

For the kind attention of the members
of the SDB XXVII General Chapter
and the FMA XXIII General Chapter

PRO MEMORIA
in connection with the preservation of our cultural heritage

First and foremost we wish to thank the Superiors and Provincials for the interest they have shown in the participation of SDB and FMA in the activities of the Cultural Association for Salesian History (ACSSA Associazione Cultori di Storia Salesiana). This association was formed in 1996 on the initiative of the Salesian Historical Institute (ISS) and approved by the Rector Major, Fr. J.E. Vecchi, with the on-going support of the FMA Superior General.

Between 2011 and 2013 there have been five international seminars on the History of the Salesian Work organized in collaboration with the Salesian Historical Institute (ISS); these have taken place in Karen-Nairobi, Kenya; Belo Horizonte, Brazil; Benediktbeuern, Germany; Cebu, Philippines; and Bangalore, India. The theme of each was *The state of Salesian historiography in the region. Preservation and utilization of cultural heritage*. This gave the opportunity to reflect on the production, conservation and use of the SDB and FMA Salesian memory and that of other groups within the Salesian Family. From the sense of responsibility towards our Congregations, some considerations have emerged which we now submit to your attention. They reflect the point of view of anyone concerned with history who, of necessity, needs to make use of the documentation preserved in the archives.

We like to remember that we are the heirs of a 'Historian Father', and therefore we have to do our best not only to preserve but, above all, to make use of the patrimony of our past memory and to make it known in an interesting way to today's world. It firmly belongs in the New Evangelization. We hope to be inspired by Don Bosco's attitude; he knew how to foster this dimension in his own formation and was committed to writing history to promote the good of the young. We are sons and daughters of a father who loved the family memories in order to nourish the sense of belonging to the congregation and trust in life, always under the guidance of a provident Father.

HISTORY – IDENTITY

In order to mould, consolidate and renew Salesian identity a knowledge of its history is indispensable, beginning with the first tentative stages to the full grown mission. Bearing this in mind, it is important to strengthen in the formation programmes of the various years, the study of the history of Don Bosco's Work and that of his sons and daughters so as to understand also the

history of the province in which those in formation are called, in their turn, to be active members once they have absorbed this history in a correct way so that it becomes 'their' history.

The close link between history and spirituality is fundamental to our religious life and must be always borne in mind. The study of history allows us to understand how the Salesian charism has developed in a specific way in each context. It also shows us what contribution it has brought to a tradition and culture, through both its merits and its limitations. When these are recognized they can aid reflection on today's choices and strategies.

Conducting research into Salesian history also means *offering a service to the local church and to civil society*, because it shows how the Congregation (the Provinces) has contributed to the growth of the local church and the country (even while enduring its conditioning factors). The well known Burk-inabé historian, Joseph Ki-Zerbo, wrote that 'despite all the ambiguity surrounding the missionary era, coinciding as it did with colonialism, no one can deny that the Christian missions have been one of the main stimuli in the social, intellectual and moral evolution of the African countries'¹. This holds good for all contexts although in different ways. The study of this past is therefore required, reaching beyond the phase of oral reminiscences, subject as they often are to bias and lack of precision. An accurate reconstruction cannot be overlooked; among other things it helps to clarify the deep motives of unity among the members who are increasingly international but gathered together by a shared spirit.

But no history can be written without recourse to the sources. At a certain point in the life of religious institutions (such as a Province) there arises the need to investigate their own origins in order to look to the future with a long term view and strategic choices, faithful to one's identity and not just intent on responding to emergencies. The present and the future are rooted in the past. During winter times, it is precisely these roots that prepare a new spring-time. The archives, therefore, inasmuch as they preserve the sources, are of fundamental importance. Every Province (pre-province, delegation) should carry out an evaluation of the state of the archive in the area for which it is responsible. Big improvements can be made without excessive expenditure. Future generations of our congregations will be grateful for the way in which we have preserved the memories of the past (which for them will mean what is present for us).

From the exchange of experiences among the members of ACSSA some problems have emerged which we point out, trying also to indicate some solutions, well aware that they demand concrete and different decisions according to one's institutional responsibilities.

¹ Joseph KI-ZERBO, *Storia dell'Africa nera*. Paris, Hatier 1979, 439.

THE GENERAL SITUATION: A PROBLEMATIC PICTURE

a. At provincial level: Despite repeated pressing requests on the part of the Salesian Historical Institute, with few exceptions, much needs to be done in the care of the provincial Archives, both in relation to the personnel responsible for them and to the structures which are necessary for suitable conservation of the heritage. On the whole, urgent action is required to awaken consciences to the need of treating the provincial archives as a precious treasure for the present and for the future. An uncalled for clearing up, can cause irreparable harm because what is destroyed is lost for ever.

The historical archive is within the remit of the provincial secretary (according to our regulations and official norms), but rarely does one of them attend a course in archival practice; there is often a rapid change of office. More often than not, committed as he is in other tasks, he fails to find time for this aspect of his work. Consequently, many are not fully aware of their responsibility for the historical Archive and, sometimes, they have no clear idea of what it is and the duties of an archivist, nor do they distinguish between the historical archive and the current one. Without other specific moments of on-going formation where they can exchange among themselves, the course offered to new provincial secretaries is generally insufficient. What has proved very positive in some provinces, for example, is the periodic gathering of those responsible for the local Chronicles.

In the vast majority of cases it is impossible and, nor even really necessary, to employ a full time archivist (even if this is a proven solution and the best one, at least for the necessary period required for putting a basic order in the fonds).

Specific attention is hardly ever given to the archives in provincial planning and so, in the meantime, they are neglected; they do not appear in lists of 'things to do' on the agendas nor discussed during chapters or other important meetings.

b. At local level. In the individual houses the awareness of having to take care of this aspect of our activity, which is of public, never just private, importance, has not taken root. In fact, on the whole, the archive does not exist. If anything, there is some sort of storage space for documentation without any order in it. So, it will be impossible to write the history of a work. A significant past history is at risk of disappearing, to the detriment of the country and the congregation.

It is noticeable that the few archives that do exist (both provincial and local) – with some praiseworthy exceptions – have no *catalogue* or *inventory* so that no one knows what documentation is deposited. Moreover, the space allocated to the documentation does not have the indispensable equipment to prevent deterioration or destruction. Frequently the papers are placed in pigeon-holes, exposed to dust, with no other measures for their protection. In general, special files capable to protecting the papers and documents from dust and in-

sects and other climate dangers are not used. In addition, they require an adequate type of *paper*.

Single documents are not suitably dealt with. Some of the simplest things: metal staples and paper clips joining pages together are not removed and, therefore, begin to rust, ruining the paper. The conservation of documents in various countries involves other problems due to humidity, mildew, termites, ants and silver-fish.

Sometimes, as well, the place and position of the room in the building are little adapted to the purpose.

The preservation of electronic sources is even more difficult and problematic and for some time has required authoritative norms.

The concept of time. The cyclical, rather than linear, concept among many peoples could represent an obstacle to the right evaluation of historical processes and their documentation. The oral tradition of information which is found among many cultures, is not suitable for writing a documented and critical history, which is useful for everyone, also for those who, coming from other houses or countries, cannot know what is known for generations by those who live in the same village or city. The mobility of personnel is an objective reason for taking care of written documentation.

SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR SOLVING THESE PROBLEMS

We have to admit that there are no easy solutions for the problems inherent in archives. However, with well thought out programming which is regularly evaluated, the situation can be improved. Some suggestions:

1. When a part-time archivist with other roles is appointed, it would be advisable for him, at the outset, to follow a course in archival practice. Should this be impossible, it should be arranged for him to acquire some experience by spending time (the holidays?) in the principal archives of the congregation, where a competent archivist could teach him the basics of archival work.
2. The various archives (documentary, photographic, financial, scholastic...) should be housed in a room separated from the Provincial's office and that of the provincial secretary, and kept locked.
3. Suitable archival acid-free containers must be acquired for the papers and other documents. The containers should preferably be placed in metal pigeon-holes to protect them from dust, insects and mildew.
4. For the purpose of preserving the content of the archival sources for the future, they have to be digitized.
5. The problems presented by humidity can only be solved by regulating the atmosphere within the archival environment. Certainly, this involves heavy expense. If the value of the material is really essential and one can-

not have an air-conditioned archival environment, then thought should be given to sending it to the central archives of the congregation where it can be correctly preserved. This would obviously require the general archives to be ready to accept it or to obtain suitable places and environments for it.

6. The problems of acidification and ink corrosion can only be solved by specialists. Documents affected by these problems should preferably be passed to the central archives of the congregation for suitable treatment.
7. In order to provide more access and facilitate the work of researchers, an inventory and a catalogue of the historic sources deposited in the archive has to be prepared.
8. Suitable guidelines have to be drawn up for the consultation and use of the archives by researchers.
9. A visitors' register must be kept. No documents may be taken outside the archive.

SOME PROPOSALS FOR THE FUTURE

1. It would be desirable for the Provincials to pay more attention to this often neglected sector of the life of the province: not only archives but libraries as well, works of art, museums...and eventually, the systematic study of the province's history.

In the current phase of restructuring and unifying provinces in some geographical areas (Europe, Latin America...) maximum attention must be given to the conservation (and not dispersal) of the original provincial archives, even if deposited in new locations. The same holds good for the archives (and libraries) of houses that have been closed.

2. Let them, therefore, provide for "personnel" (even lay persons), and 'means'(logistical and financial) and foster among the provincial secretaries and community rectors the concern to file, preserve and catalogue the documentation.

3. During the canonical visitation, the superiors should look more carefully at how the chronicle of the individual houses is kept. They should question what can be done and provide for the conservation of all the documents regarding the community and its activities.

4. It is recommended that the personal archives of individual Salesians be put to advantage. Things like personal written documents (letters received, copy of letters sent out, photos and documents of all kinds) which usually on the death of a confrere should be classified in the provincial archives. The personal archives are particularly important in the case of a confrere who has exercised

important roles in the province (in a house or a work) or who has taken care to gather and preserve some documents for personal interest but which are relevant to our history. Clearing out the room/office of a deceased confrere is the task of the rector who must safeguard whatever the confrere had gathered that could be of interest to the congregation.

5. One great problem is the conservation of electronic documents (the abundance of e-mails, short messages on Skype, Messenger, SMS...) which hastily disappear. Whole layers of history are completely slipping away from future historians and they can never be reconstructed. Concrete and precise directives need to be given to provincial secretaries for archiving electronic documents and a form of evaluation drawn up so that it is not left just to the good will of individuals who are often overwhelmed with immediate pressing concerns.

6. Writing Salesian history has yet to begin in various countries. It is important that everything is done so that it can be researched and written up by the local members themselves, without delegating it to others, who may be at a distance or externs, while yet collaborating with those directly involved.

7. It is noticeable that love for the history of the Salesian Family has somewhat diminished among the members themselves over the last decades, even though the efforts of ACSSA have created a certain movement of interest which has always to be sustained. We should reflect on this state of things which is conditioned by our culture. The study of our history has certainly to be promoted in initial formation and in the courses of on-going formation but also by raising sensitivity to the importance of the conservation of documents right from the first phases of formation.

8. The evaluation of the management of historical archives, libraries and works of art of the Salesian Family has to be subjected to a rigorous examination. Don Bosco's early idea of appointing an archivist seems very appropriate for our own times which demand competent persons in order to really provide expert conservation for the heritage of our historical memory.

There are many concerns that require attention, so how, then, can we make sure that this appeal does not remain a dead letter? We think it demands a decision at institutional level, one which is concrete and can be verified. Perhaps the Chapter could decide to appoint a commission to look into the archival sector of Salesian activity. Such a commission would have the remit to tackle this and other questions and to draw up a programme for the organization of the provincial archive and that of the individual houses. The programme would also have to co-ordinate the guidelines as to which documents should be safeguarded and deposited in the archive and which not, and at what point they should be archived. The programme should also deal with the urgent problem of digitizing the cultural heritage of the congregation, the care of libraries, museums and works of art.

We dare to hope that in the bi-centenary of the birth of our common Founder we may take greater care of the memory of what has developed beginning with him because we believe it is the seed of creative fidelity according to our common identity and mission.

In the name of the ACSSA Presidency and with
the approval of the members of the ISS,
drawn up by Sr. Grazia Loparco FMA (President of ACSSA)
and Stanisław Zimniak SDB (Secretary of ACSSA) and
on behalf of the 148 members of ACSSA (84 SDB, 54 FMA,
10 lay persons).

Rome, 31 January 2014.