and work, only those of them will survive, religiously speaking, who possess a mature well-trained conscience. There was a time when the mere walls of our schools and the majesty of the law were sufficient protection for them; but this no longer holds true today, when even the most cherished and sacred religious norms seem to have been toppled.

In the Foreword to the new Constitutions, I called your attention to the fact that the "style in which they come to you is something so new in tone and form that some may get the impression that there has been a weakening in the norms themselves". But "this is not the case", I said. "The new Constitutions are offered, with the awareness of today's attitudes, to adult persons who, having made a generous choice, with full knowledge of doing something hard, need to recall to mind again and again those things they must be forever renewing, rather than to hear imperatives... They need instead to be reminded of the grand, enthralling pledges they have made to Christ the Lord in whose footsteps their consecration bids them follow".¹⁴

A similar thought is found in the Constitutions of other Religious Families and in the "*Ration Formationis*" for seminaries. "The entire substance of the *Ratio*," says the Italian Episcopal

¹³ E. Ceria, *Don Bosco con Dio*, p. 224.

¹⁴ Foreword to the Const., the Rector Major to the Salesians, p. 6.

Conference in its introduction, “addresses itself to one’s conscience. The *Ratio* stimulates reflection, calls for personal and community effort, stands on one’s sense of responsibility, guides towards personal maturity — that maturity which cannot be imposed from without, but must proceed from one’s inner, free, and deliberate response to the action of the Spirit”.¹⁵

But there is no need for me to elaborate further what is certainly evident to all of us. Are not the crises of many priests, clerics and Coadjutor Brothers in reality crises of stunted or immature consciences? “For from the inside, from a man’s heart”, said Jesus Christ, “come the evil ideas...”¹⁶

Those who take the leading part in spiritual formation

At this point a question could be asked: In our Salesian praxis who are the people who take the leading part in spiritual formation?

The reply is: In the first place, the individual in formation — not alone, but with the formative community, and in particular, the Director, the Confessor and the Spiritual Counsellor (or Director).

a) First and foremost, the individual in formation

The concept of a young confrere to be molded like clay according to an ideal and abstract Salesian model is no longer operable, if it ever was in our true Salesian education system.

Today, the Constitutions speak of a “more personal and more responsible” formation... “Each member in training is invited to assume gradually the responsibility for his own formation and

¹⁵ Conferenza Episcopale Italiana, *La preparazione al sacerdozio ministeriale - orientamenti e norme*, pp. 12-15.

¹⁶ *Mk.*, 7: 20.

to give due value to the various phases of his life”;¹⁷ to develop “his own personal gifts” and “thus give to the Society a more effective service”.¹⁸ Therefore, those in formation are, under God and with the help of their Superiors, first and foremost responsible for their own formation. This is nothing but the teaching of the Church, which, under certain conditions, considers each Christian personally responsible for his own eternal destiny.

This, of course, does not mean that the young confreres in training should be abandoned to their own devices, but that they should be assisted in their gradual achievement of responsibility, by which they become able to give God, the others and themselves a personal, adequate, evangelical and Salesian response. Needless to say, this responsibility is not a once-and-for-all achievement, but a continuous process due to last one’s lifetime.

b) *The Formative Community*

The local and provincial communities, as everybody knows, play very important roles in the training of the confreres. Our Constitutions tell us that “all these communities should be conspicuous for their Salesian spirit”.¹⁹ God trains and educates us *in* and *through* such communities, which are the embodiment of Christ’s mysterious presence. “The success or failure of the renewal of formation”, underscores our Special General Chapter, “depends very much on the capacity of those immediately in charge of formation. Hence confreres chosen to hold a formative role in the Congregation ought to be keenly aware of the extent to which the formation of the students depends on their way of thinking and acting”.²⁰ Their main effort and concern should be

¹⁷ *Const.*, 105.

¹⁸ *Const.*, 102.

¹⁹ *Const.*, 105.

²⁰ *Acts of SGC*, 672.

directed both to the individuals in formation and to a “suitable environment”, whose creation and maintenance is a great part of the formative success in our Salesian pedagogical praxis.

In some houses serious difficulties with regard to the formation of such a “suitable environment” have been experienced by both those in charge of formation and those in formation. The question to be considered would, then, seem to be how to harmonize the values of the individual with those of the Community, even though they at times might seem irreconcilable.

Community or individual?

To set up this problem in contrasting and exclusive terms is to misstate the case, as Card. Garrone, Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, told the participants at the Salesian Priestly Formation Workshop in July 1975 at the Generalate (cfr. Acts of the Superior Council, No. 280, October-December 1975, p. 12).

I consider it most appropriate to report here, at some length, what he said on that occasion.

“In the formation of priests”, he said, “when ‘personalization’ is stressed, inevitably the rapport with the community is brought under closer scrutiny and at times, sadly, called into question. The Church, however, looks upon true priestly formation as a formation to be give and received within a community, whatever its form or dimension may be.

In the aftermath of Vatican II, as we tried to personalize formation, we at times pushed aside the community. In the seminaries where this happened, that is, where the community ‘got the ax’, the individuals flew in all directions like chips: they began by leaving the community buildings, and ended by leaving the community itself. As everybody can see, today there is no longer any community life in many seminaries. The young men live in groups of two or three, here and there, anywhere they like, like students enrolled in a secular institution. And so, under the

pretext of total personal freedom and responsibility, community living was done away with”.

No real conflict between individuals and community

“The conflict between a personalized formation and community living”, continued Cardinal Garrone, “is merely seeming, is unreal. Anyone who would insist on seeing a necessary conflict between the two, would only prove that he has lost sight of the real meaning of personhood, personalization, or personal aspects of formation. A community — this needs to be stated very strongly — does not compete with persons, does not militate against them: rather, it complements them.

Certainly, whenever community has been sacrificed to the individuals, this has been done because there has been a confusion about the respective functions of person and community in the formative process. Community provides the individual with the suitable environment or atmosphere for his complete formation.

Whenever individuals get together to pursue a common goal, a certain environment is formed where common ideals, shared beliefs and joint efforts have a discernable influence on the development of the individuals themselves as well as the community. Understanding the reasons for, and value of, the environment as a formative tool is one of the first steps to be taken by everyone in charge of, and in the process of, formation. Once the community is understood as the proper formative environment of the individuals, then it becomes the place where true personhood blooms and matures, and thus avoids the pitfalls of selfish, anti-social behavior, and other forms of stunted personal growth.

Evidently the formation of a suitable environment should be the concern and task of every one who is involved in formation. Everyone who works for the establishment of such environment will surely arrive at a deeper understanding of the value of community living as a complementary and indispensable element of

personal growth". Thus far Cardinal Garrone. There is no room for doubting that his words reflect the thinking and feeling of the Church on the matter.²¹

c) *The Director, the Confessor, and the Spiritual Advisor*

Among those directly in charge of formation the Director, the Confessor and the authorized and capable Spiritual Advisor (or Counselor) play a unique role. We shall now consider their role.

The importance of an able spiritual guide, be he a confessor or not, in helping a young confrere shape his spiritual life could hardly be exaggerated. He carries to a more intimate degree the formative work exercised by the other persons in charge of formation. He shares and combines the roles of evangelizer, prophet, teacher and shepherd. He is an intimate and skillful coworker with the Holy Spirit in the building up of the kingdom of God within men.

The Church entrusts him with the most delicate and difficult task, which is the training of young religious and/or future priests in direct and intimate collaboration with them, and the evaluating of their spiritual maturity and suitability for the life they intend to embrace.

2. THE ROLE OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

There are still some Salesians today who do not realize the importance of spiritual direction. The Workshops on the Student-ates mentioned above brought out the fact that certain young confreres show a lack of interest in, or even a positive aversion to, it. And all this perhaps in the name of the modern surrogates

²¹ Card. Garrone, *Discorso ai Formatori salesiani*. Delivered at the Priestly Salesian Formation Workshop at Salesianum, July 6-19, 1975. Unpublished.

of direction, such as self-guidance, group guidance, “soul-baring” sessions, revision of life, etc., which, as their proponents contend, lead the individual away from the self-absorption fostered by spiritual direction, towards self-donation and concern for others.

Such attacks on spiritual direction are, in reality, attacks rather on its abuses and distortions than on spiritual direction itself, and should serve as an indirect call to its correct use.

New forms of spiritual relationship

At a time when the psychological understading of man is making steady progress and reaching new depths, we should naturally expect and demand of ourselves improved personal relationships.

Confession and spiritual guidance are things that belong to the realm of Faith and to the field of human communications. The improved understanding of man’s psychological make up should be used to improve also their techniques and the very approach to them.

The fundamental attitude in such relationships must, of course, be one of deep Faith in a joint search for the will of God. “When fraternal gatherings are used in a common effort to discover God’s will”, the Special General Chapter tells us, “they favour charity, make the apostolate more fruitful and bring spiritual joy to the common life”.²²

Where spiritual direction is missing due to human failure or limitations on the part of those who should supply it, the group could supply it in some way, if the group is spiritually fervent and evangelically-minded.

At the same time should be remembered what the Special General Chapter adds in the same context: “Psychology, experience with souls, and the constant practice of the Chuch all teach

²² *Acts of SGC*, 678.

that they can help... spiritual direction".²³ But no group, no community could dispense its members from their duty to freely to freely seek spiritual direction according to their own consciences.

Spiritual direction is, however, is irreplaceable

More important than the considerations adduced against spiritual direction, are those which justify it on its intrinsic merits, in the eyes of the Church and of the Congregation. Viewed from any one of these three viewpoints, spiritual direction, whether it is sought from one's confessor or director or counselor, whether it is given according to one method or another, clearly is an irreplaceable factor of personal spiritual formation, especially during the years of initial training.

a) Spiritual direction is a human need

"Direction" in its general meaning of "guidance, assistance given by the elders to the youngsters to help them mature" is a natural, universal fact. No one is born physically adult; likewise, no one is born spiritually mature. Virtue is acquired at the school of people mature in virtue.

This is also true of a Christian and of a religious. In a Christian's life, growth in grace should be a gradual advancement towards his fulfillment of God's plan; it should be a response, ever more conscious and generous, to God's call to becoming more "like his Son" in everything he does.²⁴ But in practice it does not work that way, on account of the sluggishness and weakness of man's nature particularly in spiritual things. As

²³ *ib.*

²⁴ *Rom.*, 8: 29.

our experience tells us, we, left to ourselves, do with great difficulty, if at all, what we ought to do. We need help.

Surely help is not lacking, both from the Church and the religious community. Actually, until a certain development has been reached, help is never quite enough. A reliable guide is needed — one with the ability, born of long experience, to lead us through tests and trials, to assist us when weighty decisions have to be taken.

Such a guide, such a friend is, in the words of Father Albera, “indispensable” to all of us.²⁵ Much more so to the young and inexperienced, we may add.

I was always struck by the words of Payot — an unbeliever, and a good friend of the young — in support of spiritual direction in the Church. “It is a human need,” he wrote. “If only we would realize the importance of a word of encouragement, of a piece of advice, even of a friendly rebuke when a young man is at the difficult age of twenty! If only the state schools and universities with all their highmindedness and great knowledge would take from the Catholic Church some of the knowledge about man’s heart that she has acquired through centuries of experience in the confessional! Youth would, then be benefited without a shadow of doubt. Nothing could take the place of the person-to-person contact of a sensible and sensitive guide”.²⁶

b) Spiritual direction is a constant praxis in the Church

Spiritual direction is part of the experience of Christian life. From Ananias who approved Paul’s vocation, through the Desert Fathers, the Masters of medieval episcopal schools, the Masters of Novices in Religious Institutes and Spiritual Directors in

²⁵ P. Albera, *Lettere circolari*, 456.

²⁶ Payot, *L’educazione della volontà (Training of the Will)*, 316f.

seminaries, down to our our days, the praxis of spiritual direction has always been present in the Church. In general, it could be said that there has hardly been any Christian life, and certainly not the more committed Christian life as that lived by Religious men and priests, without spiritual direction.

Spiritual direction is today a thriving praxis in the Lay Institutes and Religious Families where spiritual renewal is operative. It occupies a noteworthy part of the pronouncements of the Popes of this century — Pius XI, Pius XII, John XXIII and Paul VI.

“Without this prudent guide of one’s conscience”, wrote Pius XII, “it is ordinarily very difficult for one to follow the inspirations of the Holy Spirit”²⁷ Vatican II declared that seminarians should receive spiritual formation “especially with the help of the spiritual director”.²⁸ The same Council requires that the seminarians “receive careful instruction in the art of guiding souls, so that they can lead all sons of the Church, before everything else, to a Christian life which is fully conscious and apostolic”.²⁹ It also recommends spiritual direction to the priests: “They should... highly esteem spiritual direction”,³⁰ and to the religious.³¹

The “*Ratio Fundamentalis*” prepared with the cooperation he shall humbly and trustingly open his conscience, in order that point: “Let every one have his own spiritual director, to whom he shall humbly and trustingly open his conscience, in order that he may be more surely guided on the way of the Lord” (Number 55).

These texts prove a consoling fact, that is, that the Church has a motherly concern for her children and strives, through

²⁷ *Menti nostrae*, 54.

²⁸ *Optatam totius*, 8 (Abbott, p. 445).

²⁹ *ib.*, 19 (Abbott, p. 454).

³⁰ *Presbyterorum ordinis*, 18 (Abbott, p. 570).

³¹ *Perfectae caritatis*, 4 (Abbott, p. 469-70).

her older children, to assist the younger ones in their gradual growth in Christ.

Hence also the serious danger faced by the seminarian or the young religious who refuses the guidance offered by the Church or seeks guidance from sources not approved by the Church.

c) Spiritual Direction is a fundamental characteristic of Don Bosco

Don Bosco's life was a constant training of the consciences of his boys to help them become good citizens for the earthly city and good Christians for the heavenly city. At the very center of his pedagogical praxis and system he placed, as we all know, the frequent use of the sacraments of Penance and Holy Eucharist. Leaving the latter sacrament aside, we shall turn our consideration to Confession, which Don Bosco, as again we all know, used to link ordinarily, but not necessarily with spiritual direction.

Here a question needs to be asked: Why should a son of Don Bosco, living in a house of Don Bosco and doing the work of Don Bosco, give in his own turn so much importance to confession and spiritual direction in his own life and in his pastoral work?

The obvious reply is that Don Bosco's own spiritual life was rooted in the practice of confession and spiritual direction, the educational milieu at Valdocco was to a large extent shaped by them, and the pedagogical system of Don Bosco was, again to a large extent, founded on them.

Don Bosco sought spiritual guidance

"From his earliest age Don Bosco became strongly attached to confession", Fr. Ceria writes in *Don Bosco con Dio*, "and

nothing in later life could weaken his attachment to it. In fact he used to frequent it most willingly, even when his mother could not take him to Church... When he was a student in Chieri and completely on his own, he soon sought out a regular confessor... As a seminarian, he distinguished himself from the very beginning for his faithfulness to weekly confession. Later, as a priest in Turin, he used to make his confession every week”³².

In his *“Memoirs of the Oratory”* Don Bosco spoke with tender gratitude of his spiritual directors, especially of St. Joseph Cafasso, as the “great friends and fathers” of his soul.

Recalling his first encounter with Fr. Calosso, he wrote: “I soon placed myself in the hands of Fr. Calosso, who only recently had come to that chaplaincy. I told him everything about myself: my conversations, my thoughts, my deeds were promptly laid bare to him. He was well pleased with that, because he thus felt able to guide me in everything. I then began to realize the value of having a faithful friend as a steady guide in my life, whereas up to that time I had had none”³³.

In his heartfelt tribute to his great friend and benefactor, St. Joseph Cafasso, Don Bosco wrote: “Father Cafasso, who for six years was my advisor, was also my spiritual director; and if I have done anything good, I owe it to this worthy priest, in whose hands I placed my every decision, my every pursuit, my every activity”³⁴.

Although he was endowed with uncommon talents and charisms, Don Bosco never dared to rely exclusively on his own devices: he wanted to be sure of walking on God’s paths by consulting his confessor-directors. We recall that it was on the advice of an enlightened priest that he abandoned the idea

³² E. Ceria, *Don Bosco con Dio*, 173.

³³ *Memorie dell’Oratorio*, 36.

³⁴ *ib.*, 123.

of becoming a Franciscan;³⁵ and it was on the advice of Fr. Cafasso that he pursued his priestly studies³⁶ and became the apostle of abandoned youth.³⁷

Such an intense love for confession and direction was no doubt a sign of his humility, wisdom, and holiness.

Don Bosco created a lively spiritual climate

Don Bosco's personal experience concerning confession and direction was, of course, reflected in his oral and written teachings, in his entire pedagogical activity and in particular in the formation of an intensely spiritual atmosphere in Valdocco.

"Anyone visiting the Oratory and the various houses conducted by Don Bosco and his priests," wrote Monsignor De Gaudenzi, bishop of Vigevano, "can quickly sense something divine in them, something that one can not easily sense elsewhere: it seems to me that in Don Bosco's houses one can truly breathe in the sweet odor of Christ".³⁸

There was a deep feeling of joy and happiness among Don Bosco's boys. In the *Life of St. Dominic Savio* we find this surprising statement: "*Il Savio godeva di se medesimo*, which could approximately be translated as: "Savio was supremely happy about himself". The saintly youth was happy for several reasons, and one of them was his reliance on confession and direction. "If I have any trouble," he used to say, "I go to talk to my confessor and he advises me in the name of God: Jesus Christ said in fact that the voice of the confessor is for us like the voice of God".³⁹

³⁵ *ib.*, 80.

³⁶ *ib.*, 113.

³⁷ *ib.*, 132 f.

³⁸ E. Ceria, *Don Bosco con Dio*, 232.

³⁹ Fr. John Bosco, *Life of St. Dominic Savio*, ch. 2.

The Oratory was a family with strong cohesion and cooperation among boys and confreres with Don Bosco at the head. "The spiritual life of the Oratory," wrote Fr. Ceria, "was alive with charming spontaneity. It was nourished by community prayer, daily Mass, frequent confession and communion, the "good-night" talk, and periodic practices, such as frequent preaching, the monthly exercise for a happy death, and the mid-year retreat. It was boosted by religious feasts and holy days celebrated with great solemnity, and by the activities of four pious associations to which many boys belonged... But the most powerful influence was from Don Bosco himself, through his example, his word, his confessional. Don Boco's kindness irradiated in all direction".⁴⁰

His kindness was that of a "man of God", a "father of souls". Above and beyond his juridical primacy as of the founder and superior of an institution, his was a primacy of spiritual fatherhood: "Always call me father", he used to tell all those who lived in his houses.⁴¹

Don Bosco was a spiritual father to his boys

"Go therefore in the name of the Lord", Don Bosco wrote to Fr. Perrot, the young and newly appointed director of Navarre (France), "go as a friend, a brother and a father. Let your authority be charity — a charity that strives to do good to all and evil to none".⁴²

Don Bosco's friendliness, brotherliness, fatherliness found its sublime expression in the exercise of confession and direction, where he could really communicate to his boys something of God's tender and loving kindness.

"The tradition of fatherliness in a Salesian Director", wrote

⁴⁰ E. Ceria, *Don Bosco con Dio*, 232.

⁴¹ *MB* 17: 175.

⁴² E. Ceria, *Epistolario di S. Giovanni Bosco*, 3: 360.

Fr. Rinaldi, was given to us by Don Bosco, who viewed it as something closely bound up with the spiritual regeneration achieved through the exercise of the divine power to forgive sins".⁴³

According to Fr. Rinaldi, Don Bosco's fatherliness was a priestly fatherliness expressing itself in sacramental forgiveness and guidance and expanding in an environment of warm friendliness, and this was something so characteristic of the Salesian Director that he believed that it should be preserved at all costs. "How wonderful it would be", he wrote, "if our directors, while avoiding hearing the confessions of their immediate subjects, regularly heard the confessions of the boys in our oratories and clubs and, as far as possible, also in our neighboring houses, and would thus revive our Founder's sublimely fatherly tradition of attracting souls with exquisite kindness!".⁴⁴

Perhaps when our boys and young confreres seem to be looking for something special in our communities, it could be that they are looking precisely for this "fatherly tradition".

Confession and direction in Don Bosco's educational system

Let us take a closer look at confession and direction in Don Bosco's system. Using his own words, confession and direction are the "column", the "base", the "foundation" and the "support" of his educational system.

"There are people who think of Don Bosco always in terms of the funny and lovable juggler of Becchi", writes Father Braido in his book "*Don Bosco*". "The 'leader of the little rascals of Turin' was instead a profound, decisive and exacting educator, who went about his job with a sense responsibility and interiority:

⁴³ *Acts of the XII General Chapter* (1931), 939.

⁴⁴ *ib.*

until his boys' consciences were touched and reshaped in their depths, all the rest was wasteful choreography, noisy orchestration and an empty show of quantity without quality".⁴⁵

This agrees with Fr. Caviglia's assessment of the same fact. "The efficacy of Don Bosco's educational work was right here", he wrote. "Don Bosco can never be understood as an educator or trainer of saints, unless he is seen as a confessor of his boys. In essence, his direction went straight to the boys' souls, and his educational work was done through confession".⁴⁶

In Don Bosco's system confession plays an essential role in molding one's conscience both as a sacrament and a privileged instrument of spiritual direction.

Confession as a sacrament

For Don Bosco confession was, obviously, first and foremost the sacrament of reconciliation of the sinner with God, with the Church, and with the brethren, who "because of sin have always suffered some harm".⁴⁷

As a believer in sin and hell, Don Bosco was convinced that the more seriously man takes the commandments of God and the teachings of Christ, the more conscious does he become of his own sinfulness and the more does he long for God's forgiveness. It was precisely this conviction that turned Don Bosco into a "martyr of confession", an apostle of forgiveness, an educator with the unmatched talent for inspiring his boys with a horror for sin and a yearning for friendship with Christ.

Confession is the privileged moment in Don Bosco's educational work, when the holy fear and love of God are instilled

⁴⁵ P. Braidò, *Don Bosco*, 87.

⁴⁶ Don Bosco, *Opere e scritti editi e inediti*, vol. 4, Part I, p. 83.

⁴⁷ *Ordo Paenitentiae*, 5.

into one's soul. "All the pedagogical system and activity of Don Bosco", wrote Father Albera, "can be summed up in two words: love and fear of God... Meditate as long as you want on the Preventive System, which is the *Magna Carta* of our Congregation, analyze it in its minutest details, in the context of reason, religion and loving kindness ("amorevolezza"), but at the end you will have to agree with me that it is all a matter of instilling the holy fear and love of God into the boys' hearts; I say, instilling, that is, rooting them so solidly that they can stay on and on, and withstand all kinds of trials...".⁴⁸

Confession as opportunity for spiritual direction

The ever increasing number of people who nowadays seek professional guidance with increasing frequency goes to prove that coming to grip with one's sense of guilt or other intimate problems with the assistance of a competent and trusted person is apparently the natural thing to do. It is in this plain fact that we can find one of the strongest reasons for extending confession into, or combining it with, spiritual direction. "This union of confession, absolution and guidance", as it has been recently remarked by the Swiss Catholic Bishops, "has a deep ecclesial relevance and dimension".⁴⁹

"*Don Bosco dirigeva confessando*", that is, he was giving guidance through confession. For him sacramental confession was the normal means and way of imparting his brief, pointed, practical guidance to his penitents, boys and confreres alike. We cannot think of Don Bosco as confessor without thinking of him at one and the same time as spiritual guide. His insistence on keeping a steady confessor, on complete frankness in manifesting

⁴⁸ P. Albera, *Lettere circolari*, 342.

⁴⁹ Pastoral Letter, «*Penance and Confession*», 72.

sins and also other things, like problems, intimate difficulties, not required for the integrity of the sacramental confession, but extremely useful to the confessor in order to enable him to offer an enlightened guidance was clearly in view of his stressing the spiritual direction aspect of confession.

“Some people think”, said Don Bosco in a “good-night” in August 1864, “that to start a new life it is enough to open one’s heart to a spiritual director and make a general confession. That is fine, but it is not enough... Besides remedying the past, you must also provide for the future with firm resolutions... To make steady progress you must reveal your habitual failings, the occasions which usually lead you to sin, and your dominant evil inclinations. You must attentively and faithfully carry out the advice you are given; you must keep your heart open and fully trusting; you must manifest your needs, temptations and dangers as they rise, so that your director may guide you with a steady hand”.⁵⁰

Don Bosco, who was at one and the same time a great psychologist and a great saint, excelled in the exercise of all the traditional roles of a confessor, i.e., those of judge, teacher, physician, guide and father. But if there was a role in which he was supremely outstanding, that was the role of guide and father. In his *Life of Mickey Magone* he wrote: “The confessor is a father, who longs to do his very best to help you and tries to keep all harm away from you”.⁵¹

Spiritual direction outside confession

Don Bosco, as we have said, tied up confession with spiritual direction, but not to the point of making spiritual direction

⁵⁰ BM 7: 430-431 (Eng. Ed.).

⁵¹ *Cenno Biografico*, 22.

inseparable from confession. Also outside the confessional he used to give guidance to his children, in his own unique style.

Under the category of spiritual direction fell his “*colloqui*” — unplanned, spontaneous, encounters and chats —, his “*parolina all'orecchio*” — a cheering word or a friendly piece of advice (a charism that every Salesian should revitalize!) —, his “*sguardi penetranti*” — maningful looks that reached into the depths of the boys' hearts — his “*gesti e strette di mano*” — pats-on-the-shoulders and handshakes, more eloquent than words — and his “*bigliettini e letterine*” — little notes and miniletters which, in spite of his tight schedule, he would hastily jot down and forward to his boys to urge them to make peace with God, or to trust in the Lord, or to do some charitable or apostolic deed.

We should also recall that trust was such a pervasive element of the atmosphere in Valdocco that for many a youth it was altogether natural to extend confession into spiritual guidance. “Confidence in the spiritual director, the almost compelling need to open themselves to him”, remarked Father Caviglia, “was, we can say in all truth, the thing that all the boys going to confession to Don Bosco were doing; for so great was the trust that his sanctity inspired into his boys from their very first contact with him that it made no difference for any of them to speak to him about their most intimate matters in or out of the confessional”.⁵²

Other saints and/or founders made use of more analytic and soul-searching methods of spiritual direction. The one used by Don Bosco was simplicity itself; and yet, if one tried it out or at least considered it at close range, he would have to admit that it was very demanding of both the counselor and the counselee. This was acknowledged by the writers of the article “*Direction Spirituelle*” in the highly esteemed “*Diction-*

⁵² Don Bosco, *Opere e scritti editi e inediti*, vol. 4, part 1, p. 85.

naire de Spiritualité” who said of Don Bosco: “A man of action and intuition, Don Bosco wasted no time either giving long talks or writing long letters of spiritual direction. As director, he did his work in the confessional: few words, but so apropos! Those brief and relevant pieces of advice and exhortation were a sure remedy against any evil or trouble at hand. A similar form of spiritual direction was exercised in Turin by St. Joseph Cafasso and at Ars by St. John Mary Vienney”.⁵³

The “colloquio” with the superior

Up to this point I have said nothing about the “talk” (or manifestation or “rendiconto”) with the superior. It is not the object of this letter, though on a wider perspective it could not be considered entirely foreign. But a few remarks or considerations could be in order here.

Until 1874, in the spiritual climate of Valdocco, as we have seen, the boys who had more confidence in Don Bosco made little or no distinction between what they told him in confession and out of it. Even the encounters which were not strictly prompted by reason of confession and guidance, such as those with regard to health or working conditions, the running of the house, etc., which intimately concerned Don Bosco as the head of the family, were characterized by family spirit, cordial and loving confidence. To Don Bosco his children revealed everything.

This explains why, when in 1858 he for the first time drew up the article on the “rendiconto” with the superior, he did it in terms that would encompass a total manifestation of the confrere’s both exterior and interior life: “Let everyone have full confidence in his superior”, he wrote, “and harbor no secrets

⁵³ *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, III, col. 1137.

from him, fully opening his heart to him whenever he should be asked to do so or he himself felt it necessary".⁵⁴

This article remained in effect in our Congregation until 1874. When the Regulations were finally approved, it was, however, radically changed in favor of liberty of conscience. The manifestation with the Superior would, thereafter, deal only with external matters. Don Bosco would have preferred that the Church would have permitted him to continue as before, since his had been a successful pastoral experience, but he humbly complied with the new rule when it came from Rome. After all, he was happy with the decision, and after that he made a clearcut distinction between confession, which was reserved to the revelation of sins and more intimate matters, and the "talk" with the superior, which was concerned with external matters.

He required from his directors to observe the distinction or separation: "*Nei rendiconti si badi a non entrare in cose di coscienza. Queste devono essere al tutto separate.* In the rendicontos let superior take heed not to enter into matters of conscience. These are to be kept entirely separate from the rest".⁵⁵

In the final analysis nothing in the previous method of spiritual direction was being destroyed or lost, because the person whom the confreres made their confession and, separately, their rendicontos to, was one and the same person, i.e. the director.

This manifestation, as it was practiced in the early days of the Oratory of Valdocco, marks a unique and perhaps irreproducible experience in the spiritual history of our Congregation; but the directors of today will have to do their very best to recapture its original purpose and spirit, while making the adaptations dictated by the changed historical context.

⁵⁴ *BM* 5: 640 (Eng. Ed.).

⁵⁵ *MB* 11: 354.

The Directors in our times

We should not forget that it was exactly because of his overriding spiritual role that the Salesian director in the earliest days of the Congregation was highly esteemed and dearly loved. He was somehow surrounded with an aura of heartfelt respect.

Fr. Lemoyne wrote a touching and revealing page on this position of esteem enjoyed by the earliest Salesian directors. After reporting the "Confidential Memos" given by Don Bosco to Fr. Rua who had been appointed first director at Mirabello, he said: "The regulations... were to be interpreted in the spirit of the Oratory traditions, which laid the frequent reception of the sacraments as the foundation of education. To keep this principle in its primary position of honor, Don Bosco established that the superior, as spiritual director, should be first in dignity and authority. He was to preach, teach theology, and give the 'Good Night'. He was also the ordinary confessor of the community and, as such, was to be punctual in fulfilling his duty every morning during Mass, and on the eve of a feast or at the Exercise for a Happy Death. Briefly, he had to emulate don Bosco's zeal for the welfare of souls.

The director's duties were fatherly and meant to win the boys' hearts and trust. For no reason at all was he ever to perform even the least unpleasant task. Such measures were reserved to the other superiors.

The prefect attended to the administration and general discipline of the entire school, handling the mail and dismissing pupils from the school. To free the director from unpleasant confrontations with parents, the prefect's office was located near the main entrance.

The catechist was responsible for the boys' moral conduct and their behavior in church. The dormitories and infirmary were under his supervision. All scholastic matters, weekly walks, and school plays were the competence of the prefect of studies.

These three superiors met weekly with other faculty members to give conduct marks to the pupils. The director was never to take part in these meetings. All the boys knew this, because he stayed with them during such sessions.

This system seemed excellent, as proven by its remarkable results — an exceptional, undeniable trust in the director, a gratifying and frequent reception of the sacraments, and numerous religious and priestly vocations”.⁵⁶

In concluding his account, Fr. Lemoyne (who wrote in 1908) said: “After Don Bosco’s death, however, an element which had proved necessary for a firm basis of the Salesian Society was judged no longer opportune by the Holy See. Since the Holy Father’s word is Christ’s word, his decree was obeyed”.⁵⁷

3. FROM THE EARLY DAYS TO THE PRESENT

Things changed, as we know, thirty years later, when the Holy See issued a decree forbidding the directors of the Salesian houses to confess their subjects. Needless to say, the decree did not scuttle the central position of either confession or spiritual direction in Don Bosco’s educational system.

By defending freedom of conscience, the Church’s decree was defending something extremely valuable also for the sons of Don Bosco, inasmuch as it was liberating from a certain uneasiness many confreres who had become edgy about making their confession to their Directors, and it was giving confession a new status as a religious practice on its own.

Such reasoning is selfevident today, but it was not at that time. We must admit that the decree of the Holy See took

⁵⁶ *BM* 7: 314-15 (Eng. Ed.).

⁵⁷ *ib.*, 315.

our confreres by surprise — totally unprepared for the change. The decree had been issued with little regard, as Card. Rampolla remarked later, “to the special situation of the Salesians, according to which the directors, and with them the Rector Major, exercised above all the office of spiritual fathers”.⁵⁸

A period of disorientation follows

The heroic compliance of Fr. Rua and of the confreres with the decree is well known.⁵⁹ That does not mean, however, that the new disposition by the Holy See did not bring about, then, any painful disruption nor usher in a period of disorientation on such a delicate matter. Perhaps it might be argued by some that its sad consequences are in some way still felt by us today...

The ceasing of the directors to be the ordinary confessors in their houses brought about at least three serious consequences. First, the confreres, who had had no forewarning of the coming change, floundered around, not knowing whom they should get their spiritual direction from. Secondly, the directors began to feel increasingly tempted, even under the pressure of many other factors of external nature, to become less and less priests and more administrators, less and less the educators and shapers of the spiritual life of the confreres, and more and more the organizers of scholastic, social, managerial activities. Thirdly, the confessors became rather cautious about, and at times even fearful of, venturing into spiritual direction, and were often reduced to mere dispensers of absolution.

It would not be difficult for anyone to visualize the spiritual harm that such a situation was bound to cause and was actually causing in our Congregation.

⁵⁸ *Annali della Società Salesiana*, 3: 181.

⁵⁹ *ib.*, 180-181.

Need of going back to Don Bosco

Anyone who reads the history of the Congregation is aware of how much the General Chapters and the Major Superiors have done to prevent a deterioration of the ideal of the Salesian director as conceived by Don Bosco, and to bring it back to its original functions of educator, spiritual guide and father of the community.

In the General Chapter of 1910 Fr. Prilip Rinaldi stated that the time had come to redefine the position of the directors in the houses after the 1901 decree on confession. "We must go back", he said, "to the spirit and the concept of Don Bosco, as expressed in the 'Confidential Memos' to the Director,⁶⁰ and in the Regulations. Let a director be at all times a Salesian director. Except with regard to the ministry of confession, nothing else about his office and role has changed. Fr. Bertello deplored that some directors were believing that they, along with confession, had to abandon also the spiritual care of their communities and begin to get involved in external and temporal affairs. 'We hope', he stated, 'that this was but a temporary drift. We must return to Don Bosco's ideal described in the Regulations'. It is therefore essential for the preservation of our Society", concluded Fr. Albera, "that the director's role remain faithful to Don Bosco's ideal; otherwise, we will change our education and formation method, and we will not be Salesians any longer".⁶¹

Similar thoughts recur in other writings of Fr. Rinaldi, and in those of Fathers Ricaldone and Ziggiotti.

I myself have felt the grave obligation to insist on this point in many meetings of provincials and directors, and will never tire of insisting on it.

⁶⁰ *ib.*, 49-53.

⁶¹ *ib.*, 4: 8-9.

Let the director be once again a father to the confreres!

The director must be a Salesian director. This means that he must always have the characteristics, the role and the functions which Don Bosco, the archetype and exemplar of all directors, wanted him to have. He must therefore put aside all other functions, such as being an organizer, or a disciplinarian or an administrator, and must delegate them to others, as Don Bosco did with Fr. Rua; on the contrary, he must recover his original and essential function, which is that of being “the centre and animator of the community”.⁶²

Brother among brothers, member of the community to which he presides in charity he is in the ideal position to lead, in a spiritual manner, his community. His very “service of authority”, which he exercises as a special sign and sacrament of Christ, is ordained to his task of spiritually vivifying his confreres. In other words, as article 35 of our new Constitution says, the role of the director is to guide his community in its apostolic task, to direct it spiritually, and to orient its mission.

Certainly, we are not among those who bemoan the passing away of the old director’s figure and long for its return out of sheer nostalgia for the good old days. We realize that evolution is a vital, unstoppable process, and also the figure of the director evolves with time. But we believe that if this natural evolution should lead to a loss of the essential characteristic of the director as the spiritual animator of his community, that would be a regression rather than an advance. We would deform a vital model left us by Don Bosco, and thus undermine and destroy his entire project.

⁶² *Acts of SGC*, 502.

No more place or time for hesitation

After much doubting, hesitating and dilly-dallying on the matter of spiritual direction in the past years, it is now high time that we make a serious effort to carry out what the last two General Chapters set down on this topic clearly, forcefully. Together let's read a portion of paragraph 678 of the Special General Chapter on spiritual guidance.

“Recognizing the importance of spiritual direction during formation, and to facilitate its practice and make it ever more efficacious and profitable, the Special General Chapter reminds all that:

a) it is essential to distinguish between the two sections of spiritual guidance: communal and personal (i.e. of the conscience);

b) in a community with the task of formation the superior is in charge of the spiritual direction of all the members of the community. He does this through conferences, ‘good nights’, public and private exhortations, talks, and the exercise of paternal authority.

Over and above this — continues the Special General Chapter paragraph — the superior is also the ‘magister spiritus’ of the young confreres in formation; in other words, his is the ultimate responsibility for the work of formation in the community and in the individual members;

c) on the personal level, the Salesian in formation have the right to choose their own director of conscience. In accordance with the mind of the Church and following Salesian tradition and the example of Don Bosco, the superior of the community is also the spiritual director proposed to, but not imposed on, each confrere. It is obvious that a serious preparation is indispensable for such an important mission; nevertheless the

young confreres in formation may also make use of confessors and other capable confreres".⁶³

As you can see, our Special General Chapter stresses the essential, i.e. the vital and continuous contact of the confrere with his spiritual director, and leaves the choice of such a guide to the individual confrere; but, at the same time, it reminds him that choosing the director of the community as his spiritual guide reflects the "lively desire" of the Church and of Don Bosco.

A practical advice of Fr. Caviglia

Talking to a group of theology students in his typically straightforward and somewhat piquant style, Fr. Caviglia once gave this piece of advice: "We should consider confession also as a means of spiritual direction. True, there is the *rendiconto*, which is pretty well cared for during the years of clerical formation, but later in the houses you'll find directors with different ideas in their brains. Your only remedy then will be the confession: circumstances will, unfortunately, require so.

In such cases, in the first place, let us consider the confessor not just like any other priest hurriedly shoving an absolution on a dying man, but like a trusted friend, in whose hands we put our souls unreservedly, in order that they may guide them, lead them on, educate them. But if we look on our confessor as a laundryman, we won't get any spiritual direction. And yet, all too often isn't this what happens in practice?

Let's keep in mind that Don Bosco wanted us to have a regular confessor exactly in view of spiritual direction. Therefore when you come into a new house, look at your new confessor rightaway from this point of view: first make a general confession

⁶³ *ib.*, 678.

to him or have a face-to-face talk with him, and so you will find a guide for yourself. Don Bosco used to insist on weekly confession and on the monthly-review type of confession exactly in view of guidance.

No less essential to direction is submission, obedience to one's confessor. It is up to you to give him authority, or else you'll get nothing out of him. I consider myself lucky that during my youth the confessor was also the director of the house. The Holy Church forbade this combination for good practical reasons, but the sad thing now is that many Salesians do not give confessor the authority he ought to have to guide them.

So it is up to you to allow him to guide you — *e non fare il testone*, and don't act like a pig-headed fool! Only if you do as he tells you, will your confession become an enlightenment, a source of correction and formation in the true spirit of Don Bosco, who made it the pivoting point of his whole educational system.

All this is said for the Salesian who for some reason or other does not feel like making a full disclosure of his conscience to the director in the *rendiconto*. But the one who feels like doing this, he surely is going back to the integral application of Don Bosco's system, because he has but one guide, one father, one master, even though, on account of the decision of the Church, he is no longer his judge in the tribunal of penance".⁶⁴

Thus far Father Caviglia. It is the same policy followed by Fr. Albera during his tenure as Rector Major. In one of his Circular Letters he wrote: "He who has an enlightened and inspired confidence in his superior and wishes to reveal to him the most intimate things of his soul, may do so, and will derive inestimable benefit from it. He, instead, who prefers to limit his *rendiconto* to external things, must remember that

⁶⁴ *Conferenze sullo spirito salesiano (Conferences on Salesian Spirit)*, 80-81 (duplicated).

spiritual direction is indispensable even if he is a priest, and let him seek it from one who inspires him with greater confidence. Naturally, the confessor, who is not only a judge, but also a physician and teacher, friend and father, and knows our spiritual life better than anyone else, can become our guide on the road to religious perfection in and out of the sacrament of confession".⁶⁵

4. RENEWED SPIRITUAL GUIDES ARE NEEDED

Dear confreres, before concluding this already so lengthy a letter, allow me to address you some words of exhortation, in the first place to the Provincials and their Provincial Councils, and then to all the confreres.

Let us all place spiritual formation at the very top of the hierarchy of our values and projects. A great deal of scientific, technical and professional know-how could end in a catastrophe, unless it is all placed at the service of an enlightened and faithful religious life. We do not know whether it is in God's plan that the Salesians should increase and multiply in his Church; but one thing is sure — he wants them all to be spiritually grownup, to reach Christian and Salesian maturity. "God", said Don Bosco, "wants us all to be saints".⁶⁶

Selecting those directly in charge of formation

Since the outcome of a formative community "hinges, to a very large extent, on wise regulations and on suitable teachers... and on their own manner of thinking and acting",⁶⁷ let every Provincial consider it his grave and sacred duty, as I said on

⁶⁵ P. Albera, *Lettere circolari*, 456-7.

⁶⁶ *MB* 13: 230.

⁶⁷ *Optatam totius*, 5 (Abbott, p. 442-443).

many occasions, to choose and place in immediate charge of formation only the confreres who have given clear proof of ability, preparedness and understanding of Salesian spirit.

At the recent "European Symposium on Spiritual Retreats" I remarked that in some provinces there has been something like a stampede towards degrees in academic, scientific, technical fields, while at the same time a dearth of professionals in spirituality has been felt, which dearth I unhesitatingly labeled acute. The Provincials must see to it that there is shift in emphasis from the acquisition of degrees in non-religious fields to the acquisition of degrees in the religious formation field. We need well-trained spiritual men to satisfy the hunger for spiritual things that so many Salesians feel and suffer from today. This is an urgent matter, and it is bound to get worse, unless we take immediate steps. We should not allow ourselves to become engrossed in immediate yet secondary needs to the point of neglecting the essential and primary one, which is the spiritual formation of our confreres.

To your and my comfort I must say that at the "Continental Meeting" of the Latin-American and Far-Eastern Provincials in April 1975 in Rome important decisions were taken on this matter, as it was reported in the July-September 1975 issue of the Acts of the Superior Council.

Let those in charge of training have the proper qualifications

In choosing the personnel in charge of formation, as the Special General Chapter reminds us, let much value be placed on their possession of human and social qualities. If they are to help our young confreres mature, they in the first place must be humanly mature: they must possess "a balanced character, self-control, an open mind, sincerity, optimism, serenity", ap-

proachability and human warmth, without which no influence could be had on people today.⁶⁸

From a director Don Bosco demanded self-control (“*nulla ti turbi*, let nothing upset you!”), suffering patience (“let charity and patience accompany you constantly in governing your confreres!”), balance and moderation (“listen to both sides of the story, try to ascertain the facts before taking a decision”), politeness (“let courtesy be a special trait of a director”), winsome affability (“let a director be very affable!”), ability to dispel mistrust, to calm contention and to soothe rancor, etc.

Let even more value be placed on the possession of spiritual qualities. Director and confessor must have not merely a bookish knowledge of spiritual life, but an experiential knowledge. To become enlightened guides, they need to have learned, like Moses, to speak to God face to face, “as a man speaks to his friend”.⁶⁹ There are men who have little or no need to speak; their very presence conveys their message loud and clear. Don Bosco was one such man. Each of us may treasure the memory of a Salesian who had a great impact on his formation. Perhaps that Salesian lacked superior education and knew very little of modern psychology. Perhaps we were even aware of his glaring shortcomings, and yet we liked him and loved him, and told ourselves in our hearts that we wanted to become like him. Such should, indeed, be the directors and the confessors that our young confreres have a right to expect during their training period.

But these men have to be prepared, to be trained, to be formed. “*Formiamo i formatori*, let us form those who are directly in charge of formation!” is my motto, and I never get tired of repeating it. Let us form them right, let us form them right now. Let us form them through a well-rounded education and

⁶⁸ *Acts of SGC*, 683-84.

⁶⁹ *Ex.* 33: 11.

the actual experience of prayer, community life, and so on. Let us form them with an updated understanding of spiritual life.

Manner and content need to be renewed

There was a time when formation was considered like a packaged commodity to be purchased once and for all and to be passed on to others with the same wrapping, and when universally accepted ascetical models and norms were the securest possession of the spiritual man. But this no longer holds today. More than in the past, we are now aware that the Gospel is, of course, changeless, but man whose responsibility and joy it is to apply it to his life, is in a state of perennial flux.

There are not a few directors and confessors today who suffer from a deep-seated uneasiness and almost a sense of personal rejection on the part of younger confreres, because these younger confreres do not go to them for guidance and confession. Could this be because the image of sanctity they project to them, and/or their mode of projecting it, are still pre-Vatican II and pre-Special General Chapter?

My dear confreres, we must all be convinced that the *aggiornamento* or renewal we have been talking about for years is not just talk: it is a fact that all of us have to reckon with, and this reckoning with reality needs to be done first and foremost in the field of formation.

As for the content of spiritual formation to be examined in depth and to be acquired with renewed vigor, I think that it was best pointed out by Fr. Caviglia in his study on St. Dominic Savio. It is: "Liberty of spirit and of action, respect for the liberty of Grace, sanctifying performance of one's duty, concentration on God, orientation towards Jesus in the Eucharist and towards Mary, mortification and self-denial; above all, trust in God, serenity, joy, cheerfulness, without apprehension or sullenness, but with a steady and confident gaze on heaven; all done

with love and out of love, both interiorly and exteriorly. This is not everything that Savio was, but this is what he had in common with those who were fashioning the spiritual atmosphere in which he became a saint".⁷⁰

Three present-day needs of spiritual direction

After updating it according to the theology of Vatican II and of the Special General Chapter, the content of spiritual direction must also be presented in an updated form, in a form keyed to modern needs. Here I would like to point out three such present-day needs.

Spiritual direction needs to be a school for discernment

Spiritual discernment is fortunately receiving the attention and credit in the contemporary Church which it had in the early Church.

Taking the lead from the certain fact of our Faith that salvation is a continuing event and that God is constantly at work in the heart of man and of history, communicating and manifesting himself incessantly, we come to the all-important practical question of how we can know God's action, will and presence. Well, we can know it through spiritual discernment. A beautiful definition of discernment can be found in the new *Ordo Paenitentiae*: it is the ultimate knowledge of God's working in the hearts of men — a gift of the Spirit and a fruit of charity.

Discernment does not come easily. It requires meditation, prayer asceticism. It takes time and patience. For the voice of

⁷⁰ Don Bosco, *Opere e scritti editi e inediti*, vol. 4, part 1, p. 85.

the Spirit is a gentle breath that reaches us through the unwieldy grossness of our "flesh" — our God-resistant self-seeking nature. Discernment is an invitation from above, which has to counter the ill will or indifference from within. Also for this reason, the assistance of a master of spirit to guide us on the road to the discernment of the will of God and of our own interior world, is a necessity for us.

For Don Bosco, discernment was absolutely necessary when it was a matter of choosing one's own state of life. Today, thanks also to progress made in in-depth psychology, subtle conscious and unconscious motivations which influence our decisions can be apprehended and appraised — with the help of one who is more mature at the school of discernment.

Spiritual direction needs to be a school for liberty

Spiritual direction is all the more efficacious the more truly free is the environment in which it grows. "You were called to be free", says St. Paul, "but do not let this freedom become an excuse for letting your physical desires rule you. Instead, let love make you serve one another".⁷¹

Contrary to what the word may seem to suggest, directing does not mean dominating or manipulating. It rather means accompanying helping someone to help himself and to decide for himself. It means assisting someone to come to grips with his own liberty and responsibility. It means aiding someone with a delicate touch to attune his life to the action of the Spirit. And this assistance is needed both at the beginning of one's spiritual journey as well as all along its duration.

⁷¹ Gal., 5: 13.

Spiritual direction needs to be a school for conversion

A spiritual director who aims at helping someone to get into intimate with Christ and his Church, also helps him to live in contact with a state of continuous conversion and ascesis. Moreover, he who begins to follow Christ in a more radical way, comes soon to learn the serious demands implied in the words of Christ: "If anyone wants to come with me, he must forget himself, carry his cross, and follow me".⁷²

In the words of the Vatican Council, "especially with the help of the spiritual director", those who are being trained should "learn to live in familiar and constant companionship with the Father, through Jesus Christ His Son, in the Holy Spirit"⁷³ and "as a result, even in matters which are lawful but not expedient" they should "be accustomed to make prompt renunciation and to imitate Christ crucified".⁷⁴

The duty of secrecy

I cannot close this letter without reminding directors, confessors, spiritual advisors of their most serious duty of secrecy concerning confidential matters. Say nothing, to anyone, ever — not even to the superiors — about such matters. The slightest imprudence here could irreparably compromise both confidentiality and formation.

I must also add that respect for confidentiality on the part of those in charge of formation places a heavier responsibility on those in formation. By this I mean that, should, for instance, a confessor or a spiritual director manifest — as he must in

⁷² *Mt.*, 16: 24.

⁷³ *Optatam totius*, 8 (Abbott, p. 445).

⁷⁴ *ib.*, 9 (Abbott, p. 446).

conscience — to a young confrere in formation some serious shortcomings or faults that would disqualify him from admission to vows or sacred orders, then the young confrere in question must likewise in conscience accept the verdict of his confessor or spiritual director. For the young confrere to act otherwise would be a deplorable betrayal of the best interests of his own and of the Congregation.

We have had many sad experiences in this regard. So let there be full openness from both the director and the directee, full respect of confidentiality from the former and full acceptance of his advice from the latter. It goes without saying that for a confessor the duty of confidentiality is all the more serious on account of the sacramental seal.

Conclusion: a serious examination of conscience

In this letter I touched upon some facts and some problems of Salesian spiritual life. The facts need no discussion — they need our full awareness and acceptance. The problems need constant study and reflection, because they usually refer to variable conditions. From the above a solid, immutable fact emerges for all of us — confession and spiritual direction remain a central and irrenounceable reality of our Salesian way of life, two fundamental factors of personal Salesian spiritual formation.

There is one disturbing thought in my mind, that keeps recurring under the guise of several questions. I often catch myself asking, for instance: Why have so many confreres taken the vows and/or become priests without having been called by God and without having had the necessary qualifications? Why have so many other confreres, whose vocation had left no doubts in the minds of their superiors, have later abandoned the narrow road of religious life? Why have so many highly gifted confreres lost their enthusiasm and become like dormant or dead volcanos, while others, attracted by other prospects have joined the local churches?

This is no doubt the mystery of God and man, and we have no right and no way to investigate it. But that does not stop other questions from coming to my mind:

Have these confreres, most of them young, spoken openly to their spiritual director about their problems? Have they spoken early enough, before it got out of hand? Why did they venture on a road where even the saints tremble to tread? Did they accept the stern discipline of self-training? Did they seek a "man of God" who would help them discern the voice of God among the other voices? Were such "men of God" available to them, and were they equal to the task?

As you can see, these are many and weighty questions — a matter for all of us for a thorough, cool, and courageous examination of conscience, to be followed, if necessary, by opportune resolutions, as Don Bosco would want us to do.

Let us, therefore, set ourselves to work, full of confidence in the help of Mary and of Don Bosco. The guidance of souls is the art of arts, that surpasses all human ingenuity; but what is impossible to man alone, is possible to man with God's help.

My dearest confreres, this has been a rather long letter, but I hope it has brought a message to each of you, and I also hope that each of you will take it to heart to the extent that it concerns him.

I pray that Mary Help of Christians may bless the work of formation in our Congregation and assist those who are directly responsible for it in carrying it on according to the teachings of Don Bosco and of the Church.

I greet you dearly and assure you of my prayerful remembrance, confident of your own brotherly remembrance as well. Thank you.

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