

«Signs and bearers of the love of god for young people,
especially those who are poor» (C. 2)

**SIX YEARS THAT DEMAND
BOLDNESS, PROPHECY AND FIDELITY**

“First, I thank my God
through Jesus Christ for all of you,
because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world.
For God, whom I serve with my spirit
by announcing the Gospel of his Son,
is my witness that without ceasing
I remember you always in my prayers,
asking that by God’s will,
I may somehow at last succeed in coming to you.
For I am longing to see you
so that I may share with you some spiritual gift
to strengthen you –
or rather, that we may be mutually
encouraged by each other’s faith
both yours and mine” (*Rom 1:8-12*).

Rome, 8 December 2020
*Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception
of the Blessed Virgin Mary*

Dear Confreres,

I am making St Paul’s words my own while writing to you to present you with the Rector Major and his Council’s ‘Project’ for the six year term already underway.

What kind of Salesians for the youth of today? This question resounded over the months preceding the 28th General Chapter and accompanied us over the months spent in Valdocco up until the premature closing of GC28 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is the question that needs to continue to accompany us and en-

lighten our path over these next six years. The six-year term that awaits us will undoubtedly be a valuable opportunity for being *bolder, more prophetic and ever more faithful*, to the point of carrying out “the Founder’s apostolic plan: ... to be in the Church signs and bearers of the love of God for young people, especially those who are poor” (C. 2), wherever we are present as the sons of Don Bosco, dreamt of and raised up by the Holy Spirit.

My dear confreres, now that some months have passed since the closing of GC28, together with the General Council I am offering you a reflection to accompany the plan prepared by the Rector Major with his Council for the animation and governance of the Congregation over the six years from 2020-2026.

1. A precarious time

Seven months have gone by since the closure of the 28th General Chapter and certainly, along with the rest of the world, we have been living through a complicated time marked by *precariousness*. Let me point to some simple indicators of this, among the many that could be listed:

- ⇒ As a General Council, we too have not yet managed to all meet together, not even once, and it will take months for this to happen.
- ⇒ We Salesians too have been struck by the pandemic: as I write I sadly need to tell you of the death of 67 of our confreres. Along with them, family members and relatives of other confreres, as well as other loved ones and our acquaintances, have also died.
- ⇒ Like so many other people, we have felt and lived through the experience of “isolation”. There have been moments of nervousness, anxiety and even fear. Elderly confreres, but also young people, have been hospitalised and risked losing their lives.

- ⇒ During the year many novitiates had to start their activities within the different countries of origin of their novices, because due to the pandemic many novices could not leave their country. This has fragmented an already well-established formation stage, in the expectation – hopefully not too long – that it would be possible to bring the novices together as in the past.
- ⇒ As has happened for thousands upon thousands of families, hundreds of our Salesians houses too have been economically affected and experience huge difficulties in keeping their works and communities sustainable. They often find themselves unable to assist those who, at this moment, need us most. All this hurts us deeply.
- ⇒ Many schedules, planned events and commitments have been skipped or cancelled. In a way, everything seems to have stopped.
- ⇒ At the same time we are seeing enormous creativity, characterised by the many initiatives on behalf of those most in need around us; but we are surprised to admit that we have never experienced something like this before and that we are still going through it.

Faced with this reality, I myself have invited you on several occasions, dear confreres, to look at, contemplate and experience this time with profound faith and hope, without letting yourselves be carried away by this “pandemic tsunami” which brings so much pessimism with it, together with the temptation to close in on ourselves.

Once again I invite you to take a contemplative stance and to remain silent before so much accumulated pain, especially the pain of many people, many families, many poor people.

This attentive and compassionate gaze according to God’s heart, must make us ever more merciful in our interventions, more humble in our words, our proclamations, our statements

and our judgements. What a splendid fruit of the Spirit this will be if we translate it into reality!

2. A believing manner of looking at reality and the world

In the situation we are going through, one truth is forced on us as believers: God has never had his people set out on a journey without accompanying them. This has been the case throughout the development of Revelation in history and continues to be the case today. In Jesus Christ, the Emmanuel, the God-with-us – the time of Advent and approaching Christmas shows us this – the way forward is God himself, who always walks with us. Even during a time of pandemic.

The current moments of difficulty and disorientation require all possible attention and acuity on our part to perceive more than ever that God is with us, very close to us, especially in His Son Jesus Christ.

Pope Francis reminded us of this last 27 March at an extraordinary moment of prayer he presided over in a deserted St Peter's Square. He invited us to be aware that this is "a time to choose what matters and what passes away, a time to separate what is necessary from what is not. It is a time to get our lives back on track with regard to you, Lord, and to others." He then added: "We are not self-sufficient; by ourselves we founder: we need the Lord like ancient navigators needed the stars. Let us invite Jesus into the boats of our lives. Let us hand over our fears to him so that he can conquer them. Like the disciples we will experience that with him on board there will be no shipwreck. Because this is God's strength: turning to the good everything that happens to us, even the bad things. He brings serenity into our storms, because with God life never dies."¹

¹ FRANCIS, *Meditation of the Holy Father during the extraordinary moment of prayer at a time of pandemic*, Rome 27 March 2020.

At this time of uncertainty, exhaustion, instability, fear, we could be thinking – like Prometheus in the Greek myth – that we have to face the situation we are experiencing with our own poor strengths, together with so many people around us. But as believers we are called to continue doing our best with the clear and steady awareness that here and now our strength is grounded in the certainty that Jesus Christ the Lord is with us, in our midst: in the “storm” or in the “desert” that we are crossing.

This is the journey that I personally think about and dream for our Congregation over these six years: tackling the storms and deserts without pre-determined horizons, knowing well the One in whom we have placed our trust – as the Apostle Paul says when writing to his disciple Timothy² – without closing in on ourselves, isolating ourselves and moving away from those who need us, in an effort to protect ourselves from whatever threats... Families, individuals and our boys and girls need our presence in their midst; they need us to stay among them, neither closed nor hunkered down in spaces of physical or psychological security.

Dear confreres, I hope that along this journey we will continue to be convinced that the rhythm of a society – the societies, people and cultures among whom the Salesian charism is present – is not only dictated by those who run the most, but also by those who are weaker, more fragile, or who cannot even walk, cannot even speak because they have no voice. This must be our post-chapter horizon: with boldness and prophecy, faithful to Christ, following our father Don Bosco.

² Cf. *2 Tim* 1:12.

3. The Project of Animation and Government of the Rector Major and his Council

Dear confreres, this letter accompanies the Project of Animation and Government of the Rector Major and his Council. First of all, let me remind you that we are going through a time and experiencing a context which is very particular: GC28 closed prematurely and the pandemic, which has already lasted nine months, will probably continue for at least another six months, according to experts. As I have said on other occasions, this is the time that has been given to us and we are called to be fruitful during it. Don Bosco was always able to act with initiative and creativity during the time in which he was called to take care of the poorest young people of nineteenth-century Turin, and did not “give way to discouragement in the face of difficulties” because he had “complete trust in the Father” (C. 17). It is up to us to do the same.

The Project of Animation and Government was not written for the provinces. They can certainly draw profit from what they believe is valid for them. However, the plan as such concerns the particular commitments of the Rector Major and the General Council.

Other than the wealth of GC28, the provinces and vice-provinces can benefit from the *Holy Father’s Message* and the *Rector Major’s Action Programme for the Salesian Congregation after General Chapter 28*. Those guidelines were intended to be a kind of long “highway” we would like to travel over these six years. I don’t believe that the most important thing is the “speed” we all make this journey with, given that so many factors are involved: historical, cultural national. The most important thing is to be certain that by following the authoritative signs from the Pope and the Congregation, we are heading in the right direction. It would be very difficult, not to say impossible, to find even a single province or vice-province that did not feel they were in tune with these action guidelines, or thought them distant or not focused on their local reality.

Adopting an image from nuclear physics or astronomy, we could say that these *action guidelines* are like the concentric orbits that particles or satellites take around a nucleus or a central star. The centre is the figure of today's Salesian: "What kind of Salesians for the youth of today?" was the question put as the theme of GC28. We could describe the concentric circles around the nucleus of the theme as follows:

- ⇒ How the young John Cagliero, today's Salesian needs to feel that the words: "Monk or no monk, I am staying with Don Bosco"³ refer to himself. This is action guideline no. 1 (AG [Action Guideline] 1: Six years for growth in Salesian identity), because in fact many of us have heard the Lord's call through the charm and attraction worked on us by Don Bosco, our father, who was everything to his young people.
- ⇒ Obviously this motivation alone is not enough to sustain an entire lifetime. Sooner or later comes fatigue, because our life is not a work but a vocation. Day after day, year after year, we discover that the life of the consecrated individual, the life of the Salesian, is sustained only by the central place Christ has, only if we have the heart of the Good Shepherd, like Don Bosco, who gave himself to the young till his last breath (AG2: The urgency of the "Da mihi animas cetera tolle").
- ⇒ From Don Bosco we learn that the essence of the preventive system and the secret that opens the hearts of the young comes from our presence among them (AG3: Living the "Salesian sacrament of presence"). This is the presence of the educator, of a brother, a father and also a friend (C. 15). It is an affective and effective presence that makes us want to spend every moment with them in their midst.
- ⇒ All this is to live with a Salesian heart like Don Bosco's, following the example of Jesus Christ the Good Shepherd. A heart that feels that "its absolute priority is for the young, the poorest, the abandoned and defenceless" (AG5).

³ Cf. *MB*, VI, 335.

- ⇒ These Salesians for the young people of today, us in other words, and those who continue to knock at the doors of Don Bosco's charism, must assimilate all the features of identity proper to it through their formation (initial and ongoing), along with another feature that is very important, but which we offer greater resistance to in many parts of the world. I am referring to the difficulty and effort of incorporating the great and powerful contribution that the laity and the Salesian Family make to the charism into our Salesian DNA, as an inheritance received from Don Bosco himself. (AG6: "Together with lay people in the mission and formation. The charismatic strength that the laity and the Salesian Family offer us").
- ⇒ And the Salesian for the youth of today is capable of loving what young people love. Today he discovers and recognises the great sensitivity that young people have and manifest for the care of creation. He perceives that this attention touches them deeply, envelops them, unites them, motivates them and stirs up their commitment. Therefore we have decided to set out on the road with them "accompanying them towards a sustainable future" (AG8).

It remains for me to stress that all these elements of the Salesian identity for today's young people involve two options which are part of animation and governance at all levels (global, provincial and local). The Rector Major with his Council will invest a great deal of energy, motivation, human and economic resources to implement these options:

1. The first concerns the central place we will give to initial formation (in all its phases) and ongoing formation in these six years. (AG4).
2. The second touches fully on the conviction that our Congregation must journey over the next six years towards greater universality and without borders. Nations have borders. Our generosity, which sustains the mission, cannot and must not know limits. *The prophecy of which we must be witnesses as a Congregation does not have boundaries.* (AG7).

4. Teamwork with clear priorities

I maintain that what I have just presented can throw light on the action plan that follows.

The plan draws an arc that includes

- the particular plan for each sector of the Congregation (formation, youth ministry, social communication, missions, economy);
- the animation and accompaniment of regions, carried out mostly by the Regional Councillors.

The *eight action guidelines* for the six-year period are involved in this plan, with some specific emphases. They are all important. At the same time the priorities and development to be brought about over these six years are strictly bound up with the diversity of contexts and the specific reality of each province.

⇒ 4.1. We will give priority to *caring for the vocation of each confrere* and to *the sense of belonging to the Congregation*.

Fr Egidio Viganò had already warned us many years ago of the danger of *genericism* in the Congregation.⁴ Perhaps today this “genericism” is of another kind and risks being experienced by some confreres as “vocational relativism”, meaning that it doesn’t matter if they leave Don Bosco and abandon the Congregation, so long as they are exercising the priestly ministry in one or other diocese. At times, for some confreres,

⁴ Cf. E. VIGANÒ, *Circular Letters of Fr Egidio Viganò to the Salesians*, Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco, Rome 1996, 69, 661, 1041, 1053, 1116, 1281, 1286, 1526, 1558.

- Other significant quotations can be found in the following works (all in Italian):
- E. VIGANÒ, *L’interiorità apostolica. Riflessioni sulla “grazia di unità” come sorgente di carità pastorale*, Elle Di Ci, Leumann (TO) 1995, 115 e 173.
- ID., *Non secondo la carne ma nello Spirito*, Istituto Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice, Rome 1978, 186.
- ID., *Un progetto evangelico di vita attiva*, Elle Di Ci, Leumann (TO) 1982.
- ID., *La Famiglia Salesiana di Don Bosco. Lettere del Rettor Maggiore*, Elle Di Ci, Leumann (TO) 1988, 222.

being a priest is a “risk” for their situation as consecrated religious rather than an opportunity to live their priesthood as Don Bosco did, meaning as the Founder of the Congregation, as a “Salesian among his Salesians” and a “priest among his boys” at every moment: on the playground, in chapel, in the dining hall, during the Eucharist, at play, in Confession, in the study hall or workshop, while praying the Rosary. Always and at every moment the Salesian and the priest with other Salesians among the youngsters.

There are Salesian priests who, after some years in the Congregation, ask if they can exercise their priesthood as parish priests, not in a Salesian parish but under the exclusive leadership of the bishop while they wait to be incardinated into the diocese. It is enough for these Salesians to exercise their priestly ministry, while being the Salesian of Don Bosco is put to one side. This is an *illness* affecting many institutes of consecrated life, and we are not exempt from this.

While saying this, I want to be understood correctly. The priestly ministry is always a precious gift from God. I am speaking about the religious consecration of the Salesian priest. I am not doubting the beauty and goodness of the priestly ministry; but I am warning against the real danger of devaluing or of not understanding the prophetic and charismatic power of our consecrated life, by thinking that one can be a Salesian, or stop being one, with the same ease, without anything changing, so long as one can continue to exercise the priestly ministry. But it is not the same thing. We are talking about a state of life that brings with it a different way of following the Lord in building the Kingdom of Heaven. Hence I speak of another kind of “genericism” that I call “vocational relativism”.

The long experience of the Congregation confirms that every time when confreres embark on paths that lead them to be focused on themselves looking for recognition, autonomy, at times independence at any price, then everything else is distorted.

On the contrary, when as Salesians of Don Bosco, brothers or priests, personally or as a community we make choices that start from a life that places Jesus Christ at the centre, we experience a profound inner dynamic that comes from the Holy Spirit and gives us solid happiness, leading us to be and to feel that we are true apostles of the young. Friends, brothers, fathers and educators who by imitating Don Bosco's fatherliness, are the best "good news" that can come to them from God through a human face.

For this reason, in the coming years we are committed to taking care of our vocation and that of our confreres as much as possible, together with the desire and joy of being forever *Salesians of Don Bosco* with our confreres, for the young.

- ⇒ 4.2 We will give priority to *being close to and accompanying provincials and their councils*, and provincial delegates too, starting from the various animation sectors of the Congregation. We believe that the decision, taken in the past six years, to ensure the closest possible proximity to each of the provincials from the beginning of their service, has been very positive and fruitful, starting with a first meeting with the Rector Major and part of the General Council and then offering the provincials a "road map" as an aid for the beginning of their service in the province.

The magnificent experience spent each year in Valdocco with provincials halfway through their service will continue to be looked after in the same way, spending a week of spirituality together at the cradle of our charism.

As I said at the conclusion of GC28, the Rector Major will also take on the task of animating a retreat for the provincials and members of the provincial councils in each of the Congregation's Regions.

- ⇒ 4.3 We will give priority, fully in harmony with the youth ministry sector, to *the evangelising dimension of our mission in all of its expressions*. In fact, we believe that it is certainly very important, and in some cases urgent, to "live, breathe and con-

tinue on its path, endeavouring to make the ‘Da mihi animas, cetera tolle’ a reality through proclamation of the Gospel”.⁵ From a careful look at the work carried out by the Chapter Assembly on the two reflection nuclei that we managed to deal with in GC28, there is clear insistence “on giving a *central place to the proclamation of Jesus Christ*, attentive to the new challenges this presents us with ‘in style content and method’. A youth ministry that proposes and produces experiences. A precious, real and striking proposal that is framed within community life, and makes young people themselves active agents in youth ministry, ‘bearers of the living fire of the Salesian charism’, offers them every kind of experience through which it is possible to touch Jesus, to feel Jesus in the first person. The relationship of friendship with Jesus needs moments of encounter, founding experiences, strong moments that consolidate (fortify, mobilise, strengthen) this relationship and ‘help to discover life as a gift for others.’”⁶

This strong evangelising conviction of our youth ministry must have the vocational dimension as its unifying principle. The many efforts expressed in the field of education and evangelisation should help our boys and girls to follow a path of faith that naturally leads them to ask themselves the right questions about their vocation: “Lord, what do you expect of me?” This aim is made possible by processes of accompaniment and by those who accompany – Salesians and lay people, members of the Salesian Family – ever more formed and sensitive to this need.

⇒ 4.4 We will give priority to the significant and prophetic journey throughout the Congregation in making the *Salesian sacrament of presence* the distinctive sign of our DNA received

⁵ *The Rector Major’s Action Programme for the Salesian Congregation after GC 28*, no. 2, in AGC 433 (2020), 22.

⁶ M.A. GARCÍA MORCUENDE, *Chiavi di lettura educativo-pastorale del Capitolo Generale 28. Riflessione del Settore di Pastorale Giovanile*, n° 4.1, Rome 10 September 2020.

from Don Bosco. We will do everything possible to help bring about the conversion already asked for by GC26. It would be a wonderful fruit of GC28 if every Salesian – in every presence throughout the world in every province – and the Rector Major himself with his Council, were to find the time to be among the young as friends, educators and witnesses of God, whatever their role be in the community.⁷

In his message to GC28 Pope Francis made reference to the “Valdocco option” and to “presence”. He reminded us that “Even before things that need to be done, the Salesian is a living reminder of a presence in which availability, listening, joy and dedication are the essential features which give rise to processes. The gratuitousness of presence saves the Congregation from any activist obsession and from any kind of technical and functional reductionism. The first call is to be a joyful and gratuitous presence among young people.”⁸ It is with this sensitivity and with the strong call to attention that the young people present at the Chapter Assembly addressed to us, asking us not to forget them, that we will commit ourselves more and more over these six years to promoting an affective and effective presence among young people and with them. The oratory atmosphere of family and welcoming young people must be a distinctive sign of all our presences and must be the personal attitude of every Salesian of Don Bosco. Indeed, “we can say that the first oratory at Valdocco is like the ‘theological place’ of our charism: all of Don Bosco’s youth ministry came from there.”⁹

⇒ 4.5. We will commit ourselves to carefully seeing to formation (initial and ongoing) *so as become more evangelically signifi-*

⁷ Cf. *Action Programme, op.cit.*, 28.

⁸ GC28, *Message of His Holiness Pope Francis to the members of GC28*, in AGC 433 (2020), 62.

⁹ E. VIGANÒ, *L’interiorità apostolica. Riflessioni sulla “grazia di unità” come sorgente di carità pastorale. Nel centenario della nascita e nel venticinquesimo della morte*, Elle Di Ci, Torino 2020, 137.

cant as Salesians of Don Bosco. Although during the work of the GC28 Assembly we were not able to fully address what was to be one of the most important nuclei of the Chapter's reflection, there was a clear desire to develop the reality of the formation processes in our Congregation with clarity, courage and a broad vision. We are convinced that in a world that is experiencing very rapid changes – i.e. the world in which we live – we must be well positioned and well grounded in what is essential for being the Salesian educators and pastors that young people and their families, the Church and the world need today. The reflection carried out in the General Council is fully in harmony with GC28, with what Pope Francis asked for in the formation of today's Salesians,¹⁰ and with the request that the Rector Major Fr Pascual Chávez made at the end of his service when he invited the Congregation to give priority to the centrality of formation as an element that guarantees our vocation.¹¹

In this six-year period our aim will be to foster more and more a formation that is not only *for the mission* (already an important aspect), but also *in the mission*, that is, far from any situation that leads Salesians to feel that they are a privileged *elite* and even more so the “lucky ones”, who do not know the fatigue and sacrifices that simple people and the poorest people have to endure every day in order to live; or forgetting our humble origins, both as a Congregation and in our own family, as happens for most of us. These words of the Pope continue to resound strongly in us: “It is important to say that we are not formed *for* the mission, but that we are formed *in* the mission. Our whole life revolves around it, with its choices and priorities.”¹²

Pastoral accompaniment is essential. We will promote it as much as possible, as well as seeking and forming formators capable of such pastoral accompaniment and discernment.

¹⁰ GC28, *Message of His Holiness Pope Francis to GC28, op. cit.*, 55-65.

¹¹ P. CHÁVEZ, *Vocation and Formation: gift and task*, in *AGC 416* (2013), 3-54.

¹² GC28, *Message of His Holiness Pope Francis to GC28, op. cit.*, 60.

The years of study will have to be oriented more and more, and better, towards the formation of young confreres that will enable them to dialogue with culture and with the most diverse social contexts, learning to position themselves well and to deal with the overwhelming secularisation very much present in many countries in which we find ourselves. In the same way we will have to prepare ourselves more and more to carry out the Salesian mission in very different religious contexts. Knowledge of and dialogue with other religions should characterise the formation of our future confreres in these countries. Such religious contexts, atheistic or agnostic, challenge us and cannot be considered indifferent to the formation of the Salesian of today.

Inculturation will have to be much more than a word, one usually not absent from our writings, but requires many processes and much sensitivity to become a reality.

We must also form ourselves to translate into reality the theological and charismatic conviction of the mission that is shared between the Salesians of Don Bosco, lay people involved in the mission and members of the Salesian family. As part of this shared mission and formation it is necessary to keep in consideration the contribution that women offer as women and in their own families. This contribution today cannot be passed over in silence or ignored.¹³ More concretely, in Pope Francis' words: "Without a real, effective and affective presence of women, your works would lack the courage and the ability to transform presence into hospitality, into a home. Faced with the rigour that excludes, we must learn to generate the new life of the Gospel. I invite you to implement approaches in which the female voice, her outlook and her actions – appreciated for her individuality – finds an echo in making decisions; not simply as a helper but as someone fully involved in your presences."¹⁴

¹³ GC24, 166. 177.

¹⁴ GC28, *Message of His Holiness Pope Francis to GC28, op. cit.*, 62-63.

In short, we must see to a formation that is committed to the constant search for full harmony and symbiosis between *charismatic identity* and *vocational identification*, implementing approaches to true and formative personalisation. In fact “We are convinced that if we succeed in guaranteeing a clear Salesian identity through formation, the confreres will feel furnished with a collection of values, attitudes and criteria which will help them to face up successfully to today’s culture and to effectively carry out the Salesian mission.”¹⁵

⇒ 4.6. In the same way, in animation and governance we will commit all possible energies to transform into reality the *absolute priority of the young, the poorest and most abandoned and defenceless*.

I return here, dear confreres, to repeating what I had already said during GC28 and which I picked up once more in the action programme for these six years. My dream is that by saying “**Salesians of Don Bosco**” today and in the coming years means, for people who hear our name, that we are slightly “crazy” consecrated individuals, “crazy”, that is, because we love the young, especially the poorest, most abandoned and defenceless of them, with a true Salesian heart. This seems to me to be the most beautiful description one could give of the sons of Don Bosco today. I am convinced that this is what our Father would really want.

The reality of the poor and the new forms of poverty – increasingly more numerous and diverse – must find the Salesians sensitive and able to deal with the damage that these forms of poverty do to the young: ready to intervene, as Don Bosco did in the real circumstances of the poverty of the young of his time. According to the Holy Father’s words: “We cannot feel ‘alright’ when any member of the human family is left behind and in the shadows. The silent cry of so many poor men, women and children should find the people of God at the

¹⁵ P. CHÁVEZ, *Vocation and formation: gift and task*, *op. cit.*, 27-28.

forefront, always and everywhere, to give them a voice, to protect and support them in the face of hypocrisy and so many unfulfilled promises, and to invite them to share in the life of the community.”¹⁶ This is how it must be for us Salesians.

Here we find a beautiful continuity in the magisterium of our Congregation. It is as if there is a river current that confirms and justifies the priority choice for young people, because it saves us charismatically as a Congregation: “If we are with them and among them, they are the first to do us good, they evangelise us and help us to truly live the Gospel with the charism of Don Bosco. I dare to say that *it is the poor young people who will save us*.”¹⁷ When a Salesian feels all this resonate strongly in his heart, he ends up saying – almost without realising it – with deep conviction, like Don Bosco: “For you I study, for you I work, for you I live, for you I am ready even to give my life.”¹⁸

Our priority choice for “that part of human society which is so exposed yet so rich in promise” (C. 1), has these strong convictions within itself: at the centre and always, for us, is the person, each individual person, all people, each with their own dignity that must be fully respected. Every person, every young person is a value in themselves and should not be considered an object of economic calculation or a commercial good, as often happens in our societies. In this priority option and in the testimony we give, “what is important in our witness is that our predilection is seen to be *clearly evangelical*, which in practice means ‘*giving the most to those who in their life have received least*’. Salesian charity begins not with the first but with the last, not with the ones who are richer from

¹⁶ FRANCIS, *Message for the 4th World Day of the Poor*, Rome 13 June 2020.

¹⁷ A. FERNÁNDEZ ARTIME, *Rector Major’s closing address at GC27*, in *GC27*, 127.

¹⁸ D. RUFFINO, *Cronaca dell’Oratorio*, ASC 110, Quaderno 5, p. 10; see also J. VECCHI, “*For you I study...*” (C. 14). *The adequate preparation of the confreres and the quality of our educational work*, in *AGC 361* (1997), 3-47.

an economic or spiritual standpoint (who already have care and attention), but with those who need us to kindle their hope and boost their forces.”¹⁹

We feel like friends, educators, brothers, fathers of young people, and for this reason we protect their rights and help them to become aware of their duties. And we are strongly committed to protecting, in a special way, those who are more fragile and weak, those who have no voice or whose voice is not heard. ***We are committed to making ourselves and our presences healthy and safe places for those to whom we are sent.*** I must confess to you, dear confreres, that while I was writing down this commitment I felt a strong and beautiful feeling of peace. And I would like this commitment to be a true “dogma” for all of us. I also admit that I felt great emotion and was left speechless by what Don Bosco wrote in 1873 about a similar reality. Please read it and welcome it into your hearts as our Father’s most ardent desire for our Congregation – his Congregation – today. This is what he wrote: “The public voice often complains about immoral events that have occurred contrary to good behaviour, and horrible scandals. It is a great evil, it is a disaster: and I pray to the Lord that all our Houses be closed before similar misfortunes happen in them.”²⁰

- ⇒ 4.7. In these six years we will give particular importance to Social Communication in the Congregation, to give visibility to the good that is done, to make known the needs that exist and to give the poorest people the voice that they have a right to have. In this way we will be doing no less than carrying out what our Constitutions say: “We work in the social communication sector. This is a significant field of activity which constitutes one of the apostolic priorities of the Salesian mission.

¹⁹ P. CHÁVEZ, “*But who do you say that I am?*” (Mk 8:28). *Looking at Christ through the eyes of Don Bosco*, in AGC 384 (2004), 20.

²⁰ P. RICALDONE, *Santità e purezza*, in ACS n. 69 (31 January 1935), 62.

Our founder had an instinctive grasp of the value of this means of mass education, which creates culture and spreads patterns of life; he showed great originality in the apostolic undertakings which he initiated to defend and sustain the faith of the people. Following his example we utilize as God's gift the great possibilities which social communication offers us for education and evangelization" (C. 43).

At the same time, let us take up our journey with young people, committing ourselves to the care of creation and ecology for a sustainable world, accompanying the prophetic sensitivity of which young people are the bearers and which must grow more in each of us.

We maintain that the Salesian of today, every Salesian and not only missionaries *ad gentes*, must be inculturated.

Among other challenges, we have that of the digital environment where today's young people live. When we speak of presence among young people, we are referring first of all to the first and most precious presence that is the personal encounter; but there is no doubt that we can and must also be present in those "virtual courtyards of today" frequented by many young people, at least by those who can access these *media*, which is certainly not all of them. In fact it is often the poor, due to their situation of poverty, who are excluded and without other alternatives.

It is very encouraging to see that not a few confreres are providing a wonderful educational and pastoral service by using digital communication.

The digital world offers many possibilities for meeting, for listening and for a truly educational presence; but it cannot be denied that these tools also have their "dark side" which manifests itself when there is a lack of quality and informational ethics or when, through the work of individuals or movements, messages of hatred, attacks on people, fake news, hindering the path towards universal fellowship and social friendship are spread through the digital world. As Pope Francis rightly points out: "As silence and careful lis-

tening disappear, replaced by a frenzy of texting, this basic structure of sage human communication is at risk.”²¹

The reality of the digital world fully touches on the task of the initial and ongoing formation of Don Bosco’s Salesians. Adequate formation is needed to inhabit this world in an increasingly competent way. It is necessary to be well aware of the challenges and opportunities that this world presents, and of what young people experience and go through in today’s new social, cultural and communication ecosystems.

To be ever closer to the world of young people and their language, their symbols and their real life is an essential task for us today. Otherwise, we will “miss the train” that allows us to take the journey of life together with them. On this “train”, sensitivity to creation and care for our common home are “non negotiable” items for young people today. Therefore, let us be at their side planning and disseminating educational pathways that will try to intercept and interact with everything that refers to the care of creation, in the light of the gaze of faith with which we contemplate the world. In doing so, we will also accept the simple and no minor concern that many young people express for ecology, even if they do not always live this interest with a transcendent or faith-based perspective.

- ⇒ 4.8. Also clear is the decision to nourish the missionary dream in our Congregation in fidelity to Don Bosco, which allows us to look to the new frontiers of evangelisation and presence among the poorest. This decision is closely linked to the effort to promote, deepen and increase a missionary culture throughout the Congregation, one that is taken up in a heartfelt way and considered to be a fundamental element of our charism, since “we look upon missionary work as an essential feature of our Congregation” (C. 30).

And certainly, as with the other priorities I have already referred to, in this case too it is a strategic commitment to see to

²¹ FRANCIS, Encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, 49.

our formation in such a way that it is also geared to the mission and missionary spirituality. This formation concerns both consecrated Salesians and lay missionaries who share missionary activity with us in its various expressions and in many places. The shared journey, even in the missionary dimension, cannot be reduced to practical and functional collaboration, but must be integrated into shared mission and joint formation for the mission.

In full continuity with what I have said elsewhere, I repeat that “We live in times when we have to face reality with a renewed mentality which allows us to ‘cross borders’. In a world where borders are more and more ‘a defence against others’, *the prophecy of our life* as Salesians of Don Bosco also consists in this: *in showing that for us there are no borders. The only reality we respond to is: God, the Gospel and the mission that has been entrusted to us.*”²² This vision is the reason for the efforts we will support to establish international and intercultural Salesian communities, where it is appropriate, necessary and possible to do so, with all the prophetic power they have – without ignoring or forgetting the effort needed to build fraternity in cultural diversity. This commitment will always require great faith and no small personal commitment on our part.

At the same time, as can be seen from the Rector Major’s planning and in the planning of the some of the animation sectors of the Congregation, we will make the openness of vision and the sense of belonging to the Congregation of the Salesians of Don Bosco in the world effective and effective especially by counting on the availability of the confreres in the provinces for international services, new foundations and attention to the new frontiers.

²² GC28, *Action Programme*, *op. cit.*, 46-47.

CONCLUSION: Dream! ... and get others to dream!


This is the invitation with which the Holy Father concludes his message to the 28th General Chapter. As the title of this “letter of presentation” of the plan for the coming years, I have chosen the words of our Constitutions where we are told that we are called to be “signs and bearers of the love of God for young people” in a six-year period in which what is being asked of us, as individuals and as a Congregation, is a healthy boldness and a strength capable of prophecy, always on the path of fidelity.

Dear confreres, like our Father Don Bosco we are great dreamers with feet planted firmly on earth and hearts always in God. “Dream of open, fruitful and evangelising houses capable of allowing the Lord to show so many young people his unconditional love and also allowing you to enjoy the beauty to which you have been called. Dream... not only for yourself and for the good of the Congregation, but for all young people deprived of the strength, light and comfort of friendship with Jesus Christ, deprived of a community of faith to sustain them, of a horizon of meaning and of life.”²³ Let us dream... And get others to dream!

Don Bosco has passed on to us the strong conviction that Mary is at the origins of, accompanies our growth and is the support of our vocation. “We believe that Mary is present among us and continues her ‘mission as Mother of the Church and Help of Christians’” (C. 8).

With complete trust, as children, we entrust to Her the journey of our Congregation and of the Salesian Family over these six years, in the awareness that She will continue to do everything.

Affectionately in Don Bosco



Fr Ángel FERNÁNDEZ ARTIME, sdb
Rector Major

²³ Cf. FRANCIS, *Message of His Holiness Pope Francis to GC28*, *op. cit.*, 65.