

1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

Rome

November 24, 1978

Dear Confreres,

A fraternal greeting to you all at the beginning of this new year, which is marked for us by the motto on Don Bosco's Preventive System. It is my earnest hope that every community may be able to deepen its understanding and living practise of what the GC 21 has given us on the salesian educational plan, about which I already spoke to you in my last circular.

The ASC as a Means of Animation

We may say that with the present issue of the ASC, the first of 1979, there begins a new series of the Acts. The SGC in article 149 of the renewed Constitutions had already specified the basic purpose of this "official organ for the promulgation of the Council's directives and for salesian information" committed to the charge of the Secretary General.

Subsequently the GC 21 laid special emphasis on the animating aspect that the Acts should possess "as a sign of unity and as an authoritative interpretation of our identity."¹ They should provide a valid means for the Superior Council's ministry of animating the communities and should offer practical aids

¹ *XXI General Chapter of the Salesian Society*, No. 19 b.

especially as regards the updating of spiritual direction and apostolic criteria for the confreres and communities.²

Looking back over almost 60 years of the Act's history, we see that they were begun with the object of helping to provide a unified service of animation on the part of the Superior Council for the entire Congregation. The spiritual significance of this indispensable ministry of religious authority has recently been described, in adroit ecclesiastical terms, by the document of the Holy See on the mutual relations between Bishops and Religious.³ In presenting (No. 13) the characteristics of the "charismatic" service to be rendered by Superiors to the members of their own Institute, the document confirms especially "their duty of service and leadership within the religious institute in conformity with its distinctive character";⁴ and it goes on to emphasize this office of teaching, stating that "religious superiors have the competency and authority of *spiritual directors* in relation to the evangelical purpose of their institute. In this context, therefore, they must carry on a veritable *spiritual direction* of the entire Congregation and of its individual communities. They should accomplish this in sincere harmony with the authentic magisterium of the hierarchy, realizing that they must carry out a mandate of grave responsibility in the evangelical plan of the Founder."⁵

Further on still the document recalls that "religious superiors have a grave duty, their foremost responsibility in fact, to assure the fidelity of the members to the charism of the Founder, by fostering the renewal prescribed by the Council and required by the times."⁶

² Cf. *ibid.*, No. 61.

³ *Mutuae relationes, Directives for the Mutual Relations Between Bishops and Religious in the Church* (translation by United States Catholic Conference), May 1978.

⁴ *ibid.*, No. 13.

⁵ *ibid.*, No. 13 a.

⁶ *ibid.*, No. 14 c.

Historical Background

In the Congregation from the time of Don Bosco himself, the Superiors have tried to give the confreres directives and guidelines in this sense. On May 24, 1867 Don Bosco wrote in his own hand a letter which may be considered the first of this kind of circular. He wrote: "Before long our Society may be definitely approved. I therefore feel the need frequently to communicate with you, my dear sons. Being unable at times to do so personally, I will try to reach you by letter."⁷

At that time the Congregation numbered 44 professed and 36 novices. Don Bosco had several copies made of his letter and wrote the address and date on each with his own hand. In it he deals with the objectives which each one must have in mind in becoming a salesian. It is completely in accord with what is stated in the recent documents of the Holy See; and the matter is dealt with in so clear and convincing a manner that the letter is a model for circulars in the Acts. I recommend you read it again.

From then on, Don Bosco himself and later Don Rua sent circular letters to the confreres without any fixed periodicity.

On January 24, 1905 Don Rua began the custom of the "Monthly Letter », dated regularly on the twenty-fourth of each month, with contributions by the Rector Major and other Superiors. But in addition he, and more especially Don Albera, wrote circulars and edifying letters of much greater length to meet the needs of the moment.

On June 24, 1920 Don Albera began the "Acts" properly so called.⁸

⁷ MB 8, p. 828; BM (English edition) 8, p. 354.

⁸ An illustrative calendar of the items which preceded and prepared the way for the ASC can be summed up as follows:

He fixed their objective very clearly; in fact he wrote:

To encourage and facilitate the organic development of our pious Society, and to give new life to the spirit of our Father in the minds and hearts of the confreres, the Major Superiors have been accustomed to convey their deliberations and advice by means of Circular Letters.

But he drew attention to the fact that to render these important communications more stable and organic the Superior Council had decided to gather them together periodically in a pamphlet its "Acts", trusting that:

This new method would redound to the benefit of the pious Society, and strengthen still more the bonds uniting the confreres to the Major Superiors, and giving ever new life to the spirit of Don Bosco, which must animate all our works.⁹

A New Series of the Acts Begin

The new Superior Council elected by the GC 21, in the light of various weighty suggestions and keeping in mind the present urgent need for animation, and wishing at the same

1867, May 24: the significant letter of Don Bosco, considered the beginning of the formative circulars to the confreres.

1867-1888: circulars of Don Bosco and other Superiors, without fixed intervals (typed copies exist in the archives).

1888-1905: Don Rua continued the practise of sending circulars at irregular intervals; they are now gathered together in one volume.

1905-1920: Don Rua began the custom of « Monthly Letters », dated regularly on the twenty-fourth of each month, with brief contributions from the Rector Major and the other Superiors (all preserved in the archives). In addition he continued to send edifying letters according to needs and circumstances.

1920, June 24: Number 1 of the Acts of the Superior "Council" was launched by Don Albera. (Cf. ANS, November 1974, p. 20).

⁹ ASC 1920 1, pp. 1-2.

time to adopt a more collegial style in its service to the Congregation, has been studying since the early months of 1978 a certain re-structuring of the Acts, beginning from the new year 1979. Because of the need to preserve the real scope of the "Acts" and in view of the General Chapter's wish to make them a better instrument of communication, the desire was felt to return to a manner of composition and presentation more explicitly "collegial" and this not merely because the responsibility for the guidelines they carry is shared by the whole Council, but also because they are written with the direct collaboration of the Vicar General and various Councillors who are given by the Constitutions themselves the obligation of watching over at the world's level some important aspects of the salesian life of the confreres.

This is the line of approach that was adopted in the original "monthly letters" begun in 1905 and later in the "Acts" themselves from 1920 till the GC 19 of 1965.

Every issue of the new series will consist of two main parts: the first and less stereotyped part will be concerned with the animation of the Congregation by means of a letter of the Rector Major and other substantial contributions from the Vicar General or Councillors, not all of them of course in one and the same issue. The second part will contain decisions and norms, information concerning the activities of the Council and documents of specific salesian interest in line with the proper objectives of the ASC avoiding a duplication of matter with any of our other publications.

Importance of Making Good Use of Them

I would like, dear confreres, that vital importance be accorded in every province and in every community to the ASC with use being made of them on both a personal and community

level¹⁰ as a particularly valid instrument for salesian animation. The GC 21 has reminded us of the importance of this animation with penetrating suggestions and ideas.¹¹

The Superior Council is fully conscious of the delicate mandate it has received from the Congregation and of its responsibility in connection with the ministry of religious authority. It wishes to express its desire to be of service by providing timely and up-to-date animation, immersing its own directives and guidelines in the rich flood of the Father's charism with its ample context of religious spirit and salesian mission. It would hope to be able to provoke attention to our traditions and at the same time to the signs of the times.

It is the particular task of the Rector Major and his Council to be able to lead this urgent work of discernment of complex and ambiguous human realities so as to translate Don Bosco's spirit into the setup of the present day, matching the unchanging values of genuine salesian tradition to new requirements.

We trust that we shall be able to pursue this line with intelligence and proper care!

A Note on the Utilization of the Recent Address of the Pope to the Union of Superiors General¹²

Before concluding I want to offer you some brief thoughts on the address which Pope John Paul II gave this very day to us Superiors General united in a session of study and prayer.

He spoke of the indispensability of Religious Life and the

¹⁰ It should be noted that good community use of the ASC implies on the part of the Rector, or whoever takes his place, skill in choosing what it to be read in common. Not everything in the pages of the Acts is automatically suitable for community spiritual reading.

¹¹ Cf. CG 21 Nos. 46, 584-586.

¹² *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, December 7, 1978.

positive contribution it makes to the work of salvation of all the People of God; without it "the Church would not be fully herself."

There is an urgent need therefore to promote earnestly the values of the Religious Life and see to it that it fulfills its proper function "in the totality of the Church's life at the present day."

To achieve so important an objective, the Holy Father emphasized some important points, and put us on our guard against some well-known traps.

Among the items of great value to be attended to for a reflowering of Religious Life today the Pope lists:

- *The charism of the Founder*, which the Church gratefully takes up not as a relic of the past, but as a source of new and dynamic life for the new age.
- *The gospel clarity of what is meant by following Christ*, not in a spirit of "challenge", but of public "witness" in the Church, nourished by the "spirit of evangelical maximalism, which is different from any socio-political radicalism."
- *Concrete incorporation into ecclesial life*, to be fostered according to the criteria and directives of the document on the mutual relations between Bishops and Religious. In this field the characteristic "way" for Religious, wherever they are in the world, must be considered as being "for the universal Church... in a given local Church...unity with the universal Church is realized in the structures of the local Church!"
- *The primacy of the contemplative dimension*, with particular attention to commitment to prayer. "This", said the Pope, "is an ontological datum which demands to emerge to consciousness and to orientate life, not only for the benefit of the individual person, but also for the advantage of the whole community."

These four main areas of commitment for the authenticity and reflowering of Religious Life must be the object of our study at both a personal and community level; this is what the Vicar of Christ with striking concern asks of us after a careful consideration of the needs and problems of the present day. They are observations and directives offered to us, today's Religious, so that we may truly become in the Church public witnesses to the central place that belongs to God and his saving love, and the urgent need of giving back to "holiness" a particular weight in the community and social scale. And it is by assiduously following this path to specific sanctity, says the Pope, that Religious will be able to avoid certain dangers which are widespread today, as for instance:

- *"the temptation of particularism and oppositions"*, which destroy the unity of Institutes and communities by the growth of pressure groups and harmful polarization;
- *"socio-political radicalization"*; twice the Pope made mention of these and emphasized the point from his own personal experience: "option for the poorest and for every victim of human selfishness" should be a clear indication of "evangelical" concern, quite distinct from temporal projects and ideological radicalizations" which in the long run turn out to be inopportune, self-defeating, and often causes of new forms of tyranny;
- *and secularist attitudes*, by which a Religious mixes with people, questioning "his own religious identity", and obscuring "the specific originality of his own vocation."

Dear confreres, let us treasure these directives which are so concrete and topical, and let us recommend ourselves to the

Virgin Mary that by living them we may bear ever greater witness.

The Pope himself reminded the Superiors General that the Blessed Mother “remains the unsurpassable model of every consecrated life. May She be your guide in the laborious but fascinating ascent towards the ideal of full assimilation with Christ the Lord.”

My cordial greetings to all of you in the spirit of our Founder Don Bosco.

FR. EGIDIUS VIGANÒ,
Rector Major