

## I. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

### THE SALESIANS AND POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY

*Rome, October 1976*

*Dear Confreres,*

I have desired for a long time to converse with you on the topic of this Circular Letter; but I wanted first to make a deeper research on the witness and orientation left us in this regard by our beloved Father, Don Bosco.

After having prayed and meditated, after having gathered on this topic the thought of persons who for years have researched with a great sense of scientific responsibility as well as ecclesial, religious and Salesian sensibility, I believe the Good Lord wishes me to invite you to reflect on the delicate subject of our "political responsibility" as Salesians faithful to Don Bosco.

You realize at once the timeliness, complexity and implications of this topic. Maybe you will find some difficulty in grasping some points at first reading: this is due to the nature of the subject, and it has not always been possible to avoid it. However, it seems to me that the interest in this burning issue and the practical conclusions that we will be able to draw from it concerning our vocation, deserve the effort of an attentive and thoughtful reading: for we are dealing with a topic which is basic to a full understanding of our very identity.

## 1. WHY THIS SUBJECT

There is certainly no lack of urgent reasons why we should face this topic. Let us see some of them.

- *The cultural transformation* and the social changes which are being experienced in various nations give rise to problems that cannot be overlooked by the Church and, in it, by us precisely as Salesians.

The manifold changes that are taking place are becoming a kind of *entrance exam to the future*: a substantial questionnaire on the validity of our vocation. It could be said that we will come out from this historic hour either “passing” or “failing”. We should not therefore be unaware of them and make no effort to set forth some answer of basic value and importance.

- *Don Bosco* lived intensely and with full awareness the problems, uncharted for him too, of the great cultural and social changes of his century, particularly in their political overtones; and he made, in this regard, a careful choice in full accordance with his conscience as Founder, adopting a specific behavior pattern that he wished should become part of his spirit and should characterize his mission.

Certainly the cultural sensibilities as well as the social conjunctures and outlooks of his time appear to be quite different from the present ones. It follows therefore that to be today objectively faithful to the apostolic project of our Father, we have to reconsider the identity of our Salesian vocation and know how to fulfill it in the environment of the new times.

- *Today's newness is characterized by the “signs of the times”* with their values as well as the ambivalences and deviations which accompany them in practice.

Among these “signs of the times” we must undoubtedly mention the process of socialization as a growth of the political

consciousness of the citizens and of their active participation in the responsibilities of the search for and administration of the temporal commonweal. And, in varying degrees, this is true of all countries.

Such a process touches upon and concerns also our Salesian life which is actively inserted in the world with its mission of integral education to youth and the working-class people.

- *Youth and the working-class people*, to whom the Salesian is *de facto* dedicated, usually live in the most teeming zones of society; and they seem to be, today more than yesterday, the privileged object of attention on the part of the so-called “educative city”. They are sought after, cared for, indoctrinated, and even flattered and manipulated by ideologists and activists, by the mass media and political parties which consider them as the most significant “exodus groups” towards the “new society”. Thus it becomes impossible for a son of Don Bosco to dedicate himself to his mission without coming across the perspectives of politics.

- *The “new society”*, about which so much is being said, is to a large extent still to be built. We certainly live in a social and cultural era of transition in which liberalism and socialism, with their varied ideological outlooks and practical achievements, are a proof of the fact that there are situations to be overcome because what has been devised up to now is no longer or not yet in accordance with the true standard for man.

- I think it is because of *this state of transition and moment of search* that the importance of this subject has received more and more emphasis in numerous documents of the official Magisterium, from the Popes to the Council, from the Episcopal Conferences to the Synod of Bishops, from the diocesan clergy to those responsible for religious Orders. From among the most significant of these documents I will point out a few in the

Appendix,<sup>1</sup> as a useful means for your personal and communal reflection.

For us Salesians the Magisterium of the Church constitutes a privileged instrument in determining our position vis-à-vis the most complex and vital problems.

• Today, at any rate, there is for everyone a pressing *need to commit oneself* to a profound renewal of human community life: everybody feels called to contribute in the elaboration of a new society, institutionally and culturally more in accordance with human nature. Such an urgent need, however, has given rise to the present social and political climate with its dangerous unbalances of ideological trends.

• *The SGC has faced also this aspect* of our Salesian vocation, and its directives have already given us very concrete guidelines. But the experience of these last years shows that there are some who prefer to go their own way without listening to the voice of the SGC, and there are some who interpret the texts unilaterally and use them improperly.

These are the very two temptations of which I spoke to you in my “Letter of Presentation” of the Acts of the SGC, under the titles « Preconceptions of distrust - disillusionment » and “Harmonizing the documents.”<sup>2</sup>

## 2. A NEW VISION OF POLITICS

For a little more than half a century *a shifting of accent* has been taking place in the term “politics” which has revived its fortunes and has made it a fashionable word. This, in reality, has also given to the term a multiplicity of meanings, which is unfortunately accompanied by ambiguities of no slight consequence.

<sup>1</sup> See pg. 61: *Select Bibliography of Magisterium Documents.*

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Acts of the Special General Chapter*, pp. IX-XI.

It is certainly a very positive factor that the conscience of citizens concerning as never before, and that there is continuous growth in the will of the citizens to participate in the search for a more human model of society. "Political choices", wrote the French bishops, "acquire an immense amplitude: how can one imagine new forms of life in society? What types of society do men and women want for the end of the twentieth century or for the following century? A highly developed consumer society taken up with illusory goods, or a society based on justice and fullness of human development? Politics, in short, is today situated close to the level of ultimate ends".<sup>3</sup>

But it must also be remembered that the wider the scope given to politics, the greater must be the clarity of ideas in this regard. As a matter of fact, if everything were to become politics, then Faith would lose its function, the Church would lose its mission, and all of us would have to change our vocation.

It is therefore necessary to specify in some way the meaning in which we are here taking the concept of politics, in order to avoid exposing ourselves to today's recurrent fashion of a generalized and often irrational political demagoguery. This must be done even though it is not an easy task and it does not belong to me to delve into such a complex field.

### **The snare of ambiguity**

Fortunately we now have some experience in the use of ambivalent terms, and we are accustomed to discern between values and non-values, to distinguish, for instance, between secularization and secularism, between the advancement of women and feminism, between what properly belongs to the laity and laicism, and so forth. It is therefore possible, and for us here

<sup>3</sup> BISHOPS OF FRANCE, *Politica, Chiesa e Fede* [*Politics, Church and Faith*], Ed. LDC, 44.

it is even indispensable, to establish a clear distinction between “politics” and “politicizing”:

— *politics* is a good, and it is a basic dimension of human life in the civil community;

— *politicizing*, instead, is intrusiveness and adulteration, a confusion that corrodes from within and alters the nature of society and the manifold civil services of society.

It is true that when a term has caught on, we cannot prescind from its nuances and we should not be afraid to use it. We will do it, however, with an effort not to cause misunderstandings or erroneous interpretations. We should know how to speak the present language of youth and of the people, while keeping in mind that, unfortunately, popular language is not only the vehicle for truths but also for errors. This is true especially when certain terms enter into common usage through the filter of ideologies, which reject transcendent values, oppose religious perspectives, and deny the specific mission of the Church in society.

What then is politics at the level of Christian reflections? What does “political concern” mean for a member of that Church whose mission was defined by the Council as being “not of the political order” but “of a religious one?”<sup>4</sup> And what is today the “political responsibility” of a Salesian who heard his father and founder Don Bosco counsel him, a hundred years ago, to keep away from “things political?”

### **What is meant today by politics**

Scholars today generally use the term politics in two meanings, in accordance with the two axes around which the entire social concern revolves:

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 42.

— *the axis of values and ends* which define the “common good in a global vision of civil society”;

— *and the axis of the means, methods and priorities* which must guide the effectiveness of political power in the practical attainment of an adequate “living together” in society.

### *The axis of values and ends*

The first meaning considers politics in the widest sense of the word as a carefully thought-out discourse on the social dimension of man historically situated in the city, which in Greek is precisely called “polis”. In the city, as a matter of fact, human “living together” in society is organized, culture is developed, work is planned, manifold activities are promoted, social struggles take place and, in the final analysis, the history of a people unfolds to its fullness.

To be a citizen one has to be interested and participate in the dynamics of such a life in community, and devote oneself with various endeavors and services to its right organization and just functioning.<sup>5</sup> A good citizen cannot be neutral in this field, but must know how to give his collaboration generously and with all the competence of which he is capable.

*At this level, all undoubtedly have a political responsibility.* And we think rightaway of a realistic aspect of our Salesian mission: we have often heard it repeated by Don Bosco that we must be engaged in the education of youth and of the adults of the working class, “helping them to become honest citizens.”<sup>6</sup> Certainly, the expression “honest citizen” can have a different resonance depending on its cultural context; however, we are really moving in the orbit of this widely accepted meaning. In this sense, for all practical purposes, the term “politics” refers

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, Nos. 73-76.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *Constitutions*, Art. 17.

to the social dimension of man: its substantial reality is constituted directly by the sociocultural values and activities, while the political aspect appears as a qualifying consequence.

*The axis of the means and priorities*

The second meaning considers politics in the stricter and more proper sense of the word, as an intelligent and calculated series of initiatives of proven effectiveness, as the sum total of those practical activities which, through movements, political parties, historical projects and so forth, intend to direct the exercise of supreme political power in favor of the people.

At this level, politics is an activity ordained, no doubt, to the Common Good of all citizens as the goal to which it tends; but it has, as the moving energy that specifies it, the use and the seeking of the use of political power, for the purpose of organizing the entire society, bringing about the converging of various sectors and diverse energies towards the ordering of the whole, and guiding and orienting in concrete ways the behavior patterns of community life. Now this is exactly the most significant angle from which we can survey political activity, the light by which we must ultimately appraise and catalog all the initiatives to which it gives life.

*In the second meaning not all can dedicate themselves to political activity*, both because many other activities are needed and also because it requires uncommon talents and competencies. Well, then, here when I speak of “political activity”, I intend to refer to this second, stricter, and more proper meaning inasmuch as it implies as a substantial reality “the direct relationship with the search, use and distribution of power as the unifying factor of the social community”.<sup>7</sup>

And yet the shifting of accent to which we have alluded

<sup>7</sup> Cf. CELAM, *Chiesa e Politica* [Church and Politics], Ed. LDC, Nos. 6-7.

above, stresses the first meaning rather than the second, gives priority to politics understood more as a qualifying dimension rather than a specifying activity. Will we take this into account? Of course! It is precisely for this reason that we are reflecting on our political responsibility. But what we must clarify now is that a different emphasis does not change the nature of a concept, unless one wishes to fall into relativism.

*When politics pretends to judge everything*

In our case, we cannot allow ourselves to be conned by the Marxist theory of the equalization of social and political. In effect, in a secularized society of the atheistic type, politics takes the place of philosophy and religion in describing the meaning of man and of society: it considers as its primary and fundamental task that of defining the purpose of the world and of making itself the ultimate criterion of human ethics.<sup>8</sup> In that way, politics goes on to receive a supreme value that judges everything, even culture and religious faith.

This is the logical consequence of an ideology in which temporal goals are looked upon as absolutes, and in which politics is identified not only with the social order but with the very "making of history".<sup>9</sup>

This shifting of accent, then, should not lead us to distort the real meaning of things, but to underline and give a privileged position in our concerns to the profound changes in socio-cultural contexts, the adequate revision of the scales of values, the planning of a different priority of concerns, the urgency of assuming new attitudes, the courage to come to grips with uncharted problems, and every person's capacity to make one's own vocation truly efficacious for the good of society.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. R. Garaudy, *Parola d'uomo [Man's Word]*, Ed. Cittadella 1975, 125.

<sup>9</sup> *Op. cit.*, 125.

## The limits of political activity

Even if it is true that man in his totality has political dimensions, nevertheless political activity is not the whole man. Today, also among believers, there is too much talk about the totalizing value of the political dimension, thus opening the door to grave confusions.

“The political sphere”, wrote a scholar in this regard, “does not encompass all the collective and personal dimensions of human existence, though in one way or another it may reach out to all. If it does so, it is only from a certain viewpoint and within definite limits... Men and women can render the greatest services to humanity without making politics the pivotal concern of their lives. To favor politics exclusively would make us run the risk of forgetting essential dimensions of human existence, without which politics would lose every authentic significance”.<sup>10</sup>

In other words, family life, economics, culture, religion, and so forth, are as relevant from the viewpoint of civil society as they certainly are from the perspective of political activity.

I believe that one of today's tasks is that of *deflating the myth of 'politicization'*, which threatens to contaminate the other indispensable dimensions of human existence and to change the nature of many different vocations.

However, to demythologize 'politicization' does not mean to ignore or not to appreciate the values of the present process of growth in political responsibility. On the contrary, this new sensibility is precisely what makes it imperative for the good of society that we come up with other initiatives distinct from political activity.

“Political activity”, wrote Pope Paul VI, “should be the projection of a plan of society which is consistent in its concrete

<sup>10</sup> R. COSTE, *Dimensioni politiche della fede* [Political Dimensions of Faith], Ed. Cittadella 1973, 33 and 36.

means and in its inspiration, and which springs from a complete conception of man's vocation and of its differing social expressions. It is not for the State or even for political parties, which would be closed unto themselves, to try to impose an ideology... It is for cultural and religious groupings, in the freedom of acceptance which they presume, to develop in the social body, disinterestedly and in their own ways, those ultimate convictions on the nature, origin and end of man and society"<sup>11</sup>

Hence, the all too evident *importance of having among the people and for the people many vocations which do not devote themselves to politics as such, though they actually have a profound influence on political life.*

In an epoch of radical changes politics needs, more than ever, strong cultural foundations, secure religious enlightening, and true life-giving grace from Christ. Bergson, by no means a suspect of clericalism, made a bold statement that provoked not a few discussions: "Democracy will either be Christian or it will not exist". And he was not referring to any specific party, but to that something extra which politics needs to be truly rational.

### **3. RELIGION REMAINS INDISPENSABLE**

We must ponder very seriously the historical function of the Christian faith in the present democratic evolution of peoples. *For a Christian, to truly live the religious dimension of his life becomes, in practice, a grave responsibility also in the line of politics.*

The Second Vatican Council has stigmatized as a distressing error the separation of faith from temporal concerns: "The split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age...

<sup>11</sup> *Octogesima Adveniens*, No. 25.

Let there be no false opposition between professional and social activities on the one part, and religious life on the other... They are mistaken who... think that they may shirk their earthly responsibilities. For they are forgetting that by faith itself they are more than ever obliged to measure up to these duties, each according to this proper vocation. Nor, on the contrary, are they any less wide of the mark who... imagine that they can plunge themselves into earthly affairs in such a way as to imply that these are altogether divorced from the religious life...

In the exercise of all their earthly activities, let Christians gather their humane, domestic, professional, social, and technical enterprises into one vital synthesis with religious values, under whose supreme direction all things are harmonized unto God's glory".<sup>12</sup>

Who can help people to make this synthesis? Is there not a need for a special vocation, for an appropriate ministry, for a full-time and lifelong dedication? Yes, indeed: *there can be a political responsibility which, to be truly genuine, should not concern itself with politics, but with laying the religious foundations for civil life in community* and transformig into liturgy the whole human dynamism of history.

### **The mystery of evil in history**

One could say that the process of democratization in civil life is just beginning. A great modern thinker, Maritain, stated that we are still "in a prehistoric epoch" as far as this is concerned.

On the other hand, experience teaches us that the art of government is too often and too easily accompanied by abuses and injustices: power, wealth and sex seem to be climatic zones

<sup>12</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 43.

that are very favorable to sin and to the growth of evil. Let us think for a moment of the various States which exist at this moment on earth, and of the kinds of governments of past centuries: who can promise messianically to a people that there is a science which finally resolves this problem, and that there has appeared an effective method for engaging in politics with full justice? It would be demagoguery and irresponsibility to show oneself naively confident of a political system as having magical powers to resolve problems.

Instead, it is no exaggeration to affirm that human history without Christ could have been defined as the "catastrophe of politics". In history there is evidence of a special place for the Evil one that Scripture calls explicitly "the Prince of this world". Only Jesus Christ defeated him, healing also the political values through his redemptive work (which, it is good to notice, was not of a political nature).

Faith assures us that the "mystery of iniquity" is at work in history; the scene described in chapter thirteen of the Apocalypse is not mythology: there, temporal political power is presented as permeated by a demonic spirit which uses it on behalf of the Enemy of Christ.

St. Paul, too, counsels the Christians to put on "the armor of God so as to be able to stand firm against the wiles of the devil: for our wrestling is not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities and the powers, against the world-rulers of this darkness". We must therefore meditate on the presence in history of a deviating force that can be overcome only by Christ and with Christ.

It is not our task to make exegetical considerations; but we are certainly facing the problems of a special presence of evil in the nerve centers of human activity.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Eph., 6, 11-12.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. E. Schlier, *Principati e Potestà nel Nuovo Testamento* [*Principalities and Powers in the New Testament*], Morcelliana 1967.

## The liberating function of the Church

Here, then, we see an indispensable aspect of the Church's mission in the world: to free it from evil and to leaven it in the good. "The Church is the ambit in which the dominion of Christ is affirmed".<sup>15</sup>

The church is not the world, even though it exists in the world and lives to save it. It cannot loosen itself from the political sphere because it lives in the nations and helps to lay the foundations of their right human dimensions; but *its mission does not consist in building the State, but rather in bringing the good news of the Kingdom of God which inspires the people already living in this world to live uprightly.*

There is no dualism in all this; there is, indeed, a distinction and a duality: God is not an alternative to man, but neither is He man. Thus, the gospel saying "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's"<sup>16</sup> appears as a fundamental non-dualistic principle. The Second Vatican Council affirms that "Christ gave his Church no proper mission in the political order: the purpose which He set before her is a religious one".<sup>17</sup> The statement is plain: I would say that it could not be clearer, even though it may appear disconcerting.

We hear at once the resounding counterattack of Marx's accusation: "Religion is the opium of the people"! Would, therefore, the mission of Christ and of the Church be an alienation of history, a social disqualification, a political uselessness? Yet, Christ became the "Lord of history" precisely by fulfilling his religious mission, and thus opening the gates of liberty to all human values, even those of the political sphere. The Council,

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>16</sup> Mk., 12, 17.

<sup>17</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 42.

in the text just quoted, goes on to affirm: "But out of this religious mission itself came a function, a light, and an energy which serves to structure and consolidate the human community according to the divine law".<sup>18</sup>

### **Culture needs religion**

It is natural to latch on here to the fascinating problems of culture.

We know that faith does not belong of itself to the cultural order: "The Gospel is certainly not identical with culture, and is independent in regards to all cultures".<sup>19</sup> But *between faith and culture there exists an historical necessity*, derived from their very essence, of *intimate communion* and of a mutually enriching *continuous interchange*.<sup>20</sup>

The Council reminded us of the help that the Church receives from the contemporary world,<sup>21</sup> and the help which it intends to bestow on society.<sup>22</sup> Now, all this must once more be meditated upon, in order to understand and deepen the sense of the indispensability of religion.

Today more than ever, due to the process of democratization in our epoch, it is urgent "to insist that culture be not diverted from its own purpose and made to serve political or economic interests".<sup>23</sup> Such an urgency underlines even more strongly the importance of a dynamic *presence of religious faith in the conception and development of a new order for man and society*.

The Gospel, as the Council assured us, helps to stimulate

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, No. 20.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 58.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., No. 44.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., Nos. 42, 43, 57, 58.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., No. 59.

culture, to remove from it dangerous errors, to elevate its mediation, to strengthen it, to complete it and make it fruitful.<sup>24</sup> "Faith throws a new light on everything, manifests God's design for man's total vocation, and thus directs the mind to solutions which are fully human".<sup>25</sup>

The trouble is that, between faith and culture, serious difficulties have risen to such an extent that it prompted our Holy Father Pope Paul VI to exclaim with anguish: "*The split between the Gospel and culture is without a doubt the drama of our time*".<sup>26</sup>

In view of the emerging values, it is imperative for us to reflect once more on our faith and to elaborate a theology that can dialogue with the new anthropological sciences so as to avoid the unbalance of sociologism and psychologism.<sup>27</sup> Evangelization should strive to penetrate the evolving strata of humanity; it should baptize the world of labor, purify the social struggle, enlighten politics, give a new dimension to the sense of history. Pope Paul VI tells us: "For the Church it is a question not only of preaching the Gospel in ever wider geographic areas or to ever greater numbers of people, but also of affecting and, as it were, upsetting, through the power of the Gospel, mankind's criteria of judgement, determining values, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspiration and models of life, which are in contrast with the Word of God and the plan of salvation".<sup>28</sup>

Thus, through the workings of the Spirit of the Lord, there arose and still arise in the Church apostolic vocations especially oriented to face these problems and to devote themselves to resolve them with intelligence and dedication. Among these we

<sup>24</sup> Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 58.

<sup>25</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 11.

<sup>26</sup> *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, No. 20.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 62.

<sup>28</sup> *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, No. 19.

must number also our vocation — that of the Salesians of Don Bosco.

*It is a full-time and lifelong religious commitment, an all-embracing and creative undertaking more urgent than any other, for a new projection of man and society.* For, the mammoth crisis that we are undergoing is not primarily political, but religious and cultural. We need Christian vocations specialized in healing the divorce between the Gospel and culture.

Don Bosco was raised by God in the last century with a clear mission. Our vocation as Salesians entails a religiocultural mission especially among poor youth and the working-class people, precisely in view of the new society. Don Bosco himself, in the foreword to his first draft of the Constitutions, wrote with keen perceptiveness: “On the good or bad training of youth depends the happy or sad future of the mores of society”.<sup>29</sup>

In an age of transition like ours, we should know how to rethink our vocation without betraying it. The building of a new society certainly needs politics; but to be genuinely democratic, politics needs culture; and if culture does not wish to betray man, it needs religion.

#### 4. DON BOSCO AND POLITICS

It is at least ambiguous to speak of Don Bosco as if he had nothing to do with politics. The mistake would consist in making him a tranquil, disembodied, uncreative, non-prophetic type of priest, with no battling spirit, no untiring drive, no decision, no definite social and historical choice.

It would follow likewise that the mission of the Congregation he founded in direct answer to so many sociocultural needs of his time would lose its very nature.

<sup>29</sup> *Foreword*, 1858; *Biographical Memoirs*, 5, 931.

What is undoubtedly clear is that Don Bosco chose with full deliberation not to engage in politics; as a matter of fact, he handed down this same injunction to his Congregation as part of his spiritual heritage. But this does not mean that he was a stranger to the great human problems of his epoch, or that he was neutral as regards the sociocultural innovations of his era, or that he was ignorant of the needs of the new society which was taking shape, or that he was an armchair idealist in his educational work on behalf youth and working classes, or that he was a somewhat sentimentalistic utopian in his international and missionary enterprises.

No; the very opposite is true! Don Bosco devoted himself creatively to the reform of society, with full cognizance of his responsibility for the common good. But he did it with a new pastoral dedication which followed completely from his priestly heart.

We therefore ask ourselves in what sense Don Bosco's counsel "not to embroil ourselves in things political" is not a sign of unhealthy lack of interest in politics, but implies rather a political responsibility for the common good. Keep in mind, among other things, that what he called "things political" had a very special overtone in the past century. Ours will not be a scientific research. We will simply try with a panoramic synthesis to shed some light on the original meaning and native identity of our vocation in the Church.

To this end, it is relevant for us to understand his choice in this field. We will search not so much for his mentality linked with the culture of his time, or for his possible subjective tastes in the sociopolitical climate of Piedmont and Italy, but rather for those elements that could help us appreciate the spirit with which he lived and the type of mission he wished to accomplish. For we wish to be faithful to our Founder as to a grace from God.

To enlighten such a fidelity, we will gather some observations concerning the difference in sociopolitical context between the

past century and the present time; we will also ask which were, in practice, Don Bosco's most significant specific activities, and how the pastoral aspect of his vocation gave clear witness in his daily life.

### **The century that changed the face of the world**

Today we in the West perhaps look upon the last century with a certain superiority complex, which prevents us from seeing its importance and fecundity in the social and political field. Suffice it to consider that notwithstanding Vienna's restoration (in the year of Don Bosco's birth), all the leavening forces and "signs of the times" contained in the explosion of the French revolution continued to grow. "We know", wrote Father Caviglia, "that the nineteenth century changed the face of the world in every sense, good or bad, and religion was no exception".<sup>30</sup>

It is a century "that aspires to the liberation and elevation of the lower classes, and seeks to achieve democratically a just social order: a century that, calling itself the age of enlightenment, wants education, science, progress for all and in everything, tries with increasing fervor to educate the people in the moral, civil, political, social spheres, turns to the people for national vindications, and adapts to the people the spirit and the genres of the new literature and the new art".<sup>31</sup>

No doubt, all this took place in a cultural climate which was different from our own. It could be summed up politically as the search for independence and constitutional democracy in the new nations, and ecclesiologically in the trends of the First Vatican Council.

<sup>30</sup> A. CAVIGLIA, *Don Bosco - Profilo storico* [*Don Bosco - Historical Profile*], SEI 1934, 5-7.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5.

## Characteristics of Don Bosco's times

We list some characteristics of the time in which Don Bosco lived.

- In the first place, there was a *general reawakening of nationalism* — which in Italy took the form of the *Risorgimento* and of the wars of independence. When Don Bosco was ordained a priest, there were in the Italian peninsula as many as six State Capitals (Turin, Milan, Parma, Florence, Rome, Naples); the empires of Spain and Portugal had broken asunder; the independent States of Latin America were being born; forces were already at work that would tear apart the Austro-Hungarian empire.

- *The system of government was changing.* Foundations were being laid for a new civil life along democratic lines; forms of absolute monarchy were disappearing; a constitutional government was established also in the Papal States; voting was beginning to take place; political parties were making their appearance.

- It is in the last century that *the travail of socioeconomic transformations began* — industrialization, urbanism, demographic explosion (Europe went from 180 to 400 million inhabitants), and the important phenomenon of emigration to America.

- *New ideologies appeared* which would exert an ever greater sway over the masses through the growing power of the press on public opinion: besides the neo-Guelfs, neo-Ghibellines, and utopian socialists, the movements of Liberalism and Marxism were asserting themselves.

- In Italy there was a particular intensity in the *clash between State and Church*, which saw the vehemence of sectarian forces, a widespread anticlericalism (with the response of a strong clericalism), the confiscation of ecclesiastical goods, the invasion

of the Papal States, the conquest of Rome, abstention from voting and from holding public office on the part of Catholics, and their consequent conflict of conscience.

Let us reflect on what it meant, then, at a time of constitutional euphoria, to have the boys shout, "Long live the Pope!" instead of "Long live Pius IX!" or, during Mazzini's republic in Rome, to make among the boys a collection on behalf of the Pope in exile at Gaeta.

• *To speak of politics in such a context* implies a not so negligible difference of emphasis when compared to the meaning usually given to politics at the present time. Don Bosco used to express in different terms what we have taken to the wide meaning of politics at the sociocultural level of the common good. "The meaning which we give to the expression 'Political World', writes Peter Stella, "must be found to a great extent in the area of other expressions, such as 'civil society', 'fatherland', 'nation', 'society', 'morality'".

In this area it is possible to discover a basic convergence between the goals set by Don Bosco and by the most disparate supporters of the education of youth and of the people, such as Ferrante Aporti, Ilarione Petiti of Ro, Achilles Mauri and Giuseppe Mazzini himself.<sup>32</sup> We can say that, in this field, Don Bosco in practice focuses the goals to be obtained by an integral education in the formula "good Christians and upright citizens".

Instead, when Don Bosco uses the term "politics" or "things political" or "party principle" (cf. letter to Minister T. Mamiani), he refers to what is directly linked with an intervention by the local government, to one's view of the exercise of power in the State, to the ideological postulates which guide the leanings of certain newspapers, of pressure groups which are more or less sectarian, of movements that parted company over the question

<sup>32</sup> P. STELLA, *Don Bosco e la Politica* [*Don Bosco and Politics*], Rome 1971, Duplicate, 3.

of the type of government to be organized and the kind of independence and national unity to be brought about. This was the meaning of the term at the more specialized level of politics.

“To look for nuances in the texture of Don Bosco’s experience it proves advantageous to underscore the points of tension, and at times also of divergence, between Don Bosco and others. Where we find the term ‘politics’, it is possible to fathom the motivations of some of his choices, the criteria which instinctively or consciously guided the line of conduct he had taken”.<sup>33</sup>

### **Don Bosco's political initiatives**

Never did Don Bosco show either a temperament or an attitude that was neutral or, as people say today, uncommitted to any position whatsoever. He was unmistakably and totally a priest with a genial and self-sacrificing pastoral dedication.

He possessed a noteworthy practical acumen; he obviously had psychological balance; he was, as it is popularly said, very shrewd, realistic and supple; he had the leadership needed to build and rule communities; he faced difficulties with skill; he was gentle and tactful in his dealing with people, knowing how to reach key-persons; he cultivated his inclination and taste for history; he followed the course of world events, appraising them with an objective critical sense; in a word, he had (if we may say so) the qualifications and the making of a “politician”, not as some politicians, armchair critics, who in practice are unable to organize a work, to govern a group, to find a solution or to analyze the components of a concrete difficulty.

He instinctively felt he was Italian and Piedmontese (that is, a citizen of the Kingdom of Sardinia); but, as a believer, he nourished a strong sense of catholicity, which he saw not in con-

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

trast to but naturally linked with his being Italian. As a priest and as a citizen, *he was intimately convinced that "religion was always regarded as the mainspring of human society and of families, and that where religion is lacking there is nothing but immorality and disorder; that we ought therefore to do our best to promote it, love it and make it loved also by others, and guard ourselves carefully from those who do not honor it or who despise it"*.<sup>34</sup>

He was totally and continually taken up with his task, spurred on by "zeal for the Christian renewal of society"<sup>35</sup> and by "a suprapolitical concept of the Papacy",<sup>36</sup> so much so that in an encyclical written toward the end of 1929 (the year of the Concordat between the Holy See and Italy) Pius XI disclosed his admiration "for God's mercy who providentially and for such a long time, in opposition to sectarian and wicked men, all bent on uprooting the Christian religion and downgrading with accusations and insults the supreme authority of the Supreme Pontiff, raised Don Bosco who, strongly deploring the violated rights of the Apostolic See, time and again had toiled to have those rights restored and to heal on a friendly basis a division which had torn Italy from the fatherly embrace of the Pontiff".<sup>37</sup>

But to assure ourselves of Don Bosco's indefatigable dedication and clearness of choice in this matter, let us recall his *main initiatives* which have some reference to the political dimension.

• *Don Bosco dealt personally with politicians and men of culture*, such as Pellico, Gioberti, Rosmini, Manzoni, Cavour, Balbo, Rattazzi, Farini, Crispi, Zanardelli, Lanza and many others, and he continually endeavored to keep up friendly relationships

<sup>34</sup> G. BOSCO, *Storia d'Italia* (in *Opere e scritti editi e inediti*, Vol. III, SEI) [*History of Italy* (in *Works and edited and unedited writings*)], 472-473.

<sup>35</sup> A. CAVIGLIA, *Profilo Storico* [*Historical Profile*], 135.

<sup>36</sup> A. CAVIGLIA, *Discorso introduttivo alla storia d'Italia* [*Introductory Discourse to the History of Italy*], pg. XXIII.

<sup>37</sup> Encyclical *Quinquagesimo ante anno* of 12/23/29.

with cabinet ministers in the successive capitals (Turin, Florence, and Rome).

• *He participated with interest in some significant events of the new political current.* The Constitutions of Charles Albert in 1848 ushered in the election of deputies and senators and the inauguration of Parliament. "Don Bosco, who studied carefully the events of the day, went a few times to assist at the parliamentary discussions in the first months of its opening; and he understood right away the direction that things political would have taken with regard to the Church".<sup>38</sup>

In the month of November, 1875, the government convoked the general elections. Bishop Frasoni reminded the people of the Christian meaning of voting Don Bosco took all the necessary steps to obtain the documents required to fulfill this duty, and he prudently tried to further the election of competent Catholics.<sup>39</sup> The majority of the Catholic deputies who were elected were his personal friends, and they often had recourse to him for counsel on certain difficult problems.<sup>40</sup>

• Just when the *Rattazzi law on the confiscation of the property of convents* was about to pass, Don Bosco published in the "Catholic Readings" the famous pamphlet on "The goods of the Church, how they are stolen and what are the consequences, with a short appendix on the chain of events in Piedmont", which brought about strong reactions in Parliament<sup>41</sup> and was followed by letters to the king with the prophetic warning: "great funerals at court".<sup>42</sup>

• *When Rome was occupied by the Piedmontese forces, and Pius IX felt he might have to abandon it (with the consequent*

<sup>38</sup> *Biographical Memoirs*, 3, 305.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 5, 762-764.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 5, 233, 234.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 5, 239-244.

possible intervention by other military powers), Don Bosco saw to it that the Pope received the historic counsel: "Let the sentinel of Israel remain firm at his post".<sup>43</sup>

• *In the enthusiasm of the first missionary expedition to Latin America*, we find an important aspect of his creative participation in the problems of the Nation, and it was accompanied by a curious proposal. The expansion of the migratory movement, which did not disturb the politicians too much, was instead of grave concern to Don Bosco, who wanted missionaries to care also for their fellow countrymen abroad.

But the curious incident is that on March 16, 1876, Don Bosco wrote a memorandum to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Italy, Melegari, in which he suggested the unusual project — very bold indeed, and, as a matter of fact, utopian — of establishing to the south of Rio Negro, in Patagonia, a kind of colonial state for the emigrants.<sup>44</sup> "It is interesting to note that, twenty years later, the celebrated Zionist, Theodore Herzl, proposed in his turn that the great powers assign to the Israeli people the sovereignty either of Palestine or of Argentinian Patagonia".<sup>45</sup>

### *In the conflicts between State and Church*

• In the grave conflicts between State and Church, Don Bosco carried out very high and delicate tasks.

In 1865, and four years later in 1869, he intervened in the problem of the several vacant episcopal sees.<sup>46</sup>

In 1873 he was entrusted with the problem of the "temporality of Bishops", which had only partial success because of the opposition of the press and of Bismarck.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 10, 10-66.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. *Biographical Memoirs*, 12, 111; 12, 623-624.

<sup>45</sup> G. SPALLA, *Don Bosco e il suo ambiente sociopolitico* [*Don Bosco and His Sociopolitical Environment*], LDC 1975, 39.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. *Biographical Memoirs*, 10, 62 ff.; 10, 453.

<sup>47</sup> *Biographical Memoirs*, 10, 528 and 10, 550.

In 1878, at the death of Pius IX, Don Bosco was given charge to explore the dispositions of the Crispi government as to the guaranteeing of the safety of the conclave.<sup>48</sup>

The new Pope Leo XIII, soon after his election, commissioned Card Manning to consult Don Bosco on the possibility of a new effort to reach some understanding with the government.<sup>49</sup>

It was a moving scene when, some time later, Leo XIII, upon receiving Don Bosco in audience, told him: "Your life belongs to the Church. At this moment, Don Bosco, you are necessary. Take care of your health. It is the Pope who commands you to do it".<sup>50</sup>

We know that Don Bosco wanted to disentangle the difficulty of the *Exequatur* as well as the one concerning the participation of Catholics as deputies and senators to the clambers of the new Italian State. It was a thorny and intricate question, not only on account of the prohibition, "Neither elected nor electors", but also because he, as a Piedmontese, was regarded with certain diffidence in some influential circles. On that delicate problem, Don Bosco consulted many important persons and obtained from Father Sanguinetti, professor at the Gregorian University, an interesting study which in due time would bear fruit.<sup>51</sup>

### *Writer for youth and the people*

• But one of the particularly enlightened sectors in this regard is that of Don Bosco as a writer, at the service of the cultural uplifting of youth and the people.

"In this sector", wrote Peter Braido, "one can easily pinpoint the central preoccupation of all his works and favorite methodologies: the focusing on the Christian religious motive,

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 13, 481-482.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 13, 501.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 18, 98.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 10, 469-475.

held to be also the source of moral and civil prosperity; a lively awareness of otherworldly realities...; but, conjointly, the appreciation of work and study, industriousness in the earthly city and in one's profession; and the will to bring into one's life, which is something serious, a note of joy. It is, in a sense, Don Bosco's synthetic formula for action, and it finds one of its typical expressions in the popular theatre to which he gave life".<sup>52</sup>

We must mention, among the most significant writings in this field, the *History of the Church*, *Bible History*, the *History of Italy*, the plan for a "Universal History", the original *Dialogues on the Decimal Metric System*, the pamphlet *Italian Oenologist* written to counteract a vine-growers' society founded by anti-Catholic sects, and so forth.

Don Bosco, moreover, had a keen sense of public opinion, and he carried on an intense promotion activity "on behalf of good morals and civil society"; he issued a famous circular, on the feast of St. Joseph, in 1885, on the spreading of the printed word: "This was one of the principal undertakings entrusted to me by Divine Providence", he wrote, "and you know that I had to shoulder it with untiring energy, in spite of my other countless occupations... I beg you and I plead with you not to overlook this most important part of our mission".<sup>53</sup>

I believe it opportune now to center our attention for a moment on the *History of Italy* and on the initiative of the *Salesian Bulletin*.

### *The History of Italy*

• The *History of Italy* offers an extraordinary abundance of cues for our reflection: "It is not only a book: it is a deed of his life and a trait of his character and thought; and in this

<sup>52</sup> *Scritti sul Sistema Preventivo nell'educazione della gioventù* [Writings on the Preventive System in the Education of Youth], Ed. La Scuola 1965, 553.

<sup>53</sup> *Biographical Memoirs*, 3, 479-489.

sense, more than a historiographic event, it has an enormous value".<sup>54</sup>

I invite you to read it again, together with the documented and keen "Introductory Discourse" of the unforgettable Father Albert Caviglia, who began by stating: "It is commonly agreed that, among Don Bosco's writings, the *History of Italy* is the masterpiece... It is his most mature and most powerful work; when it was first published (1865), it was said that it had no equal in Italy; it still remains so, because the Author infused into it a vitality which is higher and lasting in that it is not only cultural".<sup>55</sup>

Don Bosco's preoccupation was that of getting the people and youth to know the history of their country at a time of rising national consciousness. The one who was speaking well of Italy, in spite of the passions and anticlericalism of the *Risorgimento*, was a priest; and he was speaking of Italy as the fatherland of all, when national unity was only a distant future which not even all Italians looked forward to, and much less believed in.

It would seem impossible that a writer could have faced such a topic at such a crucial hour without some political attitude, without polemics against sectarians and theorists, without a certain political clericalism proper to the local Christian community; and yet, it is a book that avoided engaging in politics as such. Even when utilizing the works of Guelf or Ghibelline historiographers, Don Bosco knew how to distinguish and prescind: "Just as with the Ghibelline authors whom he follows, his sympathy is not adherence to certain forms of action (secret conspiracies), or to certain political views (like those of Mazzini and Gioberti), and it stops where Ghibellinism begins (anticlericalism and antipapacy); likewise, his Guelf sense of Italianism

<sup>54</sup> A. CAVIGLIA, *Discorso Introduttivo* [Introductory Discourse], p. XLVII.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. IX.

is tempered by his suprapolitical concept of the Papacy, and by his faith in Divine Providence”.<sup>56</sup>

A proof of this superior value of the book is a somewhat emblematic chapter that deals with “The temporal goods of the Church and the power of the Supreme Pontiff”. Father Caviglia called it “most important” because of its subject matter and the way it presented it: “Written in 1885, it is still valid and can even become much truer and sounder for those who understand it well, after the Concordat (1929)”.<sup>57</sup> For he wrote on contemporary events and personages without betraying his high pedagogical, cultural and religious goal.

### *The Salesian Bulletin*

• The beginning of the *Salesian Bulletin* (1877), linked to the prevailing lay Catholic environment of the Cooperators and to the dimension of the Salesian mission which was already worldwide, has a characteristic socioreligious significance on account of the factors that determined it and the goals which it was meant to achieve.

Don Bosco was fully aware of the factors determining his choice. In the first years of his priesthood, he had dedicated himself to some journalistic activity. In 1848, faced with the flood of party and liberal press, he had engrossed himself, with other priests and laymen, in the foundation of the newspaper *L'Armonia* (Harmony).<sup>58</sup> Later, realizing that the newspaper was not popular, he conceived the idea of a periodical that would be better suited to the simple and less educated people, and he launched *L'Amico della gioventù* (The Friend of Youth); it reached only its sixty-first issue and it was combined, after eight months of life, with *L'Istruttore del Popolo* (The People's In-

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. XXIII.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 549, Note 89.

<sup>58</sup> *Biographical Memoirs*, 3, 409.

structor), another newspaper on which Don Bosco collaborated for twenty months, but which he later abandoned.

In the years of the foundation of the Bulletin, there was an interesting political ferment among Catholic organizations, labor societies, and youth associations; there were even people who advocated a Catholic party of conciliative tendencies.

“What was going to be the way”, writes Peter Stella, “that Don Bosco would show to his Cooperators? Would they, too, be an association preparing to descend some day to join ranks with other legions in the political struggle against the liberal and anticlerical government? Would their organ, the *Salesian Bulletin*, be patterned after the style of the *Civiltà Cattolica*, the *Unità Cattolica*, or Father Albertario’s *Osservatore Cattolico*, the tribune of the most immoderate intransigence? There were, to be sure, various models, but Don Bosco chose the model of the socioreligious periodicals: “Far from being useless, religion is the very soul of well-being, of true progress and of civilization. ‘Civilization and religion are synonymous’, we read in the lead article of March, 1885. The very title of the periodical was meant to be programmatic, and it was the result of careful study”.<sup>59</sup>

Thus, the policy chosen for the Bulletin helps us to grasp even better the vocational choice made by Don Bosco for his Congregation. He himself used to say: “I would hope that the Bulletin, which is printed specifically to spread the knowledge of our goals, will be of great help to this effect and will present in their true perspective the main events as they take place in the Congregation”.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>59</sup> P. STELLA, *Don Bosco e la Politica* [*Don Bosco and Politics*], Rome 1971, Duplicate, 12-13.

<sup>60</sup> *Biographical Memoirs*, 13, 288.

### **Clear understanding of his vocation and clever adaptability**

From Don Bosco's initiatives and attitudes, it does not seem difficult to draw some conclusions that can shed light on our problem. Never was he "uncommitted" to his mission. He wanted his Salesians to be truly "committed" to their vocation, but without putting on airs and in a simple style, with clarity of vocational position and with self-sacrificing dedication to the fulfilment of their chosen mission.

The qualifications for such a commitment are balance and work, without instability and without falling into a soft and easy life, without fanaticism and without fear — neither a conformism that always favors one's government, nor a revolutionary alignment.

The awareness of a definite pastoral choice was called by Father Caviglia Don Bosco's "*higher vocation*".<sup>61</sup> He felt himself strongly called by God to carry out this mission beyond his possible personal tastes and his eventual plans; he had to dedicate himself to it, by passing every obstacle and leaving behind all things, even good ones, that could in any way hinder its accomplishment. In order to be able to dedicate himself daily to his religious and civil objective, Don Bosco prescinded from many other things. His decision not to engage in politics as such, is to be interpreted in this line of thought. It was not a pragmatic strategy suited for the last century, as the provisional *non expedit* was; it was not a waiting for better times. It was a consequence of his vocation; it was a choice that was deeply rooted in a typical spirituality; and it was also an attitude of realistic efficiency, which led him to consider his pastoral task as absolutely indispensable for the new society, no matter what

<sup>61</sup> *Profilo storico* [Historical Profile], p. 99-100; *Discorso introduttivo* [Introductory Discourse], p. XLIX.

its de facto form of government would be. "Instead of filling the air with whining lamentations", he would say, "we should work to the very best of our powers so that things may proceed well".<sup>62</sup>

"Don Bosco lived for an idea and, if we may say so, lived the idea: the conquest of souls, the fulfillment of his motto. Here we see a true ideal synthesis, the focal point that brings together all the rays of that activity prodigiously extended in so many directions".<sup>63</sup>

Don Bosco lived his "higher vocation" in *an intelligent flexibility* according to the sociopolitical situations: "He was not an obstinate man who refused to accept the reality of facts".<sup>64</sup>

### *The politics of the Our Father*

This capacity for adaptation, or holy shrewdness for the purpose of being able to do good in accordance with the scope of his mission, constitutes his well-known "*politics of the Our Father*".

Writing in July of 1863 to the school Superintendent of Turin, he made his "profession of political faith" in this sense.<sup>65</sup> But the expression was born in a conversation with Pius IX, when the trend of the negotiations over the vacant episcopal sees was hardening on both sides. The Pope asked Don Bosco what kind of politics would enable him to disentangle himself from such an intricate problem, and he answered: "My politics is that of Your Holiness. It is the politics of the Our Father. In the Our Father, we pray every day that the Kingdom of our heavenly Father may come on earth and expand ever more, that its presence be ever more felt, in an ever more living manner,

<sup>62</sup> *Biographical Memoirs*, 13, 288.

<sup>63</sup> A. CAVIGLIA, *Profilo Storico* [*Historical Profile*], p. 19.

<sup>64</sup> A. CAVIGLIA, *Discorso introduttivo* [*Introductory Discourse*], p. XXXII.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. *Epistolario* [*Correspondence*], I, 273, 274.

always more powerful and glorious". And he insisted that priority be given above all to the good of the dioceses, and that there should be a study of the way in which it could be ensured.<sup>66</sup>

In summary, Don Bosco knew what his vocational commitment consisted of. He knew what his specific contribution to youth for the building of society should have been. He knew that Christ possesses an original role in history, that the Church has the only true religion, and that this religion is an indispensable ferment of progress. His politics of the Our Father consisted in having as the supreme criterion of his decisions and activities the *Da mihi animas* above and beyond any economic, social, cultural and political criterion, yielding his own personal tastes and even his rights if the situation were to require it, for the sole purpose of being able to stay with youth and announce to them the good news of the Kingdom of God.

### *The article that was left out of the Constitutions*

Within this vocational framework we can understand why Don Bosco insisted on having an article on politics inserted in the Constitutions.

One of the unique features that was very dear to him and that he pondered very carefully regarding the religious form of our Society was that of safeguarding the civil rights of the members. And yet, three times he tried to introduce an article that would prohibit Salesians from getting involved in political activities.

The article is found in the margin, written in Don Bosco's own handwriting, of a sample copy of the Constitutions drawn up between 1863 and 1864: "It is an adopted principle, to be unalterably applied, that all members of this Society are to rigorously keep clear of all matters concerning politics. Therefore,

<sup>66</sup> *Biographical Memoirs*, 8, 593.

neither by spoken word nor by writings or books are they ever to take part in matters which even only indirectly involve them politically”.

Two things are to be noted here. First, the article is inserted in the paragraph dealing with the “ends” and not in the one dealing with the “form” of the Congregation; as though to emphasize that it concerns a vocational attitude derived from the very object itself of the Salesian mission. Second, it was taken for granted at that time that, in the Church, even priests could enter politics: it was an offshoot of the sacred outlook of Christianity and of the weight that clericalism carried in the social environment.

Now, all three times, the Roman Curia squelched the article and wanted it to be deleted.

Don Bosco would comment later: “I even wanted an article in our Constitutions that would prohibit any kind of involvement in political matters, and there was one in the hand-written copies; but when our Rules were submitted to Rome and the Society was approved for the first time, this article was removed by the Congregation appointed to examine our Rules.

“Then, in 1870, when it was a matter of definitively approving the Society and we had to submit the Rules once more for examination, I again — as if nothing had happened before — inserted this article, which said that the members were forbidden to enter into political matters. They cancelled it again. I, who was persuaded of the importance of this article, in 1874, the year in which it was a matter of approving the individual articles of the Constitutions, i.e., it was a matter of the very final approval, presenting the Rules to the Sacred Congregation of Bishops and Regulars, I introduced it again; and again it was cancelled. This time, reasons were given for the cancellation, and they wrote to me: ‘The article is being canceled for the third time. Although it might generally appear to be admissible, in these days it sometimes happens that a person’s conscience motivates him to enter into politics, for political matters are often in-

separable from religious matters. Therefore, an exclusion among good Catholics is not to be approved’.

“And so this article was definitively removed. And we may deal with political matters when it is useful or truly appropriate to do so; but, outside of these cases, let us always abide by the general principles of not meddling in political matters, and this will do us a world of good”.<sup>67</sup>

*“The greatest problem”*

Also in the first General Chapter (September 5 - October 5, 1877) Don Bosco returned to the subject of politics, considering it to be an important problem, and perhaps even “the most important problem”.

In view of the historical significance and importance which Don Bosco attached to the holding of the first General Chapter (“My desire is for this Chapter to mark a turning point in the Congregation”), we see once again how he wanted to insist on an aspect which he considered to be essential to his spirit and to his style of apostolate and which was to characterize his Congregation.

In the 24th conference, our Founder said the following: “Our purpose is to make known that one can give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, without ever compromising anyone; and this does not prevent us at all from giving to God what is God’s. In our day, they say that this is a problem; and, if you will, I would add that it is probably the greatest of all problems, but it has already been solved by our Divine Savior Jesus Christ.

“In practice, there are serious difficulties, it is true. Let us try to overcome them, not only by leaving the principle intact, but by furnishing reasons and proofs and testimonies that are

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 13, 265.

dependent on the principle and that explain the principle itself. My main concern is this: try to find a practical way of giving to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, while giving to God what belongs to God...

By the grace of God and without saying a lot of words directly, we are going to give priority to this principle, and it is going to be the source of enormous good, both for civil as well as for ecclesiastical society".<sup>68</sup>

It seems quite certain, therefore, that Don Bosco was aware of the importance and extent of political activity, that he made a definite choice with regard to it, and wanted his Congregation to have a spirit of its own in this field.

### **Some conclusions for our guidance**

We can end this brief overview of "Don Bosco and politics" by pointing out a few summary conclusions which are not difficult to draw from his life, from his attitudes, and from his directives.

• *Don Bosco's fundamental option*, the basic explanation for the positions he took, the focal point of all the rays of his dynamism, is the pastoral charity expressed in the motto *Da mihi animas*. At the center of his entire personality is a priestly heart. The absolute value, for him, is the coming of the Kingdom of God. The values of politics, of the economic order, and of conjugal love are purely contingent: one can live a full life while in some way renouncing to them, not to depreciate them but to defend them from distortions and exaggerations.

He exercised an option, accompanied by a kind of asceticism and renunciation, that aimed at removing those elements that might slow him down and hold him back from his mission.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 13, 288.

• Don Bosco's characteristic aspect, his historic personal trait, the convergence of his choices and his activities is what Father Albera called "*the gift of predilection for youth*", especially the poorest and most in need. "He did not take a step, he did not speak a word, he did not set his hand to any task that did not have for a goal the salvation of youth".<sup>69</sup> Even though he had talents and capacities for political involvement, he gave them up so as not to be impeded in his work for youth.

To Father Vespignani, who was all enthused over a certain Catholic activity linked to politics, he said: "That is not our spirit. All we want is for them to let us work among youth; therefore, let us keep out of politics. Wherever we are not busy working for youth, we are going to be out of place".<sup>70</sup>

For this reason, he will remain throughout the ages as the "Father and teacher of youth".

• *The historic insight of Don Bosco*, his vision of human unfoldment, his capacity for perceiving the overall course of events, is the long-range outlook of the Christian believer: he does not let himself be tossed about by the winds of the short-lived fads of the day, nor does he fail to recognize the future perspective of deeds accomplished.

Don Bosco's personal bent and great regard for history helped him to shed light on two great orbits of his social sensitivity: the necessity of religion for true progress, and the importance of youth and people in the building up of a new democratic society.

• *The ecclesial consciousness of Don Bosco*, his practical conception of religion, his pastoral criterion of action, is a supra-political and supracultural vision of Christianity, made concrete in the Church, which he loved to view as founded on Peter and

<sup>69</sup> M. RUA, *Lettere Circolari* [Circular Letters], letter of 1/29/1896.

<sup>70</sup> *Biographical Memoirs*, 13, 684.

the Apostles and their successors, the Pope and the Bishops: "Whatever work we do is little", he used to say, "when it is a question of the Church and the papacy".<sup>71</sup>

His was a vision rooted in the certainty of the living presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church, in the conviction that the Pope is the Vicar of Christ on earth, and in the awareness (and devotion) that Mary is the Help of Christians. In keeping with this conviction, he ventured into vast projects, framed clear decisions, took on difficult tasks, and even suffered misunderstandings and injustices.

- *The realism of Don Bosco's activity*, the sphere of his social contribution, his type of action, focuses on the cultural level of human advancement in terms of the education of youth and the working classes, and in terms of molding public opinion on great religious and social values. To this end, he would make use of all the classical means (the press, theatre, school, associations, and the like) under the impulse and with the yardstick of the burning pastoral charity that animated him.

He was an evangelizer who did not just teach Catechism or celebrate the liturgy, but who became embodied in the reality of youth and the working classes, by means of all those cultural avenues that served his purpose. His realism was one of socio-cultural preference, not of political activity.

- *The pastoral rule of Don Bosco*, his educative artistry, his genuine orthopraxy (if we may use the word), is that of the pastoral wisdom of the Preventive System: "not with blows, nor with violence, but with goodness".

The very name "Salesian" was chosen to underscore a spirit, a lifestyle, that is founded on the balance of common sense and not keyed to any party fanaticism, that is made up of human relations and dialogue and not of subversions and resistance, that

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 5, 577.

is dedicated in a positive way to whatever is possible, and not to shout or denounce with sterile negative criticisms.

Following in the footsteps of St. Francis de Sales, Don Bosco devoted himself to emphasizing all the values of doing good, awakening a sense of optimism and of gratitude to God as Father, rather than waxing eloquent and harping against doing evil, thus appealing to the instincts of hatred and forgetfulness of God: "Do good and let people say what they will".<sup>72</sup>

Don Bosco was courageous, decisive, and even controversial, but never subversive, let alone violent. He was even a bit foolhardy, but according to charity and within the framework of his vocational choice: "Regarding those things that are to the advantage of endangered youth or that serve to win souls to God, I rush ahead even to the point of making a fool of myself".<sup>73</sup>

## 5. OUR COMMITMENT IN SOCIETY

We have now stored up a goodly amount of food for thought. The topic itself demanded somewhat of a panoramic view of the vastness and complexity of its contents. At this point, I think I can spell out — at least in terms of giving general directives — some guidelines for Salesian behavior.

They proceed, as you probably know already, not so much from a disciplinary concern, but from the desire to clarify, deepen, and defend the spirit and mission left us by Don Bosco as our spiritual legacy.

In the Congregation, we now need to decisively commit ourselves to our vocation and to give a new and vigorous impulse to our pastoral creativity. Unfortunately, certain deviations spring

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 13, 286.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 14, 662.

from a loss of identity, from a cooling off of enthusiasm, and from a lack of vision concerning the relevance and necessity of the Salesian vocation. The problem of politics comes on as a challenge and a critical yardstick for our genuine fidelity to the apostolic plan of Don Bosco and to his unflagging commitment to the betterment of society.

### **The pressing needs of today**

A formidable social, economic, cultural, and political crisis has exploded throughout the world, thus paving the way to a new society. Certainly there will be differences from country to country, but there are forewarnings in the air regarding the inevitable end of an entire socioeconomic system with its culture and its structures. Now, to build a new society, we need politics; but, as we have seen, politics is not an absolute and foundational value, but a derived value that needs, in turn, a groundwork.

Politics urgently needs culture and culture needs, in turn, religion and faith. Thus, to build the new society, other commitments — nonpolitical — are needed in order to prop up and assure sound and efficient politics.

The Salesian commitment is above and beyond political activity and resides in the sector of its religious and sociocultural foundations. In this area, there is a vacuum or a superficiality or an anachronism that is really tragic. The Council made it clear when it condemned the break between faith and daily life; and Paul VI reminded us of it when he spoke of the clash between the Gospel and culture. If we then reflect on the urgency of a commitment on the part of Christians to justice, as the Synod of Bishops described for us in 1971, we will find that many serious needs today are knocking on the door of our vocation. We cannot be strangers to them. Nor can we rest on the laurels of the past, or they will turn into funeral wreaths.

Many are the needs inviting us to a newness of religious

presence on the cultural level, with new inner attitudes, with a professionalism adapted to the times, with a rereading in depth of the Gospel in the light of the signs of the times.

How many demands for renewal on the part of the Christian are comprised in our embodying the Faith in everyday reality, in developing social sensitivity, in contributing to the advancement of the common good!

How many demands for renewal are comprised in cultivating our conscience and that of others in terms of the social function of economic goods and of their being destined for all men!

How many demands are comprised either in training people regarding civil rights and duties (i.e., being a good citizen today), or actively promoting justice and peace, or appreciating and realizing the necessity for politics, or democratically growing in the capacity to work together in a pluralistic climate!

There is, therefore, particularly for us Salesians, a need to be present with ever better qualifications to meet the needs of the times.

### **The Salesian commitment is a religious commitment**

Let us talk about commitment. This word, too, has a changing fate of its own. Today, when we speak of a “committed” priest, unfortunately we are not talking about the quality of his ministerial priesthood, but about his political leaning and class preference. By the same token, the adjective “uncommitted” denotes the middle-class individual who has “sold out to the system” and accommodated to the *status quo*.

A similar use of language denotes the climate of ‘politicization’ which we have criticized above: a climate in which everything is judged from the standpoint of political choice considered as the key value. Now, the word “commitment” is not clear in itself, but must be qualified.

To commit oneself means to take a definite stand, to choose a certain perspective, to accept a task with seriousness and sincerity, with a firm intention, that is, to carry it through to its ultimate consequences. That which qualifies a commitment will be the stand or the task chosen. In this way we can speak of various commitments and even of a religious commitment.

Indeed, it is this very commitment that we are interested in. We have a magnificent example of it in our Father Don Bosco.

Now, it is urgent for us Salesians to make the word "commitment" signify again our religious profession. If we read articles 73 and 74 of the Constitutions, we will find its meaning. Described therein is a fundamental option for a perspective of faith: evangelical radicalism in following Christ. There is the taking on of a task that requires all one's energies and all one's time: the mission among youth and the working classes. There is the choosing of a plan of life by which we gauge all our attitudes and activities: the Constitutions of the Society of St. Francis de Sales.

We have seen how Father Caviglia, in giving the historical sketch of our Founder, spoke of his religious commitment as of a "higher vocation", whose focal point is the pastoral charity of *Da mihi animas*. Our religious profession commits us to do likewise. It is the most personal and mature act of our baptismal freedom. With it, the Salesian makes "one of the noblest choices open to the conscience of a believer".<sup>74</sup> If we should empty such a choice of its meaning, we would be opening the door to the possibility of other commitments, substitutes for the religious commitment. The decline of religious commitment is the root of our evils. Just take a look at those confreres who have apparently substituted their religious profession with a political, or a scientific, or an affective commitment!

<sup>74</sup> *Constitutions*, Art. 73.

But what good is a religious commitment? Marxists perhaps might say that we are “high on drugs”, because of the notorious “opium of the people”. And yet, our religious vocation is a right which belongs to our charges. It is a gift, a charism, which the Lord has given to the Church for the good of all. Religion, rather than being an opium, is a basic reality and an indispensable value for social and political life; and the Salesian vocation is not a private privilege of each one of us, but a service which youth and the working class urgently need. To alter the nature of such a vocation would be to contribute in some way to aggravating the current crisis, because the contribution — however modest — of our Congregation to the human and Christian building up of society would be diminished or would be lacking.

*What did the Special General Chapter say?*

The Special General Chapter has helped us to fathom the meaning of the Salesian commitment in the present world; we are striving to assimilate its depth and to implement its guidelines. The forthcoming 21st General Chapter will give us an assessment of and an encouragement in the path we have already undertaken — a path of fidelity to Don Bosco and the times.

Among the topics examined thoroughly by the Special General Chapter, we find also the one about our contributing to justice in the world.<sup>75</sup> It is an aspect of our religious commitment.

The Chapter has clearly distinguished in this regard the above-mentioned two levels of political conception,<sup>76</sup> to point out that the Salesian “works principally through education... in a new cultural context: he is aroused not by contingent motives of political factions and of ideologies of the moment, but by the needs that the integral formation of the ‘perfect Christian and

<sup>75</sup> Cf. *Acts of the Special General Chapter*, Nos. 67-77.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 67.

honest citizen' places before the educator. The Church and the world ask us to form men capable of bringing justice into our world laden with grave problems".<sup>77</sup>

It is a question of a "religious commitment" welling up from "charity", in view of "a more profound communion among men".<sup>78</sup> "It is an element of our mission, which is accomplished by people consecrated to God with permanent reference to the Gospel", with the intention to "evangelize people, keeping in mind the collective evangelization of their environment".<sup>79</sup>

Therefore, it is not a political activity, but it is the practical manifestation of pastoral charity that symbiotically unite evangelization and human advancement. For Don Bosco, separating evangelization from the sociocultural demands of human advancement is the same as lacking practicality on the religious level and usefulness on the social level; but, for him, uniting human advancement to the perspectives of a political project leaves the way open to renouncing the primacy of faith and falsifying the spirit and mission of one's specific vocation.

It is worth reflecting in this regard on what the Acts of the Special General Chapter have to say: "Our commitment to justice:

has for its source the charity of Christ;

has for its motivation the demands of the Gospel;

has for its purpose cooperating with the mission of the Church;

has for its immediate effect cooperating in the manifestation of a particular aspect of Christ's work of salvation;

has for its style that of Don Bosco".<sup>80</sup>

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 70.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 77.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

### **Some unacceptable deviations**

I have already told you that, unfortunately, the decline of a genuine religious commitment on our part gives rise to some deviations. Then, too, the atmosphere which surrounds us brings with it dangers and errors (It is common today to breathe polluted air...). But we have to react.

It is not right to take refuge in an irenic relativism that would try to house fidelity and infidelity under the same roof, nor is it right to lump things together under the label of an open-ended pluralism.

Every country has its own characteristics; hence, it is on the local level that we should size up situations and attitudes in a concrete way. But I do not think it is out of place for me to enumerate here some deviations that tend to be widespread, a criticism of which might serve as a guiding light for all.

There are two signs, in opposition to each other, on which are hinged unacceptable attitudes, unbalanced postures, and errors. They are an irresponsible apolitical frame of mind and political radicalism. Let's take a look at each.

#### *An irresponsible apolitical frame of mind*

Under an irresponsible apolitical frame of mind, we find a plethora of attitudes, which are perhaps not all formidable in essence but which are certainly all very dangerous.

- *Superficiality and apathy concerning the demands of the signs of the times.* This is an attitude which kills imagination and apostolic creativity. It stands aside from the emerging culture and from its intense process of socialization. It makes a kind of ghetto out of local communities and their works, with a cultural mentality alien to the surrounding world. It does not stimulate one's spirit to make a valid effort at bringing the Gospel into a context of situations which has already become

radically different from that of the time — even though not too long ago — of one's own formation.

If Don Bosco had had such an attitude, he would not have been a historic leader, nor would he have gotten under way the vocation of our Congregation.

This static attitude is found at the very opposite end of the creative dynamism of Don Bosco: it was something unthought of in the newborn Congregation, and it is a mortal disease in the Congregation which has to be renewed. It is the beginning of that smug complacency which eats away at the pattern of a vocation.

• *The facile refuge of "anti-itis"*, whether expressed in a gut-level anticommunism or a neurotic antifascism. This is the attitude of the person who is looking for a substitute for his commitment to the difficult and thorny pursuit of growth in religious and cultural values; of the person who prefers to abdicate his responsibility by shifting the solution of difficulties to easy ideological schemes, without having to be committed any more to the hard job of educating people's consciences.

There are both likes and dislikes in the social and political field which are the fruit of irresponsibility, ignorance, and mental laziness. The same holds true for a certain belligerent self-righteousness worthy of a better cause. Such is the case of those who, instead of being constructively committed to announcing the Gospel, rail emotionally against certain positions they dislike. This lowers the level of one's religious vocation, because — as we already said — Christianity is not reducible to the order of sociopolitical projects, but transcends every ideology. Such an attitude, then, promotes a lack of discernment and nurses a veritable mass of myths and prejudices, when instead we know that faith is a leaven that ferments human reality all along its continual historical changes.

• *Finally, a pseudomystical spiritualism*, suspicious of the temporal order and heedless of its values, anchored to an in-

dividualistic conception of virtue, inclined to utopian interpretations, that escapes the reality of life and throws out of balance the wholesome formation of one's conscience.

### *Political radicalism*

Under political radicalism we find another plethora of attitudes, very violent and quite contagious, because they are dynamic and fashionable, and nurtured in some cases by a thick crowd of ideologues and architects of culture with easy access to the mass media.

• *The primacy of revolution.* The first imperative, for some people, is a class option which involves adopting the Marxist manner of operating and actively collaborating for the triumph of the sociopolitical scheme which inspires it.

According to this drastic choice, it is customary to speak not so much about the poor in the Gospel sense but, rather, about the "oppressed", the "exploited", inasmuch as they make up a class struggling against a given socioeconomic system. Class consciousness, thus, turns out to be an essential dimension and a prime value for judging everything, even the Church and the sense of faith.

Those who are most committed along these lines have made an ideologic justification for themselves out of this explicitly political choice. They affirm the primacy of the temporal order as a qualitative jump which upsets the traditional view of society; they set up historical materialism as an interpretative criterion of everything (even Revelation), and practically leave neither space nor time for the inspiration — indispensable for a Christian — of the Holy Spirit. Such a view ends up by excluding in practice the specific character of faith, with readily discernible consequences.

It is not my intention to analyze here the doctrinal significance of a system that is so extremist. But I see clearly that the conclusions lead to a concrete choice of political activity, in

radical disharmony with everything that Don Bosco has left us for spiritual legacy.

That is why — though it grieves me to say so — I am forced to say that any confrere who persists in thinking and acting this way should, in all fairness, leave a Congregation which no one is obliged to belong to, but in which there is a different fundamental option and a commitment that is decidedly not political but religious. In fact, to take on such a revolutionary attitude would signify as a logical consequence that such a confrere is no longer living the spirit or the mission of Don Bosco.

• *A pseudo-pastoral methodology of denunciation* is the attitude of those whose first element in forming consciences involves a criticism of the Marxist view of society and of the world, and who put off proclaiming Christ and the mystery of faith to a later stage, or who present Him as a messiah who subverted the established sociopolitical order.

Even supposing that the criticism leveled at society is basically just (which, of course, is quite problematic and hard to establish), the fact remains that, instead of fostering goodwill in a climate of love, the only thing one succeeds in is arousing a growing desire for subversion and actually fomenting the temptation to hate.

Such a methodology, which I do not hesitate to call pseudo-pastoral, often originates in a concealed political choice which gets the upper hand on a genuinely apostolic commitment. One ends up in this way confusing evangelization with the socioeconomic aspect of social liberation.

Here too, we are a long way off from the Preventive System of Don Bosco and from the concrete guidelines of the Magisterium of the Church.

• *A practical ecclesial dissent* is the attitude of some people who prescind from the guidelines of the Magisterium, even with occasional and varied manifestations of public contestation. Their

behavior, in effect, disregards the “gift of enlightenment of the Ministry” of the Pope and the Bishops.

At the roots of this attitude — to which Don Bosco was a complete stranger — we usually find a sociological interpretation of the mystery of the Church which safeguards neither its divine institution nor its distinction from the world, nor its specific mission of evangelization. According to this perspective, the “people of God” become simply the people, and the community assembly substitutes for the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, rendering meaningless any institutional mediation.

Also this attitude seems to be in outright contradiction to Don Bosco’s method of operating and completely alien to the clearest Salesian tradition.

### **Six criteria for guiding Salesian activity**

After making painful allusion to these very dangerous deviations, it would be good, before concluding, for me to point out to you some criteria that may keep our activity on a steady course. I will try to do so in a sort of concise way, which will leave room for your own reflections.

#### *1. Being realistic about our mission*

We are apostles of youth and of the working classes, who represent — as we said in the beginning — the avant-garde of the exodus to the new society. The “great personage” in Don Bosco’s dream, whom the Lord sends us to serve, is the world of our charges. They claim our attention with their problems, with their sensitivity to the signs of the times, with the mentality of the culture emerging today. We have to build a bridge leading to that world. The boys, of course, will not preach the Gospel to us; they are the one to whom we must carry the message of salvation which Jesus Christ gives to us through His Church.

A first criterion for guiding the renewal of the Salesian commitment should, therefore, be that of our having a living and intelligent presence in the sociocultural world of today, particularly in the portion assigned to us, namely, the "little ones and the poor". No aloofness, no naive subservience, but a ministering presence — in order to cooperate with the mighty effort of believers, to heal among youth the tragic breakdown between Gospel and culture.

## *2. Being of one accord with the Church's option*

Another guideline for our action is: to be sincerely of one accord with the option made by the Church.

First of all, the Church has opted decisively and invariably for Christ, her Lord, as a bride for her bridegroom. Here is the absolute primacy of love and of truth that illumines her entire mission and guides her activities.

But, against the background of this basic option, there are pastoral choices which the Church makes in different historical situations.

Coming to grips with the crucial times in which the world lives, the Church has made her concrete choice in the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council. In that choice, she has turned toward, not away from the man of today; she has looked upon him with the eyes of God, after having considered herself as a sacrament that must be of service in his salvation. The Council wanted her to have a presence that is useful and liberating in the cause of human advancement; a presence, however, that is made concrete in a commitment of a religious nature.

To be of one accord with such a choice, one must be deeply convinced that religion is not a superstructure, but a substantial driving force of human life. We must therefore rediscover the true significance of religion; we must acknowledge its significance to be truly basic and humanizing. Situated along the same lines, of course, is the dynamic and omnipresent concept which Don

Bosco had of religion. Therefore, instead of letting ourselves be overwhelmed by a secularism that attempts to give politics an all-embracing and supreme significance, we too will commit ourselves with the Church and in the Church to reappraise the basic value and social usefulness of the Christian faith.

### 3. *Accepting the demands arising from conversion*

If uncharted problems have cropped up today and if certain sensitivities and human values have developed, we will have to study them and adapt ourselves to their needs.

“It is not enough”, says Paul VI, “to remember principles, to affirm intentions, to point out blatant injustices, and to utter prophetic denunciations. These words will lack real weight unless they are accompanied in each individual by a deep awareness of one’s responsibility in the face of injustices, unless one is convinced at the same time that each person shares in it, and that a personal conversion is needed first. This basic humility will rid action of any harshness and sectarianism; it will also prevent discouragement in the face of a task that seems enormous”.<sup>81</sup>

What we need, then, is the personal and community witness of a real participation in the building of a new Society.<sup>82</sup>

### 4. *Always starting out from the Salesian vocation*

Our activity, therefore, must always start out from the perspective of the Salesian vocation. Religious profession is the act that characterizes our type of sharing in the Church’s option.

The Salesian commitment has, therefore, a true primacy in all our activities: we cannot lose our identity, we cannot take on a type of activity that, even though it be Christian, is characteristic of other vocations. In particular, we must not take on

<sup>81</sup> *Octogesima Adveniens*, No. 48.

<sup>82</sup> Cf. *Acts of the Special General Chapter*, No. 70.

the commitment which is proper of the lay person dedicated to political activity.

There may even be among the confreres a distinct mentality, a different way of looking at events; but the criterion that guides our pastoral decisions and our particular postures, community ones above all, will be the pastoral perspective of Don Bosco's apostolic plan: "To be, in a Salesian way, the signs and bearers of God's love to young people, especially the poorest".<sup>83</sup>

### 5. *Taking direction from the Shepherds*

We must remember, then, that a pastoral commitment in a Salesian way takes its direction from the Shepherds.

In the plurality of sociopolitical situations, "it is up to the Christian communities to analyze objectively the situation proper to their country, to shed on it the light of the changeless words of the Gospel, to draw principles for reflection, criteria for judgment, and directives for action from the social teaching of the Church. It is up to the Christian communities, with the help of the Holy Spirit, in communion with the Bishops in charge, and in dialogue with other Christians and with all men of goodwill, to determine the choices and commitments called for, to bring about the social, political, and economic changes that appear urgent and necessary in many cases".<sup>84</sup>

Therefore, all the confreres should see that they get in tune with the local church — national, regional, and diocesan — to receive directives from the Bishops and, in particular, from the Pope.

Our Constitutions time and again emphasize adherence, so characteristic of Salesian tradition, to the Magisterium of the Church.<sup>85</sup>

<sup>83</sup> *Constitutions*, Art. 2.

<sup>84</sup> *Octogesima Adveniens*, No. 4.

<sup>85</sup> Cf. *Constitutions*, Arts. 44 and 128; cf. also Art. 6, 33, 55.

## 6. *Becoming intensely dedicated to education*

“Our first responsibility”, says the Special General Chapter, “concerns the mass of young people who need an open and complete education: understanding of social activity, knowledge of the Church’s doctrine, formation in civic, social and political responsibility, initiation into a progressive commitment of concrete service”.<sup>86</sup>

Since educative action must be grafted onto the surrounding reality, the Province or the respective Provincial Conference in each country would do well to promote a program of action and give concrete directives in order to spell out the Salesian educative action in this field, in imitation of the creativity, boldness and tirelessness of Don Bosco.<sup>87</sup>

### **The most urgent areas of educative action**

In this perspective, let us consider briefly what the most urgent areas of our educative action are, i.e.: the field of culture, the world of work, the activity of Christian liberation.

• *The field of culture.* It is principally in this area that the future of man is prepared and the recognition of man is guaranteed by man himself. We witness today a true democratization of culture, not in the pejorative sense of its cheapening, but in the positive sense of building up in people an awareness of it and of the roles to be played by it. To be left out today of a cultural refining process would be to betray the future.

The chief concern of the Christian for the betterment of social life lies basically in the cultural work of synthesis between values of faith and values of temporal order.

<sup>86</sup> *Acts of the Special General Chapter*, No. 68.

<sup>87</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, No. 68, 69.

Culture is so very basic that there cannot be any good politics without it. Here, then, is a privileged area for a renewed presence of the Salesian commitment.

• *The world of work.* We must recognize that work, considered in the overall historical meaning it has assumed in the current period of industrialization, has become a kind of lever of the entire social life: it is changing the complexion of society, its cultural garments, its balances of coexistence, and its prospects for the future. We have entered an era of technology. At last, as Father Chenu has remarked, “we are coming out of the neolithic age”. We have to be aware of this and to realize that work lies at the origins of a new civilization, mainly in terms of the working classes and so many young people.

This new world of work — it is well to remember — was born and brought up, unfortunately, almost totally apart from the religious sphere; and this is having an enormous influence also on political life.

The pastoral originality of Don Bosco and the essential part played by the Salesian Coadjutor Brother in the mission of the Congregation call for, today more than ever, a special educative commitment particularly in this difficult field.

• *The activity of a Christian liberation.* This is an especially timely aspect in the formation of the good citizen. We know that “liberation” is a rather well-worn subject today, but we are confronting it in the light of the secure guidelines of the Special General Chapter.<sup>88</sup>

The capacity for criticism of social injustices and the courage to struggle in the cause of justice have now become indispensable elements for a Christian education in politics; and this requires a lucid faith and a knowledge of the Church’s social

<sup>88</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, No. 61.

doctrine in order for a person not to be taken in by class-conflict views and violence-inspired solutions.

It is a fact that conflict is always present in social life. Daily experience and faith itself tell us that personal and collective existence is interlaced in a context of struggle, to such a point that courage and patience are necessary virtues of a good citizen, and the supreme expression of religious witness is martyrdom. Who could imagine the life of Jesus Christ without struggle, without courage, and without patience?

If in the present time of transition and heavy social injustice, society were not to analyze its situation and engage in a struggle to overcome injustice, it would appear dismal and short-sighted. On the other hand, if it were marked by wholesome criticism and righteous conflict, it could not remain apathetic about its ills.

We will have to educate people, therefore, to be able to struggle for justice in a Christian way.

But social struggle is not to be exalted to the point of identifying it with the radical conflict between good and evil. It is proper of a materialistic outlook to secularize and politicize the basic disagreement between grace and sin. Social struggle is not the conflict between Christ and Satan.

Every citizen, in fact, is a person and, as such, should not be reduced to his political choice only and to his class standing. Even if he were a political opponent or a beneficiary of unjust structures or even actually guilty of wrongdoing, a citizen should never be equated with the devil and attacked as such.

Education in politics, therefore, must take into account the social fact of conflict; it requires formation in the awareness of the objective analysis of situations, in clear principles, in real possibilities, in the knowledge of projects, and in means and ends; and it requires patient exercise to build up one's capacity for competent participation, and to build up solidarity, constancy, courage and sacrifice.

Salesian educative activity "must be liberating not only in

its objectives but also in its methods, with continual appeal to the responsibility and personal participation of the person being educated".<sup>89</sup>

## Conclusion

Dear sons, we have taken up the issue of politics as something that today concerns and challenges our Salesian vocation. It is a delicate subject. We have felt the necessity to give the exact meaning of a term that now has too many connotations and is therefore, to say the least, ambiguous. We then made a brief overview of the entire life of Don Bosco, and were no doubt amazed by the intensity and broad scope of his initiatives on behalf of society, and by his clear choice of vocation. At the end, we too found ourselves confronted with a vast and precise responsibility: if politics is in need of cultural and religious underpinnings, then the vocation of the Salesians of Don Bosco will be a generous, though limited, pastoral commitment programmed to help meet that need.

We were born in the Church to work together for the renewal of society at a time that ushered in democratic values. We have on that account and precisely as a Congregation, a political responsibility! But this adjective which we use to qualify our responsibility as shepherds of youth and of the working classes denotes an aspect derived from the religious commitment that is at the root of our all-embracing choice.

It is indeed a political responsibility, but understood according to the broad meaning we have described above and therefore not reducible only to what is commonly called "political activity". On the contrary, engaging in political activity would mar the sense of this responsibility of ours. We can paraphrase the

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 61.

clear-cut expression of Paul VI speaking at the end of the Council: “We turn to, but do not stray into” political reality.

“He who observes well this prevailing interest of the Council for temporal human values”, said the Pope, “cannot deny that such interest is due to the pastoral character that the Council has chosen almost as its program, and must recognize that this same interest is never detached from the most authentic religious interest. Let no one, therefore, use the word ‘useless’ to describe a religion like Catholicism, which, in its most perceptive and effective form such as its conciliar form, declares itself to be wholly in favor and at the service of man.

“The Catholic religion and human life thus reaffirm their convergence into one sole human reality: the Catholic religion is for humanity; in a certain sense, it is the life of humanity”.<sup>90</sup>

The entire Salesian commitment is directed to this “alliance” and “convergence” between religion and human life, between faith and politics. To better the chances for a more equitable human life, we are working to bring faith into it more and more and to inject the life-giving Gospel into its social and cultural activities.

Dear sons, I think I have furnished you with abundant material for reflection, so that you may also examine thoroughly that part of the subject proposed for study at the next General Chapter: “To witness and proclaim the Gospel: two needs of Salesian life among youth”. May our Father illumine us and bless us all.

Let us call upon our Mother the Help of Christians to help us be faithful to our precious vocation, in the birth of which she cooperated maternally. Don Bosco, after 1860, chose to honor the Virgin and to spread her devotion under the title of “Help of Christians”, precisely in order to emphasize her social media-

<sup>90</sup> PAUL VI, *Omelia alla chiusura della 9ª Sessione Conciliare* [Homily at the Closing of the 9th Conciliar Session], 12/7/65.

tion on behalf of the pilgrim Church, its Shepherds and people. "Our times are so trying", he said to would-be Cardinal Cagliero, "that we really need the Blessed Mother to help us keep and defend the Christian faith".<sup>91</sup> How much relevance for us too, in such a choice!

Let us be enthusiastic and tireless bearers of a religious inheritance that is so useful for today's society.

Cordially yours in Don Bosco,

Fr. LOUIS RICCERI  
*Rector Major*

<sup>91</sup> *Biographical Memoirs*, 7, 334.