

*A past that throws light on our present*  
**IN DIALOGUE WITH FR PAUL ALBERA**

Rome, 24 June 2021  
*Nativity of Saint John the Baptist*

My dear confreres,

This year 2021 marks the first centenary of the death of Fr Paul Albera (1845-1921), the second successor of Don Bosco at the head of the Pious Society of St Francis de Sales.

The desire to address each one of you in recalling this important anniversary together, has given me the opportunity to study this great Rector Major and get to know him better, since perhaps he has been somewhat neglected because of the fame of his predecessor (Fr Michael Rua) and his successor (Fr Philip Rinaldi).

I allowed myself to be challenged above all by the light from the past in which Fr Albera spent his life, which radiates witness and strength and offers us many challenges for our present: a “today” of the Congregation that we live in the light of General Chapter 28, the first one that did not reach its planned conclusion because of the COVID-19 pandemic that still afflicts our world.

As I have written on a previous occasion, Fr Paul Albera’s term of office was the most difficult and dramatic period experienced by the Congregation. It was the time of the First World War, which caused millions of deaths and saw more than 2,000 Salesians sent to war, 80 of whom lost their lives.<sup>1</sup> This terrible conflict also prevented the General Chapter planned for those years from being held.

I can tell you, dear confreres, that the figure of Fr Paul Albera has enthused me. Above all, I believe I have found many elements that stimulate a dialogue between our time and his,

<sup>1</sup> Certainly, more painful still was the Second World War, which destroyed a large part of Europe and also hit Japan very hard. A war that, according to the most realistic estimates, left behind a trail of some 60,000,000 dead.

allowing that past to challenge us today with what were, at the time, courageous and clear decisions for the Congregation.

The bibliography on Fr Albera is very rich. I wanted to include it at the end of this letter, together with other studies and texts on specific topics which help to deepen our knowledge and the spirit of this great Rector Major.<sup>2</sup>

## **1. A SALESIAN WHO BELONGED TO THE “EARLIEST TIMES”**

### **1.1. From a boy who breathed in the “Valdocco atmosphere” to being Don Bosco’s Successor**

Fr Paul Albera was one of the “Salesians of the earliest times”, one of those who got to know Don Bosco personally and in depth, live with him, grow with him and mature alongside him, as well as seeing him in action. Fr Albera *breathed the Valdocco atmosphere alongside Don Bosco*, together with Michael Rua, John Cagliero and other Salesians. He then exported this “Valdocco atmosphere” to Mirabello, where he was sent with the first Rector of the house, Fr Rua, as an assistant and student of philosophy and theology.

Later, at a more mature age and after having been Rector in Genoa, he also became a witness to and actively involved in the development of Salesian work beyond the borders of Piedmont, first in Liguria and then in France.

<sup>2</sup> I refer to the recent book by Fr Aldo GIRAUDO, *Don Paolo Albera maestro di vita spirituale* (LAS, Rome 2021 but now also in English as *Fr Paul Albera, Master of Spiritual Life*, available on [sdb.org](http://sdb.org) and [SDL](http://SDL)), as well as the doctoral thesis by Bro. Paolo Vaschetto, a Salesian Brother. I also refer to the text by Jesús Graciliano González Miguel GONZÁLEZ, *Los once primeros capítulos generales de la Congregación Salesiana* (CCS, Madrid 2021) and by Stanisław ZIMNIAK, *Don Paolo Albera (1845-1921) secondo successore di don Giovanni Bosco. Cenno biografico*, in *Ricerche storiche salesiane*, Anno XL, 1 (76), 2021, 137-144. Finally, I share the same view of Fr Albera as does Fr Manuel Pérez, a Salesian from the Salesian Centre for Ongoing Formation in Quito, Ecuador.

Fr Albera was entrusted with the responsibility of being “Spiritual Director” of the Congregation and then became Rector Major: second successor of Don Bosco. In this service of responsibility – travelling by ship, horseback, carriage, train and car – he saw the spirit of Don Bosco expand: from Turin to America, the Holy Land, Northern Europe, the first presences in Africa.

Fr Albera was an eyewitness to the transition from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century: a very delicate time for the Salesian Congregation, for the Church and for the world. A difficult time, as I have already mentioned, especially because of the First World War, which affected a large part of the world; a tragedy that Fr Albera witnessed from beginning to end.

## **1.2. What did it mean for Fr Albera to be one of the first Salesians? Some glimpses of his life**

It all began with the proposal of admission to Valdocco. It was 1858, and Paul Albera was 13 years old. Fr Abrate, his parish priest, who already knew Don Bosco from the beginnings of the Oratory in the church of St Francis of Assisi, introduced him without further ado: “Take him with you”. The young Michael Rua, Don Bosco’s right-hand man at the age of 21, after talking to Paul, confirmed this: “You can take him in without problems...”.

The serene atmosphere of a lively youthful community still very much marked by the style of holiness left by Dominic Savio, who died on 9 March 1857, reigned at the Oratory in Valdocco. In this environment the young Paul Albera also met Michael Magone, with whom he became a companion and friend.

I was deeply moved to read that a year and a half after his arrival at Valdocco, Paul was admitted, at the explicit wish of Don Bosco himself, into the fledgling Salesian Congregation founded in December 1859. The teenaged Albera was not yet 15 years old and was a student in first rhetoric.

Together with the first manuscript of the Constitutions sent to Archbishop Luigi Fransoni, there was an accompanying letter which gave the names of those who were part of the beginnings of the foundation: Don Bosco, Fr Vittorio Alasonatti, the young priest Angelo Savio and deacon Michael Rua, together with 19 other young “clerics”, two coadjutors and the boy Paul Albera. I personally feel that this “group snapshot”, which we can easily imagine, strikes the heart of each one of us, Salesians of today, because we can “touch” our humble origins “with our own hands”.

In this letter, the first Salesians said: “We, the undersigned, moved solely by the desire to ensure our eternal salvation, have united to undertake community life in order to attend more easily to those things which concern the glory of God and the salvation of souls. In order to preserve unity of spirit and discipline and to put into practice means known to be useful for our intended purpose, we’ve articulated some rules in the manner of a Religious Society, which, excluding any political principle, only sanctifies its members, especially through the exercise of charity towards one’s neighbour.”<sup>3</sup> *From this moment onwards, Paul Albera’s life would be inseparably linked to Don Bosco’s life.*

### ***At Mirabello with Fr Rua***

Paul Albera continued his formation and studies at Valdocco and on 13 October 1863 he was sent with other young confreres to found the new community at Mirabello.

It is worth pausing to analyse the composition of that young community, which undoubtedly conveys Don Bosco’s full confidence and courage in entrusting a new and delicate mission to the hands of those particular confreres. At the head of the com-

<sup>3</sup> Giovanni BOSCO, *Epistolario*, I 406 quoted in GIRAUDO, *Fr Paul Albera, Master of Spiritual Life*, 19 (note that all page references are to the English edition found on [sdb.org](http://sdb.org) or [SDL](http://SDL)).

munity was Michael Rua: a young Salesian, a priest for only two years and the only priest in the group; he was 26 years old at the time. All the others were called, in the usual language of the time, Salesian “clerics”: “The prefect Francis Provera (twenty-six), the spiritual director John Bonetti (twenty-five), the assistants Francis Cerruti (nineteen), Paul Albera and Francis Dalmazzo (both eighteen)”<sup>4</sup>. Finally, there was one other very beautiful fact, desired by Don Bosco: that first and very young community was also accompanied by Michael Rua’s mother, Mrs Giovanna Maria Rua. Shortly afterwards, another four young people from the Valdocco Oratory joined the initial group to help with the mission.

They were five years of intense Salesian life for Paul Albera: while he studied philosophy and theology at the seminary in Casale Monferrato, 14 km from Mirabello, at the same time he took on the tasks and responsibilities of an educator among the boys. As the new education laws required teaching qualifications, Paul took the necessary exams in October 1864 and became a secondary school teacher. In the same year another young Salesian joined the community: Louis Lasagna, a great friend of Paul’s, who would later become a missionary in Uruguay. Appointed bishop for the *Indios* in Brazil, he would die there in 1895 in a railway accident.

The time came when young Albera and others were to be admitted to “minor orders”. At this juncture the age-old rivalry between the diocesan clergy and other forms of service in the Church (in this case, another young Congregation) became sadly evident. The new archbishop of Turin, who succeeded Archbishop Fransoni, was not so convinced that the Don Bosco boys who showed signs of vocation should remain with him. And since there was a shortage of priests, the archbishop demanded that these young men become part of the diocesan clergy. Don Bosco had to point out, among other arguments, that a large number of the diocesan seminarians of the time came from the

<sup>4</sup> GIRAUDD, *Fr Paul Albera, Master of Spiritual Life*, 24.

Salesian institutes at Valdocco and Lanzo Torinese. These arguments meant, though not without difficulty, that Paul Albera, Joseph Costamagna and Francis Dalmazzo received minor orders and then the subdiaconate while remaining with Don Bosco.

### ***Back to Valdocco***

These were difficult and troubled times. Anti-clerical laws had already been passed in 1855. In the following years, the Piedmontese army occupied almost the entire peninsula until the unification of Italy was proclaimed in 1861. The process of unification of the country would end on 20 September 1870 with the taking of Rome, which marked the end of the Papal States and led to the suspension of the First Vatican Council, which had begun the previous year. The story we are reviewing is set in this complex and moving context.

In 1865 the Valdocco Oratory was a “seminary”, a boarding school and a series of workshops, and the number of young people attending (about seven hundred) grew along with the debts. In that year Fr Alasonatti, the bursar, died. The Basilica of Mary Help of Christians was under construction. The *Letture Cattoliche* (*Catholic Readings*) had 12,000 subscribers and the work involved was enormous. Don Bosco often went to Rome seeking approval for the Congregation and in some respects the work and responsibility weighing upon him was just too much. Faced with this situation, Fr Rua was recalled from Mirabello to support Don Bosco.

The young Albera was ordained a priest at Casale on 2 August 1868. The Basilica of Mary Help of Christians was consecrated on 9 June of the same year. That year Don Bosco asked Fr Albera to return to Valdocco to be the “prefect for the day students”. So Paul returned to Turin to collaborate with Fr Rua, who was exhausted and ill. Don Bosco entrusted him with the seminarians and matters dealing with outsiders: acceptance of students, relationships with their families and other people, until, on 27 August 1871, Fr Rua received a letter from Rome in which

Don Bosco wrote: “The house in Genoa is finished, get Albera to pack his bags!”

Regarding that time, Fr Albera himself wrote: “The year of the consecration of the Sanctuary of Mary Help of Christians, I returned to Turin, and for another four years I was able to enjoy Don Bosco’s intimacy and draw from his great heart those precious teachings that had all the more effect on us the more we saw them already put into practice by him in his daily conduct.”<sup>5</sup>

### ***Rector at Sampierdarena (Genoa)***

After those four years, Fr Albera became the founder and rector of the house at Marassi (1871–1872), which the Salesians then left to move to Sampierdarena in order to have more space available to them (Marassi and Sampierdarena are districts of Genoa). Let me tell you about these events in a more relaxed way.

Since 1858 the young people at the Valdocco Oratory looked forward every year to the autumn walks organised by Don Bosco. In 1864 they were given a great promise: they would see the sea at Genoa! There, since the end of 1856, Don Bosco had met benefactors and the people disseminating the *Lettere Cattoliche*. And now for our Father, warmly welcomed by Archbishop Andrea Charvaz, a dream came true: the Salesians would have a place in Genoa.

The new community consisted of six Salesians: Fr Albera, 26, in the lead, 2 seminarians and 3 workshop teachers. Sending them off on 26 October 1871, Don Bosco asked if they needed anything. Albera had 500 lire to pay the rent. “My dear young Paul, you don’t need so much money. Divine Providence also lives in Genoa... Open a hospice for the poorest and most abandoned young people”, and he gave them what they needed for the journey. When they arrived, there was no one waiting for them... and there was nothing in the house. But Providence did

<sup>5</sup> Cf. letter XXXV of 18 October 1920 in *Lettere circolari di Don Albera*, Direzione Generale delle Opere Salesiane, Turin 1965, 362-363.

not delay in manifesting itself. At the end of November, tailoring, shoe-making and carpentry workshops were opened for about forty young people. And on 3 December the long-awaited visit arrived: Don Bosco in person.

The Salesians stayed at Marassi for almost a year; Fr Albera was in charge there of an orphanage and at the same time prepared boys to become tailors, shoemakers and carpenters. In November 1872, the presence in Sampierdarena began, and vocational training continued, extending to the specialities of bookbinders, mechanics, typographers and typesetters.

14 November 1875 was a particularly significant and moving day. As many of us surely remember, it was the date of the first missionary expedition prepared by Don Bosco and directed to Argentina, where it would arrive, having called into Uruguay a few days before according to the route established by the shipping company. The farewell liturgical celebration took place three days before the departure, in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians. The young Rector of the house in Genoa, Fr Albera, accompanied Don Bosco on board ship to give his last farewell to the Salesians who were to be the first missionaries of our Congregation. I would like to recall that from that time until today, as we are preparing for the 152<sup>nd</sup> missionary expedition, Salesian missionaries (and often our sisters, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians) have been pioneers uninterruptedly, even in times of war, taking the Gospel to the most remote places. Some years there were even two missionary expeditions.

One further note: it was in the printing press at Sampierdarena, while Fr Albera was the Rector there, on 10 August 1878 that the very first edition of the *Bollettino Salesiano* was printed. The printing of the magazine continued there until 1882.

### ***Provincial in France (1881-1892): the “le petit Don Bosco”***

This lot fell to Fr Albera from October 1881, when Don Bosco sent him to Marseilles as the first Provincial of the Salesian houses in France. There he found a difficult situation, since



the law expelling unauthorised congregations had been passed the year before. However, undeterred, the Salesians found a way not to be expelled and to remain, declaring themselves to be “charitable societies”. When Albera arrived, there were four houses in France. In ten years he founded ten more houses and performed a splendid service, making himself appreciated both by his confreres and by many lay people, all of whom spoke highly of him. His kindness and simplicity of manner, his smile, his open and cordial manner, his profound spirituality won the hearts of the young, as well as the trust and affection of the Salesians and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

Throughout all this Don Bosco was very much part of Fr Albera’s life and heart. The affection Don Bosco had for him was well known; in one letter, for example, he confided in him: “For some time now my health has been declining every day, but as I write to you I feel perfectly well. I believe that this is the effect of the great pleasure I take in writing to you.” The letters are not the only evidence of this benevolence. In fact, Don Bosco visited Fr Albera several times to support him in his mission, to encourage the Salesians and young people, to give conferences and seek financial help in various cities and towns.

During his visit in 1884 Don Bosco was sick and suffering. Doctor Combal gave him an in-depth consultation: “His whole body is like a garment worn out by daily use, the only remedy is rest.” In February 1885 an alarming rumour spread in France that Don Bosco was dead. It was only a false alarm; but in January 1888 it was a sure fact that Don Bosco was seriously ill. So on 12 January Fr Albera arrived in Turin. He did not know whether to stay or go... Don Bosco helped him to decide: “You do your duty by going. God be with you! I will pray for you; I bless you with all my heart.” Fr Cerruti promised to keep him informed. Some days after his return to France, Fr Albera received a telegram that said that Don Bosco was dying. In reality, when he read it, Don Bosco was already dead. However, he had time to make his travel arrangements, be present at the funeral and say goodbye to his dear father.

What is certain about the years spent in France is that Don Bosco's presence was extended through Fr Albera: they called him "*le petit don Bosco*". One past pupil of St Leo's Oratory in Marseilles testified: "His modest and humble demeanour, his constant smile, his gentle way of treating us gave us courage." There was no time when he was not among the boys. He visited them in the dining room and in the chapel. He spoke little, but his presence was enough to command respect... He often attended the weekly meetings of the St Aloysius and the Blessed Sacrament Sodality, and his words were a stimulus to piety and virtue.

### ***Spiritual Director of the Salesian Congregation (1892-1910)***

On 29 August 1892, during the 6th General Chapter, Fr Paul Albera was unanimously elected "Catechist General", that is to say, spiritual director of the Congregation, to replace Fr John Bonetti, who had died suddenly the year before. He held this position for eighteen years. During this period he took particular care of the formation of young Salesians through personal meetings, retreats and conversations. On 12 October 1893, together with Bishop Cagliero, the Rector Major Fr Rua, and Fr Barberis, he went to London to attend the consecration of the Sacred Heart Church. An interesting anecdote gives a good picture of his personality: after an unforeseen incident on the train, he wrote in his diary: "We need to learn English".

It is also worth mentioning that in 1895 Fr Albera accompanied Fr Rua on his journey to the Holy Land, and in the same year he took part in the First International Congress of Cooperators in Bologna. It is interesting to mention these two facts, because in his diary, in his magnificent and classical handwriting, Fr Albera outlined a self-portrait that moves me personally for its transparency and spiritual finesse in talking about himself, his feelings and his faults. In the manuscript, dated 31 December 1895, we read: "1895 heaves itself into eternity. For me, it was full of joys and sorrows. I was able to see the house in Marseilles

again, where I left most of my heart. From there I went to the Holy Land and was edified by the company of Father Rua. What a spirit of sacrifice and mortification! What zeal for the salvation of souls; and above all, what a balanced personality! I saw Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Nazareth: what sweet memories! I was able to take part in the Congress at Bologna. I have an unforgettable memory of it. ... I was able to preach retreats to the sisters in France. This was good for my soul. I was able to take care of the candidates to the priesthood, and I was much more satisfied with the previous years. I wrote a few pages about Bishop Lasagna. 1895 also ends without my most serious weaknesses being corrected. My pride is still of the highest degree. My character is always difficult, even with Father Rua. My piety is always superficial and doesn't significantly influence my conduct or my actions, which are all still human and unworthy of a religious. My charity is unpredictable and full of partiality. I'm not mortified in eyes, taste, words... Illnesses have increased: I could have died at any moment in the state I'm in. This is not an idea, it is reality, and I'm aware of it. In the new year I want to start to live healthier, to die better. I remember having directed two of my confreres who made the vow to be slaves of Mary. They edified me with their zeal, with their devotion. Their blood has sealed their commitment, and I, who have had the air of being their teacher and director in all of this, am nothing. ... Mary, my mother, don't allow me to have the shame of recognising myself as inferior in virtue to my subordinates: give me a great love for you."<sup>6</sup>

I like to think that whoever reads this page will understand much about Fr Paul Albera's spiritual finesse and how demanding he was of himself. In truth, the accounts of others about him are far more eulogistic than what he writes about himself, for his qualities were evident. His finesse and delicacy were recognised by all.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. ASC B0320101, *Notes confidentielles prises pour le bien de mon âme*, handwritten ms by Fr Albera 1893-1899, 31.12.1895 cited in GIRAUDO, *Fr Paul Albera, Master of Spiritual Life*, 61

### ***America from top to bottom***

Don Bosco recounted that in one of his missionary dreams he had crossed America from Valparaiso and arrived in Peking... In the year 1900 the silver jubilee of the first missionary sending was being celebrated and the expectation grew that Fr Rua would visit the American provinces; but it would be Fr Albera, who was then 55 years old, who would be sent in his name.

“In January 1900, Fr Rua announced the jubilee of the arrival of the first Salesian missionaries in America and the great good that had been done in those 25 years by the Salesians and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in the New World. On this occasion, since he himself could not go to America to celebrate the feast with his missionary confreres, he decided to send someone to represent him. Since the first two appointed, Fr Marengo and Fr Barberis, could not accept the commitment for various reasons, Fr Rua asked Fr Albera to replace them. So from 7 August 1900 to 11 April 1903 Fr Albera visited the 215 Salesian presences and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in Uruguay, Paraguay, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, Central America, Mexico and the United States.”<sup>7</sup>

For almost three years, Fr Albera went from house to house: personal and group meetings, liturgical celebrations, joyful receptions and formal acts, exercising his priestly ministry, preaching retreats, giving talks to communities and associations, especially in the formation houses of the Salesians and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. He made people enthusiastic about Don Bosco and brought comfort, such as in Ecuador after religious persecution, or following exile, yellow fever and guerrilla warfare in Colombia and Venezuela. Travelling by train, boat, carriage, on horseback, on foot..., he crossed cities and forests, through snow storms, stormy seas and torrential

<sup>7</sup> Jesús Graciliano GONZÁLEZ, *Los once primeros capítulos generales de la Congregación Salesiana*, CCS, Madrid 2021, 337.

rain, adapting to different climates, cold or hot, at different altitudes, risking his precarious health, even experiencing quarantine on the island of Flores. He went from one republic to another, with or without a cassock (in Mexico), noting that the Oratory at Valdocco was the model reproduced in the fervour of spiritual life, in pedagogical proposal, in evangelising activity... This was his usual agenda, comforted by the cordiality with which he was received.

During those years, Fr Albera encouraged new foundations and accepted several requests from bishops to send Salesians. He presided over events such as the 1<sup>st</sup> South American Chapter of Salesian Rectors, which was attended by 44 rectors, two bishops and four provincials. He concluded his visit by attending the ordination of 15 priests, who celebrated Midnight Mass between 1900 and 1901 when Fr Rua consecrated the Salesian Family to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

His personal experience can be summarised by these words from one of his letters: "I feel almost better here, even though the way of life is so different from Europe. I am always travelling and have no time to write... The confreres show me the most delicate attention..."

A lasting characteristic of Fr Albera, evident everywhere – whether in Sampierdarena, in France or during his visit of more than two and a half years in America – was his simple way of "being another Don Bosco". During the long visit we are talking about, Fr Albera went out of his way to enthuse the Salesian Family and, in particular, the Salesian Cooperators.

His concern was that of Don Bosco for his young people: the salvation of each one. There are many testimonies that state how his presence, his words, his serene and unassuming smile left the image of a father who bore the imprint of Don Bosco.

On 18 March 1903 Fr Albera began his return journey to Valdocco, where he arrived on 11 April. The whole Oratory gave thanks with the singing of the *Te Deum*. It can be said that Don Bosco's dream had become reality.

### ***Rector Major (1910-1921)***

And the moment arrived that he had never wished for and would gladly have avoided, if only he could have. On 16 August 1910, at the 11th General Chapter, Fr Paul Albera was elected Rector Major on the first ballot and with a large majority: "Amid applause all arose to render homage to the Second Successor of Don Bosco, while the newly elected Superior burst into tears... 'I thank you for the profession of confidence and esteem which you have made towards me, but I fear you'll soon have to hold another election!'"<sup>8</sup> In fact Fr Albera did not consider himself suitable. That evening he wrote in his notebook: "This is a very unhappy day for me. They elected me Rector Major of the Pious Society of Saint Francis de Sales. What a responsibility on my shoulders! ... I cried a lot especially in front of Don Bosco's tomb."<sup>9</sup> In his first circular letter to the Salesians he reminded them again: "As soon as I was allowed, I ran to throw myself at the feet of our venerable Father. I complained to him strongly that he had let the helm of the Salesian ship fall into such miserable hands."<sup>10</sup>

Fr Eugene Ceria, revealed certain passages from Fr Albera's intimate diary in his *Annali della Società Salesiana*<sup>11</sup>. A few days after Fr Rua's death, Albera wrote: "I talk a lot with Fr Rinaldi. I wish with all my heart that he be elected Rector Major of our Congregation. I will pray to the Holy Spirit to grant us this grace." Referring to the voting time, Fr Ceria noted how the names of Fr Albera and Fr Rinaldi resounded in the assembly. He added that the former seemed more concerned, while the latter seemed very calm. In the end, the number of votes was 46 in favour of Fr Albera against 19 in favour of Fr Rinaldi. Rinaldi

<sup>8</sup> GIRAUDO, *Fr Paul Albera, Master of Spiritual Life*, 96.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>10</sup> *Fr Paul Albera's circular letter to the Salesians*, 98.

<sup>11</sup> Eugene CERIA, *Annali della Società Salesiana*, vol. IV. *Il rettorato di don Paolo Albera 1910-1921*, 2-3, quoted in GONZÁLEZ, *Los once primeros capítulos generales*, 350.

was calm because he was certain that the “prophecy” of Don Bosco, made on 22 November 1877, would come true. Fr Rinaldi, in fact, was convinced that on that day Don Bosco had prophesied the appointment of Fr Albera as his second successor. For this reason Fr Rinaldi kept that prophecy in a sealed envelope, certain that it would be fulfilled. And, in fact, it had just been fulfilled.<sup>12</sup>

At the end of the General Chapter, Fr Albera began his service of real animation of the Congregation, continuing the model of governance inaugurated by Fr Rua and gradually perfecting it in various aspects.<sup>13</sup> The first part of his term of office was the most dynamic, characterised by numerous trips, meetings and participation in events. We will discuss many of these in the second part of this letter, referring to various aspects of his animation and their relevance for us today.

Fr Albera ensured missionary expeditions every year, in fidelity to Don Bosco and as Fr Rua also did. He took part in many congresses, such as the First International Congress of Salesian Past Pupils at Valsalice (1911), with more than a thousand participants, or the Fifth Congress of Festive Oratories and Religious Schools (1911). He took great care of the young Salesian Family and was an innovator through choices and decisions made for Salesian houses, especially through the preferential option for orphans during the war period and at least for the following decade. It was precisely at the time of the First World War that the position taken by Fr Albera and the Congregation aroused great interest. He took great fatherly care of the Salesians called to the front, right up to the serene conclusion of his own life.<sup>14</sup> Fr Rinaldi wrote an extensive obituary on Fr Albera

<sup>12</sup> BS 1910, 267-268, quoted in GIRAUDO, *Fr Paul Albera, Master of Spiritual Life* 96-97 and also in Morand WIRTH, *Da Don Bosco ai nostri giorni*, LAS, Rome 2000, 311.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. GIRAUDO, *Fr Paul Albera, Master of Spiritual Life*, 97.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. GIRAUDO, *Fr Paul Albera, Master of Spiritual Life*, 111-122.

in which, as a review of his term of office, he recalled: “The Lord gave him the consolation of seeing his labours blessed: the number of members increased during his term of office by 705, despite the losses caused by the war; the number of houses increased by 103; new missions opened in Africa (in the Belgian Congo), in Asia (in China and Assam), in Chaco Paraguayo.”<sup>15</sup>

## **2. A PAST THAT THROWS LIGHT ON OUR PRESENT**

At the beginning of this second part, which is in dialogue with the life and service of Fr Paul Albera as Rector Major, I would like to share with you, dear confreres, what has prompted me in a special way to write this letter to you.

My intention is obviously not that of an historian: I am not one and, from this point of view, I could not add much to the excellent publications that already exist. My intention is other: in the light of Fr Albera’s life and his circular letters, I have tried to discover those elements – choosing only a few from among the many contributions he made during his eleven years of service as Rector Major – that have great power to enlighten, guide and provoke reflection for our present.

As unimaginable as it may seem, what Fr Albera experienced and decided stimulates a rich dialogue with our present; the reality in which he lived as well as the animation and governance he exercised more than a century ago have rich analogies with our present and with some of the action programme guidelines that we have indicated for the present six-year period following the 28<sup>th</sup> General Chapter.

<sup>15</sup> ACS 9, 310-311 quoted in GIRAUDO, *Fr Paul Albera, Master of Spiritual Life*, 134.



## 2.1. At the school of Don Bosco

“Salesian of Don Bosco forever.  
Six years for growth in Salesian identity”  
(GC28, *Action guideline 1*)

Reading Fr Albera’s writings, one is struck by his great love for Don Bosco: “the only thing necessary to become his worthy son was to imitate him in everything. Therefore, following the example of numerous elder brothers who had already copied in themselves the way of thinking, speaking, and acting of their Father, I tried to do the same. And today, after more than half a century, I repeat also to you that you are sons like me, and that he has entrusted you to me, as the eldest son. Let us imitate Don Bosco in acquiring our religious perfection, educating and sanctifying youth, dealing with others, and doing good to all.”<sup>16</sup>

He recalled, in his circular letter *On religious discipline*<sup>17</sup>, how he and a small group of boys had been “at the school of Don Bosco”: “So little by little we were being formed in his school, all the more so because his teachings had an irresistible attraction on our souls, which admired the splendour of his virtues.”<sup>18</sup> In this part of the letter Fr Albera tells how that small group felt fortunate to have access to Don Bosco’s confidences, how proud they were to have been chosen by him to follow his ideals, how encouraged they were to see that they were becoming more and more numerous, and how all these sentiments “made our resolve more and more generous, and our will to remain always with him and to follow him wherever he went even firmer.”<sup>19</sup>

It is very significant to read in his writing that “More than fifty years have already passed since those fortunate times, but the time that has passed has not been able to erase from our

<sup>16</sup> GIRAUDO, *Fr Paul Albera, Master of Spiritual Life*, 140.

<sup>17</sup> *Lettere circolari di Don Paolo Albera ai salesiani*, 57ff.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*.

hearts the impression left on us by the words of Don Bosco”.<sup>20</sup> Many years after those experiences, as Rector Major and now a mature man, Fr Albera continued to express with the love of a child or teenager, his profound gratitude to Don Bosco whom he felt was a father and to whom he believed he owed everything: “When I look back to the day, when as a child of thirteen, I was received by Don Bosco with so much charity at the Oratory, I am filled with emotion, and I seem to realise quite distinctly the almost innumerable graces which were reserved to me by God, under the guidance of our most loving father! And, indeed, how many there are who can assert the same thing – that they owe all they are to the Venerable Don Bosco! Our education, our training, our very vocation – we owe all to the fatherly solicitude of that Man of God, who bore towards his spiritual sons a holy and indefatigable affection.”<sup>21</sup>

We could add many other testimonies about Fr Albera’s fidelity to Don Bosco, but, in order not to dwell too long, I will limit myself to quoting the magnificent portrait that Fr Rinaldi drew of him at his death: “He was trained first and always at Don Bosco’s school, all of whose teachings he eagerly studied... His moral figure was imposing. As rector major of the Salesians, Father Albera was firmly intent on walking faithfully in the footsteps of Don Bosco and Father Rua, without restriction or mental reservation. This is the true glory of the eleven years of his term of office.”<sup>22</sup>

These testimonies show how insistently and convincingly Fr Albera spoke of the need to get to know Don Bosco, to study his life and writings with love, to make him known and to talk to young people about him.

In today’s words I would say that in this matter, our charismatic fidelity and our very identity as Salesians of Don Bosco

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>21</sup> BS 1921, 1, quoted in GIRAUDO, *Fr Paul Albera Master of Spiritual Life*, 130.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in GIRAUDO, *Fr Paul Albera Master of Spiritual Life*, 134.

“is at stake”. In the recent 28th General Chapter, referring to the fact that we have before us a very propitious period of six years to grow in the Salesian identity, I wrote some strong words of appeal, saying that “our Galilee for the encounter with the Lord today, as Salesians of Don Bosco, passes through Valdocco, the beginnings at Valdocco, fragile as they were, but with the strength and passion of the words: ‘monk or no monk, I am staying with Don Bosco’, which young John Cagliero expressed with so much ardour and youthful enthusiasm. Valdocco is, in fact, the spiritual and apostolic atmosphere in which each of us breathes the air of the Spirit, where we nurture and strengthen our charismatic identity. And it is the place of ‘transfiguration’ for every Salesian who, by taking care of all the elements of our spirituality, can contribute to making each of our houses an authentic Valdocco, where it is possible to meet our Lord Jesus Christ face to face in daily life.”<sup>23</sup>

That is why I say that we are risking a lot in this. Our charismatic identity is at stake. To be either imbued with the spirit of Don Bosco or to be more or less indifferent to him is not something trivial. Turning our gaze to Don Bosco as a guarantee of fidelity to the Lord inspired by the Holy Spirit is decisive, because it is in contemplating Don Bosco that we discover, in Salesian terms, our “genetic code”... And just as the charism developed in him, so it must develop in us if we choose the way of fidelity. Article 21 of our Constitutions presents Don Bosco as our model: “The Lord has given us Don Bosco as father and teacher. We study and imitate him, admiring in him a splendid blending of nature and grace”. I am sure that Fr Paul Albera, who spoke so much to his Salesians about Don Bosco’s fascination and attraction for them, would be in total agreement with these beautiful statements in our Constitutions.

The encounter with Don Bosco, as it was for the young Rua, Francesia, Cagliero, Albera and so many others, has been decisive in our lives to this day; at least for many of us. His figure

<sup>23</sup> CG28, 19.

and personality, his faith in God and in the Lord Jesus Christ, as well as his love for his boys, have been and continue to be a source of inspiration. Our encounter with him, certainly through the most unexpected mediations, has been a grace, and knowing him – sometimes a little, sometimes a little more – to the point of loving him, has marked us deeply. For us, as the article of the Constitutions I have just quoted states, Don Bosco is a “father”: an expression that not only speaks to us of love, affection and admiration, but also directs our gaze to Don Bosco as founder; to Don Bosco who initiated this fascinating spiritual experience that is the Salesian charism, which we carry in our hearts and of which we are a part. He himself said: “Call me father and I will be happy”<sup>24</sup>. “Wherever you are, remember that here in Turin you have a Father who loves you in the Lord.”<sup>25</sup>

Let us seek to know and admire this Father, as we live our being Salesians of Don Bosco (SDB) in a vital relationship with him, feeling happy, experiencing a growing sense of fullness in our lives, making our lives, the lives of each one, despite personal limitations and poverty, make us “Don Bosco today” for every young person whom Divine Providence places on the path of our lives.

And let us commit ourselves to studying our Father – something Fr Albera insisted on only twenty-two years after Don Bosco’s death – because we cannot ignore or underestimate the chronological and cultural distance that separates us from him.

Awareness of this need and my knowledge of our Congregation led me to say, in the *action programme* for the six years following GC28, that this six-year period will need to be distinguished “by a profound effort in the Congregation to grow in charismatic depth, in Salesian identity in all phases of life, through a serious commitment in every province and every Salesian community to arrive at saying, as Don Bosco did: ‘I have

<sup>24</sup> BM XVII, 150. (Note, English version not the Italian MB).

<sup>25</sup> BM XI, 362.

promised God that I would give of myself to my last breath for my poor boys.’”<sup>26</sup>

## 2.2. “How Don Bosco loved us”<sup>27</sup>

The pedagogy of kindness.  
“Living the ‘Salesian sacrament’ of presence”  
(GC28, *Action guideline 3*)

Fr Albera, in his circular letter on oratories, missions and vocations, reports that Fr Rua said one day to a Salesian whom he was sending to open a festive oratory: “There is nothing there, not even the land and the place to gather the young people, but the festive Oratory is in you: if you are a true son of Don Bosco, you will find a good place to plant it and make it grow into a magnificent tree full of beautiful fruit.” Fr Albera continued: “And so it was, because in just a few months the Oratory was built, beautiful and spacious, and filled with hundreds of young people, the oldest of whom quickly became the apostles of the youngest.”<sup>28</sup>

I begin with this quotation from Fr Rua not so much to refer to the Salesian Oratory – even though it is a wonderfully charismatic theme in which Don Bosco, Fr Rua, Fr Albera and others, of course, believed so much – but to show the great value of carrying in our hearts all the strength of an educator, all the educational passion of a pastor, all the pedagogy of goodness and gentleness which enables us to live our presence among children and young people as a true “Salesian sacrament”.

There are many pages in which Fr Albera tells how our Father Don Bosco loved his boys. I offer a few “brushstrokes”

<sup>26</sup> GC28, 20-21.

<sup>27</sup> *Lettere circolari di Don Paolo Albera ai salesiani* (letter on ‘Don Bosco our model...’), 373.

<sup>28</sup> *Lettere circolari di Don Paolo Albera ai salesiani* (letter ‘The Festive Oratories - The Missions - Vocations’), 129.

among the many that could be chosen: “Don Bosco’s love for us was something singularly superior to any other affection: it enveloped us all almost entirely in an atmosphere of contentment and happiness from which sorrow, sadness and melancholy were banished... Oh! It was his love that attracted, conquered and transformed our hearts... Everything about him had a powerful attraction for us: his penetrating gaze, sometimes more effective than a sermon; the simple movement of his head; the smile that flourished perpetually on his lips, always new and varied, and yet always calm; the flexing of his mouth, like when someone wants to speak without pronouncing the words...”<sup>29</sup>

In the letter I am quoting, Fr Albera points out to the Salesians that *it is necessary to love the youngsters* and, as he does many times and abundantly in his other writings, he recalls his own experience of life alongside Don Bosco. For example, he writes: “Even now I seem to feel all the tenderness of his predilection for me as a young man: I felt as if I were taken prisoner by an emotional power that nourished my thoughts, words and actions, but I could not better describe this state of mind of mine, which was also that of my companions of that time... I felt I was loved in a way I had never felt before, which had nothing to do even with the very keen love that my unforgettable parents bore me...”<sup>30</sup>

In Letter 27 *On gentleness*, addressed especially to provincials and rectors to encourage them to distinguish themselves in their relationships with others not only by charity but also by gentleness, Fr Albera does not hesitate to say that this has “a capital importance, and is the characteristic note of Don Bosco’s spirit.” He spends quite some time in the opening pages of the Letter, referring both to the effort needed to cultivate and master one’s character, and to the examples of the lives of some saints, up to the one who is our model, Don Bosco. In his dream

<sup>29</sup> *Lettere circolari di Don Paolo Albera ai salesiani* (letter on ‘Don Bosco our model...’), 373.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*.

when he was nine, John Bosco is asked to practise gentleness. The Lady of the dream would be close to him and “would teach him the most effective way of correcting and improving the young urchins”. Fr Albera commented: «We all know that this means was none other than gentleness; and Don Bosco was so convinced of this that he immediately began to practise it with ardour and became a true model of it.”<sup>31</sup> He then concluded: “Let us be convinced of this: according to our Venerable [Don Bosco’s] way of thinking, the real secret of winning hearts, the characteristic quality of the Salesian, consists in the practice of gentleness.”<sup>32</sup>

In his written message to those taking part in the 28th General Chapter, the Holy Father – who announced at the last minute that he could not be present as he would have wished because of the local blockade imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic – gave us words and expressions that are typical of those who are well aware of the ones he was writing to, and “provoked” us to always return to our origins in Valdocco. The Pope spoke to us about the “Valdocco option” and the “charism of presence”, that in all humility I allow myself to call the *Salesian sacrament of presence*, because – and I am convinced of this – it is a “theological place” for us for encounter with God through our presence among the young. Well then, the Holy Father told us: “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”<sup>33</sup>.

We are certainly in tune with this sort of language, comprised of words that touch our hearts as apostles and educator;

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 316.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 317.

<sup>33</sup> *GC28*, 25.

but that speak of a reality that is much more than a natural predisposition to be among young people. When I say “Salesian sacrament of presence” I am not just referring to being physically present – something I consider necessary in any case – and not even to having and exercising a natural or cultivated and cultured sympathy (which is also necessary), but above all to living this gentle and sensitive presence as an essential element of our spirituality. Affection, gentleness, kindness, “loving-kindness” – the Italian “*amorevolezza*” that picks all of this up in a single word – is, above all, a sign of God’s love for young people through us as individuals. It is the fruit of pastoral charity, the authentic and true love of the educator who is friend, brother, father, the love that is manifested in presence with a true family atmosphere, in the generosity of service and sacrifice on behalf of our children and young people. It is a presence that takes the form of attentive and patient listening, of self-mastery and also of our efforts never to ruin what we are building with so much effort in just a single moment. It is the expression of a true Salesian *mysticism* and *spirituality*: the content of these two words should not frighten us. It is certainly a magnificent way and means of educating and evangelising young people.

The Salesian presence among young people is not complicated, it is not rigid. We accept that we are interested in what interests them; we are happy that they can express themselves spontaneously, being themselves. Ours is an affective and effective presence (and not only in words), a presence as an educator and as a friend who knows how to be close, knows how to *speak to the heart* in a unique and personal way. The words addressed to us by the young people who participated in the 28th General Chapter continue to resonate in me with a potency that does not leave me unmoved every time I read them. I invite you, dear confreres, to read them over and over again: “Our search for spiritual and personal fulfilment worries us. We want to journey towards spiritual and personal growth and we want to do it with you Salesians... We would like you to guide us, in our situation, with love... Salesians, do not forget us young people because we have not forgot-



ten you and the charism you have taught us... You have our heart in your hands. You must take care of your precious treasure.”<sup>34</sup> Certainly, dear confreres, it is a privilege to perceive and listen to the heartbeat of the lives of our young people, and to feel emerging and growing within us, in our hearts, that feeling that makes us say, as Don Bosco did: “Here with you I feel good”.

The oratory, the school, the youth group are in you, in every Salesian heart, when you are inwardly moved by this strong conviction: they are our inheritance; it is they, the young, who save us. And, with the gentleness of Francis de Sales, we have no other way of helping them than to be in their midst, present among them with the true heart of the educator and pastor. In this way the expression: “Education is a matter of the heart and God alone is its master.”<sup>35</sup>

### **2.3. The spirit of piety**<sup>36</sup>

“A Congregation where  
the ‘Da mihi animas cetera tolle’ is urgent”  
(GC28, *Action guideline 2*)

I find it very significant that Fr Paul Albera’s second circular letter as Rector Major was dedicated to the spirit of piety. He wrote it on 15 May 1911. In those years the Congregation was at a particularly delicate moment in its history. The years of Fr Rua’s term of office had been years of great geographical expansion and numerical growth. These were times when the Salesians were experiencing great enthusiasm, carrying out great initiatives and engaged in overwhelming activity, but also exposed to risks and dangers.

<sup>34</sup> GC28, 26.

<sup>35</sup> BM XVI, 376. Cf. Pietro BRAIDO, *Don Bosco educatore. Scritti e testimonianze*, LAS, Rome 1992, 340.

<sup>36</sup> *Lettere circolari di Don Paolo Albera ai salesiani*, (second letter, ‘On the spirit of piety’), 26ff.

In this letter Fr Albera gives us an overview of what he means by the “spirit of piety”: its nature and its necessity for Christian and religious life, for apostolic fruitfulness, for endurance and forbearance in trials, for perseverance in vocation, for the practice of the preventive system, etc. But in particular, with the great sensitivity of a spiritual guide, Fr Albera warns against uncontrolled activism and its dangers: “Speaking to you with my heart in my hand, I confess that I cannot defend myself from the painful thought and the fear that this vaunted activity of the Salesians, this zeal that has so far seemed inaccessible to any discouragement, this warm enthusiasm that has so far been sustained by continual happy successes, will one day fail if it is not fertilised, purified and sanctified by a true and solid piety.”<sup>37</sup>

Fr Albera recognises that, together with the grace of God and the protection of Mary Help of Christians, it was the tireless work and admirable energy of Don Bosco, Fr Rua, Bishop Cagliari and “so many others of their sons” that led to the rapid spread of the Salesian works in Europe and America. In addition to this, it shows appreciation and gratitude for the testimony of many confreres – priests, clerics and brothers – who are true models of the spirit of piety and are admired by all; “but unfortunately I need to add, *et flens dico*, that there are also Salesians who leave much to be desired in this respect. There are some who, when they were novices, had edified all their companions with their fervour. Some of them, who consider religious practices as an unbearable burden, would no longer be called sons of Don Bosco; they do everything they can to exempt themselves from them, and they give the sad spectacle of their laxity and indifference everywhere [...]. What a strange contradiction! They live in a religious house, they follow the community in many things, they perhaps even work according to our rules, but in the meantime they are no longer religious.”<sup>38</sup>

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 32-33.

Cardinal Augustine Richelmy, during the visit he made to GC11 just after Fr Albera's election as Rector Major, warned them: "*The world admires your prodigious industriousness, but the Church and God admire your sanctity*"<sup>39</sup>. We must not forget that the "*holy fire of piety*" and "*uninterrupted union with God*" were "*the characteristic note of Don Bosco*."<sup>40</sup>

I confess to you, dear confreres, that I was deeply impressed when I read this eighteen-page letter from a Rector Major who, at the beginning of his service, was so deeply concerned about the lack of authenticity in the lives of some Salesians at that time. And I have no doubt that Fr Albera knew very well what he was talking about, having been spiritual director of the Congregation for eighteen years.

I think that throughout the history of our Congregation (and certainly also in most religious congregations) there is a constant insistence on being very attentive to the authenticity of consecrated life – to use today's language. In fact, the loss of this authenticity puts everything at serious risk. In several of our General Chapters<sup>41</sup> and in very many of the writings of the Rectors Major<sup>42</sup> this has been a great insistence, and sometimes a concern similar to that presented by Fr Albera. It seems important to me to recall that this constant reminder should help

<sup>39</sup> Jesús Graciliano GONZÁLEZ, *XI Capitolo Generale della Pia Società Salesiana presieduto da don Paolo Albera (1910)*, CCS, Madrid 2020, 25, n. 182.

<sup>40</sup> *Lettere circolari di Don Paolo Albera ai salesiani*, 36.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. *SGC20* (1972). On the "spirit of piety" of the SDBs and in Don Bosco, nos. 103, 134, 521, 532, 546 etc. Cf. GC23, *Educating the young to the faith*, Rome 1990. On piety and God in the life of the Salesian, cf. nos. 7, 139, 176, 219, 220. Cf. GC26, "*Da mihi animas cetera tolle*", Rome 2008. On charismatic identity and apostolic passion, nos. 3, 6, 19-22.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Egidio VIGANÒ, *Interioridad apostólica*, CCS, Madrid 1990, 169 (first edition from Ediciones Don Bosco Argentina, Buenos Aires 1989). Cf. Egidio VIGANÒ, *Non secondo la carne ma nello spirito*, Ed. FMA, Rome 1978. On interiority p. 41; 66; 152. Cf. *L'Esortazione «Vita Consecrata»: stimoli al nostro cammino postcapitolare*, in Juan Edmundo VECCHI, *Educatori appassionati esperti e consacrati per i giovani*. Lettere circolari ai salesiani di don Juan E. Vecchi, LAS, Rome 2013, 114-122. Seeing spirituality as a prior need; cf. Pascual CHÁVEZ VILLANUEVA, *Lettere circolari ai salesiani*, LAS, Rome 2021, 54.

us to be vigilant so that we can continue to be very authentic in living our lives as pastors consecrated to the good of young people, with the dedication that we also ask for as a fruit of GC28. Speaking of charismatic identity, I pointed out that there is much at stake. No less important is the aspect I am referring to now. We discuss and strive so much to meet young people and be accepted by them with a thousand “tricks of the trade” of recent times; we make all kinds of strategic plans, we talk about 4.0 projects similar to the direction taken by technology companies. I do not take away the slightest value from our efforts to live with great relevance and at the pace of youth. However, I want to say with Fr Albera, who is accompanying me in this reflection: not even the greatest sympathy and the best natural gifts can replace the depth of life, the interiority, the being a man of God that, almost without demanding it, reaches deep into the hearts of young people. Fr Albera says this referring to Don Bosco and the attraction he awakened in him and the first Salesians: “From this singular attraction sprang the work of conquering our hearts. Attraction can sometimes be exercised by simple natural qualities of mind and heart, of features and bearing which make the person who possesses them likeable; but such an attraction fades after a while until it disappears altogether, and might even give way to inexplicable aversions and conflict. This was not how Don Bosco attracted us: his many natural gifts were made supernatural in him by the holiness of his life, and in this holiness lay the whole secret of his attraction which conquered hearts forever and transformed them.”<sup>43</sup>

The fascination exerted by Don Bosco derives not only from the fact that he was certainly a “man of God”, a great charismatic, raised up by the Spirit for the good of youth in the Church and in the world, but also from the fact that he always lived as a simple priest, founder of a very young and poor Congregation; that he began his work with a small group of young people, always maintaining and nourishing his passion for the

<sup>43</sup> *Lettere circolari di Don Paolo Albera ai salesiani*, 374.

good of his boys; and that, as he developed his work, he recognised and reaffirmed with increasing certainty that it was Providence that was guiding him.

The same and unique Spirit of God that inspired Don Bosco is present today. From the point of view of faith we have no doubt that it is this presence of the Spirit that is the foundation of our hope and that it is possible to continue to be faithful to the Lord Jesus through fidelity to Don Bosco and his mission. It is the Spirit who unites us with Don Bosco and who, therefore is the basis of *our communion in Salesianity*. It is He who wants to help us, under the same impulse, to be “with Don Bosco and with the times” (Fr Albera) or in other words, be “with Don Bosco today”.

But the Spirit’s presence is not something static, alien to our development. On the contrary, it is a permanent invitation, addressed to our freedom, to pay attention and to collaborate continuously. It is docility to His call that makes His presence effective, because otherwise we could easily “resist the Spirit” or “quench the Spirit”. (cf. *Acts 7:51; 1 Thes 5:19*). Hence we need, as Fr Albera reminds us, to *return to the Spirit*. Our *Da mihi animas cetera tolle* guides us along the path that leads us to be, even today, deeply spiritual men, men of deep faith who resonate in God with what he offers us every day so that each can be *totally and completely for the young*.

“We live in a time that loves the ephemeral,” Fr Egidio Viganò wrote in 1989 in his reflections on the *grace of unity*<sup>44</sup>. Analysing with a careful eye what was happening in those years, in which the stress was on the ephemeral, ideological fashions, the mirage when faced with technological wonders and the dynamism of efficiency, Fr Viganò warns us of the need for depth and interiority in the Spirit. Fr Albera’s language is different, but he warns us of the same risks. And if this was the situation thirty-two years ago, we can see that our present time has accentuated some of these tendencies even more.

<sup>44</sup> Egidio VIGANÒ, *Interioridad apostólica*, CCS, Madrid 1990, 169.

Our vocation is fascinating if it leads us to truly fall in love with the Lord for the development of the Kingdom. As disciples and consecrated people, we must be “signs and bearers” for others, not only of God’s love for young people (C. 2), but above all of the power of the Lord’s Spirit in our lives, in their lives and in everyone’s lives. And this, Fr Viganò tells us, is only possible if “we daily practise looking deep into the depths”.<sup>45</sup>

I believe that we can recognise, also from personal and community experience, that our spirituality of active life is not easy, in the sense that it is not something that can be acquired once and for all, but requires laborious and demanding growth in *apostolic interiority*, which was, is and will be the guarantee of our spiritual authenticity. The real, daily, almost imperceptible dangers of letting ourselves be carried away by seeing things on the horizontal plane, seeing ourselves submerged in activity that in itself results in stifling activism, wearing ourselves out through work and organisational and managerial efforts, and so many other situations we know of: all this is like an “attack against life in the Spirit”. Remembering Fr Viganò, I would like to reiterate these certainties: *apostolic interiority* is like the quintessence of our being Salesians of Don Bosco for today’s world. Its secret is the *grace of unity*. And only by nourishing this inner unity do we lessen the risk of being prey to *spiritual superficiality*<sup>46</sup>.

I have no doubt that, in substance, Fr Albera’s call to piety and Fr Viganò’s invitation to interiority refer to the same thing. Today it is a question of giving quality to the authenticity of our life as Salesians of Don Bosco, in order to give a concrete response to the urgent question: “What kind of Salesians for the youth of today?”

The *Da mihi animas cetera tolle* which led Dominic Savio as a boy to understand that there, with Don Bosco, there was a “business” dealing with souls, not money. This is the expression

<sup>45</sup> Egidio VIGANÒ, *Interioridad apostólica*, 12.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*.

that best expresses Don Bosco's pastoral zeal and charity and ours too. Looking at Don Bosco we learn about his deep spirituality, his solid and trusting faith, the certainty that God is present in the midst of the young and the need to cultivate a robust interior life. The deep root of Don Bosco's spirituality was always his union with God, his inner life and his dialogue with the Lord. "There is no doubt that in Don Bosco holiness shines out in his works, but it is certainly true that the works are only an expression of his faith. It is not the deeds that make Don Bosco a saint [...] but it is a faith enlivened by practical charity that makes him a saint."<sup>47</sup> When it is lived in this way, as it was for Don Bosco and as it must be for us today, then our presence among the young, our going out to meet them, our repeating the promise today that even our last breath will be for them, everything, absolutely everything, will be imbued with that pedagogy of grace, of the soul and of the supernatural that is contained in and that we are called to live in the *Da mihi animas cetera tolle*.

#### **2.4. The drama of the war (1914-1918)**

The option for the poorest young people: orphans  
"Absolute priority for the young, the poorest and  
most abandoned and defenceless"  
(GC28, *Action guideline 5*)

During Fr Albera's term as Rector Major, the toughest trial was the Great War. The First World War caused almost half the confreres to leave for the front, with many works requisitioned and turned into barracks and hospitals. In that emergency situation, Fr Albera did his best to welcome war orphans and refugees into Salesian houses, even at the cost of great sacrifices. He was concerned to continue Salesian works at all costs, and indeed to increase some of them, such as the oratories and

<sup>47</sup> CHÁVEZ, *Lettere circolari ai salesiani*, 1299.

orphanages. He invited his confreres to austerity and to calling on Mary with the title of Help of Christians, according to the Salesian tradition of imploring help from “Our Lady of difficult times”. Don Bosco, in fact, always recognised the inspiration and support of Mary Help of Christians; thus he did not let himself be discouraged by the oppositions and difficulties he encountered.

Italy entered the war on 24 May 1915 and the Congregation became totally involved, since most of the confreres were of Italian nationality. In the monthly letter following this serious event, the Rector Major invited us to pray for those who were under arms and to do “three days of strict fasting”, “to obtain that they may be spared from any misfortune”.<sup>48</sup> He also asked that the closure of the school year not be brought forward, as many hoped, so as not to add further burdens to families already struggling with the departure of their young men into the ranks of the army. Fr Albera, therefore, strongly urged austerity as a sign of solidarity with the poor and the apostolic zeal to bring in all the children who found themselves abandoned.

When the conflict went on beyond what was expected, Fr Albera maintained as a guideline the invitation to keep our eyes fixed on Don Bosco (“Let us imitate Don Bosco in acquiring our religious perfection, educating and sanctifying the young, dealing with our neighbour, doing good to all”<sup>49</sup>), and encouraged those remaining behind in the works to a spirit of sacrifice and ardent zeal. He hoped that there would be the igniting of “a holy competition to take on the burdens and labours, by no means light, but which are indispensable for filling the gaps left above all in the school and in assistance by those whom the war has removed from our institutions”.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>48</sup> ASC, E212, no. 117 (24 May 1915), quoted in Leonardo TULLINI, *Esperienza bellica e identità salesiana nella Grande Guerra: tratti di spiritualità nella corrispondenza dei Salesiani militari con D. Paolo Albera e altri superiori (1915-1918)* [dottorato], UPS, Rome 2007, 117.

<sup>49</sup> *Lettere circolari di Don Paolo Albera ai salesiani*, 360.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 183-184.



He invited provincials to be creative: “Your knowledge of your province will suggest to you some other practical measure; well, study it, according to the spirit of Don Bosco, in relation to the present circumstances and then send it to me no later than 20 August. Your plans, well detailed [...] will be examined in depth by the Superior Chapter, and after making the appropriate observations, they will return them to you for your execution...”<sup>51</sup> As we can see, the governance of the Congregation appears to be increasingly prudent and centralised according to clear lines of conduct and safeguarding of the charism. In my opinion, this “Fr Albera style” is above all an expression of the authority of someone who knows the charismatic priority of the mission and wants everyone to be faithful to it.

Perhaps it is precisely this perfectionist and operational impetus that is the most typical and dynamic feature of the position taken by Fr Albera and his Council in the face of events, the one that most inspires the confreres to heroic actions, both at the front and in the houses. The following words of exhortation are magnificent: “Push the boat out to the high seas, that is, hurl yourselves ardently into the vast field of perfection, do not limit your labours to what is strictly necessary, be grandiose in your aspirations when it is a question of the glory of God and the salvation of souls; move away from the seashore that so narrows your horizons, and you will see how abundant the catch of souls will be [...]. In this the motto of the zealous apostle will be the same as that of the valiant soldier: courage, onwards!”<sup>52</sup>

During the difficult period of the First World War, Fr Albera’s spiritual fatherliness was expressed in his affectionate concern for his confreres engaged at the front and for the young people still being cared for in Salesian houses. We have evidence of this in the circular letters he sent every month to all his confreres engaged in military service<sup>53</sup> and from the prompt replies he sent

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

<sup>53</sup> There were 32 circular letters to Salesian soldiers sent by Rector Major Fr Paul Albera between 19 March 1916 and 24 December 1918.

to each confrere who wrote to him.<sup>54</sup> It was certainly a period of tremendous trial for the Rector Major and the young Salesian Congregation, an experience of anguish and bewilderment without measure, which became a watershed in the history of a group of convinced religious educators, as well as for all of contemporary history.

I think it is particularly necessary to recall some traits of the figure of Fr Albera and his good work in those years, because it expresses a way of acting in a “borderline situation”. In addition to underlining, as I have just done, his particular attention to his confreres who were at the front, there is another aspect that I consider of great strength and charismatic importance. I am referring to the fact that in the most dramatic and extreme situations, Fr Albera did not hesitate for a minute to make the whole Congregation understand that there was a specific priority of the moment in the Salesian mission: attention to children and young orphans who were the poorest of the poor, having lost at least one of their parents, often both.

Fr Albera was not content just continuing with ordinary activities. He did not just wait for the dark clouds of those years to clear, but with exceptional effort he activated the best energies of the poor houses and decimated numbers of Salesians who continued the mission in them. I highlight this fact because it has much to do with the priority option for the poor that we are asking of the whole Congregation throughout the world even today.

A first special intervention was carried out a few months before Italy entered the war, following the terrible earthquake in Abruzzo on 13 January 1915. Fr Albera wrote to his confreres: “Let us bow our heads to God’s will and pray also for the many victims of this cataclysm. But my heart tells me that Don Bosco and Father Rua would not be happy with this alone, and so I am prepared to take in, within the limits of the charity that the

<sup>54</sup> The Central Salesian Archive contains about 3390 letters and military postcards addressed to Fr Paul Albera or other members of the Superior Chapter by 791 Salesian soldiers.

Lord sends us, some of the surviving orphans...”<sup>55</sup> After this appeal, the Salesians immediately set to work and took in hundreds of orphans in various houses in Italy.

As I have already mentioned, when Italy also entered the war on 24 May 1915, hundreds of young Salesians were drafted. As was to be expected, the number of civilian deaths multiplied and at the same time the number of orphans caused by the war increased. With firm determination Fr Albera wrote: “relying on the Providence of God and the co-operation of the public I have decided to open an Institute wholly for boys between the ages of eight and twelve who have become homeless through the war”.<sup>56</sup>

Just as we have spoken of the uniqueness of the Oratory, so it is necessary to mention the orphanage as a very Salesian educational space, particularly at that time. One might consider the orphanage an educational institution of another era, but it reveals the Oratorian heart in an extraordinary way. The orphans of every war, especially of defeated nations, are victims twice over: they have lost their parents in violent circumstances and their homeland does not have the means to care for them.

Pope Benedict XV had drawn the attention of everyone to this problem, both the victorious nations and the local Churches and congregations, with a range of responses. Fr Albera, on behalf of the Salesians and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, made a personal commitment to alleviate this plague; welcoming orphanages were opened in war-torn Central Europe. In the last year of the war he told the Salesians called to the front: “I immediately arranged for almost a hundred refugee boys aged 12 to 14 to be housed in the Oratory; at the same time I appealed to all the directors of our houses in Italy to welcome as many boys as possible.”<sup>57</sup>

<sup>55</sup> *Lettere circolari di Don Paolo Albera ai salesiani*, 171 quoted in GIRAUDO, *Fr Paul Albera Master of Spiritual Life*, 112-113.

<sup>56</sup> *BS* 1916, 131 quoted in GIRAUDO, *Fr Paul Albera Master of Spiritual Life*, 119.

<sup>57</sup> *Lm* no. 22... cf. ASC E444, *Lettere mensili ai salesiani soldati (1916-1918)*, quoted in GIRAUDO, *Fr Paul Albera Master of Spiritual Life*, 120-121.

I have referred to this aspect of the life of Fr Paul Albera and his service as Rector Major because it directly touches on an essential element of our charism, which is the option for the young and, among them, the poorest and most abandoned (C. 2). As you can imagine, dear confreres, going over our General Chapters and the teachings of the Rectors Major on this subject would require a lot of time and a long letter.<sup>58</sup> I think that what I have said is sufficient to show that in the Congregation there has always been concern for the poorest and most abandoned young people, and that it coincides with a constant concern to be faithful to the Lord in charismatic fidelity to Don Bosco. However, in my opinion, the decisiveness and firmness with which Fr Albera addressed this priority emerges with singular force.

Well then, the orphans of the First World War are now the orphans of some of today's wars for us, like in Syria, or the victims of guerilla warfare on the African continent and in Latin America. The orphans of that time are the street children for us today in many of the nations where Don Bosco's charism has taken root. They are also the migrant children who arrive alone in unknown lands without any protection. They are all those children and young people who undoubtedly, as Salesians, are in our hearts and whose pain we feel so deeply because of their condition. And I ask, dear confreres, that they continue to wound us in this way. *Let us not get used to the situations orphans face in our 21<sup>st</sup> century.* That is why, in the fifth action guideline for our Congregation for these six years following GC28, I asked you to give absolute priority to the young, the poor and the most abandoned and defenceless: "I am convinced that assuming this perspective as an indispensable one will be very significant throughout the Congregation and in all contexts, cultures and continents. Today there are many kinds of youth poverty that demand urgent at-

<sup>58</sup> Fr Pascual Chávez V., in fact, refers several times in his letters to his fondness for the poorest: cf. CHÁVEZ, *Lettere circolari ai salesiani*, 156, 349, 503, 609-613, 614, 735, 987, 1106. See also "He had compassion on them". *New forms of poverty, Salesian mission, effectiveness in* VECCHI, *Educatori appassionati... Lettere circolari ai Salesiani*, 166-192.

tention from the whole human family, and no doubt from us Salesians in a particular way. In fact, the history of our Congregation is characterised by calls to go out to the poorest young people. ‘As sons of Don Bosco, we have taken on an historical commitment to serve poor young people.’<sup>59</sup> It is precisely for this reason that I appealed to us to look at our young people, the young people of the world and of our own presence, those we know and those we must go and seek out, to very respectfully get to know their life stories, their anguish and their pain, their very lives, so often full of tragedy. These are “our orphans” today, who have so much in common, even if they do not know it, with those of the great wars. We must be there for them.

## 2.5. All of you be missionaries<sup>60</sup>

Fr Albera’s strong appeal is a “sister”  
to the invitation addressed to the whole Congregation  
after GC28 and reminds us that:  
“It is time for greater generosity in the Congregation.  
A universal and missionary Congregation”  
(GC28, *Action guideline* 7)

One of the characteristics of Fr Albera’s service as Rector Major was his great concern, animation and commitment to the missions, which he considered essential to the charism of Don Bosco.

What he wrote in his first letter to the Congregation, dated 25 January 1911, is very significant: “I am surprised at the fear that the ardent zeal of our first missionaries is waning among us, and that we are not completely fulfilling God’s plans for our humble Congregation. Unfortunately, I see that every day the number of requests to go to the missions is decreasing, and for

<sup>59</sup> GC28, p. 36.

<sup>60</sup> *Lettere circolari di Don Paolo Albera ai salesiani*, 135.

this reason the following words echo in my mind like hammer blows: *tene quod habes*.<sup>61</sup> To his great sensitivity, in fidelity to Don Bosco and Fr Rua, we must add the fact that during his visit to the Americas on behalf of the Rector Major, he got to know the beautiful and emerging reality of the missions, especially in Patagonia, Tierra del Fuego, Mato Grosso and at Méndez and Gualaquiza.

During Fr Albera's term of office, more than 450 Salesians left for the missions. Only in one year, 1915, was the missionary expedition suspended because of the war.

In 1913 the 47th expedition was completed. On 31 May of that year Fr Albera sent a circular letter to all Salesians encouraging them to come to the aid of the missions: "Therefore, it will not be difficult for you, dear confreres, to understand the heavy burden that falls on your Rector Major to provide these Missions with reliable and zealous personnel and material means. Indeed, the needs for personnel and resources are becoming more and more sensitive, and I feel the need to appeal to your hearts, good confreres, for help. Yes, please share such a burden with me, taking our Missions very much to heart, first through prayer and then through your work."<sup>62</sup>

The result was that in that year more than 70 Salesians made up the 47th expedition. Together with the Salesians, 52 Daughters of Mary Help of Christians were also sent on mission.

Looking back over Fr Albera's biography, we can see that he was very concerned about the preparations for the annual missionary expedition while he was in Turin or returning from some of his trips. Here is an example of the account of some of his dispatches: "The new missionaries were sent forth on 11 October 1910 from the church of Mary Help of Christians. He embraced each of the hundred missionaries, leaving each one a personal remembrance."<sup>63</sup> The same happened in 1911 when,

<sup>61</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>63</sup> GIRAUDDO, *Fr Paul Albera Master of Spiritual Life*, 99.

“after the farewell service for fifty missionaries destined especially for China and Congo, Fr Albera left for Austria, Poland and Ukraine”.<sup>64</sup> In October 1912 he greeted and blessed the new missionary expedition. The young Ignatius Canazei, who would later succeed the bishop and martyr Louis Versiglia as Vicar Apostolic of Shiuchow (Shaoguan), was part of it. In 1929 Canazei himself recounted: “Before we left for China, Father Albera invited us to attend the Holy Mass that he would celebrate in Don Bosco’s chapel. Afterwards, he paternally addressed us by saying: ‘You are now leaving for the missions. At the beginning you’ll find many difficulties, but over time you’ll get acquainted with the language and customs, you’ll meet many people, and after about ten years, your new country will become a second home for you; you won’t even want to return to your native country.’”<sup>65</sup> Something similar could be said about every missionary expedition.

All this shows how, out of *fidelity to Don Bosco*, the missions were for Fr Albera an essential and indispensable charismatic element. So – it is my conclusion – with the same criterion of fidelity to Don Bosco and his charism, they must continue to be for us today.

In the earlier-mentioned circular letter of 31 May 1913 entitled. *The festive oratories – The missions – Vocations*, Fr Albera devotes some splendid pages to reminding the Salesians what the missions meant to Don Bosco, how he carried them in his mind and heart. At the same time he made an appeal to take “our missions very much to heart, first through prayer and then through your work” and he invited them to enrich themselves “with the virtues of the missionary, which must be a deep piety and a great spirit of sacrifice for the whole of our lives and not just for a few years”.<sup>66</sup> In this letter Fr Albera also declares how the festive Oratory should be the heart and life of the Congre-

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>66</sup> *Lettere circolari di Don Paolo Albera ai salesiani*, 135.

gation, as it was for Don Bosco: “The missions among the savages were always the most ardent aspiration of Don Bosco’s heart, nor am I afraid to say that Mary Most Holy Help of Christians had given him a clear intuition of them from her first motherly manifestations. He spoke about it continually to us, his first sons, who were full of wonder and felt transported by holy enthusiasm; he described, with the clear precision of an explorer, distant regions, immense forests with mysterious flora and fauna, majestic rivers, warlike tribes... and then new towns and cities, springing up as if by magic where solitude and death had previously reigned...”<sup>67</sup> For Don Bosco “the missions were the favourite topic of his talks, and he knew how to instil in hearts such a strong desire to become missionaries that it seemed the most natural thing in the world”.<sup>68</sup>

Dear confreres, in the action guidelines of our GC28 I placed strong emphasis on the missionary dimension of our Congregation. It is clear that we are in a time that demands greater generosity from all of us, since “The missionary reality of our Congregation continues to question us and present us with wonderful challenges, the missions urge us onwards and make us dream beautiful dreams that come true.”<sup>69</sup>

I believe I can say that missionary animation in our Congregation is one of the dimensions that every Rector Major in our history to date, has taken up with true love. There has not been a single year – with the exception of 1915, to which I have already referred – in which, as each *missionary expedition* matured, there has not been a great effort to help the various local Churches and provinces with the presence of new Salesians who have offered to give the best of themselves wherever they have been sent. We cannot forget that the Congregation is present today in 134 nations because missionaries from so many parts of the world and for so many decades have taken the first steps so

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 132-133.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>69</sup> *GC28*, 47.



that the charism of Don Bosco might take root in every nation and region.

Today as yesterday, as I have done during these seven years and as my predecessors have done, I continue to invite the confreres to be generous, especially those who feel a particular call from the Lord (“Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations...”, Mt 28:19) in the vocation that we all live as Salesians of Don Bosco. Fr Paul Albera is a good mirror through which to look at the greatness and value of the missionary dimension and the missions in our Congregation.

I believe I can say, without fear of error, that the Congregation continues to be vigilant, attentive and always ready to proclaim the Gospel to peoples who do not know it (C. 6), convinced that “we look upon missionary work as an essential feature of our Congregation” (C. 30). Precisely for this reason, in total harmony and dialogue with the spirit Fr Albera reminded us of, I proposed at the end of General Chapter 28: “I am proposing to the entire Congregation to make this time for generosity concrete by naturally assuming the availability of confreres from all provinces... for international services, new foundations, new frontiers to we want to reach.”<sup>70</sup>

### 3. OUR LADY AND DON BOSCO<sup>71</sup>

I could not conclude this letter without making a reference, albeit briefly, to Our Lady, the great Love of Don Bosco, and to Fr Albera’s deep devotion and conviction in reference to the great gift that we Salesians and the Salesian Family have for “our powerful Protectress”.<sup>72</sup> In the circular that took its cue from the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the consecration of the Sanctuary of Mary Help of Christians<sup>73</sup>, Fr Albera wrote with his usual

<sup>70</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>71</sup> *Lettere circolari di Don Paolo Albera ai salesiani, 283.*

<sup>72</sup> *Ibidem.*

humility: “No doubt other pens, better toughened than mine, will sing the praises of Our Lady of Don Bosco in every language and in every metre.” Nevertheless, he knew that “the Rector Major of the Salesians is not allowed to remain silent” when it is a question of joining his own voice to that of so many of Don Bosco’s children in grateful praise of the Mother of God. For this he concludes: “May Mary Help of Christians guide my pen so that I may write things less unworthy of Her.”<sup>74</sup>

The letter is filled with the conviction that Mary Help of Christians is above all *Don Bosco’s Madonna* and that, as Salesians, we have a duty of gratitude “towards our heavenly Queen, for the great and innumerable benefits that she so generously has wanted to bestow on us”.<sup>75</sup>

Fr Albera points out that the unfolding of the life of Don Bosco, “son of a humble peasant of the Becchi”, remains “an inexplicable enigma” if it is not understood and savoured in faith, which knows how to see the omnipotent hand of Divine Providence always at work. And with all certainty he states: “Don Bosco could certainly not have any doubt about the continuous intervention of God and the Most Holy Virgin Help of Christians in the various events of his very laborious life.”<sup>76</sup> After the dream when he was nine, “It was the Mother of God who guided him in all the most important events of his career, who made him a learned and zealous priest, who prepared him to be the Father of orphans, the Teacher of countless ministers of the altar, one of the greatest educators of youth, and finally the Founder of a new religious Society which was to have the mission of spreading his spirit and devotion to her everywhere under the beautiful title of *Mary Help of Christians*.”<sup>77</sup>

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.* Letter no. XXIV (24) entitled “*Sul Cinquantenario della Consacrazione del Santuario di Maria Ausiliatrice*” (*On the 50th anniversary of the Consecration of the Sanctuary of Mary Help of Christians*), 282-299.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 284.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibidem.*

I think we can say, dear confreres, that the passage I have just quoted is a perfect and complete summary of Don Bosco's life and the place Our Lady had in it. She was his valid support, she guided him throughout his life. At the end, during the Eucharist celebrated in 1887 in the church of the Sacred Heart in Rome the day after it was consecrated, the elderly Don Bosco, much compromised in health and filled with emotion and tears, understood what was the thread that accompanied his whole life: "She has done everything".

As sons of Don Bosco, we express our love and devotion to Our Lady every day in the morning prayer of entrustment to Mary Help of Christians: a prayer desired by Fr Rua already in 1894 and which, as Fr Albera writes, "was very much appreciated by all and was quickly and easily learnt by heart".<sup>78</sup> And so it has been up until today.

Dear confreres, I conclude this letter, written with reference to Fr Albera and in dialogue with him, by reaffirming with deep conviction that our love and devotion to the Mother of the Lord, to Mary Help of Christians, is not something optional in our charism.


I allow myself to declare with all frankness and awareness: if one of us does not love Our Lady and does not feel anything towards her, if he does not have the desire to live all his days under the protection and the presence of the Mother of Heaven, if he does not have a fire in his heart that leads him to want to show and transmit this love to children, young people and the people of God whom he meets every day, then he will not be a Salesian of Don Bosco.

"We believe that Mary is present among us and continues her 'mission as Mother of the Church and Help of Christians'. We entrust ourselves to Her, the humble servant in whom the Lord has done great things, that we may become witnesses to the young of her Son's boundless love." (C. 8).

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 289-290.

Let us ask the Lord that Our Lady Help of Christians, who always guided and supported Don Bosco, may continue to accompany our Congregation and the beautiful Salesian Family, for the good of the Church and to continue to respond, in fidelity to the call that the Holy Spirit addressed to us in Don Bosco, to the needs of the Church and the whole world. In the knowledge that we came into being not as a merely human venture, but by the initiative of God, who entrusted to us the most precious portion of society: the young and, among them, the poorest and most abandoned.

May our devotion and love for the Mother of the Lord be our guarantee for a beautiful, full and happy life, in fidelity, as disciples of her Beloved Son.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Ángel Fernández Artime". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a horizontal line underneath the name.

**Fr Ángel FERNÁNDEZ ARTIME, sdb**  
*Rector Major*