

1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

THE POPE SPEAKS TO US OF DON BOSCO

Introduction. - The pastoral viewpoint. - The "holiness" perspective. - The Baptismal option and the courage of Confirmation. - Constant entrustment to Mary. - Commitment to vocation. - Central role of the priestly ministry. - The charism of education. - The Gospel and the culture of the common people. - Responsibility of the Salesian Family. - The "true" Don Bosco. Conclusion.

Rome, Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception,
8 December 1988

My dear confreres,

As the Centenary celebrations move towards their close, there is a growing conviction in our heart that as a family we have lived through an intense "Year of grace".

The time is not yet ripe for making an appraisal of it, and in this letter my purpose is solely to draw your attention to one of its particularly significant aspects: the things Pope John Paul II has said and written of Don Bosco in these months of the Jubilee year.

His interventions have been made on the occasion of celebrations of a liturgical or pastoral nature; they do not constitute a systematic study or exhaustive presentation of the figure of Don Bosco; but they express an authoritative synthetic overall view of his unique character as "Saint" and "Founder". These are two objective aspects which

extend beyond his death and his own period. They are of crucial concern to us because they enter into the origin of the particular "charisma" of the Holy Spirit which has been passed on to us "to be lived, preserved, deepened and constantly developed in harmony with the Body of Christ continually in a process of growth".¹

¹ MR 11

It is somewhat unusual for Peter's Successor to express himself with so much interest and grateful attention to the present-day ecclesial relevance of a Saint.

The pastoral viewpoint

In his interventions the Pope's approach is always clearly "pastoral". His starting point is that of his Petrine ministry, i.e. the constant and universal zeal that makes of John Paul II an inexhaustible seeker of ever more adequate apostolic perspectives.

On 30 May last, the Pope invited His Eminence Cardinal Ballestrero, Archbishop of Turin, and the Rector Major to a working lunch. He wanted to talk about his approaching visit to Turin and Colle Don Bosco, together with the details of each stage with its practical pastoral significance. He wanted to go to the Archdiocese in the guise of a pilgrim to the historic places linked with Don Bosco, to proclaim his prophetic message to the local Church, the Salesian Family, and the People of God all over the world, and to emphasize his pastoral labours especially for the benefit of the young.

He listened with interest to each suggestion, approved the somewhat lengthy period of two and a half days allotted to the visit, and desired to go

more deeply into the motivations lying behind each individual event: the administration of the sacrament of Confirmation at the Sports Palace, the 'Good Night' to the young participants in the 'Appraisal DB88', the dialogue with priests and religious, the visit to the Baptistery at Castelnuovo Don Bosco, the solemn celebration at the Becchi with the beatification of the Chilean girl Laura Vicuña and the visit to Mamma Margaret's little house, the meeting at Chieri with the young religious and seminarians, the visit to the State University of Turin for a greatly desired meeting with the world of culture, the festive encounter with the big crowds of young people gathered in the Municipal Stadium, the usual recital of the Rosary on the first Saturday of the month, for transmission by Vatican Radio from the newly restored chapel of Archbishop's House (where Don Bosco had been ordained priest), the visit to the Italian Army Training School to recall the witness of the Officer Francesco Faà di Bruno who had been a friend of Don Bosco, the brief call at the church of St Francis of Assisi where Don Bosco celebrated his first Mass and met Bartholomew Garelli, the address to women Religious in the basilica at Valdocco, the great Eucharist celebrated in the Square of Mary Help of Christians followed by the Sunday Angelus and the visit to Don Bosco's rooms, the encounter in Turin Cathedral with those working in schools, the exhortation with a personal embrace to a fair-sized group of sick people in the Piazzetta Reale, the farewell to the civic authorities and citizens in Piazza Castello, and two meals in salesian houses (at the Becchi and Valdocco), where it would be possible for him to say a few words at the end.

In the previous year, when the Rector Major

had asked the Pope if it would be proper to offer him some background material for a letter commemorating the Centenary, he replied: "Don Bosco is one of the Church's great Saints; I do indeed want to write such a letter to relaunch his important and prophetic message, so relevant to the present day".

The Holy Father's interventions arise simultaneously from deeply felt pastoral concern and from an intimate personal feeling of gratitude to Don Bosco. He admires his stature as Saint and Founder, as a gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church; he is convinced of his prophetic greatness; he is in harmony with his predilection for youth; he admires his original method of education to the faith, his oratory criterion and sensitivity towards the world of work, his openness to the laity, his involvement of women, his bold universal sense and predilection for the poor and little ones of the lower classes. It pleased him especially to emphasize Don Bosco's intense and practical Marian devotion, so strongly ecclesial in form and having special relevance in difficult times.

A careful reading of the Pope's Letter of 31 January and of his September addresses invites us to go back to our sources and drink from their pure crystal-clear waters, so that the Centenary may provide us with a powerful stimulus to renew the quality of our pastoral work.

We should indeed be grateful to the Holy Father for helping us to be more authentically Salesians among the People of God in its pilgrimage through history.

Let us listen once again to the exhortation contained in his Letter "Iuvenum Patris": "'Don Bosco ritorna' ('Don Bosco return again') is a traditional

hymn of the Salesian Family: it expresses the fervent hope and desire of a 'return of Don Bosco' and of a 'return to Don Bosco', so as to be educators able to preserve our fidelity of old, and at the same time be attentive, as he was himself, to the thousand and one needs of today's youth, so as to find in his legacy the starting point for a present-day response to their difficulties and expectations".²

² IP 13

The Pope has also taught us to speak in familiar fashion with our dear Founder: several times he addressed him in terms like: "Dear Saint John Bosco!", and used the Italian second person singular form of address as with personal friends; he called him a man of "spiritual flair", one "with a great heart".

The "Holiness" perspective

Don Bosco can be studied under many different aspects but, for the Pope, what sums up all of them and gives them their overall significance is that of "holiness". He sees him as a truly gifted man but completely docile to the Holy Spirit, under whose action he gave rise to a particular kind of evangelical witness very much attuned to the present time.

"I want especially to consider in Don Bosco the fact that he realized his personal holiness through an educative commitment lived with zeal and an apostolic heart, and that at the same time he knew how to propose holiness as the practical objective of his pedagogy".³ This is where we have to look for the "prophetic message which he has left to his followers and to the Church".⁴

³ *ibid* 5

⁴ *ibid* 8

"In the Church and in the world the integral

educative vision that we see incarnated in John Bosco is a realistic pedagogy of sanctity. We need to get back to the true concept of 'holiness' as a component of the life of every believer. The originality and boldness of the plan for a 'youthful holiness' is intrinsic to the educational art of this great Saint, who can rightly be called the 'master of youth spirituality'".⁵

⁵ *ibid* 16

All holiness must be seen in the light of the real presence in history of the Holy Spirit: "The powerful though hidden efficacy of the Spirit is directed to bringing about the maturity of humanity on the model of Christ. He is (in fact) the animator of the birth of the new man and the new world".⁶

⁶ *ibid* 20

The Holy Spirit too is a creator of great originality; he can never be confined in a preconceived scheme; he gives rise in every Saint to a quite unique work of art, especially when he wants to make of him the harbinger of a special way of living the Gospel to be followed by many others.

The Pope says of Don Bosco that "his stature as a Saint gives him a unique place among the great Founders of religious Institutes in the Church".⁷

⁷ *ibid* 5

He considers him therefore as the initiator of a charism whose "distinctive character also involves a particular style of sanctification and apostolate which creates a definite tradition so that its objective elements can be easily recognized".⁸

⁸ MR 11

This perspective of Don Bosco's "holiness" has been sketched out by the Pope following some fundamental stages of the action of the Holy Spirit in his life.

The baptismal option and the courage of confirmation

At Castelnuovo and at the Sports Palace of Turin John Paul II spoke of the young John Bosco's baptism and confirmation.

As is well known, the Baptistry of the parish church of Castelnuovo is the place where several great witnesses to the Gospel were reborn to christian life; outstanding among them is Don Bosco. The Holy Father explained and emphasized what had been at the root of their holiness and their fundamental option for Christ: "The Second Vatican Council reminds us", he said, "that the call to holiness has its original source in baptism".⁹

⁹ Address Castelnuovo 4

This option involves a work of education on the part of parents and the parish community: "Your ancestors knew how to live the christian faith in a personal and communal way, in the conviction that educational work for one's children is the first and essential form of the apostolate. This is a strong and significant tradition among your people".¹⁰

¹⁰ *ibid* 4

And here the Holy Father drew attention to the wise daily care of Mamma Margaret which had so great an influence on John's baptismal growth, in particular as he prepared for his First Communion. He quoted Don Bosco's own words from his Memoirs: "My mother set out to prepare me as best she could and knew how. During Lent she sent me every day to catechism; then she took me to confession three times; I was examined, and passed. 'John', she told me repeatedly, 'God is preparing a great gift for you; make sure you prepare yourself well for it; make your confession and do not keep anything back in it'. That morning she accompanied me to the holy table and made the prepara-

tion and act of thanksgiving with me, giving me the advice that a mother knows to be appropriate for her children".¹¹

¹¹ *ibid* 4

In the homily he gave at the Sports Palace during the Eucharist at which he confirmed some 800 young people (in the presence of all the Piedmontese Bishops), the Pope recalled that this sacrament is the personal Pentecost of every christian: "Today you have been 'seized' by the Holy Spirit to be his courageous witnesses in the defence of the faith and the practice of the christian life".¹²

¹² Add Sports Palace 9

Referring later to John Bosco (who was confirmed at Buttigliera) he declared that the reception of this sacrament had been the "decisive moment of his life, of his personal story, a story of holiness".¹³

¹³ Sports Palace, before final blessing

He emphasized the "great availability to the Holy Spirit's action" in John Bosco's life. There is to be found "the whole explanation of his exceptional life".¹⁴

¹⁴ *ibid* 6

"The special 'capacity of the saints' consists in their ability to radiate God through their lives".¹⁵

¹⁵ *ibid* 1

Constant entrustment to Mary

We know that John Paul II considers Mary as the Spouse and Collaborator of the Holy Spirit, as "She who believed" and who after her Assumption into heaven accompanies men as a mother as they grow constantly in faith.

The Holy Father has insisted more than once on this efficacious presence of the Blessed Virgin in the life of Don Bosco, who always practised a deep filial devotion to her in return. For the Pope Don Bosco is one of the great devotees of Our Lady in

the Church: he used to call her, in fact, the "Mother and Foundress" of his works.

In his meeting with the priests and religious the Holy Father declared: "Don Bosco had a great devotion to the Madonna; like all here in Turin he venerated Our Lady of Consolation with filial love. During difficult times of attacks against the Church and her pastors he revived devotion to Mary Help of Christians, whom he also called 'Mother of the Church'. He wanted this very church to be a sign of the absolute certainty of Mary's intervention in the vicissitudes of history; to her he dedicated the institute of Sisters whom, as a 'living monument', he wished to be called 'Daughters of Mary Help of Christians'. From childhood his priestly vocation had Our Lady as its pole star; his pastoral effectiveness and apostolic daring had their deep and authentic root in this sure confidence in her".¹⁶

¹⁶ Addl to priests etc.

The Holy Father recalled the presence of Mary in Don Bosco's "dreams"; her continual assistance; the notion of her strict linkage with the mystery of the Church; her powerful aid in its mission ("Star of evangelization"); her care for growth in holiness; her loving solicitude in the work of education.

As well as the building of the basilica at Valdocco, the Pope drew attention also to the big painting of Mary Help of Christians, which contains an explicit Marian message of apostolate. In this sense he spoke of entrustment to her for the realization of the motherly apostolic task of the Church: "The Church's maternal role needs holy, docile and prayerful interpreters like Don Bosco, especially in educating young people to the faith".¹⁷

¹⁷ Angelus 2; homily final Mass; other addresses passim

In the Letter "Iuvenum Patris" the Holy Father had already recalled that for Don Bosco the work of education was a "motherly function of the

Church", and that "through the centuries Mary continues to be a maternal presence".¹⁸ When you look at Don Bosco and make an objective analysis of his holiness, you find it impossible to separate the action of the Holy Spirit from the solicitous and uninterrupted intervention of Mary. 18 IP 20

Commitment to vocation

In the Cathedral of Chieri the Pope spoke to a large number of young men and women who "have answered 'yes' to the Lord's special call and are preparing to build their whole life on that response".¹⁹

¹⁹ Address Chieri 1

He told them: "The young John Bosco, who in the last century walked these same streets and lived under this sky will certainly be an inspiration for you. During his years at Chieri he laid the foundations of his mission. He understood that it could not be undertaken without spiritual and cultural preparation, nor can it be continued without the interior strength that comes from an ascetical journey and constructive relationships within a community, nor without the interior strength that comes from prayer and the sacraments".²⁰

²⁰ *ibid* 1

In those years "the Lord led John Bosco progressively to develop a 'new mentality': to fashion that theological and spiritual synthesis of culture and the gospel message which is characteristic of his spirituality and seems to be one of the primary needs of our time".

Here "he patiently prepared himself to be a communicator of the Gospel"; here "he developed that maturity of relationships which became the fruitful source of his Oratory and the heart of the

educational experience which later he would call the 'preventive system'. He perceived that the Gospel could be proclaimed only by one who loves and has learned to invest love with immediately legible and perceptible signs".²¹

²¹ *ibid* 3, 4

"On the day he received the clerical cassock, he outlined a life plan to which he committed himself by promises. 'I went', he wrote, 'in front of an image of the Blessed Virgin. I read it to her and after praying, I made a formal promise to the Heavenly Benefactress to observe it at any cost'. And a little later, 'at the foot of Our Lady's altar', he took a vow of chastity, to put all the strength of his love at the service of Christ".²²

²² *ibid* 2

In this way the Holy Father presented to those young people a Don Bosco of their own age as an outstanding example of the welcome acceptance of his vocation and of constancy in it, and indeed as a "vocational invitation" for all the young; in fact "faith answers the many immense questions of youth, and in order to be young it is not at all necessary to forget the Gospel, nor is it necessary to extinguish the ardour of youth in order to be a christian. Tell them that faith and happiness are not in competition with one another, but are different names for the same goal".²³

²³ *ibid* 5

Central role of the priestly ministry

On the morning of Saturday 3 September John Paul had a meeting with the Piedmontese priests and religious in the basilica at Valdocco and spoke to them about priestly ministry. He reminded them that they had "a privileged vocation among the People of God. If it be genuinely followed, abund-

ant fruits spring up for all the faithful; if it suffers a crisis, both the life of the ecclesial communities and the necessary leaven which they should provide in society will be endangered".²⁴

²⁴ Address Priests 1

He explained why he was concentrating his reflections "on the priestly vocation; our meditation on it will serve the other consecrated persons also".²⁵ Priests "are given the grace by God to be the ministers of Jesus Christ; the object for which they strive in their ministry and by their whole existence is the glory of God the Father and the growth of men and women in the divine life. To achieve this fundamental purpose they need many virtues and a true programme of spirituality".²⁶

²⁵ *ibid* 1

²⁶ *ibid* 1

The priest is "consecrated" to do things that far outstrip his personal capacity. The power of Christ's Spirit surrounds him and sends him "to be an authentic minister of God's word, a sanctifier through the Eucharist and the other sacraments, and a teacher of the faith among believers. All this involves various duties in the fields of culture and development as well. In fact the Good News brought by Christ is not something added on from outside the human situation, but must be sown and cultivated internally; it must grow from within as an essential part of the integral person, and as an indispensable force in his life. The separation of the Gospel from culture is always a tragedy for humanity".²⁷

²⁷ *ibid* 1

The manifold activities involved in the ministry of the priest require in his existence "the witness of a true unity in a higher synthesis of life". In this regard Don Bosco is an outstanding model.

"Look at the great priestly figure of Don Bosco! The dominant feature of his life and mission was the very strong sense of his own identity as a

Catholic priest according to God's heart. Not for nothing has the name by which he is more frequently known remained simply 'Don' Bosco. We cannot look at him without being moved by his intense conviction that God wished him to be a priest, without becoming lost in admiration at his penetrating understanding of the genuine values of the priestly consecration".²⁸ This consecration by Holy Orders implies a vital and intimate involvement of the priest's person with the ministry he has received, which affects and pervades his whole existence. "Certainly the priestly ministry is not identified with the priest's person"; but "the adjusting of one's person to this ministry, and the carrying out each day of this spiritual process of identification with greater clarity and intensity, represent in synthesis the unity of life and holiness in the priestly ministry".²⁹

The Pope believes that Don Bosco's first great intuition was precisely the sense of being a collaborator of the Apostles by divine consecration: "In him there was no distinction between the time to be given to God and that to be devoted to activities, to the boys, to the duties of the apostolate".³⁰

And here the Pope takes up the mutual and inseparable connection between consecration and mission, "which are not two opposite poles, but are based on the higher harmony of pastoral charity, which brings with it a vital and wonderful grace of unity. In fact, for the priest the mission is a part of that very consecration, and the ministerial action is in its turn a practical manifestation of interiority. The Lord consecrates and sends; apostolic action is the fruit of pastoral charity".³¹

One cannot discover the secret that animated Don Bosco, the "Saint and Founder", without a

²⁸ *ibid* 1

²⁹ *ibid* 2

³⁰ *ibid* 2

³¹ *ibid* 4

deep and careful analysis of his conditions as a priest, a "minister of Christ" and "steward of God's mysteries".³² He is a priest everywhere, as he himself said in 1866 to the President of the Council of Ministers, Bettino Ricasoli, who had invited him to the Pitti palace in Florence, then the provisional capital of the Kingdom of Italy.³³

³² cf 1 Cor 4,1³³ cf Add Priests 1

The charisma of education

The priestly commitment, the Pope reminds us, excludes no one; it includes all. Nevertheless Don Bosco's name "remains unmistakably linked to that special educational charism which makes him rightly known as "the saint of youth". This characteristic gives priests reasons for reflection which today take on dramatic urgency".³⁴

³⁴ *ibid* 4

In the homily he gave on the occasion of the solemn beatification of Laura Vicuña at the Becchi (which he officially recognized as the "Hill of the Youth Beatitudes"), John Paul II developed his reflections on Don Bosco priest and educator, a theme he had already treated in depth in the letter "Iuvenum Patris". This is the clearest legacy the Saint has left us. Like the apostle John, he has written us by his apostolic life "a living letter in the hearts of youth. He wrote it in this exultation which is given to the little ones and to the lowly in the Holy Spirit. And this living letter continues to be written in the hearts of young people whom the heritage of the holy educator of Turin reaches. Such a letter becomes particularly clear and eloquent when, from one generation to another from this heritage new saints and blessed are born".³⁵

³⁵ Homily, Becchi 1, 2

The Pope found in this the great "prophetic

message of St John Bosco the educator", his originality and brilliance, linked with "the educational method which he himself called the 'preventive system'. In a certain sense this represents the quintessence of his pedagogical wisdom and constitutes the prophetic message which he has left to his followers and to the Church.³⁶

³⁶ IP 8

The "preventive" dimension of the system has for the Pope a very practical significance. "The intention of foreseeing and preventing anything that might give rise to negative experiences" involves "deep intuitions, precise options and methodological criteria, such as: the art of positive education by putting forward what is good through appropriate experiences which are attractive because of their splendour and lofty nature; the art of producing growth in young persons 'from within' by appealing to their inner freedom to oppose external conditioning and formalism; the art of winning the heart of young people so as to inculcate in them a joyful and satisfied attraction to what is good, correcting deviations and preparing them for the future by means of a solid character formation. Evidently this pedagogical message supposes in the educator the conviction that in every young person, no matter how far he may seem to be from the straight and narrow, there are hidden sources of good which if properly stimulated can lead to an option for faith and honesty".³⁷

³⁷ *ibid* 8

And John Paul II goes on to make a deeper analysis of "what the Saint summed up in the well known threefold formula: 'reason, religion, loving kindness'".³⁸

³⁸ *ibid* 10, 11, 12

It is a question of pedagogical criteria "which are not things of the past"; certainly the educational message of Don Bosco "needs to be studied

at still greater depth, to be adapted and renewed with intelligence and courage, precisely because of changed social, cultural, ecclesial and pastoral contexts. Nevertheless the substance of his teaching remains intact: the unique nature of his spirit, his intuitions, his style, his charisma are unchanged, because they draw their inspiration from the transcendent pedagogy of God. He is relevant to the present day for another reason too: he teaches us to integrate the permanent values of tradition with 'new solutions' so as to meet in a creative fashion the newly emerging requests and problems: he continues to be our teacher in the present difficult times, and suggests a 'new education' which is at once both creative and faithful".³⁹

³⁹ *ibid* 13

By virtue of the energy inherent in his pastoral charity, Don Bosco was able to "establish a synthesis between evangelizing activity and educational work. His concern for the evangelization of his boys was not limited to catechesis alone, nor to liturgy alone, nor to those religious practices which call for an explicit exercise of faith and lead to it, but covered the whole vast sector of the youth condition. It forms an integral part therefore of the process of human formation, not losing sight of defects but at the same time optimistic about progressive maturing, in the conviction that the word of the Gospel must be sown in the reality of their daily living so as to lead the boys to a generous commitment of themselves in life. Since they are living through a period of particular importance for their education, the saving message of the Gospel must sustain them throughout the educational process, and faith must become the unifying and enlightening element of their personality".

At the end of the eucharistic celebration at the

Becchi, the Holy Father took his leave of those present in words expressing his great admiration for Don Bosco the educator.

Here "the entire Church joins the Salesian Family in pilgrimage. I too have come to thank Divine Providence for this great gift given to us a hundred years ago for the whole Church, for the benefit of youth and of the whole Catholic community, not only in Piedmont here in Italy but in so many other countries and environments in every continent. I bring too my personal gratitude because I also lived for five or six years in a salesian parish. And when I find myself here at Colle Don Bosco, on this 'Hill of the Beatitudes', when I look at the imposing facade of this great church, it brings to my mind that of another church, not unlike this one from an architectural point of view: the parish church of Saint Stanislaus Kostka in Cracow. There Don Bosco's charisma touched me through the Salesians, his spiritual sons. And so I too come here in pilgrimage with all of you to give thanks for the part played by St John Bosco, his spiritual Family and his charism in my life. I want to express my gratitude in union with all of you here present, from Piedmont, Chile, Argentina and Latin America in general, from so many other countries from every continent of the world with their great variety of languages. I express my gratitude today here at the place where Don Bosco was born, near the little house where he lived with his mother Mamma Margaret, and where his vocation had its origins".

Don Bosco's educational brilliance, declared the Pope, is most clearly seen in his love for the young: "to be able to educate, you must first love".

To the educators gathered in Turin Cathedral the Holy Father emphasized Don Bosco's genius in

bridging the gap between human civilization and christian faith. Because of his love he became the "father and teacher of youth", "the missionary of the young".

They must be able to preserve this kind of pedagogical charity; they needed to revive a "precious and historical patrimony and possess the grace to have it flourish anew":⁴¹ a love that is deeply sensitive and "able to re-establish the alliance of science and wisdom. It is necessary, therefore, to recover the awareness of the primacy of truth and perennial values of the human person as such. And for all this it is equally necessary to reaffirm with Don Bosco the conviction that in every young person there are reserves of good and interior qualities which, if opportunely stimulated, can give wisdom to man".⁴²

⁴¹ Add educators 1

⁴² *ibid* 4

Like him they must put forward holiness as the concrete objective of christian education. "What a great demand there is for an educator to be able to convince each of his disciples that he is called to holiness! Be concerned, therefore, to make the Gospel visible in your daily life. Only in that way can you have an evangelical influence on the students whom you teach".⁴³

⁴³ *ibid* 7

For the Holy Father, therefore, Don Bosco is an outstanding model of pastoral charity in the cultural environment of education.

There is need too, added the Pope, to foster the responsibility of parents: "the time of associations of christian parents has come at last!" Education, in fact, "is always the emanation of fatherhood and motherhood". And here too he made another genial reference to Mamma Margaret: "everyone should note what an importance Mamma Margaret had in the life of Saint John Bosco. Not only did

she give the Oratory at Valdocco that characteristic 'family spirit' that still exists today, but she was able to mould the heart of her young son John into that goodness and tenderness which was to make him the friend and father of his poor boys".⁴⁴

⁴⁴ *ibid* 8

The Gospel and the culture of the common people

In his address to the academic community of the Turin State University, Pope John Paul dealt with the topic, which he has much at heart, of culture and the urgent need for human education and the overall formation of the individual.

"The university was conceived as a particular 'community' from the beginnings of this institution in the Middle Ages". It is called to realize the "difficult synthesis of the universality of knowledge and the necessity of specialization". It "must serve the education of the person. The presence of even the most prestigious cultural means and instruments would be worthless if they were not accompanied by a clear vision of the essential and teleological objective of a university: the comprehensive formation of the human person, viewed in his constitutive and original dignity and in his true end".⁴⁵ He went on to recall that the cause of humanity will best be served if science is allied to conscience. "In this substantial mission the duties of the Athenaeum meet those of the Church. Church and University, therefore, must not be strangers to each other, but close and allied. Both of them are dedicated, each in its own way and method, to the search for truth, to the progress of the spirit, to universal values, to the integral development of the human person. An increased mutual understanding

⁴⁵ *Add University* 2, 3, 4

between them cannot but lead to the achievement of these noble goals which unite them".⁴⁶

* *ibid* 4

And here the Holy Father introduced his remarks on Don Bosco, "the promoter of a solid popular culture, which forms the civil and professional consciences of citizens involved in society". This Saint, "despite his incredibly vast activity, was able to cultivate in himself a solid cultural preparation, joined to his felicitous gifts of literary expression which enabled him to carry out a noteworthy apostolate. He felt strongly the urge to elaborate a culture which was not the privilege of a few, or something remote from the evolving social reality".

Don Bosco "further showed an extraordinary interest in the world of work. He had the far-sighted concern to give the young generations a professional competence and an adequate technical training, especially in a city like Turin and a region like Piedmont which, through advanced centres of industrial production, have spread the scientific creations and discoveries of the Italian genius on a global scale. Notable also was his concern to promote an ever more discerning education to social responsibility, on the basis of increased personal dignity to which the christian faith not only gives legitimacy but also gives energy with incalculable implications".⁴⁷

⁴⁷ *ibid* 5

Here we have an authoritative reflection of great value on an aspect which is certainly characteristic of Don Bosco, whose mission to youth and the common people forms part of the living environment in which the Gospel is an enlightening and purifying cultural stimulus, in particular in connection with social communication among people.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ cf C 6, 7, 29, 33, 43

Responsibility of the salesian family

On several occasions when the Holy Father has spoken of Don Bosco's charism, he has referred to the Salesian Family which is its guardian and which transmits its living tradition. He had already insisted to the members of the General Council that all Salesians should be, like their Founder, "missionaries of the young".

In his September pilgrimage he spoke of this heritage, which must be rendered fruitful, especially in his homily at the Eucharist celebrated in the Square of Mary Help of Christians: "Dear Saint, how much we need your great charism! Although you left us a hundred years ago, we feel your presence in our 'today' and in our 'tomorrow'".⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Final homily 8

He reminded the Salesian Family that they were the bearers of the "spiritual heritage of the Founder"; a heritage which is "strongly engrafted in the Church".

Don Bosco educated his collaborators to let themselves be enfolded by the "mystery of the child", so well presented in the Gospel (Mt 18,5). This had been Don Bosco's charism: to welcome young people in the name of Christ. "For him, to be an educator meant to embody and reveal the love of Christ, to express the constant and gratuitous love of Jesus for the lowly and the poor, and to develop in them the ability to receive and give affection".⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Ibid 4

He insisted with his followers: "let each one strive to make himself loved"; and in that there is an indispensable attitude of pedagogical spirituality. "Active and wise charity, a reflection and fruit of the charity of Christ, was for John Bosco the golden rule, the secret impetus allowing him to face

privation, humiliation, opposition and persecution in order to give bread, shelter, teaching and especially health of soul to the young. It enabled him to help the little ones achieve and appreciate 'with enthusiasm and love' the tiring tasks necessary for the formation of their personalities".⁵¹ He insisted continually on the importance of "letting oneself be guided by a great trust in God", which had sustained him in all his far from easy undertakings. "He is your model, a humble and trusting man, and hence strong and full of divine courage, of the holy courage to face life".

⁵¹ *ibid* 5

The educator who loves much, said the Pope, "must have great trust. The person who does a lot of work must remain continuously in the presence of God".⁵²

⁵² *ibid* 7

When speaking to women religious gathered in the basilica he had already emphasized the importance of union with God in Don Bosco's lived experience: "he gave witness throughout his existence to the primacy of the interior life. He wonderfully combined this primacy with intense activity for others, a generous and joyous service, both tireless and radical, which allowed his communion with the Lord to shine through".⁵³

⁵³ Add women relig 2

But in his homily the Pope left some specific recommendations to the Salesian Family, called to "accept generously the mission and service of educating youth which you inherited from Don Bosco".⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Final homily 8

And his recommendations are three in number:

1. *"Face courageously and with a ready spirit the sacrifices that work among the young requires. Don Bosco used to say that one must be ready to suffer the difficulties, troubles, ingratitude, anxieties, needs and carelessness of the young so*

as not to break the tender reed, or snuff out the smoking wick”.

2. “In a special way, the Salesian Family has been entrusted with the task of knowing youth, of being in the Church animators of a particular apostolate oriented especially towards the service of catechesis”.
3. “It is the particular task of the sons and daughters of Don Bosco to incarnate a spirituality of mission among the young, while always keeping in mind that the personality of the young person is modelled after the figure of his educator”.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ *ibid* 8

We may add that John Paul II, who admits to his “passionate predilection for the young”⁵⁶, has given us a lesson in how to speak to young people at the present day, both in his ‘Good Night’ to the participants in “Appraisal DB88” and in his address at the Municipal Stadium.

⁵⁶ Add educators 2

He exhorted them to be “brave, convinced and open to hope”,⁵⁷ and he spoke to them of deep and demanding topics: “youth and the choice for Christ”, “youth and the Church”, “youth and moral values”, “youth and social involvement”.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Good Night, “Appraisal DB88”

⁵⁸ Add Stadium

Don Bosco’s heritage indeed calls urgently on all the Salesian Family to “study attentively the world of the young in order continually to update appropriate pastoral methods, while keeping attentively and lovingly in focus the aspirations, value judgements, conditions, situations in life, environmental models, tensions, claims, and collective proposals of the constantly evolving world of youth”.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Final homily 8

The "True" Don Bosco

These reflections of John Paul II certainly reveal in its truest and deepest aspects the ecclesial importance of Don Bosco as the originator of a prodigious and practical "spiritual tradition". One cannot in fact consider him at the present day without taking into account his spirit which is actively present in every continent.

Don Bosco the Founder has begun this "living tradition", not by cleverly subjugating young people of weak personality, but by forming in them, through living transmission and by hearkening with docility and intelligence to the Holy Spirit, clear and firm convictions, new evangelical attitudes, educational and pastoral criteria, active creativity and good will in living together, which served to enrich their exceptional personal qualities: think, for instance, of Rua, Cagliari, Fagnano, Lasagna, Albera, Rinaldi, Lemoyne, etc.

Reading the Pope's reflections will also help us to avoid certain reductive tendencies to which we might give way if we prescind from his holiness and charism as Founder.

It has been said that "the true Don Bosco is greater than the Don Bosco of history!" It is a phrase that could be misunderstood, but it can also be interpreted intelligently without possible equivocal oversensitivity. There can be, in fact, a kind of "scholarly superficiality", locked in its methods of exclusively human reasoning which, although of value and to some extent objective, does not deal with the question exhaustively, because it does not come to grips with the secret sources of greatness of a Holy Founder. For a believer it is clear that you cannot get an objective idea of the "true"

reality of a Saint if you prescind from the action of the Holy Spirit and the continuous living tradition (faithfully relaunched after Vatican II) later continued with enthusiasm by the best of his disciples.

The believer goes beyond the instruments, valid though they be, of human reasoning. The liturgy, for example, which is an expression of the authenticity of the christian faith, proclaims the "truth" about Christ and the objectivity of his mystery, even though not making use of scientific opinions (on which, incidentally, it in no way looks down). Thus, anyone wanting to make a judgement on the real presence of the Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharist from the sole approach of chemistry or physics, would be starting from way behind scratch, even though those sciences are indispensable.

Faith teaches us that the Holy Spirit intervenes effectively in history, with his ineffable power and unpredictable creativity. St Paul, preaching the paradox of "Christ crucified", forcefully exclaims: "It is written: 'I shall destroy the wisdom of the wise and bring to nothing all the learning of the learned'. When God showed us his wisdom, the world, with all its wisdom, could not find its way to God. We preach Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. When I came among you I did so in all simplicity. It was with distrust of myself, full of anxious fear, that I approached you. My preaching, my message depended on no persuasive language devised by human wisdom, but rather on the proof I gave you of spiritual power; God's power, not man's wisdom, was to be the foundation of your faith".⁶⁰

The liturgical and pastoral style of the Holy Father in his interventions on Don Bosco helps us to

⁶⁰ 1 Cor 1,18 - 2,5

deepen our understanding of the more fundamental and living part of the truth about him, his spiritual and pastoral heritage, his unique evangelical way of following Christ.

In this way we see him more clearly as a “sign and bearer of the love of God for young people”.⁶¹

⁶¹ C 2

Conclusion

In conclusion, dear confreres, I exhort you to lend an attentive ear to this Pope who invites us to rediscover to the full Don Bosco’s spirit, and to make practical resolutions. This was our objective on 14 May when we solemnly renewed our profession.

In the evening of 3 September, a day that had been full of deep emotions, while we were at supper in the refectory at Valdocco and were talking with admiration about the events in which we had taken part, a Bishop from a far-distant diocese and who was sitting in front of me summed up his impressions as follows”

“For me it is as though Don Bosco’s charisma has begun today. I am thinking of Vatican II which has cleared away the dust and released the brakes. And I have been struck by this extraordinary and courageous John Paul II who, right here where everything began, has launched us towards the third millennium”.

I thought it was an inspired assessment, and I leave it to you as a theme for reflection and for your future aspirations.

May Don Bosco from heaven intercede in gratitude for this Pope, who has contributed so much to his Centenary, and obtain for us a youthful spirit

and tireless pastoral creativity.

It will be "the most precious gift we can offer to the young".⁶²

⁶² C 25

I wish you all a fruitful New Year.

Cordially in the Lord,

Don F. Viganò

**List of the homilies and addresses of John Paul II
in his pilgrimage to the historic places linked with Don Bosco
2-4 September 1988**

- Homily during the Confirmation Mass in the Turin Sports Palace (2 September).
- “Good Night” to the young participants in “Appraisal DB88” (2 September).
- Address at the meeting with Priests and Religious in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians at Valdocco (3 September).
- Address during the visit to the Baptistry in the parish church of Castelnuovo Don Bosco (3 September).
- Homily during the concelebration at the Becchi (“Hill of the youth beatitudes”) with the beatification of Laura Vicuña (3 September).
- Brief conversation after lunch in the refectory of the salesian community at Colle Don Bosco (3 September).
- Address to seminarians, young religious and aspirants in the Cathedral at Chieri (3 September).
- Address at the meeting with the world of culture at the Turin State University (3 September).
- Long dialogue with 70,000 young people gathered in the Municipal Stadium (3 September).
- Greetings address during the visit to the Italian Army Training School at Turin (4 September).
- [Greetings address in writing during the brief visit to the church of St Francis of Assisi in Turin (4 September).]
- Meditation for women Religious gathered in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians at Valdocco (4 September).
- Homily during the Mass celebrated in the Square of Mary Help of Christians (4 September).
- Brief address at the Sunday “Angelus” after the Mass (4 September).
- Family conversation after lunch in the refectory of the salesian community at Valdocco (4 September).
- Address to educators gathered in Turin Cathedral (4 September).
- Exhortation at meeting with the sick in Piazzetta Reale, Turin (4 September).
- Farewell address to the civic authorities and crowds of Turin citizens in Piazza Castello (4 September).