

WE ARE "EDUCATOR-PROPHETS"

- Introduction. - The prophetic dimension of consecrated life. - Leaven in the area of significance.
- The contemporary aspect of Christ. - The key for understanding Vatican II. - With Don Bosco, in line with our apostolic consecration: . in the Covenant, . in the Mission, . in Communion, . in a Radical perspective. - May Our Lady of the Rosary be our guide.

Rome, Memorial of Our Lady of the Rosary

7 October 1993

My dear confreres,

Today we are celebrating the memorial of Our Lady of the Rosary, an event which prompts us to give renewed importance to the personal and communal practice of this devotion which inserts us into the events of the great mystery of Christ. It is a simple and popular devotion, highly recommended by Pope John Paul II. It is a truly deep way within the reach of all for contemplating the persons and events of the central moment of salvation history. It brings us closer to Christ and intensifies our familiarity with him who is the one true Prophet of truth in the definitive Covenant in the Church's existence in time.

It occurred to me that this Marian commemoration, while inciting us to contemplate the mystery of Christ, can lead us to reflect on a theme linked in a particular manner with consecrated life in the Church: that of its prophetic dimension. In the years following Vatican II there have been several references to the prophetic role of consecrated persons, who are placed among the People of God for their enlightenment, inspiration and correction, and to provide a creative relaunching of the common vocation to holiness. Such persons need to be realerted to this service, which is a gift of the Holy Spirit for all.

The feeling that one has been called to be a "prophet" is a powerful stimulus to responsibility for one's own vocation. But prophecy, though absolutely indispensable, is not easy, and there is always the danger of spurious interpretations. There have always been "false prophets", who never represented genuine interventions of God in history. To evaluate the reality and authenticity of our own ecclesial service, we must start from meditation on the Christ-event.

The preparation for the 94-Synod on consecrated life impels us to examine more deeply this kind of service, in harmony with the other global aspects of the Institutes of Consecrated Life in the Church.

At the present time we are witnessing numerous initiatives promoted by Bishops Conferences and associations of religious in preparation for the Synod. Various studies and reflective contributions are appearing which create an atmosphere of interest and hope. Due to be published shortly is also a *Manual of the Theology of the Religious Life*,¹ prepared by a group of specialists at the urging of the Mixed Commission of Bishops and Major Superiors

¹ Turin-LDC

in Italy; it will certainly provide enlightenment for our minds.

It is true that the Synod will be primarily concerned with pastoral aspects and not directly with doctrine; but for this very reason there is urgent need for some clear principles, as the foundation for a greater updating of communion, of apostolic activity and of witness of life.

We earnestly hope that the coming Synod will serve to give greater consideration and esteem for charisms in the Church, and that Institutes of Consecrated Life will develop with greater organic awareness and an increased prophetic penetration their own vital membership of the People of God in the conciliar aspect of the "Sacrament of salvation" in these new times.

In these months preceding the Synod, I invite you to reflect on the "prophetic dimension" of our own vocation as consecrated persons.

The prophetic dimension of consecrated life

The prophet is a believer chosen by God to speak to men in his name. In fulfilling this function he lives in intimate relationship with God so as to hear, understand and faithfully transmit his message. What he communicates to others comes not from himself but from the heart of God himself – a God who is not merely a kind of great architect of the world but also the Lord of history, who has an immense love for man and remains unbelievably at his side in the events of his freedom.

Prophecy is one of the phenomena which more clearly reveal the transcendent nature of the history of salvation; it characterizes the religious realism of

Judaism and Christianity, and brings with it innovations and challenge on the part of God no less.

The mystery of Christ is at the pinnacle of such phenomena. Jesus did not bring to an end the era of prophecy, but elevated it and transformed its function. He is eminently "the great Prophet", the definitive and greatest, and has left to his Church a prophetic role of a new kind, under the powerful animation of the gift of his Spirit. Today, in the midst of new ideas which are continually appearing, and unfortunately with the spreading of various kinds of aberrations, a great need is felt for authentic prophets to carry out a truly new evangelization.

This vital need gives rise to a special interest for the prophetic function of the Church and, in it, of consecrated life.

Sometimes one hears attributed to consecrated life the specific characteristic of being by its particular vocation "the" prophetic dimension of the whole Church. Statements of this kind seem evidently exaggerated; but they have the merit of trying to stress a vital aspect not sufficiently emphasized. Consecrated life cannot appropriate to itself in exclusive form a quality common to all the People of God. The Council says of the lay faithful: "Christ is the great prophet who proclaimed the kingdom of the Father both by the testimony of his life and by the power of his word. Until the full manifestation of his glory, he fulfils this prophetic office, not only by the hierarchy who teach in his name and by his power, but also by the laity. He accordingly both establishes them as witnesses and provides them with the appreciation of the faith and the grace of the word, so that the power of the Gospel may shine out in daily family and social life".²

And the recent "Catechism of the Catholic Church" speaks of a whole prophetic People as the light and sacrament of humanity on its pilgrimage: "Jesus Christ is the one whom the Father has anointed with the Holy Spirit and has constituted as 'Priest, Prophet and King'. The entire People of God shares in these three functions of Christ and bears the responsibility for the mission and service which derive from them".³

³ Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 783

And so it seems neither right nor fitting to present consecrated life as a kind of "institutionalization" of the prophetic dimension of the Church. But in any case it is certainly right and even urgent to point out and intensify, in particular, the peculiar prophetic aspect of consecrated life. The Founders and Foundresses of the various Institutes have played a truly prophetic role in the Church and in the society of their time, and have left as a legacy to their followers a prophetic dynamism "to be lived by them, to be preserved, deepened and constantly developed in harmony with the Body of Christ continually in a process of growth".⁴

⁴ cf. MR 11

The charismatic aspect of consecrated life implies a continual presence and creativity of the Holy Spirit; it belongs to the prophetic dimension of the Church to proclaim to everyone that "the world cannot be transfigured and offered to God without the spirit of the beatitudes".⁵

⁵ LG 31

The fact that consecrated life, "while not entering into the hierarchical structure of the Church belongs undeniably to her life and holiness"⁶, bestows on it a special prophetic character for all the People of God. This is rightly declared by the Council when it says: "Let religious see well to it that the Church truly show forth Christ through them with ever-increasing clarity to believers and unbelievers

⁶ LG 44

alike – Christ in contemplation on the mountain, or proclaiming the kingdom of God to the multitudes, or healing the sick and maimed and converting sinners to a good life, or blessing children and doing good to all men, always in obedience to the will of the Father who sent him”.⁷

⁷ LG 46

The document “*Mutuae Relationes*” touches on the same aspect when it presents the signs which render a charism authentic: “a constant re-examination of their fidelity to the Lord, docility to his Spirit, prudent weighing of circumstances and careful reading of the signs of the times, the will to be integrated in the Church, awareness of obedience to the hierarchy, boldness in initiatives, perseverance in the gift of self, humility in the face of adversity”.⁸

⁸ MR 12

In line with these authoritative guidelines, the various religious Institutes are called upon to put into effect their common prophetic function, not in an identical and uniform manner, but in conformity with their own charismatic plan, indicated by the Spirit of Christ in their own Founder and identified in each Institute by those who have the delicate and responsible task of making the necessary discernment.

For us the problem consists not so much in defining the differences or complementary aspects of the prophetic function of consecrated life in respect of the various groups – lay or hierarchical – but rather in deepening and intensifying our own prophetic role in line with the charismatic scope of the Founder.

Meanwhile it must be recognized that the question of the prophetic dimension of consecrated life has not yet been treated in depth in any document of the universal Magisterium. It has been empha-

sized in some more sensitive regions (e.g. Latin America) and in various interventions of Conferences of religious. It is undoubtedly a theme relevant to the present day; it can help to speed up the slow process of renewal, to gauge its quality and encourage initiatives for change while avoiding deviant interpretations; it breeds among the members a perspective of hope that is no longer found in the present atmosphere.

In the last analysis the practice of prophecy serves to indicate a permanent choice of God to intervene personally in human affairs. The prophet is his ambassador, not living in a dimension outside of time but deeply committed among his contemporaries: he feels himself sent by God and destined to pass on God's message, not only by word but also through his actions and his life, with symbolic gestures – sometimes even paradoxical; he is a living transmitter of the saving light of God: he displays, corrects, stimulates, preaches, prepares, constructs, suffers and bears witness; "the Spirit of the Lord", says Isaiah, "is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted";⁹ the prophet is not a stranger but a watchman: "I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me".¹⁰

⁹ Is 61,1

¹⁰ Ezek 33,7

The God of the prophets enters through them into history for the work of salvation. In his name they point out objectives to be attained and criteria for achieving them, introduce positive innovations, indicate evils to be overcome, constantly insist on the sense of sin, present concrete ways of conversion, and challenge deviations and errors.

The present acceleration of social and cultural changes has a special need of the light of a God

who became incarnate precisely to lead humanity to salvation. The many innovations which follow on the heels of one another at breakneck speed can make us forget the prophetic function, or exploit it only for the social and cultural sector; in this sense we sometimes see emphasis placed on certain aspects of the prophets of the Old Testament without specific reference to Christ, and this can lead to arbitrary and dangerous interpretations. For this reason too an authentic consideration of the prophetic dimension has a leading place in the renewal of Institutes and in the search for efficacious commitments for the New Evangelization.

A People of God without prophecy would not be able to leaven the present course of the world; it would not be faithful to the extraordinary presence of the Spirit of Christ manifested in Vatican II and in the many ecclesial and social events that have followed it: "You are the light of the world", said the Lord, "let your light shine before men",¹¹ well knowing that "the true light that enlightens every man"¹² is Jesus Christ.

¹¹ Mt 5, 14-16

¹² Jn 1,9

Today the whole Church is urgently called to be a prophet of Christ; after the example of John the Baptist she must "bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him".¹³

¹³ Jn 1,7

Rightly did the apostle Paul proclaim: "For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord".¹⁴

¹⁴ 2 Cor 4,5

If the whole Church is so strongly urged to do this, it means that in the Church consecrated life must concern itself about its particular prophetic function in a form which is both singular and intense; because of its effect "in bestowing greater freedom from the cares of earthly existence on those who follow it, it simultaneously reveals more

clearly to all believers the heavenly goods which are already present in this age, witnessing to the new and eternal life which we have acquired through the redemptive work of Christ and precluding our future resurrection and the glory of the heavenly kingdom. Furthermore the religious state constitutes a closer imitation as an abiding reenactment in the Church of the form of life which the Son of God made his own when he came into the world to do the will of the Father and which he propounded to the disciples who followed him. Finally this state manifests in a special way the transcendence of the kingdom of God and its requirements over all earthly things and the highest kind of bonds within it, bringing home to all men the immeasurable greatness of the power of Christ in his sovereignty and the infinite might of the Holy Spirit which works so marvelously in the Church".¹⁵

¹⁵ LG 44

Leaven in the area of significance.

In Jesus Christ the new and definitive Covenant is realized, no longer with a single people of a particular religious and social culture and organization (Israel), but with the whole of humanity in the multiplicity of its peoples and their cultures, giving a new and deep significance to God's intervention through prophecy, priesthood and kingship.

In the Old Testament the function of the prophet, personally raised up as he was by God himself, was distinct and separate from the institutionalized function of the priest and the king; he did not receive his authorization from them but

from a direct and strictly personal relationship with Yahweh, in whose name he spoke.

In Christ these three functions (prophet, priest and king) are inseparably united; and thus united he has left them as a patrimony to his mystical Body in history, to be exercised in multiple ways and ministries. Vatican II reminded us that in the Church "communion" has a central and characterizing value; it is manifested too in the mutual compenetration of the three functions: together they serve to build up the kingdom – not an earthly one – which is Christ's through the centuries to be consigned to the Father at the end of time.

At this present moment in history the exercise of the prophetic function is an urgent pastoral priority. Vatican II has expressly emphasized in the first place the service of the Word, of evangelizing activity, and of the formation of believers' consciences. Christians are called to be a People of prophets with creativity, intelligent boldness, and the ability to be witnesses even to the point of martyrdom, following the generous and trenchant example of the apostles.

If we examine the context in which the prophets of the Old Testament played their part, we meet an Israel in a serious social situation of infidelity to the Covenant, and so the work of the prophet usually consisted in denouncing in forthright terms a situation that was at once religious and social. In today's world an epoch-making change is taking place with regard to the future of all peoples and their religions and cultures, and it cannot take the right direction without the light of Christ.

The present context certainly manifests a host of evils to be corrected, but the prophecy of Christ is called to bring enlightenment and discernment to

the insistent new changes so as to adopt their good points and foresee or correct dangerous deviations, so that the complex anthropological turnabout will not end up in a fatal anthropocentrism.

For us Salesians in such a context the specific prophetic function is to be inserted in that "educative option" which gives its characteristic tone to the whole of our vocation: we are not called to become "agitators of youth", but to be a light for their conscience as "signs and bearers"¹⁶ of the love and kindness of Christ. The present-day youth context presents some exacting challenges; we have seen what they imply at world level in the GC23, and the provinces have spelled out specific aspects in local situations. One hears proclaimed in the squares and marketplaces of the world numerous substitutes for the light of the christian faith; the path of human knowledge is separated from that of Christ's Gospel, as though they were paths to irreconcilable objectives; valid signposts are lacking; it is a time of anxious searching for experts for the education of personalities.

We have tried in recent years to express globally our efforts at renewal by the use of the term "significance" (*Italian "significatività"*): in the sense of becoming once again true "signs" among youth of a "new evangelization", precisely with a "new education". We are making concrete progress, but we have to persevere, and deepen and intensify our efforts.

We must convince ourselves that the prophetic dimension of our commitment constitutes the central nucleus of our significance in this sense. The official Commentary on art. 2 of the Constitutions ("signs and bearers") clearly states that it is a matter of "a very demanding obligation, because it re-

¹⁶ C 2

quires the whole of each individual member, all his life and all the activity of the Salesians, detaching them from themselves so as to centre them at the same time on the two poles of the living Christ and of youth, and on the meeting of the two in love. It obliges the Salesians to a double service: to Christ who sends them and to the young to whom they are sent, to reveal to them the loving call of Christ and to stir up the loving response of youth. This, in the last analysis, is the meaning of all their 'spiritual and corporal works of charity'".¹⁷

It is precisely this that is the prophetic function of the Salesian: we are (and must strive to be in truth) "educator-prophets", prophets who are educators!

Significance, in the sense explained, is more extensive than prophecy, but to be an authentic prophet of Christ is its vital leaven, to such an extent that without it our very significance would be lost. But this prophetic role is situated "within" the present demands of the new education, in shared and harmonious intent: in his incarnation Christ chose an anthropological turnabout so that his light might vanquish anthropocentrism from within. For us at the present day, to be a prophet implies not so much social and cultural display, as being able to validly proclaim the supreme event of Christ as the yardstick for all innovations, showing clearly their dynamism for the future, proclaiming their divine origin, and irradiating them with the powerful beams of light that alone reveal what man really is.

It is a matter of bringing youngsters to feel the presence and force of the love of Christ in a clear fidelity to his initiatives. It is a prophetic activity which is not just personal fantasy, but an active and creative service to his ministry; it is not reducible to

¹⁷ *The Project of Life of the Salesians*, Rome 1986, p.99

simple religious observance, but is a communication of salvation energies; its primary aim is not some structural revolution, but concentrates on the formation of mentalities and the conversion of persons, but when necessary is able to challenge points in the cultural and social field, though not with methods of a horizontal and temporal basis.

Hence we are called upon to intensify a prophetic dimension that will give dynamism and intensity to our salesian significance.

The contemporary aspect of Christ

In the Old Testament the prophetic function belonged to a period of the history of salvation that was moving towards Christ as its objective; the interventions of Yahweh gradually developed in a process of preparation which became ever clearer, finally arriving at the testimony of John the Baptist who proclaimed that the Messiah had indeed arrived and was present.

In Christ, on the other hand, salvation history reached its fullness; henceforth there would be no further increase in God's revelation; in Christ the whole of his Word was made present for ever; in him lives definitive prophecy. He is the new Man, the Lord of history, the Centre and Source of all future prophetic function; Christ is the *eskaton*, the absolute vertex of God's intervention in becoming man.

Without any doubt the 'becoming human' continued to progress and grow, even after the Passover of Christ, but it was a progress and growth in the line of creation and not in that of revelation.

This implies something new in the nature of question and challenge, but not a truly new Word of God: "The christian economy, therefore, since it is the new and definitive covenant, will never pass away; and no new public revelation is to be expected before the glorious manifestation of our Lord, Jesus Christ".¹⁸

¹⁸ DV 4

This definitive intervention in Christ, therefore, does not disown the dynamic effects of becoming human in the line of creation; indeed it takes them explicitly into account. For this he instituted the Church, his mystical Body through the centuries, with the mission of extending the paschal light of that definitive event to all times and ages.

On the other hand the very incarnation is radically linked with Christ, both because he himself is the initial "creator" ("all things were made through him, and without him was made nothing that was made"¹⁹), and insofar as he continues in every age to send the Holy Spirit who moves everything in the direction of the kingdom ("He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you"²⁰).

¹⁹ Jn 1,3

²⁰ Jn 16,15

There is still therefore a human growth, and at the present day the numerous signs of the times are making this very clear: cultures are changing, as also are the mentalities of peoples, social situations and structures, the perception of values, urgent challenges and the search for a guiding truth.

The Christ-event, in its aspect as something ultimate, is of its nature contemporaneous with every subsequent period of time; it requires in fact that the Church be able to bring about the discovery of this contemporary aspect. And this is where enters the prophetic role which must present as contemporary, i.e. as a revelation of God for the present

day and every new age, all the light of the Christ-event.

To be able to present Christ as the "great Prophet" of the present day; to make him appear as the modern and disturbing Teacher, as the Light which cannot be extinguished by any sign of the times, as the absolute New entity which measures, takes up and judges every emerging innovation – this is the task of the New Evangelization with its task of rendering the Gospel something riveting and captivating.

This is no easy task; it involves an indispensable and pressing prophetic function. The Church, and with it consecrated life, is called upon to get involved in it with "new ardour" and enthusiasm.

The key for understanding Vatican II

As we have already said, many Founders and Foundresses of religious Institutes have performed a special prophetic function in new forms with respect to what had been done before: some of them by witnessing to the solitary, cenobitical and contemplative life to indicate the absolute place of Christ in human existence; others by direct teaching to enlighten the intelligence, bring maturity to faith, and put a stop to heresy and error; others by testifying through works of charity to Christ's interest for every category of those in need; and still others in other forms of love.

Today the whole of consecrated life is called upon to relaunch this aspect, in line with the multiple charismata that make it up.

To bring about renewal in this connection we

must start from a secure standpoint, which will not do violence to our own particular charism.

Vatican II, in speaking of the renewal of religious Institutes, indicates an authoritative line of approach. The decree "Perfectae caritatis" states that in the first place we must consider "the following of Christ as it is put before us in the Gospel", and then that "the spirit and aims of each founder be faithfully accepted and retained, as indeed should each Institute's sound traditions".²¹

²¹ cf. PC 2

These two statements of the Council do not constitute two separate lines of approach, but rather a single manner of procedure, because the Founders were raised up by the Spirit of Christ to put into effect, according to the times, his saving mission. Those who have tried to proclaim his prophecy at a particular moment of time to those to whom they have been sent, can be considered living evidence of the contemporary aspect of Christ at the period concerned.

To give this contemporary perspective to the great prophecy of the New Covenant they have lived in the reality of their own time, docile to the Holy Spirit and in harmony with him, so as to understand where the urgent need of salvation is most to be found, what questions and challenges have to be met, and why black areas exist characterized by absence of the light of Christ, or by rejection or indifference to it. It is in fact from within that one must launch a discernment of what is meant by contemporary.

But it is important to note at this point that the prophetic function of the New Covenant is not only a response to the demands arising from human development. Christ's prophecy certainly offers a great and adequate response to many questions;

but the Gospel is not only a response of this kind – it is also an initiative on the part of God revealing and teaching: he suggests, questions, anticipates, teaches, and corrects, as well as responding.

Prophetic renewal, therefore, is not limited to concern for the pole of the emerging culture with its context of life, language and methods – indispensable though this be – but it first of all examines in depth once again and with the sensitivity of a cultural approach ‘from within’ the luminous pole of the Christ-event, so as to identify more clearly its vital nuclei that are more incisive and penetrating, and be able to communicate them as something relevant and right up to date.

The Holy Spirit has assigned to Don Bosco and to us, in the Church’s prophetic mission, a field of work characterized – as we said earlier – by the “educative option” in favour of needy youth, and with respect to the poorer classes.

He has called us to be “prophets who are educators”! The renewal of the prophetic function of our charism cannot be a kind of invitation to change our role, or in other words to make a different option; rather does it provide a stimulus, following the line we have indicated, to wake up, strengthen our courage of faith, and with greater daring set about looking for pedagogical ways for rendering the mystery of Christ contemporary to the young.

We bring our prophetic function into play through a new christian education, proportioned to the different categories of young people with whom we live and work, adopting educative and pastoral projects put together in direct reference to them, making good use of past and present experiences and creating new ones.

With Don Bosco, in line with our apostolic consecration

Following the line of approach already indicated, we can now point out, albeit briefly, the sense and manner in which our charism shares in the prophetic function of the Church in favour of the young and the poor in different cultures and geographical situations.

The GC23 has launched us on a process of serious discernment of both the readaptation of our activities to the local context²², and a re-reading of the contemporary nature of the mystery of Christ.²³

²² GC23, especially in 1st part

²³ GC23, especially in 2nd part

Here I would like to recall some of the more demanding points concerning our prophetic function from the standpoint of its "plan" of Christ, and link them with the constituent elements of our apostolic consecration, as indicated in art.3 of the Constitutions.

There are four main elements indicated in that article: the covenant (remaining with Christ), the mission (apostles of the young), communion (fraternal community), and the Gospel as the root foundation (practice of the evangelical counsels). For each of these let us choose some aspects of greater prophetic urgency so as to intensify the witness they provide. I indicate here those which seem to me more forceful in our present efforts at renewal.

In the covenant

The covenant of our religious profession requires a witness of special intimacy with Christ, in a vital and enduring form. In this is found the secret of all

prophecy: young people must perceive that we are "sacraments of Christ", signs and bearers of his love, that we live through him and in him for them.

In this connection we may recall the intensity of personal relationships between Yahweh and the prophets of the Old Testament; this is the fundamental condition: it is not the result of some psychological affinity or mere human empathy. It is a vocation: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations";²⁴ "you have deceived me, Lord, and I was deceived; there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot".²⁵

And in the New Testament the mystical enthusiasm of the apostle Paul openly declares: "for me to live is Christ";²⁶ "it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me";²⁷ "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, the new has come".²⁸ The covenant of religious profession is a personal transforming friendship which makes us live in Christ, with Christ and through Christ.

Our prophetic dimension displays a well-marked Christocentric character. Daily intimacy and friendship with Christ enable us to live in his newness, to such an extent that we are able to depict adequately the contemporary nature of his mystery: "God has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth".²⁹ In this light one may perceive, from within cultural reality, the christian aspect of so many themes of modern interest: love, solidarity, liberation, justice and peace, truth and conscience,

²⁴ Jer 1,5

²⁵ Jer 20, 7 and 9

²⁶ Phil 1,21

²⁷ Gal 2,20

²⁸ 2 Cor 5,17

²⁹ Eph 1,10

sense of sin, kindness and pardon, voluntary work and self-donation, personality and sacrifice, the ways of the world, intercultural dialogue, the meaning of history, etc.

Above all I would recommend three aspects on which to concentrate our prophetic function starting from the standpoint of this covenant: the communication of the Word of Christ, his paschal newness in the Eucharist, and the experience of his infinite kindness in Reconciliation.

On these points we need to concentrate our pedagogical attention. They are central aspects of the preventive system, to be relaunched in prophetic manner with courage and intelligence, with decisive methods and rhythms, in line with the possibilities of individuals and groups.

— *The communication of God's word.* Let us ask ourselves a question: can we say that today we have an interior covenant with God to such a degree that it makes us updated catechists? Don Bosco's first oratory began with a simple catechism lesson,³⁰ and he always considered the communication of God's word as the primary objective of his works. The Special General Chapter (1971) has left us an important document on "Evangelization and catechesis" which is still valid at the present day. In its "practical directives" it says, with regard to our present point, that: 1° the Salesian Congregation is today in a state of evangelizing mission; 2° the Province is "a community at the service" of evangelization; 3° every community is an evangelizing community, i.e. a community of listeners, a probing community, an educative community and a community of action inserted in the local Church.

The same main subject was studied by the GC21

³⁰ cf. BM 9,35

(1978) in its first document ("Salesians, Evangelizers of the Young"). The relevance of its guidelines, which hoped for a "new salesian presence" in this field, concentrated on the educative and pastoral plan which is now familiar in the provinces and houses.

The GC22 (1984) drew up the definitive text of our Rule of Life. In art. 34 of the Constitutions we read: "evangelizing and catechizing are the fundamental characteristics of our mission. Like Don Bosco, we are all called to be educators to the faith at every opportunity. Our highest knowledge therefore is to know Jesus Christ, and our greatest delight is to reveal to all people the unfathomable riches of his mystery. We walk side by side with the young so as to lead them to the risen Lord, and so discover in him and in his Gospel the deepest meaning of their own existence, and thus grow into new men".³¹

³¹ C 34; cf. also: 6, 17, 20, 38, 43, etc.

Finally the GC23 (1990) was entirely dedicated to the education of young people to the faith, and is now guiding our renewal. Let me point out that this document is primarily directed to the salesian community as the first subject of pastoral activity. As I wrote in presenting the Chapter documents: "The community lives the following of Christ with joyful intensity, confesses his mystery with consecrated testimony, examines carefully and attunes itself to the situation in which it is working, discovers in it the seeds of the Gospel, interprets the desires of faith, deduces intuitively the steps to be taken on the journey, dedicates itself to following the route, continually verifying in the light of God's word the progress that has been made".³²

³² GC23, p. 13

It is symptomatic that the principal documents of these recent great and historic Chapters con-

centrate the effort of renewal in the capacity for hearing and communicating the Gospel of Christ. In this sense too, valid and important institutions have been set up in the Congregation for fostering the study, teaching, communication and diffusion of whatever refers to evangelization and catechesis. Work goes on and progress continues to be made.

All this was seen and developed starting especially from the aspect of mission. Here we look at it again from the aspect of the covenant, which emphasizes *in individual persons* the prophetic aspect of their personal and communal interior vitality. At the present day there is, in fact, an urgent need to intensify and enhance the aspect of "new ardour" which is the source and leaven of the prophetic dimension.

May this topic have priority in every community's programme for revision and planning!

— *The Paschal novelty in the Eucharist.* The vertex of Christ's mystery is his Passover. It constitutes the centre of the whole of salvation history, and is made perpetually present in time and space through the Eucharist. "In the most blessed Eucharist," says the Council, "is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church. It appears as the source and the summit of all preaching of the Gospel, and the faithful, who have already been consecrated in baptism and confirmation, are fully incorporated in the Body of Christ by its reception. Therefore the eucharistic celebration is the centre of the assembly of the faithful".³³

³³ PO 5

We already meditated some years ago on this central aspect: "The Eucharist in the apostolic spirit of Don Bosco".³⁴ Here our purpose is to review in practical terms from the standpoint of the covenant the convictions, testimony, and our prophetic

³⁴ AGC 324 (1988)

service in the various educative activities.

One cannot conceive the authenticity of the salesian covenant in separation from the central position of the eucharistic celebration as the goal already achieved and to be achieved still more. I think that there is a good deal to be revised on our part in this field of the education of young people to the faith. The GC23 recognized that in this connection we are traversing a period of stagnation³⁵ and exhorts us to remedy the matter.³⁶

One cannot be an educator and prophet with Don Bosco without an explicit, intelligent and enthusiastic revival of a pedagogical process centred on the Eucharist.

— *The personal experience of his pardon.* The loss of the sense of sin needs to be fought against with special concern at the present day. Education must lead to a restoring of the awareness of christian dignity of feeling repentance, and of experiencing the therapeutic values of the sacrament of Reconciliation. From this point of view, to evangelize means to tell the story of God's mercy. One could not imagine Don Bosco's life without a constant dedication to this task among his youngsters: it is "one of the main pillars of the educative edifice".³⁷ It is a matter of "a special moment of personal contact with the youngster"; and so, says the GC23, "the Provincial will foster the preparation of confreres for this ministry, which is so important in salesian pedagogy".³⁸

Here too, I repeat, we are speaking of the prophetic role of us Salesians, of our convictions, our initiatives and our practical programmes in our educational activities. Confreres who are priests need to make a serious examination of conscience on their personal practice and their availability for

³⁵ GC23 148

³⁶ GC23 175

³⁷ GC233 174

³⁸ GC23 289

the ministry of Reconciliation which nourishes spiritual fatherliness in the heart; confreres who are not priests need to examine their own personal practice in this connection and their collaboration in fostering an atmosphere in which the sacrament of Penance receives its proper value. Let us recall what St Paul wrote to Timothy: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; he wanted to display in me, as the foremost of them, his perfect patience".³⁹

³⁹ 1 Tim 1,15-16

Summing up therefore, from the standpoint of the covenant our prophetic role as regards duties of an integral education can in no way prescind from the communication of the Gospel, from the invoking of the Eucharist as the true vertex of the life of the new man, and from the personal contact with Christ as a therapeutic approach which educates the conscience to the sense of sin and transforms it into the awareness of personal friendship with Christ.

The prophetic fostering of these three aspects requires practical pedagogical programmes, which each community and each confrere will draw up with particular care so as to be, like Don Bosco, both prophet and educator.

What will be done in each house in this connection? What practical initiatives will be launched for improving our knowledge of the Word of God, for the preparation of and sharing in the supreme act of love of Christ's Passover, and for fighting the loss of the sense of sin in the light of the infinite and ineffable merciful kindness of Christ?

In the mission

The theme of the mission provides numerous

and fertile possibilities for prophetic options, to which in fact we should be already committed. Here I will emphasize only two of them which I think are particularly urgent: the generous application of the oratorian criterion in the choice of those for whom we work, and the grace of unity between evangelization and education.

— *Don Bosco's oratorian criterion* means we must have a love of predilection for the young and the poor. Of this our recent General Chapters have reminded us; we spoke about it in the last circular letter on poverty:⁴⁰ it forms a central aspect in the revision of the significance of our works.

⁴⁰ cf. AGC 345

The GC23, in presenting to us the process of education of young people to the faith, explicitly affirmed that "the salesian option of giving priority to the poor is a precondition for dialogue with all, including those who are less well informed about the christian 'event'".⁴¹

⁴¹ GC23 105

And it added: "Their poverty may appear in many forms: poverty of living conditions, of significance, of perspective, of possibilities, of awareness, of resources. Their life itself is lacking in many of its main resources. No religious experience can emerge until life is discovered in its true sense. And on the other hand, every experience of true life sets off a religious reaction".⁴² Prophetic sensitivity also includes the search for a response to the new forms of poverty, as an expression of Don Bosco's anxiety to meet the needs of those most in want in various periods and territories; the GC23 exhorts us to "start up some works which will be a 'sign' of our intention to go after those youngsters we have not yet reached".⁴³

⁴² GC23 120

⁴³ GC23 230

Dedication to those to whom we have been particularly sent is a vital part of fidelity to the Holy

Spirit who wanted this to be realized in Don Bosco. It is not a minor option; it has an incidence on the global sense of our prophetic role in the Church; it constitutes in fact a characterizing trait of our charismatic physiognomy. I have seen in various provinces that from this practical commitment arise flourishing initiatives and more ardent spiritual attitudes which renew the confreres and become greatly appreciated by the Bishops and local Churches; our foundations of this kind are a providential prophetic gift which has an efficacious incidence also on social renewal.

— *the grace of unity between evangelization and education* shows quite clearly that the style of our mission is a positive help towards overcoming the rift between Gospel and culture. The capacity of what is valid in culture and the signs of the times, examined in the light of Christ's mystery, should constitute an element for professional education in the service of our apostolic consecration. Christ himself urges us in this very direction. As we have already seen, he is the creator of all human reality and his Spirit is the animator of its dynamic qualities. The GC23 declares with keen perception and depth: "We believe that God loves the young..., that the Spirit is present in them and that through them he wants to build a more authentic and human christian community. He is already at work in individuals and groups. He has given them a prophetic task to carry out in the world which is also the world of all of us. We believe that God is awaiting us in the young... *In this way our work of education becomes the preeminent context in which to meet him*".⁴⁴

⁴⁴ GC23 95

To interchange these different values among themselves is an art of no little difficulty; in the pas-

toral charity of our charism we are offered a special grace of unity through which "we evangelize by educating and educate by evangelizing".

At the present day, unfortunately, it is quite common to separate cultural values from evangelical principles, not necessarily for the purpose of opposing them to each other but rather because the connection between them is ignored. It is the task of our mission to make known through our pedagogy that they are inseparable, and to do this through the witness of our lives by daily dialogue and by adequate instruction.⁴⁵ This task is a vital aspect not only of a true Catholic school but also of all educative activity.

⁴⁵ cf. AGC 344, *Educating to the faith in the school*

A sector calling for special attention in this field is that of the social dimension of life. The process of socialization, which is constantly developing, has brought and continues to bring great innovations to social life; on the other hand the influence of so much selfishness in political activity and the financial field has provoked terrible inequalities and social injustice, which call with urgency for a profound change of mentality and restructuring of systems in a world perspective.

The formation of christian political responsibility is badly needed, as also the incorporation of the Church's social doctrine in practical programmes of evangelization, and a continual rethinking of the fundamental evangelical precept of charity. In this way there can be an active participation in the prophetic work of the Church, so abundantly realized in recent decades by the Pope and the Bishops.

Revision in this field is a complex and delicate matter, and it must be permanent.

In communion

The GC23 has made strong reference to the community as the subject of our mission. What it has to prophesy through its daily witness and activities is Christ's message concerning "communion".

For us this prophecy of communion is to be applied particularly at two levels: that of the religious community and that of the apostolic involvement of many of the lay faithful.

— *Communion in the religious community.*
There is in the Congregation, thank God, a living communion at world, provincial and local levels. Here we refer in the first place to the great values of the mystery of Christ in the local communities; when these values circulate among the confreres each local community becomes transformed into a 'sign' and 'school' of faith – a living faith which, being necessarily rooted in each individual, develops its communion with others, thus amplifying its capacity for witness ('sign') and multiplying its fertile transmission ('school') in a community which is clearly significant as regards its prophetic role.

Communal practice is proper to the whole Church, with different modes of realization. The Acts of the Apostles say as much, speaking of the first Christians;⁴⁶ and so later does Vatican II, for which "the understanding of the Church as communion is a central and fundamental idea".⁴⁷

Everything now being done in our houses and all that will be done in the future to ensure that the community is a real nucleus of animation as a "sign and school of faith" is without any doubt a true prophetic commitment of certain efficacy in this era of new evangelization.

I recommend to each Province and every house

⁴⁶ cf. Acts 2,42-47; 4,32-35

⁴⁷ Extraord. Synod 20 years after Vat. II - Final Report II,C,1.

to exploit to the full the providential "day of the community" for a continued and constructive revision of the circulation (communion) among the confreres of the evangelical values of our vocation.

— *The apostolic involvement of the lay faithful* finds practical realization in that wider community of action that we call the "educative community". The duty of the confreres, as the animating nucleus, is to promote and stimulate in it a continual mutual exchange of the values of our educative project, so as to successfully constitute an authentic operational communion on the main principles and become a real ecclesial instrument for the human and christian maturing of the young.

For some time now we have been trying to realize this aim. The successful launching of such an educative community, intensifying in it the circulation of the great dynamic ideas of Don Bosco's pedagogy so as to launch a prophecy with powerful future perspectives, implies an indispensable ability for involving valid members of the lay faithful. It is a matter of taking seriously the ecclesiology of the Council; it will transform our evangelizing and educative presence, giving to our works a new vitality and more promising future.

In a radical perspective.

We have seen that the practice of the evangelical counsels is already in itself a prophetic presence in the Church and in society. The problem lies in knowing how to give it greater modern significance in respect of the mission and communion of our evangelizing plan. It is not just a question of living obedient, poor and chaste, but of manifesting that such radical conduct makes us visible "signs and

bearers" of Christ's love for the young.

The Constitutions declare: "The evangelical counsels, by fostering purification of the heart and spiritual freedom, render our pastoral charity more concerned and productive";⁴⁸ "the practice of the counsels, lived in the spirit of the beatitudes, makes our proclamation of the Gospel more convincing";⁴⁹ the evangelical counsels "make the salesian a sign of the power of the resurrection. They fashion his heart entirely for the Kingdom, and help him to discern and welcome God's action in history; in the simplicity and hard work of daily life they transform him into an educator who proclaims to the young 'new heavens and a new earth', awakening in them hope and the dedication and joy to which it gives rise".⁵⁰

⁴⁸ C 61

⁴⁹ C 62

⁵⁰ C 63

I invite you to bear witness to this radical prophecy at the present day by giving particular attention to two complementary aspects which are really urgent: the education of young people to love, and courageous opposition to certain fashionable idols.

— *The education of young people to love*⁵¹ is certainly one of the key points in education to the faith. If there is any single aspect where cultural changes have brought about a ruinous change in conduct and at the same time a need for rethinking, this is it. Because of a distorted idea of love, many youngsters are no longer capable of living Christ's grace, and this is a baleful obstacle to growth in the faith and the directing of life towards vocational objectives.

⁵¹ cf. GC23 192 ff.

In us, the "salesian" practice of the evangelical counsels which strengthens the covenant, the mission and communion, translates our daily living witness into a kindness of manner, an educational

attitude of welcoming acceptance, a family spirit, sincere and stable personal relationships, the joy of being together, and the circulation of great ideals which produce an atmosphere very favourable for an authentic formation to love. The salesian style of an obedient, poor and chaste life, with the added witness of joyful and industrious work carried out in common, manifests the beauty and satisfaction of a vocation of love which is able, in Christ, to give itself for others, helping them to an existential experience of the reasons behind the demands and sacrifices inherent in the love of Christ.

The prophetic element in our practice lies in fidelity to Christ, without any subterfuges or compensations; it helps us to renew that family atmosphere of the Oratory which made of Don Bosco "the genius of the heart". In such a climate we dedicate ourselves to understanding and guiding the affective tendencies of the youngsters, to the importance of their vocational guidance, and to opening them to experiences of self-giving in service to others, and to growth in solidarity.

I think it is important to reflect on this aspect in community, meditating on the Constitutions and with practical examinations of conscience, giving particular attention to the theme of salesian purity; progress made in the anthropological sciences make necessary a revision of a certain mentality of the past, but at the same time demand a deepening of consecrated chastity which will be in truth a sign of Christ's mystery, which always remains the highest revelation of what love really is.

— *Opposition to fashionable idols* reminds us of the courageous prophetic style of the Old Testament; Jesus himself challenged more than once and in biting words certain mentalities and moral

abuses which distorted the prophetic concept of the Kingdom he was proclaiming.⁵²

⁵² cf. e.g. Mt 23,13ff; Mk 9,42ff; Lk 19,41-45

Today there are certain fashionable idols which must be disavowed; they are concerned in various ways with power, riches and pleasure. They are already opposed in practice by the observance of the evangelical counsels: "In a world beguiled by atheism and the idolatry of pleasure, possession and power, our way of life bears witness, especially to the young, that God exists, that his love can fill a life completely, and that the need to love and the urge to possess, and the freedom to control one's whole existence, find their fullest meaning in Christ the Saviour".⁵³

⁵³ C 62

But it can happen that in some house there may be a soft and easy way of life, or too free a manner of speaking or judging, or the presence of some imprudent confrere giving a negative witness, which instead of collaborating in opposing idols conceals, denies and in fact destroys the prophetic force of radical adherence to the Gospel, as though it had no further influence, or at least as though no further attention was given to it by the community as an efficacious sign against worldly deviations. Unfortunately secularism can find its way even into consecrated communities where it rapidly cools down any prophetic forces; it brings about the loss in our educative commitment of the evangelical thrust of our existence, concealing it behind the camouflage of non-evangelical innovations.

It is important to be able to oppose in a pedagogical manner certain invading idolatries by highlighting, in the first place, the motivations and joy of our salesian profession.

Every community should feel itself prompted to make a serious examination of conscience on the

prophetic aspect of its radical adherence to the Gospel in oppositions to the idolatries of individualism, the seeking of an easy life, and hedonism. We must be able to unmask, using the anthropological sciences if necessary, certain anti-gospel tendencies with regard to sex, marriage, advancement of personality, the dignity of women, the constitution of the family, the sacred nature of life, the use of goods, the indispensability of political activity, the harm done by selfishness, the irrational nature of many conflicts, the sense of sin, etc. Challenging in an educative manner is a delicate task, not within the ability of everyone; it calls for competence, study and reflection, and is an expression of a concrete prophetic service of which young people have special need.

— There you have some reflections on the prophetic dimension of our salesian life. “I appeal to you”, says St Paul, “to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith”.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ cf. Rom 12,1ff

It could seem at first sight that our attention is concentrated on too many things, and that in consequence our efforts will be too widely dispersed. But further examination reveals that each of the points indicated is already in process of realization, together with many other indications provided by recent General Chapters. In fact this circular letter is insisting on one single point, *our prophetic ardour and enthusiasm* in everything we are trying to realize: that we be aware of being prophets of

Christ and to know what to insist on so as to be genuine prophets without non-authentic manifestations.

Our own particular prophetic role in the Church is to live with new fervour the authenticity of Don Bosco's charism, so that all our work of evangelization may appear to be clothed with the christian innovations and newness desired by the present times. Fundamentally this implies a renewed witness of personal intimacy with Christ which prompts us to review, revalue, rethink, and replan; to emphasize certain aspects, to concentrate efforts, to reawaken pastoral creativity with Christ as the true point of departure! What it comes to in the last analysis is to manifest efficaciously the contemporary aspect of Christ to lead the new generations towards a better future.

St Paul would tell us: you must become Christ for the young!

To feel ourselves prophets is for us a great spiritual reawakening, which makes us take very seriously the line of approach to the declarations of the Council that we have adopted in these reflections: "The up-to-date renewal of the religious life", declares Vatican II, "comprises both a constant return to the sources of the whole of the christian life and to the primitive inspiration of the Institutes and their adaptation to the changed conditions of our time. But even the best-contrived adaptations to the needs of our time will be of no avail unless they are animated by a spiritual renewal, which must always be assigned primary importance even in the active ministry".⁵⁵

May our Lady of the Rosary be our guide

⁵⁶ Lk 2,51

Speaking of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, Luke the Evangelist says that she “kept all these things in her heart”.⁵⁶ And this not only with regard to the extraordinary events of the conception of Jesus and of his birth and infancy, but also of his entire life, of his ascension to the right hand of the Father and his wonderful interventions in history. Proof of this is the canticle of the Magnificat, the mirror of Mary’s heart, which can be considered the model of the interior life and of the global outlook that every true prophet of the new Covenant must cultivate within himself. Let us ask our Blessed Lady to help us to develop in our heart each day this specific aspect of christian hope.

Today’s Marian commemoration on 7 October is an invitation to discover in the recital of the Rosary a practical way of preserving jealously in our hearts the various aspects of the Christ-event: there are fifteen of them and we call them “mysteries”. It is on the basis of these facts that we can nourish our relationships of friendship with Christ and, while contemplating in them the ineffable richness of the incarnation and redemption in comparison with the grave problems that surround us in this era of epoch-making change, we can perceive day after day their contemporary aspects and pass them on to others. They are an abundant source of saving light; they remind us of the secret for the prophetic functioning of every disciple, who must be “like a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old”.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Mt 13,52

We must indeed learn to bring out from the treasure of Christ the urgent gospel messages

which, through meditation on these fifteen mysteries, the Holy Spirit suggests to us. Prophetic concern can change our practice and esteem for this exercise of devotion and give back to it the character of a true and relevant source for the nourishment of the new evangelization.

We may also remember that Don Bosco set great store by the Rosary. To the Marquis Roberto d'Azeglio, who tried to dissuade him from having his boys recite it, he replied: "That practice means a lot to me. I would say that my whole undertaking is based on it. I would not mind giving up many other important things, but not this one".⁵⁸

⁵⁸ BM 3, 207

We are concerned here not so much with the praiseworthy observance of a devotional practice, as with the aspect of a Marian heart concentrated constantly and with prophetic affection on the various aspects of the Christ-event, the vital centre of the new evangelization. To meditate on Christ in this way is not simply to recall a visitation of God in the past, but to consider its permanent consequences of revelation and salvation and become familiar with its eschatological aspect, or in other words its newness for every era in which it is called to leaven current history.

It is a manner of fostering the experience of the divine lived by Christ. The prophet is given authority not to command but to communicate the light of a mystery he has personally experienced; it would be contrary to his vocation were he to fall into routine; he cannot appear as having "got used to" Christ but as one who understands Christ's current saving presence here and now, and as his wise and faithful messenger who can draw attention to his perennial "newness" and is endowed with the gift of frankness and courage to communicate it;

before taking sides in social options his concern is to proclaim Christ's Gospel, taking his stand totally on Christ's side; he invites to conversion rather than rebellion; he is not an expert in the course of future events, but provides a sense of guidance for the future; he brings the good news including the forgiveness of sins, and hence insists on conversion and openly denounces evil; he likes innovations, being himself the bearer of the greatest innovator of all time.

A prophet needs a burning enthusiasm, an ever-fresh vitality, a bold and lively imagination, and daily docility to the Holy Spirit; he needs enthusiasm and courage even to the extent of martyrdom. This is evident in the lives of the saints of every age, men and women who have made of Christ the motive for their life and actions.

May Mary obtain for every confrere and community an interior apostolic conviction that will make the fullness of Christ's light shine out in us prophetically for the benefit of the young.

My fraternal greetings to you all.

Cordially in Don Bosco,

Don F. Viganò