

## I. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

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*Dear confreres,*

This letter comes to you at a time when the work in preparation for the 21st General Chapter is becoming more intense by the day. This is a wonderful opportunity for me to issue not so much a doctrinal document as rather a brotherly invitation to reflection which I propose to you also in view of the fast approaching General Chapter.

### **The journey we travelled together**

In the letters I sent you from time to time since the Special General Chapter, I dealt with a variety of topics. Some of these topics were suggested by special events, dear to our Congregation, as those treated in my letter written on the occasion of the Centenary of the approval of our Constitutions,<sup>1</sup> or in the one written for the Centenary of the Salesian Missions.<sup>2</sup>

Other topics, instead, were suggested by special problems that seemed to me to crop up as we advanced in the present delicate phase of the renewal of our Congregation. Thus I first summoned you to revive the missionary spirit in our Congregation and to rekindle that flame of charity and dedication which was afire in the heart of Don Bosco.<sup>3</sup> I knew full well, however, that we would never have achieved any renewal unless we drew abundantly at the very wellsprings of charity — God himself.

<sup>1</sup> *Acts of the Superior Council* No. 274 (April-June 1974).

<sup>2</sup> *ASC* No. 277 (January-March 1975).

<sup>3</sup> *ASC* No. 267 (July 1972).

For this reason the first letter was followed by others which dealt with prayer — vital indeed for our Congregation<sup>4</sup> — and still by others which called your attention to particular points of the on-going renewal.

At a time when we were confronted with the delicate task of changing our structures, I felt it my duty to issue clear guidelines on “decentralization and unity”.<sup>5</sup>

At a time of a serious and alarming vocations crisis, I thought it necessary to discuss with you the vital problem of vocations.<sup>6</sup> Later, when the mounting tide of secularism and materialism was threatening to engulf our religious values, I thought it my responsibility to call you to reconsider the absolute need for spiritual direction,<sup>7</sup> to wage an all-out war on the “bourgeois mentality”,<sup>8</sup> to joyously live our lives of Salesian chastity as men consecrated to the Kingdom of God,<sup>9</sup> and then to dedicate ourselves to the urgent work of evangelization.<sup>10</sup>

Since we live in a world in which politics plays an increasingly large and often excessive role in our social lives, I then thought it opportune to fix the extent of the Salesians’ responsibility in this field.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, in the midst of a social and ecclesial situation which under certain aspects is fraught with difficulties and frustrations and yet under others is full of high hopes and marvelous promises, I deemed it useful to exhort you to two typically Christian and Salesian virtues — trust and optimism.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>4</sup> ASC No. 269 (January-March 1973) and No. 270 (April-June 1973).

<sup>5</sup> ASC No. 272 (October-December 1973).

<sup>6</sup> ASC No. 273 (January-March 1974).

<sup>7</sup> ASC No. 281 (January-March 1976).

<sup>8</sup> ASC No. 276 (October-December 1974).

<sup>9</sup> ASC No. 285 (January-March 1977).

<sup>10</sup> ASC No. 279 (July-September 1975).

<sup>11</sup> ASC No. 284 (October-December 1976).

<sup>12</sup> ASC No. 278 (April-June 1975).

## **The Chapter: an occasion for an assessment**

The mere list of topics treated in the pages of the Acts in the past should give us a pretty comprehensive picture of the weighty problems which our Congregation has had to face over the last few years, and it should in a way have traced the road to be travelled in order to renew itself in spirit and in action. This was a tiring and at times painful journey indeed, but also productive of inner purification, new ardor and promising initiatives.

The new General Chapter will be a most timely opportunity for the whole Congregation to make a calm and serious-minded assessment of how much has been done and remains to be done, how much has been built up and, perhaps out of some excessive eagerness for renewal, has hastily been torn down without due concern for finding an adequate substitute, and, finally, how much of what was set down by the Special General Chapter was correctly interpreted and how much, more or less intentionally, was distorted or used to achieve objectives foreign to the mind of the Chapter itself.

In order to offer you an additional item for your reflection in this reassessment, I would like to dwell with you on a point that seems to me to be of great importance for the life and work of our Congregation. For here is the reef against which even the best efforts at renewal can get shipwrecked. Here is the sinister evil which can really undermine our Congregation. I am referring to individualism.

### **THE SINISTER EVIL OF INDIVIDUALISM**

I would not want you to believe that, on the whole, the evil of individualism has popped up just now. Already in his own days Don Bosco sensed its danger clearly, even though he overlooked it just in order to establish in our Congregation a tradition of obedience, which would not be rigid and impersonal,

but, on the contrary, extremely personalized and wholeheartedly family-like, as it is fitting for members who are bound one to other by bonds of intimate brotherly love rather than by juridical bonds.

### **Wholehearted obedience willed by Don Bosco**

When we read the documents regarding our traditional obedience, we see how Don Bosco really wanted a Congregation in which everyone would be ready to make great sacrifices — not sacrifices of health nor money, nor macerations and penances, nor extraordinary fasts, but sacrifices of the will: “The sacrifice that is needed”, he said, “is the sacrifice of the will”.<sup>13</sup> Don Bosco wanted a Congregation in which none of its members would say, “I would like to have this or that job. Rather let each be ready to do whatever is entrusted to him, stay wherever his superiors place him, and perform his office diligently”.<sup>14</sup>

Don Bosco wanted people who would be easily and entirely available — ready to do any kind of works as the circumstances required (this in fact has remained one of the characteristics of his better sons). He wanted people who — to use one of his famous expressions — would “allow themselves to be decapitated”, that is, who would obey “without any sort of reservation, promptly, cheerfully and with humility”;<sup>15</sup> people who would not only obey the given commands, but anticipate them. This is the obedience of the *vado io* (I volunteer) as opposed to the one Fr. Caviglia called a “Salesian blasphemy”, that is, the obedience of the *non tocca a me* (it’s none of my business).<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Don Bosco’s talk to his first helpers on January 20, 1862. *BM* 7:35.

<sup>14</sup> Don Bosco’s talk on March 11, 1869, following the Holy See’s approval of the Constitutions. *BM* 9:269.

<sup>15</sup> *Salesian Constitutions* 1966, art. 44.

<sup>16</sup> See *Conferenze sullo spirito salesiano* (*Conferences on the Salesian spirit*), typewritten manuscript 1953, p. 62.

Needless to say, such wholehearted, willing and generous obedience is possible only when the relationship between the one who commands and the one who obeys is not merely formal or bureaucratic, but is truly heartfelt and brotherly. For this reason Don Bosco insisted that every effort be made to preserve the necessary subordination of one to the other, “voluntarily, not forcibly”.<sup>17</sup> To obtain this, he exhorted the Superiors “to favor as much as they could the inclinations (of their subjects) when assigning them duties”.<sup>18</sup>

Don Bosco wanted that “each one (should) work according to his strength and capability”.<sup>19</sup> He did not expect that one should be “bound to carry unbearable burdens”, but that he be “willing to do whatever (he could)”, whenever he was requested, whatever the particular need could be.<sup>20</sup>

### *The superior according to Don Bosco*

In the background of these recommendations we cannot but see Don Bosco’s fatherly image, which describes what a Salesian Superior ought to be like in the midst of his brothers, and this it does far better than any scholarly dissertation could do. For here we see a Salesian Superior not as a cold and impersonal bureaucrat who lays upon other people’s shoulders burdens which he himself would not lift with his finger. Neither do we see him as a business manager, who is merely preoccupied with efficiency and productivity. On the contrary, we see him as a person totally dedicated to the wellbeing of his brothers, as a “loving father”,<sup>21</sup> who takes great pains to provide not only what is necessary, but “also what is useful”.<sup>22</sup> The “fullest confidence” which each

<sup>17</sup> MB 12:81.

<sup>18</sup> BM 10:287.

<sup>19</sup> BM 9:269.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 270.

<sup>21</sup> *Salesian Const.*, 1966, art. 44.

<sup>22</sup> *Id.*, art. 46.

confere is to have in him<sup>23</sup> and which alone can explain the kind of wholehearted and generous obedience mentioned above, is not a blank check that he could demand outright, but it is something that he has to win for himself by striving “to make people love (him) rather than fear (him)”.<sup>24</sup>

Father Caviglia, a knowledgeable and authoritative witness of the Salesian spiritual tradition, assures us that this was the style of relationship Don Bosco wanted to exist between subjects and Superiors. “Don Bosco conceived a religious congregation of simple vows”, Father Caviglia says, “but he wanted it to be made up of alive and thinking men, capable of spontaneous action. The work which has been done and remains to be done by his Congregation is of such quantity and quality that it cannot be conceived without free-willed individual action, and cannot be reconciled with a lifestyle which, though meritorious before God under different conditions, could here become a handicap in the performance of our work”.<sup>25</sup>

Father Caviglia concludes his remarks with a truly noteworthy statement: “I know I can state that Don Bosco, even though he demanded of his own men a loving and kind discipline as of Christian and religious people, nevertheless respected their wills and ideas to the highest possible degree, leaving, so to say, lots and lots of breathing space around each of them”.<sup>26</sup>

### *Obeying for supernatural reasons*

The exercise of this type of authority — so human and respectful of the individual — runs the risk of lacking supernatural motivation. Don Bosco himself, in a talk to the Rectors following

<sup>23</sup> *Id.*, art. 47.

<sup>24</sup> Don Bosco's counsels to Fr. Rua, first Salesian Rector, in *BM* 7:317.

<sup>25</sup> A. CAVIGLIA, *Don Bosco*, p. 25.

<sup>26</sup> *Id.*, 169.

the final approval of the Constitutions (September 25, 1875), acknowledged that “until now obedience (has) been more personal than religious. Let us avoid this serious error”, he said. “Never obey just because this person or that one is giving the command, but for reasons of a higher order, because it is God who commands us, no matter through whom his order is given. Let us begin to practice this religious virtue ourselves, and then let us try to instill it in others ever so slowly. We shall have accomplished little until we have attained it. Let us not do things because we like doing them or because we like the person who orders us to do them... Stress this principle in your conferences and sermons, when hearing confessions, and on every other possible occasion”.<sup>27</sup>

Such transcendent dimension of religious obedience which is a sharing in Christ’s obedience to his Father,<sup>28</sup> had certainly to be safeguarded at all costs, lest the very essence of religious life be lost. But perhaps some of the Superiors in Don Bosco’s times found it more convenient to insist on this principle than to imitate Don Bosco’s fatherly goodness and kindness. Some of them found it easier to follow “the speedier and less onerous way” of issuing orders than that of helping their people to become mature through a truly adult and responsible obedience. That is why Don Bosco in his famed letter written in Rome in 1884 complained that “the warmth of charity” was gradually being replaced with “the coldness of regulations”.<sup>29</sup>

This is the complaint of a man who feared that his work could be distorted. He was afraid of seeing in his work the signs of an organization in which greater emphasis would be placed on efficiency than on the person, thus running the risk of fostering legalism and formalism. He feared the disappearance of the family spirit — that fraternal communion in which not the

<sup>27</sup> MB 11:356

<sup>28</sup> See *Lumen Gentium*, 42a; *Perfectae Caritatis*, 14a.

<sup>29</sup> MB 17:111-112.

coldness of the law but “the warmth of charity is the rule”.<sup>30</sup>

### *A delicate balance*

Being a realist, Don Bosco could not ignore the difficulties and risks involved in keeping a delicate balance between divine and human elements, between individual and community needs. Any excessive unilateral emphasis on either could cause a dangerous unbalance and make people fall either into a disembodied spiritualism leading to an authoritarianism which would almost systematically sacrifice persons to principles, or into a purely earthbound humanism leading, in its turn, to gross individualism.

Whenever either the transcendent dimension of obedience or brotherly union with its inherent sense of belonging and solidarity should be lacking, the Congregation would then inevitably begin to fall apart.

The *Pia Salesianorum Societas qualis esse periclitatur* (Pious Salesian Society such as it threatens to become) of the Dream at San Benigno,<sup>31</sup> on whose mantle nothing but a “moth-eaten gaping hole marked the spot previously covered by the diamond of obedience”, should make the sons of Don Bosco of all generations pause and reflect most seriously.

### *Today's 'reasons' for individualism*

We have an assurance that in the past the pitfalls of a wrong conception of obedience have been avoided from Father Caviglia himself, who wrote that Don Bosco “instilled into his Congregation such sense of freedom and order and left it such a tradition of adaptability and independence and such spirit of

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Dream of September 10, 1881, in *MB* 15:183-187.



initiative and work that, barring human malice and forgetfulness of the Founder, it will last in spite of the storms that will break out”<sup>32</sup>.

I most willingly second Fr. Caviglia’s declaration, and I find it to be in agreement not only with my hopes, but also with my convictions. Nevertheless, I cannot overlook the precise conditions that go with its fulfilment and that demand of us a constant verification and a serious self-examination.

From the observation post where Divine Providence has placed me, despite the obvious fact that not everything can always be known in all its details, certain basic trends in our Congregation can, however, be discerned more clearly by me than those, such as you, dear Confreres, who are in contact with a necessarily more limited reality, and this is true whether such trends are for the better or for the worse. With regard to the issue at hand, I must state that the evil and the danger of individualism do exist in our Congregation, even if its manifestation, growth and gravity vary from place to place. (It will be the task of the General Chapter to check on the seriousness of this evil and to prescribe timely and adequate remedies).

Even if, as it was stated, this evil is not new, some reasons adduced for its justification — like having recourse to the documents of Vatican II or the Acts of the Special General Chapter — are quite new. We cannot but note that such attempts to justification — partially and unilaterally true and thus substantially false — make this evil even more dangerous inasmuch as it is not perceived and recognized as such.

### *When the individual becomes absolute*

The basic motivation for modern-day individualism often rests on an overexaltation of the individual, who is viewed as

<sup>32</sup> A. CAVIGLIA, *Don Bosco*, p. 41.

self-sufficient, independent, subject to no criticism or censure, to whom, however, everything must be subject. This becomes, so to say, a pathological defence not of authentic freedom, but of a freedom which is an end in itself, without substance and often without aims.

This way of thinking, which is widespread in present-day society, finds its way into our lives imperceptibly under the most specious pretexts, and manifests itself in the most varied aspects of our lives.

### *Individualism and apostolate*

In the field of our apostolate we see this way of thinking reflected in the attitude of those who under the pretext of respecting everybody's conscience no longer dare to proclaim the Gospel message in its entirety, and limit themselves to stress only those points which are not so sharply opposed to current opinion.

We see it reflected in the fear of those who refrain from inviting the faithful to the reception of the sacraments, especially the sacrament of reconciliation; we see it in the fear of those who avoid setting before youth the ideal, the value and the beauty of the religious and priestly vocations, though this be done in the context of the common Christian vocation.

These people do not seem to realize that by so doing they violate that very freedom they vow to defend. Infact a man's choice can be perfectly free and responsible only when he is fully informed; but he cannot be so as long as, due to culpable omissions, only a partial and consequently faulty view of reality is presented.

### *Individualism and formation*

Such an individualistic and myopic view is also projected into the field of formation where, on the premise that the Constitutions invite each member "to assume gradually the

responsibility for his own formation”;<sup>33</sup> an individual claims total self-sufficiency in the field of formation from the moment that he knows what is good for himself and what he needs for his maturation.

### *Individualism and vocation*

A view of this kind is also reflected in the very concept of ‘personal vocation’, that is a vocation to the attainment of one’s own life goals independently of others, outside the sphere of the vocation and mission of the Congregation, brought about at any cost, even in open opposition to the will and guidelines of those responsible.

To justify this view, an appeal is made to one’s conscience, which is understood as the sole judge on the matter — and an infallible and final one at that, — as though in-depth spiritual discernment were within everybody’s reach, and positive sciences would not give us enough warning about how easily man can be a victim of illusions and self-deception...as though the individual could dispense with his community and Superior in the discernment of God’s will and of his own charisms...<sup>34</sup> as though God’s gifts to the individual were not for “the common good”<sup>35</sup> but only for furthering one’s own ego...as though, finally, the vocation of a single member of Christ’s body could be fulfilled apart from the common vocation, independently of the other members.

### *Individualism and authority*

It is inevitable that a person with such an individualistic cast of mind would collide head-on with any one in authority

<sup>33</sup> *Salesian Const.*, art. 105.

<sup>34</sup> *Id.*, art. 95 and 97.

<sup>35</sup> 1 Cor. 12:7.

who would but call his attention in gentle and general terms to the needs of the common good and brotherly union.

As a rule, such an individual has become afflicted with a kind of a sudden allergic reaction to every intervention — even a legitimate one — of his Superiors and denounces it as an undue authoritarian interference.

We emphasize that “authority means service”, without, however, going to great lengths to specify what kind of service it is. We seem to forget all too easily that within the Church we are all at each other’s service, and that the service to be rendered by authority is not that of becoming an automatic executor of the will of one’s brothers, but that “of serving in their brothers the design of the Father’s love”.<sup>36</sup> This “design of love” can, of course, be revealed through the opinions, wishes and deliberations of the brothers, provided they are docile to the Spirit and intimately united among themselves.

We must in fact realize that not every gathering of confreres is capable of spiritual discernment by the mere fact of being a gathering... If the individuals are not docile to the Spirit and not united in charity, their gathering is not an occasion for the discernment of God’s will, but one for contradiction, sterile contestation and abuse of power.

In a situation of this kind in no way does the individualist want the Superior to make decisions. He wants him simply to endorse what the majority has decided. He stands ready, however, to appeal to the unquestionable verdict of his own conscience, in case the opinion of the majority runs counter to his own.

Such a ‘liberated’ attitude towards local authority extends also to the central authority of the Congregation, and at times it goes as far as to contest, in the name of personal conscience and

<sup>36</sup> *Evangelica Testificatio*, 25 in *The Pope Speaks* quarterly, vol. 16, No. 2 (Summer '71), p. 117.

responsibility, the teachings and guidelines of ecclesiastical authority.

### *Individualism and Rule*

We wonder how one with such basic attitude of distrust for any thought or decision not in agreement with his own would acknowledge and observe the Rule or, for that matter, any kind of norm. At best he would not contest the existence of rules and regulations; rather, if they happened to be to his advantage, he would willingly appeal to them. What he dislikes and contests is their binding force.

He claims that the new importance gained by the person with respect to the institutions which, according to him, always try to constrain and condition the person, necessarily implies a slackening in the observance of any rule. Rules are nothing but 'examples', 'suggestions', which each confrere or community could take up or drop at will, depending on whether they suit the circumstances or not. And the evaluation of the circumstances is usually left to the 'conscience' of each individual...

### *Individualism and belonging to the Congregation*

It should be clear that such an attitude not only paralyzes the activity of the Congregation, but also break up its organism. The very first to feel these effects is the one affected by this evil. For it is inevitable that such person living under the banner of arbitrariness and phoney spontaneity slips sooner or later into a progressive crisis of his sense of belonging to the Congregation and into the ensuing crisis of his vocational, religious and priestly identity.

It is in the very nature of individualism that one affected with it drifts progressively away from the community whose values he no longer cherishes, whose rules he no longer observes,

whose Superiors he no longer recognizes, and in whose life he shares less and less.

All this may at first remain hidden not only to his confreres, but also (strangely enough) to the individualist himself, for the reason that he still feels a certain sentimental attachment to the values and the people of his past life. Or else, even if he no longer feels he can identify with the Congregation as is today, he may at times identify with an imaginary Congregation which may one day be more to his tastes, views and plans — tastes, views and plans which in reality are always further afield from the charism of our Congregation and always more foreign to its lifestyle. But sooner or later he will have to drop all pretenses, including his latest alibi, and reveal his condition in all its starkness, that is, the crisis of his Salesian vocation.

I would like you to take into serious consideration the fact that the itinerary, which I have attempted to describe, has been already covered by a number of Confreres of ours, of whom some have left us, and others, even though still in the Congregation, live in it not as brothers but as guests or, we could say, as outsiders.

I would also want you to realize that the attitudes described, despite their difference, are linked by a strict logic. This logic can be broken only if, helped by God's light and grace, we can become more aware in good time of the extreme consequences, both as individuals and as community, that this attitude foreign to our spirit can lead us to.

### **Salesian reasons for "vivere in unum", living in unity**

As it looks today, the problem of individualism is so vast and complex that even a barely adequate exposition of it would require a much ampler consideration, one that would certainly go beyond the necessary limits of a Rector Major's Letter. Therefore, after briefly discussing this evil in its genesis and

development, I will only add a few more points for further reflection. Hopefully they will help us, not to foreclose the discussion, but to carry it on among us and thus overcome this serious obstacle which threatens to cripple our Congregation.

*We are no longer private persons*

After the Holy See's final approval of our Congregation,<sup>37</sup> Don Bosco on March 11, 1869 gave the Salesians a forthright and friendly talk — a memorable one indeed. "Tonight I shall tell you only a few things", he said, "but these must be borne in mind since they are, so to speak, the very basis of our Society. We are the ones who must set these principles on firm foundations so that those who come after us need only follow us".

After disclosing that "lacking ecclesiastical approval, our Society was, in many ways, somewhat suspended in air" and that "this precarious condition made it inevitable that some laxity should creep in", Don Bosco added, "But now, my dear sons, things are no longer the same. Our Congregation is approved; we are mutually bound: I to you, you to me, all of us to God. The Church has pronounced herself, God has accepted our services, and we have an obligation to keep our promises. We are no longer private individuals but a Society, a moral body with certain privileges".<sup>38</sup>

The principle on which Don Bosco based his community life is the value of living together like brothers within the Church: "Oh, how good and delightful it is for all to live together like brothers'".<sup>39</sup> Hence the need for "*vivere in unum*", living together in unity. The rest of Don Bosco's talk is nothing but a detailed and practical unfolding of this fundamental principle

<sup>37</sup> Decree of March 1, 1869.

<sup>38</sup> *BM* 9:268, 267.

<sup>39</sup> Psalm 132, 1.

in its three main aspects, that is, “habitare in unum locum, in unum agendi finem, in unum spiritum, unity of abode, unity of spirit and unity of will”.

*The principle of “living in unity”*

For Don Bosco “unity of abode and of spirit” means living and acting as a body, that is, being closely bound together one to the other and all to God by the bond of obedience. “Unity of spirit” points to what kind of bond there ought to exist among us, that is, one which is inspired by that divine charity that has been poured by the Spirit into our hearts.<sup>40</sup>

A century has gone by since Don Bosco delivered his talk. Yet, even though today the cultural framework is vastly different, I believe that his words have lost nothing of their validity. On the contrary, when read in the perspective of the Church after Vatican II, they sound more timely today than in his time. In fact, by presenting the Church more like a “mystery of communion” than a “perfect society”, the Council helps us to understand more clearly how strongly we are bound one to the other and all together to God.

Made to God’s image, we are destined to share in God’s life in Christ, through the Spirit. Through Christ’s cross and blood which broke down the barriers between us and God and amongst ourselves, we have — already here on earth — the opportunity to build ourselves into God’s People and Body, into a brotherly communion, into the family of God’s children.

The bond of brotherliness that binds one to the other in the Lord Jesus does not rise from “flesh and blood”, but it is a most real one. Our brotherliness, therefore, is not imaginary, conventional and much less illusionary; on the contrary, it is

<sup>40</sup> BM 9:268-271.



grounded in the real, though mysterious, participation in God's only-begotten Son, for in Him we are truly reborn of God.

Our very vocation to the religious life within the Church is nothing else but a vocation to live more intensely and more meaningfully this brotherliness which was initiated by Baptism and is nourished and expressed by the Holy Eucharist. If we observe the various elements of our religious life attentively, we will notice that they have no other purpose. The renunciation to having our own private families, the sharing of our goods in common, the deep bond that ties us to our community, the observance of the same rule, the living together under the same roof and working together for the same end — these are elements whose only aim is to make of all of us who have been gathered in the Lord's name, one heart and one soul, one communion of life and love.

#### *A common charism and vocation*

To enable us to practice this Christian brotherliness within the Church according to our specific mission, the Spirit gave us a common charism and vocation.

The word *common* does not, however, mean *uniform* or *impersonal*. The common Salesian call is shared by every confrere for the fulfilment of his own task within the common mission.

It is said in the Constitutions that "as God has called each one to form part of the Salesian Society, so also has He given to each his personal gifts".<sup>41</sup> The Congregation on its part must acknowledge and accept "this individual call" and "help each member to fulfil it",<sup>42</sup> by offering him "the possibility of developing his gifts of nature and of grace"<sup>43</sup> and of "an adequate

<sup>41</sup> *Salesian Const.*, art. 4.

<sup>42</sup> *Id.*, art. 4.

<sup>43</sup> *Id.*, art. 52.

preparation to carry out the task God gives him to do”.<sup>44</sup>

While we admit of a true personal vocation within the common Salesian vocation, we should not, however, become confused about the meaning of the word. From all that has been said above, it should be clear to all of us that we are not dealing here with an individualistic vocation, but with one which has to be fulfilled in intimate union with the vocation of the other confreres.

In the first place the very discernment of each confrere's personal vocation must be done “in communion”. For such discernment is not the work of the one concerned alone, but of all the community to which he wishes to belong: in fact it is the community that “accepts him”,<sup>45</sup> that “recognises him in his vocation”,<sup>46</sup> and “is responsible for the discernment and right use” of the abilities and special gifts each has.<sup>47</sup> And again it is the community to which “our mission is entrusted” in the first place,<sup>48</sup> and which sends, plans, verifies and acts “as the day-to-day interpreter of God's will”.<sup>49</sup>

I think that no one should have any difficulty in understanding how in the back of these articles of our Constitutions there is not a vague ideology, but the very reality of the Church, of whose inner life our Congregation is a visible expression and participation.

### *Bound to each other and all together to God*

The moment of profession, in which “a Salesian gives himself totally to Christ and his fellowmen” and in which the

<sup>44</sup> *Id.*, art. 99.

<sup>45</sup> *Id.*, art. 52.

<sup>46</sup> *Id.*, art. 4

<sup>47</sup> *Id.*, art. 97.

<sup>48</sup> *Id.*, art. 34.

<sup>49</sup> *Id.*, art. 91.

community of brothers “receives him with joy”,<sup>50</sup> is, if seen in its proper perspective, also the highest moment in the progressive discernment of the bond of brotherhood which binds a confrere to the others in God’s name; and it is precisely upon the acknowledgement of this bond that, in the last analysis, our entire commitment to each other rests.

Thereafter, by virtue of our mutual acknowledgement of the bond of brotherhood, the religious profession supposes that, as Don Bosco said, “we are mutually bound: I to you, you to me, all of us to God”.<sup>51</sup>

A religious community, being a deep communion in the Spirit, must live and act in accordance with its true nature, i.e. ‘in communion’.

#### a) *The Superior in communion with the brothers*

In the first place, he who exercises the service of authority must be bound to his brothers. He must live and act in communion with them. The authority which he exercises in the name of the Church<sup>52</sup> and of God whom he represents,<sup>53</sup> was not given to him to dominate his brothers nor to shape them to his own liking; neither was it given to him that he become a mere echo of their opinions or a mindless and spineless executor of their wishes and wills.

His authority is in itself a limited one. Through it the Superior Authority, whose instrument he is, must shine. In fact the power, which he certainly has, was given him by God not to subjugate his brothers nor, strictly speaking, to serve them, but to serve in them “the design of the Father’s love”.<sup>54</sup> It was

<sup>50</sup> *Id.*, art. 73.

<sup>51</sup> *BM* 9:267.

<sup>52</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 45a; *Acts of SGC*, 644.

<sup>53</sup> *Perfectae Caritatis*, 14a, c.

<sup>54</sup> *Evangelica Testificatio*, 25.

given to him to bind them together, not in any way whatsoever, but “in the service of the Father”.<sup>55</sup> He must, therefore, seek together with them “God’s will by fraternal and patient dialogue”.<sup>56</sup>

In carrying out that will, it is his duty “to coordinate the endeavours of all, keeping in mind the rights, duties and capacities of each one”, and making every effort towards preserving his community “in unity”.<sup>57</sup>

### b) *The confreres in communion with the Superior*

While on one side the Superior is closely bound with his brothers, on the other they, too, must live and act in close communion with him, because he is “the sign of Christ uniting his followers in the service of the Father”.<sup>58</sup>

For this reason he must place himself at the center of the community at the confluence of the wills of the individual confreres, so that he and they respond all together to the Lord’s call in a visible line of convergence determined by the Rule.

In fact within the community the Superior must be the visible bond of fraternal communion, the pivotal point in the community’s search for God’s will, and the sure guide to faithfulness to the Spirit.

### c) *All bound together with God*

Lastly, all — Superiors and confreres — are bound together with God. In the final analysis, in a community there is no one who commands and no one who obeys, but all obey, “even though (they) have different tasks to perform”.<sup>59</sup> In other words,

<sup>55</sup> See *Salesian Const.*, art. 54.

<sup>56</sup> *Id.*, art. 94.

<sup>57</sup> *Id.*, art. 54.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Id.*, art. 94.

all obey a will that transcends them, and that has entrusted them with a mission to be carried out in communion. In fact, the mystery of Christ's obedience to his Father is reflected and fulfilled in each confrere, taken not alone, but in intimate communion with his brothers.

### *Poverty and the value of the Rule*

On account of the relationships and commitments that this bond of charity supposes, it tends by its own nature to pass from an interior bond to a visible and social one, and the Rule is the expression of the commitment we have solemnly taken upon ourselves with our religious profession. In the Foreword to our Constitutions the Rule is rightly defined as "a way that leads to love".

This definition, while underscoring the Rule as a means, indicates also its limitations and value.

First of all, it is "a way to love", not love itself. Love, though it is never set against the law, is by far superior to it, and reaches into the full freedom of the spirit and the kingdom of pure love where no law could ever reach. If love is not the foundation of the observance of the Rule, the spirit of its interpretation and its very goal, then even its most exact observance is nothing, is of no avail.<sup>60</sup>

In reality the Rule is nothing but the codification of the spiritual experience of our Founder, a norm of life which today can bring us to the same love of God and of youth as it brought Don Bosco. This is in fact the most precious heritage of our Congregation — not a letter that becomes old and moldered, but a spirit that carries life and can be vitally transmitted from generation to generation.

The fact that the Rule is "a way to love", rather than belit-

<sup>60</sup> See 1 Cor. 13:2.

ting it, helps us to discover its true value. If in it our vocation's identity is contained and defined and our mutual commitments taken up on profession day are spelled out, then the Rule becomes for us the expression of the will of God, who calls us to live and work in such a way as to become "in our own Salesian way...signs and bearers"<sup>61</sup> of his love for youth.

It is especially because the Rule contains so high values of communion with God and with our brothers, that these are unavoidably compromised whenever it is not observed faithfully. Evidently, not each breach of the Rule compromises those values to the same extent, because there is surely a hierarchy among the values fostered by the Rule. It is also true, however, that every willful, even small, non-observance, every arbitrary, though slight, interpretation is a weakening of the bond that unites us to God. For it is God himself who wills us to carry out the mission he entrusted to us "in brotherly communion", and it is precisely in the faithful and deliberate observance of the Rule that brotherly communion is made real and explicit.

### **Conclusion: Living a life of charity**

Let us now conclude this reflection of ours on the deadly virus of individualism. As you may have noticed, our reflection was to a large extent supported by *Salesian* arguments — and this for a good reason.

It may be useful to call your attention to this point once again: Don Bosco, a man deeply knowledgeable of the human mind and enriched with an exceptional experience of the basic values needed by his sons for their lives and their activities, never ceased insisting on the need of union of minds and souls and the need of curbing one's own individualistic ways.

At the same time he, however, never tired of repeating that

<sup>61</sup> *Salesian Const.*, art. 2.

“in order to become one in heart and soul” all the Salesians — Superiors and confreres alike — must practice that charity from which there derives a joyous and effective solidarity, understanding, cooperation and harmony among the community members.<sup>62</sup> It is up to us, each of us, to accept our holy Founder’s teaching and example.

To all of you my warmest greetings and assurance of a constant memento in my prayers. I kindly ask you to pray for me and for the success of the forthcoming General Chapter.

Sincerely yours,  
Fr. LOUIS RICCERI  
*Rector Major*

<sup>62</sup> MB 15:486.