

REPORT OF THE RECTOR MAJOR TO THE 28th GENERAL CHAPTER

1. WITNESSES TO THE RADICAL APPROACH OF THE GOSPEL. IN THE LIGHT OF THE GC27

In line with the last General Chapters, the GC27 strongly invited the whole Salesian Congregation to live our apostolic consecration in a radical manner. That call underlined the need and importance of *rediscovering our Salesian identity* by living the grace of unity and the joy of our vocation. The Chapter asked us to grow in a strong *spiritual experience* by converting ourselves into persons who seek God, are capable of building a *genuine fraternity* of life and action in our communities in order to dedicate ourselves generously to *the Salesian mission* by walking with the young.

Looking at the past six years, as the GC27 did previously, we come across many manifestations of fidelity as well as situations of inconsistency and deviation that have been pointed out in recent years. This is what I intend to examine in these first pages.

1.1. Called to live the primacy of God more fully in our lives and in our communities

The GC27 was a gift, a grace and an opportunity that pressed us to belong *more to God, more to our confreres and more to the young*. This is what I said both in my first letter and in my concluding speech at the Chapter. As consecrated persons, we wish to *give God the first place* in our lives. There are certainly very many confreres who live like this every day. They are prompted by the call to holiness in the way it was lived by Don Bosco and by those who grew up at his side in an authentic school of holiness, and they find encouragement in the thirst for life and the authenticity of many young people all over the world. Numerous signs, often simple ones, make the primacy of God visible in our daily lives: the rich legacy of our everyday spirituality, marked by an attractive family spirit and positive, cordial and healthy relationships; our manifest willingness to accompany the lives of young people and their families, and our spiritual fatherliness¹; the generous, serene and joyful giving of ourselves out of love for God and for our brethren...

As it was for Don Bosco, so too for us the *primacy of God* gives fullness to our consecrated life, enabling us to avoid “the risk of letting ourselves be absorbed by our activities, forgetting that we are essentially ‘seekers of God’ and witnesses of his love among the young and the poorest.”²

In this six-year period we have repeatedly stated that this path is possible only by living an always necessary and *continual conversion*, both personally and in community, since the goal is never reached once and for all. We have tried to transmit to our communities and provinces a vision of faith, never of hopelessness, to enable us to discover God by living and rejoicing in the daily events that speak so much about Him.

There have been several efforts, attempts, reminders and invitations that many of us have heeded in living authentic lives. And there is a lot of good that is being accomplished by our Congregation, our communities and confreres every single day.

¹ Cf. GC27, 3.

² GC27, 32.

→ We must also humbly acknowledge that we have come across forms of self-reference and self-sufficiency that have led some to live without an awareness of being *collaborators with God*.

→ The GC27 stated: “The *visibility* and *credibility* of our consecrated life has gradually lessened.”³ In these years we have tried to sensitize our confreres and make them aware of this situation, urging them repeatedly – in the words of St. Paul – “whether the time was favourable or unfavourable” (cf. 2 *Tm* 4,2); but we cannot deny the fact that oftentimes, even today, people and our youngsters still appreciate us more for the work we do than for our being Salesians of Don Bosco, that is, consecrated religious who have been called to bear witness in a clear, transparent and convincing manner to the essence of their consecration.

There is still a long way to go. We can say with certainty that the lack of visibility is the *sore point* of consecrated life after Vatican II. Nevertheless, the fact that this is also the case with other consecrated persons is no reason for us to feel relieved of our preoccupation and responsibility.

Basically, it is a matter of our living a kind of life in which, by taking small steps, we show that conversion is possible and so manifest the identity of our consecrated life; it is a question of cultivating a healthy spiritual tension which keeps us moving forward regardless of how little it is appreciated today; it is all about following a path of constant transformation of mind and heart, a process that must be personally desired, sought after and accepted. All this makes up the process we need to help us towards an ever-necessary regeneration, because life wears us down, reducing and downplaying important details, leading us to relativize what should not be relativized, etc. This is the perspective we find in the words of St. John Paul II in his Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata*: “The spiritual life must therefore have first place... Apostolic fruitfulness, generosity in love of the poor, and the ability to attract vocations among the younger generation depend on this priority and its growth in personal and communal commitment.”⁴

In these six years the General Council and myself have kept before our eyes the programmatic lines of *my closing speech* to the GC27. Obviously it was more than a speech. Its purpose was to trace a clear and practical path, in harmony with the spirit that was lived at the GC27 and the reflections that were made. Already then I expressed my conviction: “It would be really worrying if someone came to the conclusion that *the fragility we see in living the primacy of God in our lives* is something that is part of our Salesian DNA.”⁵ Because it was not so for Don Bosco nor for many of his sons in whom our charism matured. Obviously Don Bosco did not want it to be so. I therefore believe that we must continue along this journey of living a more authentic religious life, aware that we are on the right path; it is the simple way of our own sanctification, “the most precious gift we can offer to the young”.⁶ And we know that it is not possible to talk about Don Bosco and his predilection for boys and young people if we do not have an even more fascinating predilection and ardent love for Jesus Christ.

1.2. A call to live a genuinely attractive fraternal life

For us Salesians of Don Bosco, *community life*, the evangelical fraternity lived in community, is a way of realizing our experience of God. It means living the “mystical dimension of our fraternity” which is an essential element of our apostolic consecration. Pope Francis tells us: “There we find true healing, since the way to relate to others which truly heals instead of

³ GC27, 28.

⁴ VC, 93.

⁵ GC27, p. 120.

⁶ *Const.* 25.

debilitating us, is a *mystical* fraternity, a contemplative fraternity. It is a fraternal love capable of seeing the sacred grandeur of our neighbour, of finding God in every human being, of tolerating the nuisances of life in common by clinging to the love of God, of opening the heart to divine love and seeking the happiness of others just as their heavenly Father does... Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of community!”⁷

There is no doubt that especially nowadays our young people are very sensitive, not so much to our words as to the signs we convey, to the witness we give. In general, they are looking for healthy and transparent relationships, at least with us. Many of them experience divisions and ruptures within their families; so when we live our fraternity in a convincing manner, we reveal to them another world, another way of relating, other values that are simple and profound at the same time.

We know very well that over the years in Valdocco not everything was perfect. We are aware of the pain Don Bosco experienced: it transpires in his Letter from Rome. And yet, we speak of the “spirit of Valdocco”, of the family spirit, of that “taste of home and family” that Don Bosco liked so much in the relations between the Salesians and the boys. That is the ideal kind of fraternity that must shine out in our communities.

From this point of view, significant efforts have been made during this six-year period. I can assure you that all the provinces have embarked on various initiatives to accompany communities and confreres and help them take concrete steps in this area. We are not insensitive to this responsibility. Quite the contrary. At the same time, we must admit that there remain personal frailties and limitations which dim the brightness and even hide the light that ought to be radiated.

- The tendency of some confreres to live comfortably or the hyperactivity of others fosters the belief that time shared in community is time “stolen” from one’s “private” space or from something one can do.
- Sometimes, under the guise of “respect” or “tolerance” there lurks a hidden attitude of indifference towards one’s confreres.
- “Personal relationships in communities can become formal, fragmented and not very meaningful.”⁸ When the General Council made a study of the provinces at the end of the extraordinary visitations, it concluded in an almost general way that *individualism* - *an ever-increasing individualism* - is the principal disease in our fraternal life, both in relation to the mission and the work on the one hand and to particular occasions and free time on the other. It underlined the increasingly functional way of relating to others and retreating into one’s “private sphere” – accompanied on not a few occasions by a personal and not always proper use of the *mass media*. There are certainly many confreres who march forward asking for and honouring their commitments, and giving of their best to live an authentic evangelical fraternity. But by their side they encounter the kind of attitudes already mentioned that ruin their dreams. Clearly all this forms part of our frailty and belongs to the path of conversion and growth that each one is called to pursue.

1.3. Always with and for the young

In the GC27 we affirmed that young people are “our burning bush.”⁹ Through them God has always spoken to us and speaks to us today. It was through the young that the Spirit formed the heart of Don Bosco. What a stupendous *icon* this is to remind us that we are touching the

⁷ EG, 92.

⁸ GC27, 42.

⁹ GC27, 52.

mystery of life, and that for this very reason we too must, like Moses, *take off our sandals* to let ourselves be astounded and to contemplate in silence what God is doing in our lives, in the lives of our confreres and in the life stories of our adolescents and young people. And, lest we forget, we can genuinely live the *primacy of God* as the deepest expression of our vocation as Salesians of Don Bosco by being *among the young and at their service*, since the Lord awaits us in them and has dreamed of us, in Don Bosco, for them.

All this makes the Salesian charism of Don Bosco something *fascinating* and arouses a lot of attraction in young people, for example, in the 435 and more novices who every year choose to prepare themselves to live as Salesians of Don Bosco. It is precisely for this reason that we must not stop halfway; we must not let down the aspirations of the boys and young people who meet Salesians every day. We must not disappoint them.

In the letter he sent to all Salesians in the person of the Rector Major on the occasion of the *Bicentenary of the birth of Don Bosco*, Pope Francis, without mincing words, said to us directly and forcefully: “May Don Bosco help you not to disappoint the deep aspirations of young people: their need for life, openness, joy, freedom and a future; their desire to collaborate in the building of a more just and fraternal world, in the development for all peoples, in the protection of nature and all living environments. Following his example, you will help them to experience that the most authentic ideals can be actualized only in the life of grace, that is, in friendship with Christ. You will have the joy of accompanying them in the moments in which they will make demanding decisions in their search for a synthesis of faith, culture and life.”¹⁰

I think it is fair to say that the Congregation is solicitous of and attentive to the reality of children and young people. We have not lost our way. We have not strayed from the essence of our charism. We have given our energies, efforts, commitment and determination to follow and accompany our young people, to get to know and meet those who are ignored today. And in doing all this, many of our confreres have lost their lives.

To be honest, we are not wrong in admitting that more than a few times distances have arisen between young people and ourselves or between ourselves and young people – not only physical but also mental and cultural distances. It is also true that for some confreres management tasks are more attractive and rewarding than their being present among young people; also true that sometimes our playgrounds remain empty for want of the presence of Salesians; also true that sometimes between being *servants of young people* and seeing to our needs, the preference for our comforts prevails (viz. having comfortable spaces at our disposal, receiving recognition from others, having free time and privacy...). Ultimately, what is at stake is *love*, the practical realization of Don Bosco’s words: “It is enough that you are young for me to love you very much.”¹¹

1.4. Moving ahead in the Church and with Pope Francis

In various circles I have repeatedly wanted and had to remind everyone that we, in faithfulness to the legacy we have received from Don Bosco, are with the Pope: today with Francis, yesterday with Benedict XVI, and the day before yesterday with John Paul II (now a saint). And, navigating the great river which is the Church, we have lived an exceptional six years of Grace.

¹⁰ POPE FRANCIS, *Come Don Bosco, con i giovani e per i giovani. Lettera di Papa Francesco al Rettore Maggiore dei Salesiani*, Rome 2015, p. 9.

¹¹ JOHN BOSCO, *Il giovane provveduto per la pratica de’ suoi doveri degli esercizi di cristiana pietà*, in ISS, *Fonti Salesiane. I. Don Bosco e la sua opera*, LAS, Rome 2014, p. 614.

Let me say that if we had ever dreamed of the Church's animation of this small portion of it that we are as a Congregation and the Salesian Family, we would never have imagined it to be so close to the purest essence of Don Bosco's charism.

The various Apostolic Exhortations of recent times, the celebration of the last three Synods regarding the family and young people as well as the Pope's pronouncements about them, have offered us a complete ecclesial reflection which not only encourages but immerses us in the richness of the Church's thinking, and will undoubtedly illumine the reflections of our Chapter. Obviously we cannot and must not carry out our work in the Chapter without giving due consideration to the sensitivity, knowledge and pastoral richness that the Church, and particularly the Pope, have offered us.

2. OTHER REFLECTIONS ON THE STATE OF THE CONGREGATION

2.1. The key role of young people, evangelization and the Salesian Youth Movement

In the pages of this Report devoted to the Youth Ministry of the last six years, there is offered a detailed presentation of the many processes and initiatives carried out in this period. We believe that we must always say that the evangelization of children, young people and all the beneficiaries of our work is an outcome, and at the same time, a permanent challenge; it is a reality about which, even when we rejoice over the good we have done, we never feel completely satisfied because it will always seem insufficient to us. It is true that the *leadership* of young people is continuously growing in many areas of the Congregation. It is likewise true that the Salesian Youth Movement is seen as one of the most positive results of our work of evangelization for the simple reason that young people themselves are often the animators and evangelizers of other young people. All this is a deep cause for rejoicing. Furthermore, we find that in some areas of the Congregation, *volunteering* is a reality that helps the young people themselves to mature in the most important aspects of life, including the vocational and the missionary.

The following are the challenges I deem important:

→ *Evangelization* is our great task and our challenge as well. To offer in every presence processes of faith education and proposals for integral growth must be a priority that I would dare to define as extremely urgent. In some circumstances, in fact, in the face of difficulties we curtail our evangelizing and educative activity. However, in general, we would need greater competence in making proposals and more apostolic ardour. We could say that what we do is never enough. We need our educative and pastoral communities to continue growing in their conviction and commitment to educative and evangelizing activity so as to serve as a rallying point for involving and engaging all of us in a more demanding way.

→ On the other hand, we have repeated to the point of exhaustion that it is not enough to organize activities and events. We have to put life into the processes of education and evangelization in which the charismatic, pastoral and pedagogical identity of all Salesian activity gives a response to the changes taking place in this century. Often and in many contexts, the realization of this commitment still leaves much to be desired and is held in abeyance.

→ The Salesians of today and tomorrow must consider it their priority to pay attention to the training and the processes of accompaniment of all young people, especially youth animators, catechists, etc., as well as their accompaniment in forums and organizations for the defence of human rights, children's rights, development, justice and peace, etc. Our youth ministry operates along these lines and cannot remain isolated, as though it were a Salesian microcosm.

→ In our Salesian mission, the *family* must continue to receive more attention as it remains necessary for the growth to maturity of adolescents and young people. It serves on many occasions as a refuge from adverse situations in its surroundings. Not a few families suffer the consequences of divisions and fragmentation, sometimes because parents are not sufficiently ready and mature for fatherhood or motherhood. Therefore, be it in the most favourable or in the most deficient of situations, our pastoral care must include as a priority a dedicated service to families together with that given to young people.

2.2. A priority commitment: listening to and accompanying young people

The GC27 has repeatedly spoken of the concern and commitment we ought to have as Salesians in *accompanying young people*.¹² I think it is fair to say that, little by little, we are acquiring a greater awareness of the importance of accompanying young people as they make progress in knowledge and personal growth and in their journey of encounter with Jesus.

Using words that sometimes change with time, we have been talking for decades about an unconditional acceptance of young people, a willingness to meet with them personally, a dialogue, a listening to and a celebration of reconciliation with them, a readiness to “talk about vocational uncertainty”, or about “my doubts”, as they themselves often say.

In these six years, efforts have been made to pay special attention to the matter of listening to and accompanying young people. We had also dealt with it in the previous six years, but in the last years we have intensified our animation efforts. The dissemination and greater knowledge of the *Salesian Youth Ministry Frame of Reference* in all the Regions of the Congregation has been a great help. The Congress held in Madrid on the theme of *Youth Pastoral Ministry and the Family* has further motivated us. The celebration of the Synod of Bishops on *Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment* has been of special importance and value for us; it has led us to draft a document, *Young Salesians and Accompaniment*, which was prepared jointly by the Departments of Formation and Youth Ministry, studied by both the Rector Major and the General Council, and subsequently approved. The knowledge and application of this document will certainly be very useful and will promote the discernment as well as the accompaniment and initial formation of Salesians in the various phases.

It is evident that what takes place in youth ministry has an impact on the formation of Salesians, and vice versa. If we succeed in carrying out a good accompaniment and discernment of vocations in our youth ministry, the Salesian vocations that spring up with the help of God's call and his grace will be favourably disposed towards the processes of their formation. And if a good accompaniment is offered in the various stages of formation, we can presume that in the future we shall have Salesians who are well-prepared and well-disposed to engage in youth ministry and accompany young people.

I see in this undertaking, already now itself and in the near future, a magnificent opportunity for our Congregation, thanks to the young people in our presences all over the world and to our young confreres who will be increasingly inclined to follow a path they have already lived and

¹² The numbers that refer to accompaniment in the GC27 are: 1, 18, 27, 38, 59, 74.2, 75.1.

experienced. Pope Francis himself, in the last paragraph of his Apostolic Exhortation, *Christ is Alive*, expressed the wish that young people might follow this beautiful path and told them: “May the Holy Spirit urge you on as you run this race. The Church needs your momentum, your intuitions, your faith. We need them! And when you arrive where we have not yet reached, have the patience to wait for us.”¹³

2.3. A sexennium full of missionary animation

The missionary reality of the Congregation is truly great and beautiful. The contexts and the circumstances in which we share our life and mission with different peoples and ethnic groups are very rich, but generally speaking, in my opinion, not much known. That is why I thought it would be very interesting to offer the following information to all the members of this Chapter Assembly.

Right now, the Congregation is present in 134 countries: 43 in Africa, 24 in America, 29 in Asia, 32 in Europe and 6 in Oceania. For the time being, our presence has been suspended in Yemen, where our confrere, Fr. Tom Uzhunnalil, was kidnapped for 557 days. We have closed our presence in two countries: Iran and Andorra. At the same time, we have established new presences in two other countries: Malaysia and Gambia. And we have received requests to open new communities in Afghanistan, Algeria, Guinea-Bissau, Kazakhstan, Iraq, Sweden, São Tomé and Príncipe, Somalia and Vanuatu.

• A.- Particular religious contexts

→ The **Islamic** context:

The phenomenon of religious diversity and multicultural differences is increasingly transversal and not only geographically defined. Our presence in countries with a **Muslim majority** where Don Bosco’s charism is at the service of young people as a witness to the Gospel and interreligious dialogue, is particularly concentrated in the Province of the Middle East (MOR) in an **Arab Muslim** context: Syria, Palestine and Egypt. In Lebanon and Israel our works have their own characteristics because of a significant Christian presence in the former and Jewish-Muslim in the latter. We may also recall our new presences in Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates as well as in the countries of the Maghreb, Morocco and Tunisia.

→ In the **Asian** context, we have presences with very different characteristics in Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan and Turkey.

→ In the **European** context: Albania, Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina.

→ In the **African** context: Burkina Faso, Chad, Gambia, Guinea Conakry, Mali, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Sudan.

→ In the **Buddhist** context: Cambodia, China, Korea, Japan (with predominantly Buddhist and Shinto religions), Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Taiwan and Vietnam.

→ In the **Christian Orthodox** context: Belarus, Bulgaria, Georgia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania, Russia, Serbia and Ukraine.

• B.- Contexts of human mobility and migration

→ **Refugees and internal immigrants (IDP - Internally Displaced People)**: Apart from the transversality of this phenomenon which affects many nations, we are present in very

¹³ *ChV*, 299.

significant places that involve the dramatic reality of refugees and immigrants within their own country. By way of examples: Burundi, Central Africa, Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Kenya, Lebanon, Nigeria, The Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, Syria, Sudan, South Sudan, Turkey, Ukraine and Uganda.

→ The **migratory phenomenon** is enormous and differentiated, and is of such a magnitude that, in one way or another, the Congregation finds itself immersed in it to a large extent. As an example, I list some of the more significant presences, both as regards the places of departure and the places of destination where we work for migrants and displaced persons: Germany, Bangladesh, Belgium, Canada, Cuba, Colombia, El Salvador, Spain, United States, Ethiopia, Egypt, France, Great Britain, Ghana, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, India, Ireland, Italy, Morocco, Mexico, Myanmar, Nepal, Nigeria, New Zealand, The Netherlands, Peru, Poland, Portugal, Dominican Republic, Senegal, Ukraine, Venezuela...

• *C.- Contexts of ethnic groups*

It is a very complex task to draw up a more or less exhaustive list of these realities since at the moment we lack sufficiently adequate data.

These are rich and differentiated realities in the various continents. Consider, for example, the Gypsy people in Europe, the large number of ethnic minorities in Northeast India, and the hundreds of ethnic groups present in the 43 countries of the African continent. Throughout America we come across different peoples, such as those from the Andean area (quechua, aimara, mapuche) or the Mesoamerican area (quetchi, mixes, zapotec, chilanteco ...) or the Amazon.

In the context of the last Synod of Bishops held in October 2019, I wish to dwell particularly on our **Amazonian presences**. The Congregation is present in four countries of the Amazon: Brazil, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela; to these we may add the Paraguayan Chaco, which is closely linked to the Amazonian reality. In this region we have 47 Salesian communities with 245 confreres. Twenty-two communities are located in an urban context and twenty-five in a rural. **We are present among the 62 original peoples of the Amazon**: in the Church we are the Congregation having the greatest presence among these peoples. There are 1,219 Catholic communities and 2,123 pastoral workers working in rural areas with 612,231 people, of whom 66.7% are Catholics¹⁴.

According to the territory of the provinces, we can list these peoples:

→ Brazil Campo Grande (BCG): the Xavante, Bororo, Terena, Guaraní, Kaiowá, Kinikianau, Atikum, Guató, Ofaié, Kadiwéu, Kura Bakairi.

→ Brazil Manaus (BMA): the Tukano, Tariano, Dessano, Piratapuia, Hupda, Cubeo, Uanano, Barassano, Mirititapuia, Arapaso, Tuyuka, Carapanasso, Baré, Yanomani, Baniwa.

→ Ecuador (ECU): the Shuar, Achuar, Saraguro, Kitchwa.

→ Peru (PER): the Achuar, Shawi, Kandozi, Wampis, Awajun, Kitchwa, Chapra, Kuacamacamilla, Shivillo, Shipibo-Conivo, Machiguengas.

→ Venezuela (VEN): the Arawaco, Hiwi, Piaroa, Yanomami, Sanema, Yekauana, Wayúu, Wotuha, Eñepa, Hoti, Maco, Puinave, Yavarana, Piapoco, Baniba, Baré, Curripaco, Yeral, Warekena, Inga.

→ Paraguay (PAR): the Ayoreo, Maskoy, Ishir, Tomarajo.

¹⁴ Cf. M.LASARTE-D.MEDEIROS (Coords.), *Amazonia Salesiana. El Sinodo nos interpela*, Elle Di Ci, Leumann (Turin) 2019, p. 19.

It is important to underline the fact that currently 18 confreres with perpetual vows or in formation, 8 prenovices and 12 aspirants are from the original people of the Amazon (Tuyuka, Desano, Traiano, Arapaso, Tukano, Baniwa, Bororo, Xavante, Shuar, and Kitchwa).

What I wanted to present to you, dear confreres, is a “photograph” of the beautiful missionary reality of our Congregation. Between those who continue this reality today and those who laid the foundation, we can count more than 10,400 Salesian missionaries *ad gentes*, starting from the first missionary expedition of Don Bosco in 1875 to the last one we have just witnessed, viz. the 150th. A number of times our Sisters, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, have left together with us, often in order to carry out a complementary missionary activity. These missionaries, both men and women, by the grace of God and the action of the Spirit, have sowed and planted the Salesian charism of Don Bosco which has grown in the five continents.

The Second Vatican Council strongly urged all Congregations and Institutes to engage in the apostolic and evangelizing task in mission lands.¹⁵

Even if there has been no clear “missionary character” in our Salesian tradition, we have wanted all the same to respond to this appeal, because we know that from a young age Don Bosco too nourished the hope of becoming a missionary. That thought never left him.¹⁶ It was the great ideal he had, and he realized it through his sons and daughters. *We have certainly been missionaries* and “Don Bosco’s successors, faithful to the spirit of the Founder, have always made a special effort with regard to the missionary activity of the Congregation.”¹⁷ I can assure you that we too will continue to do so.

2.4. Following a continuous path and always growing as the Salesian Family of Don Bosco

The GC27 asserted that our awareness of being a *Salesian Family* has grown.¹⁸ I say the same thing with regard to these past six years. Certainly the work done by the provinces and local communities has often been very important. The Salesian Spirituality Days have been well received and have seen a remarkable and significant participation. The Strenna proposed each year continues to be requested and appreciated by the 32 groups that make up the Salesian Family in the world. In every context and place we choose what can best express the essence of the message in the local culture, thus ensuring that it is present and spread throughout the Salesian world. The proposing of the theme is something that increasingly manifests every year our identity as *a religious family* in the world, our being *the family of Don Bosco*! And the *Identity Card of the Salesian Family* is the reference point in which we find just that: our identity as a family in which each group - and our group in particular - recognizes itself as a member.

The reflection begun by the SGC20 on the Salesian Family is still of the utmost importance today, since it constitutes the foundation of our being the family of Don Bosco and defines our belonging and our service to it. The Special General Chapter stated: “The Salesians cannot fully rethink their vocation in the Church without reference to those who share with them in carrying out their Founder’s will. Consequently, they are seeking a greater unity of all, whilst preserving the genuine diversity of each.”¹⁹

¹⁵ *Ad gentes*, 40.

¹⁶ Cf. *BM II*, pp. 160-161.

¹⁷ E. CERIA, *Annali*, II-IV passim; ASC, Indexes, under the word, *Missio*.

¹⁸ Cf. *GC27*, 19.

¹⁹ *GC20*, 151.

The journey of unity and communion during these years has led to the publication, at different times, of three documents that express our identity and aim at helping to continue the journey itself: *The Charter of Communion of the Salesian Family of Don Bosco*, prepared by Fr. Egidio Viganò in 1995 and published by Fr. Juan E. Vecchi in 2000 under the title: *Charter of the Mission of the Salesian Family*; and the *Identity Card of the Salesian Family*, promulgated by Fr. Pascual Chávez in 2012 and which, like a ripe fruit, is an expression of a well-established charismatic identity.

During this six-year period there has been a rich animation on the part of the Secretariat for the Salesian Family through contact with the provinces and regions, and accompaniment of the groups asking for special attention from us as Salesians of Don Bosco. Our Chapter will certainly carry out a verification of the Secretariat for the Salesian Family, as was done at the end of the previous sexennium.

Equally positive is the reflection that has matured and been shared in these six years around the following key topics:

- The responsibility for accompaniment that we Salesians of Don Bosco have and must have towards the Salesian Family, as explained in art. 45 of *the Identity Card of the Salesian Family*.
- The assimilation of the figure and the role of the provincial and local delegates of the groups of the Salesian Family for what concerns our service of animation.
- The maturing and updating of the criteria and the conditions necessary for officially belonging to the Salesian Family.

In the next six years there will be significant possibilities of achievement through a coordination of, and joint reflection between, the Formation and the Youth Ministry sectors of our Congregation in connection with the animation of the Salesian Family. The fruits emerging from this joint effort will make for a breakthrough in our present reality which is already quite positive.

2.5. The Salesian brother (lay Salesian) in the Congregation

“There are some things priests and clerics cannot do,” said Don Bosco, “and you will do them.”²⁰ Many times, visiting the provinces of the Congregation in the five continents, I have been asked this question: “What is happening to the vocation of the Salesian brother that seems to be in crisis?” I have not hesitated to give an answer which I consider to be measured and properly thought out over a period of time. I shall offer it to you as well, but first I want to begin with some data.

It is a fact that, comparing the previous sexennium with this one, the number of brother confreres in the Congregation has decreased. According to the data compiled in 2001, before the start of the GC25, the number was 2,317; in December 2007, the number was 2,092, that is, 225 less than in the previous six-year period. In December 2013, before the GC27, the number of brother confreres in the Congregation stood at 1,758: 334 fewer than in the previous sexennium. The data in our possession at the end of 2018 says that there are 1,589 brothers, i.e. 169 fewer, and they represent 11.20% of the total number of confreres in the Congregation. For some years now the Congregation has been particularly committed to accompanying the reality of the vocation of brother confreres in the provinces. All the Rectors Major have assumed this task. We too have done it during this sexennium. Some communities have been set up to guarantee a specific training for the Salesian Brother. In general, our brother confreres

²⁰ BM XVI, p. 245.

everywhere are personally well qualified and discharge very precious pastoral services, even in the areas of management and government. It was the GC26 which, referring to the two forms of the Salesian consecrated vocation, reminded us that “we are called to give priority and visibility to the unity of our apostolic consecration, even though it takes two different forms (...). Aware that the Congregation would put its identity at risk if it did not preserve this complementarity, we are called to more deeply understand the original Salesian contribution to the ordained ministry and to make greater efforts to foster the vocation of the Salesian brother.”²¹

I now return to the initial question: so, what is happening? First of all, we cannot say that “the problem” concerns brother confreres. I do not think it can be asserted, in fairness and in the light of careful analyses, that *our brother confreres are experiencing an identity crisis in their vocation*. Generally speaking, they do not doubt their vocation. It is our Congregation that is bearing the burden of a very strong *clericalism* that is very much present in the Church as it is among us. Both for reasons relating to the culture of various countries and for reasons of ethnic groups themselves, there are provinces, particularly in the regions of Africa, South Asia and Oceania where the reality of the Salesian brother hardly exists. There is a pressure from the environment in favour of the priesthood; it affects all vocations and is particularly aggressive. Some of these provinces run the risk of not having any Salesian brother in their ranks in the not too distant future. The matter is serious. It cannot be considered a topic of minor importance or one linked to the circumstances of the moment. Our charism in these provinces cannot be expressed in all its richness - as one vocation lived in two forms - if one of them is missing: “Our Society is made up of clerics and laymen who complement each other as brothers in living out the same vocation.”²² In other provinces instead, there has always been a very clear option made by the government [of the province] to foster both vocations. The most significant example is Vietnam: that province today has more than 68 Salesian brothers, mostly young men in formation. Even before considering solely the needs of its own territory, Vietnam made a very clear choice in favour of the mission *ad gentes*. In fact, there are more than 138 Vietnamese Salesian missionaries in the world today.

I am giving this example to point out to you that *the “face” and the “cross” of a vocation coexist within one and the same reality* [translator’s note: the same vocation of the brother is both flourishing and struggling within the same geographical context]; this fact confirms that there is no crisis of the vocation of the brother, but a crisis of models and a strong tendency favouring only the vocation to the priesthood. Already in the Report to the previous General Chapter six years ago, the Rector Major pointed out the risk that the clerical tendency, if not seriously addressed, can lead to the growth in the Congregation of “a clerical and class mentality”.²³ I fully agree with this statement.

The Salesian vocation lived by our brother confreres is a vocation of great relevance and huge possibilities for educative and pastoral work in present-day society, in contexts in which the figure of the priest is not accepted.

We are well aware that our one religious vocation, lived as clerics and lay persons, manifests the fundamental equality and profound unity between ourselves. The secular dimension of the vocation of the Salesian brother allows him to live the characteristics of religious life as a lay consecrated person. He takes part in the life and mission of the Lord within the Church, starting from the exercise of his baptismal priesthood: he carries out a mission of evangelization and non-sacramental sanctification that is proper to his religious consecration, and exercises his

²¹ GC26, 55.

²² *Const.* 4.

²³ GC27, *Relazione del Rettore Maggiore al Capitolo*, Rome 2014, p. 331.

apostolate as an educator of young people in the very many dimensions of life, in the world of work and in contact with various human and Christian values.

Fr. Ricaldone expressed this sense of unity in the life and mission of Salesian priests and lay persons (brothers), saying: “The sons of St. John Bosco need to work side by side, to complete each other, to proceed fraternally united in implementing the identical aims of the their mission (...). They are not separate or in some way divergent figures, but are the heirs, instruments and executors of one and the same divine programme.”²⁴

Therefore, my appeal today becomes a rallying cry to take the situation very seriously in those places where the figure of the Salesian brother is becoming nonexistent: this is not a problem for others to solve, but one that has to do with our love for a specific vocation, a love which each of us must show in an increasingly visible way.

2.6. “*Vocational capacity*”

This is the expression Fr. Vecchi used in his closing speech of the GC24 to refer to a characteristic, viz. that of a *vocational capacity*, as an essential quality which ought to “distinguish every confrere and Salesian community”.²⁵

Here is another of the great challenges confronting us today and that will be there always and forever!

Let us not hide the fact that, despite our having an average of about 440 novices every year, there are still great changes and transformations taking place in our “vocational geography”:

- In general, the percentage of novices who make their first profession is continuously increasing in all regions of the Congregation, and the perseverance in the years of initial formation is growing significantly, marking an increase of 25-32% in the last 15 years, despite the drop in the number of novices.
- However, the “vocational response” of the candidates to Salesian life in Europe and in the Regions of Interamerica and America South Cone is decreasing. In comparison with the previous years, the number is lower in all the provinces of India, in some provinces of Africa, and in some of East Asia - Oceania.
- Other provinces in Africa and some in East Asia - Oceania are experiencing vocational growth.

We certainly need to pay attention to these changes and developments.

We have to become aware of them and study them in depth, also in light of statistical data. “*Vocational capacity*” must be a distinguishing mark of every Salesian. When we implement a proper youth ministry and an authentic faith education, it leads to a *vocational culture* in which all life options become possible, including consecrated life.

We know that “we educate the young to develop their own human and baptismal vocation by a daily life progressively inspired and unified by the Gospel.”²⁶ Therefore, in our Salesian pedagogical practice, the *choosing of a vocation* represents the mature outcome every young person should arrive at in his own human and Christian growth. Our educational model has very beautiful elements which should form the substance of our *vocational capacity* and of our firm belief that these times are also favourable for sowing the seeds of hope. To help every boy, girl and young person; to foster their growth in self-esteem; to accompany them in discovering the many values present in their hearts and in their lives; to help the young discover that to make a gift of themselves is to feel happier and therefore a reason to practise generosity

²⁴ ASC 93 (1939), p. 180.

²⁵ GC24, 252.

²⁶ Const. 37.

and availability; to be able, according to the rhythm of each young person, to make explicit proposals concerning all types of vocations (even when one perceives the call to consecrated life); to promote their accompaniment and discernment - all this is part of our *natural vocational capacity* and undoubtedly a hope and an important challenge for our immediate future.

I do not intend to add anything else on this subject. To express the urgency of this challenge, I think it sufficient to recall what I wrote at the end of the GC28: “We are evangelizers of the young, and as a Congregation, as concrete provincial and local communities, we must *live and grow in a genuine pastoral love for the young*. It will be very difficult to do this if we do not make *the proclamation of the Lord Jesus* to the young a matter of priority and urgency, and at the same time are not capable of accompanying them in the circumstances of their lives. This ought to be our strength: *accompanying each young person in his situation*, but it is often a task we leave to others, or one we say we do not know how to do. In this accompaniment it is *of vital importance to begin with the culture of vocation that we have spoken so much about*. We have not yet succeeded in it.”²⁷

3. RESPONDING TO THE NEEDS OF ANIMATION AND GOVERNMENT

3.1. Animation of the Rector Major during his visits to the Congregation over the six-year period

One of the objectives that I intended to pursue as Rector Major, which I shared with the General Council and which we have together evaluated very positively, was to accompany, as far as possible, the provinces of the Congregation. For this reason, the *visits of animation and the help to the government of the provinces* by the Rector Major were important and significant. During the six-year period I had the opportunity to visit *all the provinces and vice-provinces of the Congregation*, as well as the various delegations which, although belonging to the territory of a province or vice-province, have the characteristics of being “presences” in a particular geographical context. This is the case, for example, of Belarus, Mongolia, Nepal, etc.

Evidently the organization of these visits required a considerable effort and a continuous exercise of discipline and method in planning the agenda of the Rector Major. In any case, this undertaking was well rewarded by the joy of being able to offer the confreres the opportunity of strongly expressing their communion with the rest of the Congregation.

In all I visited 100 countries.

The Salesian confreres whom I was able to meet and greet, to whom I was able to say a word and with whom I celebrated the Eucharist and shared some enjoyable moments, were about 13,100, i.e., approximately 92.25% of the Congregation. This was undoubtedly one of the most significant aspects of the sexennium. On many occasions I have repeatedly said that the fact that the Rector Major can personally meet his Salesian confreres is very important and gratifying, and that it alone fully justifies the possibility for the Rector Major to travel through the Salesian world in the six years of his mandate. At the same time, it was very important for me to be able to know all the provinces and to gather many fruitful elements to fulfill my task as Rector Major and help the General Council in the exercise of the service of animation and government of the Congregation.

²⁷ GC27, *Address of the Rector Major at the closing of the GC27*, p. 127.

In these visits I met with the various groups of the Salesian Family from all over the world. It was a very significant and, at the same time, an exceptional experience. It allowed me to see the beautiful reality we have, the extraordinary sense of belonging and existing communion, as well as the gratitude on the part of all the groups towards the Rector Major as father of the whole Salesian Family, the reference point and guarantor of our charismatic communion in the name of Don Bosco.

All the provinces and vice-provinces of the world took a lot of pains to prepare well for the visit of the Rector Major, deeming it an extraordinary opportunity. The following meetings of the Rector Major were never omitted:

- The meeting with the confreres repeatedly - in one, two or three places - so that the greatest number could participate.
- The meeting with the members of the provincial council for several hours. The regional councillor of the area was often present at these meetings.
- The meeting in one, two or three locations with the Salesian Family of the country or the territory in which a province is established.
- One or more significant meetings with the young people of each province.

3.2. Animation and government of the Congregation and of the provinces

From the beginning of the sexennium we perceived very clearly that the *animation and government* of the Congregation, both worldwide and at the level of individual provinces, had to be a priority. The history of the Congregation, which is now over a hundred years old, teaches us that animation without government leads to a state of apparent tranquillity in which it can be considered legitimate to do whatever one wants, but which basically leaves great dissatisfaction since it does not correspond to the essence of either religious or Salesian life. On the other hand, government without animation, fraternal presence, fatherliness and accompaniment can turn into a merely authoritarian management and seriously damage the Congregation and the provinces.

For this reason, at the beginning of the six-year period, we chose to prioritize *a closeness to and an accompaniment of the Provincial and his Council* as a help in the animation and government of the provinces. This commitment came to be realized by means of two initiatives which, in the opinion of the provincials who took part in them, were of great help.

- A first meeting with the Provincial and the consignment of a “navigation chart”. Once a confrere shows his willingness to serve as Provincial, he is summoned to Rome about a month after his appointment in order to meet personally with the Rector Major, his Vicar, the Economist General and the General Councillors for the various sectors. At the end of the visit, the Rector Major delivers a letter to the new Provincial in which he thanks him for his availability, communicates what the confreres of the Province have expressed in the consultation for discernment in view of the appointment (viz. the strengths and weaknesses of the Province), and finally offers some indications about what he should pay great attention to at the beginning of his service. This “navigation chart” is first and foremost a tool for the Provincial and his council, which - if they deem it appropriate - can be made known, at least to the Rectors, if not to all the confreres.

As I have said, to date all the Provincials have underlined and appreciated the great help provided through these indications as a guide in beginning their service.

- The Spirituality Week for Provincials at the beginning of their fourth year

At the end of the third or the beginning of the fourth year of their service, the Provincials - usually in groups of 10-14 - come together in Turin during the last week of September, which coincides with the meeting to hand over the crucifixes to the missionary confreres belonging to the *annual missionary expedition*. It is a week of spirituality, tranquillity, prayer and salesianity in the places that form part of our historical memory; the Provincials have ample opportunities for prayer and reflection which allow the Lord and the sanctity of the Salesian holy places to touch their hearts. They are given the opportunity to meet both the Rector Major and his Vicar to review the service of their first three years, to draw up an initial assessment, and to plan with serenity and hope for their remaining time in office.

Up to now, all the Provincials have described this period as one of the most beautiful and most intense in their Salesian life, far from the urgent needs and demanding rhythms of daily life in their own provinces.

Through these two new initiatives of the six-year period, which have been added to the *formation meeting of the new Provincials* and to the *team visits*, both of them a legacy of our Salesian tradition, there has taken place a genuine accompaniment of the Provincials and their respective Councils. This has made it possible to offer great help and support to the Provincials, and to make concrete and visible the nearness of the Rector Major and his Council to each one of them. It has also made it possible to get to know the life of the provinces up close, including their daily lives. In this way the Rector Major has been able to have a greater and better knowledge of the provinces as well as an understanding of the needs and difficulties of each reality in the Congregation.

- Closeness to the provinces with particular difficulties

The life of the provinces is neither homogeneous nor uniform. Although the *charismatic identity* is one, the particular history of each province, the typical path followed - in some cases for over a hundred years and in others only since their recent foundation - and the cultural, ethnic, social, racial and national differences, have led to some of them experiencing particular difficulties in government, in the management of assets, in the political and economic crisis of their country, in armed conflicts, etc.

The list of provinces needing support, not only economic but also in animation and government, is long. I believe I can say that the Rector Major and his Council have given a priority to being close to these provinces and these confreres. In some cases, the Rector Major, his Vicar and the Economist General as well as the Councillors for the various sectors have rightly been at hand to accompany and help the provinces in particular difficulties.

3.3. The governing activity of the Rector Major and his Council in the appointment of Provincials, Provincial Councillors and Directors of Salesian communities around the world

It might be obvious, but I wish to underline something that we have handled with particular attention in the General Council in so far as it is a matter of the utmost importance, viz. the appointment of Provincials. We have taken the results of the consultation very seriously, giving all the time necessary to make a correct discernment. We have always sought to appoint, according to possibilities, the Provincial most suitable for the actual situation of the province. I can say that we are happy with how we have carried out this task. And the same can be said with regard to the appointment of the provincial councillors. We have spent a lot of time discussing each person, thanks also to the fact that some or many members of the General Council have known the candidates well.

No less significant has been the attention paid to the directors of communities. In some cases we have had to suspend the approval of the nominees in order to seek clarifications or to communicate that the nominees were unacceptable because of existing counterindications. Much more demanding has been the process of identifying and appointing the directors of the formation houses in the regions. Thanks to all this effort and discernment, we are certain - humanly speaking, according to our possibilities - that we have provided good candidates for these communities. Several times we have asked a Provincial or a group of Provincials of a curatorium to seek out a candidate with a more suitable profile, because *we are convinced that the stages of initial formation condition the present and even more the future of the Congregation.*

3.4. Enhancement of the service rendered by the Provincial Vicar

“The vice-provincial is the first collaborator of the provincial in everything that concerns the ordinary government of the province, as also in those matters specially entrusted to him.” With these words our Constitutions in art. 168 define the role and the figure of the Provincial Vicar. It would seem that there is nothing else to add. However, in recent years we have seen that, in most provinces, the *Provincial Vicar* has been of vital importance as a help to the Provincial, collaborating with him in maintaining the province in good health, addressing together with him the more difficult situations, and personally taking on the service of accompaniment in resolving irregular situations, etc.

Unfortunately, we have to point out that a good number of provinces do not have a fulltime Vicar to carry out the functions assigned to him. The lack of personnel regrettably leads the Provincial to saddle his Vicar - who is also the director of a house, a complex one perhaps that keeps him continually occupied - with many other responsibilities, thus effectively preventing him from performing his particular duties, apart from his conversations with the Provincial and his presence in the Provincial council.

3.5. A sexennium of “purification”

If, in the Reports of the two previous six-year periods, the Rector Major spoke of two issues calling for reflection - one of which concerned sexual abuses - I think I can make a well-considered and serene assessment by stating that we have lived in the Congregation a six-year period of grace and serenity from many points of view, and at the same time, a six-year period which painfully is leading and will lead us towards a genuine “purification” which will make us ever more faithful to the call we have received from God.

At the beginning of this sexennium we found that the Congregation was weighed down by a heavy burden. It was the burden of an ample number of so-called “irregular” situations. Some of them were more recent and others had remained unresolved for a long time, either because of carelessness and forgetfulness or because of an unawareness of how to come to grips with and resolve painful situations. The work done in the General Council by dealing with these situations, in agreement with the respective provinces and not without insistence on our part, has led to the settlement of many of these situations.

However, I must stress that what matters is not the resolution of an irregular situation in itself, but the fact that as a Congregation we feel freer, more relieved and increasingly aware that *there are no shortcuts on the path of vocational fidelity.* As confreres, we are and will be more and more aware of the intrinsic fragility concerning ourselves; at the same time, we feel that, by declaring ourselves to be *Salesians of Don Bosco*, we are affirming even now our desire and

our will to be Salesians as Don Bosco dreamed us to be, that is, to live our lives as consecrated religious with the greatest authenticity possible. In this sense this purification is a grace and a blessing.

3.6. *“Monk or not, I am staying with Don Bosco.”*²⁸

As I quote John Cagliero, this dear confrere, a great missionary and a man of the Congregation, I wish to allude to another aspect which I confess causes me great pain. I am referring to those confreres - between 20 and 25 every year - who, with the consent of the General Council, present their request to the Holy Father to leave the Congregation in view of their incardination according to canon law in a diocese they have already chosen.

My pain is not about the loss of a confrere – in general, unless the Bishop refuses them after a while, they do not usually return to the Congregation anymore – nor is it about the fact that a confrere leaves after receiving an intellectual formation and with a good baggage of experience. It is not about that. What hurts me is that it makes me ask: where is the love for Don Bosco that led young John Cagliero to make that very significant statement?

Usually these confreres say that they carry Don Bosco in their hearts. And I have no reason to doubt them. But, it is not the same thing. They will do well as priests. Certainly. But *it is not the same thing*. The heart of a Salesian, including that of a Salesian priest, is a heart that thinks and dreams, suffers and spends itself in a self-gift and service to young people. It is the heart of someone who, like Don Bosco, says: “I promised God that until my dying breath I would dedicate myself entirely to my poor boys.”²⁹ It is the heart of someone who is a friend, brother and father to those boys who have no friend, brother or father; and there is no doubt that the boys will not find all this in those confreres because they will leave them and embrace a different life. It is the heart of a Salesian who loves his Congregation and his confreres, and for this reason pronounced these words before God: “with complete freedom I offer myself totally to You. I pledge myself to devote all my strength to those to whom you will send me, especially to young people who are poorer, to live in the Salesian Society in communion of spirit and action with my brothers”.³⁰

What lies behind the choice made by those priests?

Scholars identify especially the following signs of weakness: “frequent abandonment of religious life while taking a fancy to parish priestly life, the easy assumption of parishes by Institutes and the high regard for them as places of refuge and “recycling” rather than as real centres for carrying out the mission (...), the uncertainties of young people who, during the time of formation, find it difficult to understand the specific identity of the religious priest and experience situations full of ambiguity”.³¹

There are many elements that coexist in such situations, and the motivations are not always the same or equally clear. However, looking towards the future, this phenomenon teaches us that *we have a deficit in the matter of our Salesian charismatic identity*.

²⁸ BM VI, p. 181.

²⁹ BM XVIII, p. 216.

³⁰ Const. 24.

³¹ A. MONTAN, *Il religioso presbitero nella Chiesa oggi: attualita', contenuti, prospettiva di un qualificato seminario della CISM*, in CISM, *Il religioso presbitero nella Chiesa oggi. Atti del Seminario di Studio* (Rome, 31 March 2005), ed. A. Montan, Il Calamo, Rome 2005, 7-17, 7.

In light of the reflection made by the GC26 there is a risk, with particular reference to Salesian priests, of both a *pastoral genericism*, because of which the spirit of our Founder cannot be recognized in the way they live and in the way they transmit it, and an *apostolic individualism*, which often leads them to take on pastoral commitments and occupations that are far from the logic of religious life. In the name of these apostolates they seek to justify their absence from the community, their unsuitability for fraternal life, their need for individual management of everything they do, their autonomy in economic matters, including transparency, etc.

The time is long past when some used to say: “Enough of Don Bosco! Enough of our self-referentiality!” Today, in a world undergoing a very rapid change in values, I say that just as the thirsty man needs water, **the Salesians of today and tomorrow must have a strong charismatic identity**, and that the love for the Lord Jesus must penetrate the call that made us, together with our Salesian confreres, turn our gaze to Don Bosco and the poorest youngsters. It is clear that we need to make evident where the roots of the two forms of life of the one consecrated vocation as Salesians of Don Bosco are to be found.

3.7. Transparency and financial solidarity and the availability of confreres

“Responsibility, transparency, and the maintenance of trust are interconnected principles: no responsibility is given without transparency, transparency generates trust, trust verifies both.”³²

Transparency is partly an outcome that has been achieved and at the same time a great challenge we always face. I can assure you that it has been a priority for the Rector Major and his Council during this sexennium, and has been recommended insistently to all the Provincials of our Congregation.

We must practise transparency in the various aspects of our consecrated life. And all of us immediately understand that it is concerned with the use of goods and their administration. A great responsibility lies on our shoulders with regard to the use we make of goods.

I would like to point out some aspects of considerable importance:

- The first and principal criterion for a proper management cannot be that of obtaining personal benefits and advantages.
- Management decisions, while respecting the ethical nature of what is done or decided, must always be coherently motivated.
- Responsibility also implies that there must always be an accountability to someone (there is always an accountability to civil society, to the Church and to our Congregation).
- This transparency must be sought, knowing that the requirements of supervision and control should “not be understood as limiting the autonomy of institutions or as a lack of trust, but rather as representing a means for communication and transparency and providing protection for those who perform delicate administrative tasks”.³³

I believe I can say that in our Congregation we are making gradual progress along the path of transparency and responsibility. The continuous efforts we have made over the years are bearing fruit. An important support is also being given, especially in some continents, by the change of mentality brought about by civil laws which increasingly call for legality and correctness. Undeniably, the teaching and reflection on the proper use of our means have always been very clear in the magisterium of our Congregation, from the Constitutions and

³² CIVCSVA, *Economy at the Service of the Charism and Mission. Guidelines*, LEV, Vatican City 2018, n. 41.

³³ *Ibid.*

Regulations to the various General Chapters. Where guidelines and indications have not been followed, it has been more on account of human frailty and a lack of skills and competencies than a shortage of proper guidelines and indications.

To confirm what I am saying, I repeat an important statement of the Special General Chapter: “Those in charge of the management of such goods, as well as being scrupulously careful to provide a sound administration which ensures the collective and individual observance of poverty, will act as custodians of the goods of the Church and will not allow any arbitrary or personal use of them. By bearing constantly in mind that what they are administering is the precious fruit of the work of the confreres and a tangible sign of that Providence which, through the generosity and sacrifices - sometimes beyond all calculation - of our benefactors, enables us to carry on...”³⁴

As a result of the progress made in this field, I would like to point to the gradual decrease in “shrewd tactics” and the ensuing damage to requests to the Rector Major for financial assistance, and through him, to the missionary procures. Today the data presented when requests are made for help in the formation sector are much more realistic and authentic. There are fewer and fewer cases in which some ask for the same contribution from several “agencies” and succeed. This is not “shrewdness”, much less is it “evangelical”. A big help in putting an end to these distortions has been a greater coordination between the Economist General’s office and the mission procures as well as the sharing of information.

A decision taken by the GC27 has been *a great step forward, both because of its significance* and because of *the real financial assistance* provided in the difficult years which we have experienced at the *Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco* on account of judicial conflicts (over the well-known “Gerini case”). It has become possible for the solidarity of the provinces, according to their different possibilities, to help in supporting the service of animation and government of the Rector Major and his Council as also of the Salesian community which assists him for the benefit of the entire Congregation in the world.

This help has been very important. On not a few occasions it has served to meet the emergency situations that we have experienced, both at our headquarters and in some provinces. I wish to avail myself of this opportunity to express my gratitude for the generosity shown by everyone. And I renew the request for help for this purpose. At the same time, in a dynamic of *solidarity and communion*, the Rector Major and his Council, especially through the proxies depending directly on him, will accompany and support nearly two thirds of the provinces of the Congregation with some kind of aid for the purposes of formation, the construction of educational structures, and other needs.

I thank you once again for the ever-increasing generosity that has been shown, from the financial point of view, by some of the better-off provinces towards the poorer ones. That is very inspiring and beautiful.

Finally, I want to emphasize an even more important form of solidarity than the one I have mentioned. I am referring to a *solidarity in terms of an exchange of confreres between different provinces*. There is no need to say much more about something we all know. All of us profess as *Salesians of Don Bosco* in the Salesian Congregation. The religious profession before God is not made for a province or a nation. For this reason, dear confreres, after a timid beginning in the past sexennium, the next six years will have to be marked much more by this mutual

³⁴ SGC20, 726.

exchange, donation and availability on the part of confreres of those provinces who have been blessed with a greater number of vocations - and are usually the poorest – *for the youth pastoral mission that the Congregation is called to carry out in every part of the world*. We are being called by many nations to open new presences and we cannot refuse to respond citing a lack of availability [of personnel]. There is no doubt that we shall have to take some significant steps in this direction. It would not seem very fair for the provinces with more vocations and greater growth to continue receiving all kinds of help from the rest of the Congregation, and not be willing to offer the wealth they possess. A wealth which, as in the *Acts of the Apostles*, does not consist in gold or silver, but in Jesus Christ the Lord himself in the person of the Salesian confreres who are willing to serve generously wherever they are needed.

3.8. Providence and grace: from the Gerini case to the Sacred Heart (Rome)

As I write this Report for the General Chapter, a final attempt is being made to resolve the long dispute of the “Gerini case”, if possible with an agreement that would benefit not only our opponents but also ourselves. In the previous Report to the GC27, the Rector Major referred to this “case”. The conflict became even more pronounced starting from 2007 when a transaction with the counterparts was signed in June of that year, involving as guarantor the *Direzione Generale* (i.e. the Congregation, we Salesians) and not the Gerini Foundation, which is the real object of the dispute.³⁵ The situation was greatly aggravated by the outcome of a “legal arbitration” which misjudged and exaggeratedly assessed the value of the Foundation’s assets, and consequently put the *Direzione Generale* in the situation of having to pay exorbitant amounts which we never possessed and which would be impossible to have. All this also justified our resistance through legal and judicial means to try to prevent our opponents from achieving this unfair and disproportionate economic advantage. Since then (2007) there have been twelve years of strenuous and costly litigation in courtrooms.

In this six-year period, and more precisely in June 2017, our adversaries became, through an executive order signed by the judge, the owners of our General House known as La Pisana. Their intention was to exert maximum pressure in order to obtain money as a countervalue of the Pisana. In return they would return the ownership of the house in which we lived.

I can assure the General Chapter and the entire Congregation that it was a very delicate moment. However, I had one very clear conviction and so did the General Council: we would not do anything that would saddle the future Rectors Major with a great debt for many years! Other solutions could have been found, but not this one. At the same time, we had not forgotten the suggestion we heard during the GC27 about our stay at the Pisana headquarters. In the light of all this, we made a serene discernment in a spirit of faith and came to the decision – a courageous one, I think – to leave the General House of the Pisana. Therefore, it would not be a matter of “losing” it, but of “leaving” it to our opponents for the value established by the judge. In this way, we would lessen our debt towards them – and this in fact is what took place. We had no other places to go to. And in three months’ time we had to vacate a house that meant so much to us, with 50 years of history behind it and unique realities such as, for example, the central Salesian historical archive. But, our decision remained firm and clear.

The confreres of the community of the Generalate were exemplary in their availability. Within three months we moved to the Sacred Heart in Rome, a house belonging to the ICC Province. The confreres there welcomed us with great generosity and made available to us all the space we required.

³⁵ Cf. *Relazione del Rettor Maggiore al GC27*, Rome 2014, p. 334.

It was then that I informed the whole Congregation. The decision we had taken was very well received throughout the world, both by the Salesian confreres and by the members belonging to the various groups of the Salesian Family.

Pope Francis himself told me in a private audience that he had prayed a lot for us and that he was happy with the decision we had made for what it meant and for the witness it gave.

For these reasons, I believe I can say that we have lived a time when we have truly experienced *Divine Providence and the grace of the Lord*.

After a year and a half of sharing the same premises with the ICC Provincial and his Council and with the community of the Sacred Heart, we came to the decision, after much dialogue and frequent meetings, to make the Sacred Heart, the emblematic presence wanted by Don Bosco himself and that cost him so much fatigue, the definitive headquarters of the Rector Major and his Council and of the community that collaborates with them in the various services to the Congregation and the Salesian Family in the world. The ICC Province found suitable premises for its offices and communities; so did the National Youth Pastoral Centre of the Italian provinces (CISI). The costs of renovating these premises to accommodate the two new communities and their respective services were borne by the Rector Major and his Council. In addition, the ICC Province will be reimbursed for the economic value of the house of the Sacred Heart (excluding the Basilica).

4. LOOKING TO THE FUTURE WITH FAITH AND TRUST

4.1. A hope founded on “the one in whom I have placed my trust” (2 Tim 1,12)

In the Apostolic Letter sent to all consecrated persons on the occasion of the Year dedicated to Consecrated Life, Pope Francis indicated three very specific objectives: *look to the past with gratitude, live the present with passion, and embrace the future with hope*.³⁶

I believe that what the Holy Father proposed for all religious life is without a doubt applicable to our Congregation and can become a programme for our GC28. We too have a great past to contemplate with sincere gratitude, as we thank the Holy Spirit for the great gift that our beloved Father Don Bosco has been for the Church and the Salesian Family.

There is no doubt that the present time is lived by many confreres with genuine educational and evangelizing passion - as did Don Bosco in his time; with the same passion for the salvation of the young that animated Don Bosco, a true evangelizer and catechist, a great educator in the faith; and with a strong and tender devotion to the Immaculate Virgin Mary, Help of Christians.

But, this call to authenticity passes today through a **future embraced with hope**. We do not hide the difficulties that consecrated life is experiencing, and we, too. These are the difficulties that the Pope himself speaks of³⁷: decreasing vocations, aging members, particularly in the Western world, economic problems, the challenge of internationality and globalization, the pitfalls of relativism, marginalization, social irrelevance, etc.

There is no doubt that we recognize ourselves in the reality the Pope speaks of; but it is in these difficulties, which we share with many men and women religious in the world, that we must

³⁶ Cf. POPE FRANCIS, *Apostolic Letter to all Consecrated People on the occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life*, 2014, 1-3.

³⁷ Cf. *o.c.*, 15-16.

exercise our hope, which is a fruit of our faith in the Lord of history who accompanies us and who continues to say to us: “Do not be afraid ... because I am with you”.³⁸

Albeit moderately, our Congregation too has suffered a numerical decrease during the sexennium. But, the hope we speak of is based neither on numbers nor on works; nor can we yield to the temptation of taking refuge in a quest for efficiency, trusting solely in our own strength. We need a different outlook. It is the *hope* that is founded on the One in whom we have placed our trust and who sustains us.³⁹ Only a strong experience of God can sustain and give a solid foundation to our religious life, become its source and principal mission, and enable us to bear witness to God with our life. Otherwise, we run the risk of not communicating anything precious and not understanding our specific task as religious and Salesians in today's world.

Our GC28 must have a prophetic outlook, not so much in order to indicate the ways by which the Congregation can simply “survive” for a few decades, as in order to offer instead the freshness of a charism that, in our great desire to be Don Bosco in the 21st century and in the future, we are trying to embody, notwithstanding our limitations. Personally, I *consider it a “sin” against our charism to worry only about “survival”*. Our Congregation must not fall into this temptation for any reason. I think we have not succumbed to this temptation, but we must always be careful and very vigilant in this regard. Only by remaining “seekers of God” shall we free ourselves from immobility, from the temptation of discouragement and stagnation, and be able to live for the mission which we have received as a call from God in Don Bosco.

The future of our Congregation will have to be permeated by the *hope* that “as it was for Don Bosco, so for us too *the primacy of God* will be the cornerstone of our *raison d’être* in the Church and in the world. This primacy will give meaning to our consecrated life, help us avoid the risk of letting ourselves become too caught up in our activities and forgetting that we are essentially “seekers of God” and witnesses of his love among the young and the poor. We are called, then, to redirect our heart, our mind and all our energy to the ‘beginning’ and the ‘origins’”⁴⁰ of our charism and the vocational call of each of us. With this clarity we shall make the decisive choice of what was essential for Don Bosco, viz. leading the young to the encounter with Jesus!

4.2. God continues to bless us. The challenge of a solid, courageous and responsible formation

We surely recall that in the previous sexennium one of the themes that occupied the Rector Major and his Council was *vocation and formation*.⁴¹ Well, I can assure the Chapter Assembly and the whole Congregation whom you represent that also in this sexennium initial and ongoing formation in the Congregation were a real priority. We worked very intensely and achieved greater success with regard to initial formation in all its phases, the reconfiguration of the houses of formation of the Congregation, the preparation of formation personnel, and the establishment of good formative teams capable of accompanying the various stages.

The greatest shortcomings were in ongoing formation, a matter that has not yet been satisfactorily resolved despite many repeated initiatives and well-organized formation proposals.

Over the last three six-year terms, the Congregation has taken significant steps with regard to our Salesian identity as consecrated persons and a commitment to better accompaniment in ongoing and initial formation. I think I can say that in the past six years important work has

³⁸ Jer. 1,8.

³⁹ Cf. 2 Tim. 1,12.

⁴⁰ GC27, 32.

⁴¹ Cf. *Relazione del Rettor Maggiore*, o.c., p. 328.

been done in achieving a better coordination and effective collaboration between the various departments or sectors.

In close continuity with the previous six-year period, an effort was made from 2014 to 2020 to foster a better understanding of the Salesian consecrated vocation in its two specific forms. Some good progress has been achieved; nevertheless, we have the task of helping each confrere and each community to live our identity as consecrated persons with ever greater depth and conviction. The GC28 will have its say in this matter, but in all likelihood we shall see quite clearly that the Salesians needed by today's youth must be those who live their vocation as consecrated persons, brothers or priests, with *a deep sense of God, a strong conviction, a total transparency of life and a great joy, both within and without.*

Even if the number of candidates for Salesian life varies considerably from region to region, we, as a Congregation, consider the number of novices beginning Salesian life every year to be a blessing from the Lord. The Lord certainly expects our work in youth ministry and accompaniment to continue bearing much fruit.

There are other signs too that, humanly speaking, tell us about the hope and the decisive path we shall have to pursue in the coming years:

- The reduction in our numbers in this sexennium, taking into account the irregular situations that have been dealt with and resolved, has been significantly less than in the past. In December 2013 the Yearbook of the Congregation listed 14,371 Salesians and 122 bishops. Today there are 14,184 Salesians in total.

The difference is better understood and the positive trend noticed if one takes into account the fact that in these five years 583 irregular situations have been resolved; these were mainly confreres who still formally appeared as Salesians even if they had left the Congregation years before. Hence, the real drop in numbers in these five years has been about 100 confreres. This “containment” can inject much hope for the future provided we take constant care of the vocation of the confreres, first of all of ourselves and of the local and provincial community to which we belong.

- The percentage of dropouts in the formation stages has also decreased slightly, bringing down the number of those who left us in this sexennium.
- The exercise in listening, carried out with the help of a study and a questionnaire involving more than 3,000 confreres in formation and their formation guides, has brought to light some weaknesses in initial formation. This awareness is a help towards growth.
- Vocational discernment in youth ministry and in the aspirantates and prenovitiates will help, as it has in the last 15 years, to achieve greater perseverance, both in the novitiate and in the period of temporary profession.
- We also believe that suitable processes of discernment and accompaniment in vocation animation will lead to a significant improvement in formation and a decrease in the phenomenon of vocational fragility, especially in some regions of the Congregation.
- The ever more careful preparation of formation guides represents another great opportunity; we must continue along the lines developed in this sexennium. An important effort has been made to prepare formation guides and formation teams for the various phases. Some steps have been taken. However, there are situations in the Congregation that still show considerable fragility. Undertaking the formation of formation guides in order to provide them with the skills needed for their task is a long and arduous journey. In any event, we are confident of the fruits it will bring to formation.
- Our formation cannot be something abstract. The mission of the Salesian for today's young people *conditions the formation of the Salesian*. It is important to help young Salesians arrive at the vital discovery that our mission today is a shared mission with lay people and

sometimes with other consecrated persons as well. From the beginning of the Congregation we have been formed in the mission and by the mission. The experience that was had with Don Bosco at Valdocco continues to be a model for us today.

- In the formation of today's Salesian, listening and dialogue, respect and acceptance of the personal rhythms of growth and maturation must characterize the coming years. Forming does not mean "formatting", and "walking with" must lead to processes of genuine personal growth and transformation. Such a commitment calls for formation guides with a clear vision and the needed flexibility to accept being always a "work in progress". In this sense we speak of formation guides who are able to live a continuing "exodus".
- The hope we speak of will be truly strengthened by the actions we will do and which will give *genuine continuity to the various stages of formation*.
- Finally, we must grow in the conviction that formation lasts a lifetime and for this reason all the phases of life must be accompanied, including the phase of Salesian maturity and seniority.

The outlook that the Congregation has acquired today, following the path taken in recent decades, is certainly in need of further deepening by this General Chapter.

4.3. We need you among us: the cry of young people at the GC28!

This is what we read in the Letter from Rome: "I looked, and I saw that very few priests and clerics mixed with the boys, and fewer still were joining in their games. The superiors were no longer the heart and soul of the recreation. Most of them were walking up and down, chatting among themselves without taking any notice of what the pupils were doing. Others looked on at the recreation but paid little heed to the boys (...). I must finish: Do you know what this poor old man who has spent his whole life for his dear boys wants from you? Nothing else than, due allowance being made, we should go back to the happy days of the Oratory of old: the days of affection and Christian confidence between boys and superiors; the days when we accepted and put up with difficulties for the love of Jesus Christ; the days when hearts were open with a simple candour; days of love and real joy for everyone."⁴²

Dear confreres, already at the beginning of our GC28, I can assure you that ***the voice of young people from all over the world is a cry that asks us to be among them, with them and for them.***

When, in all the provinces and countries where we are present, we asked young people what they expect from us and what they want from us, their cry was just that.

Undoubtedly, this reflection will occupy us in the coming days and will probably be one of the major directions in our planning for the future. That is because the life of the charism of our Congregation passes through an authentic and permanent return to Don Bosco to replace, where necessary, management with presence, administration with a priority for each young person, and authority as power with service, until the words of our Father become a reality for each of us and every day: "*In those things which are for the benefit of young people in danger or which serve to win souls for God, I push ahead even to the extent of recklessness.*"⁴³

The Magisterium of our Congregation is full of beautiful pages and expressions that remind us that they, the young people, are our priority; it is we ourselves, the Salesians of Don Bosco, who say it. In this GC28 it is the same young people who ***cry out to us, who beg us.*** Of the

⁴² J. BOSCO, *Lettera da Roma alla comunita' salesiana dell'Oratorio di Torino-Valdocco*, in ISS, *Fonti salesiane. I. Don Bosco e la sua opera*, LAS Rome 2014, pp. 446-447, 451.

⁴³ *Const.* 19 and *BM XIV*, p. 536.

many passages that I have read and on which I have reflected, I offer one to this Chapter Assembly. These are a few lines from the message of the GC25 to young people, in which we said to them:

Gathered together in Rome,
coming from all the continents,
we the Salesians of Don Bosco,
write to you Young People,
because it is for you that we live.
(...)
We want to be for you and with you
in situations of poverty,
in the tragedies of war,
in the conflicts which divide
and wherever life is threatened
and development stifled.
We are with you
in the search for Love,
that gives full meaning to life and leads to happiness.
(...)
We want to renew our pledge:
the doors of our hearts and of our houses
are always open for you.⁴⁴

Continuing to fulfill these promises is a guarantee of fidelity to Don Bosco and, in him, to the Lord.

4.4. A Salesian Congregation in the 21st century with a priority for the poorest

In the GC27 we said: “We want to be a *Congregation of the poor for the poor*. Like Don Bosco we maintain that this is how we live the Gospel in a radical way and are more available and prompt in responding to the needs of the young, bringing about in our lives a genuine exodus towards the most needy. Migrants, refugees and unemployed youth challenge us as Salesians in all parts of the world.”⁴⁵

Don Bosco concentrated his whole life on young people and knew how to adapt to them, to their reality and their environment. We too, with the same love and the same educational and evangelizing determination, will have to continue to discover the treasures that each of them carries in his heart.

Our absolute priority remains the young and among them, the “poor, abandoned and in danger”. It is Don Bosco who frequently used this expression right from the first article of the Constitutions that he wrote. It is therefore “a priority among priorities: *help to the most needy*”.⁴⁶ And the last General Chapters, in one way or another, in one context or another, have always focused attention on the mission in favour of the poorest and most needy young people.

The fear of not being completely faithful to this priority has always existed. Already Fr. Ricceri in the SGC20 warned of this danger and extended an invitation to correct “certain

⁴⁴ GC25, 139.

⁴⁵ GC27, 55.

⁴⁶ SGC20, 48.

exaggerations in works which developed in a way that does not give clear witness of the Salesian charism (for the poor) with consequent atrophy of the usual congenial Salesian characteristics”.⁴⁷

I myself, in the closing speech of the GC27, said: “I dare to ask that with the ‘courage, maturity and much prayer’ with which we are sent to the most excluded young people, we choose in each of our Provinces to take another look at where we must remain, where we should go and where we can leave... Needy young people challenge us with their groans and their cries of pain”.⁴⁸

I believe I can honestly say that in these six years the Congregation has been attentive and vigilant with respect to this priority. I have repeated all over the world that when a decision or a pastoral option of any kind has to be made, we must not neglect the priority for the boys and young men who are most in need. And I believe we have not deviated along the way. But at the same time, I must remind you that there is a very strong tendency in some countries and provinces, especially in school settings, to give the first place to those who “can pay” and forget the poorest. It is a temptation that is easily justified “a priori” by the need to support our works or to guarantee their sustainability, and we do not do our utmost to seek those alternative means that could guarantee the sustainability of the works without *ever* - *I say ever* - having to transform our presences into elitist setups or spaces reserved only for those who have lots of possibilities. In fact, among the confreres and in the provinces there is a real danger of thinking only or above all of one’s own wellbeing and comfort, and of not being available to go to the poorest areas of the province or to leave the cities for more remote and humble presences. It is particularly worrying that in certain situations some young Salesians do not have in their hearts the desire to make a radical gift and surrender of themselves, whatever the price or the effort.

As I write this reflection, convinced of the existence of so many available choices in favour of the poor in our Congregation and also of the great danger of being stuck halfway, I turn my gaze to Mother Teresa of Calcutta (a Saint today) and think of what she recommended when she spoke to us on April 17, 1984 at the GC22: “Do not let anyone and anything separate you from Christ by taking you away from the poor”.⁴⁹

In this GC28, looking to the future with hope must mean, even in this case, returning to Don Bosco and proposing to the Congregation genuine life challenges that will fill the heart of every Salesian to be like Don Bosco today and for today’s young people.

4.5. In a Congregation that truly believes in sharing the mission with the laity

Doing a quick survey of our General Chapters, from the SGC20 to the GC27, I searched with some curiosity for all the paragraphs that directly, concretely and broadly make mention of the laity, their formation and commitment, and their collaboration and sharing in the mission with us... All these expressions appear in 82 paragraphs; in addition, the entire GC24 is devoted to the topic of “Salesians and Lay people: Communion and Sharing in the Spirit and Mission of Don Bosco”.

This data speaks to us, confreres, of a sensitivity in our reflection and in our magisterium that goes back a long way. In some areas of the Congregation good progress has been made; but in

⁴⁷ SGC20, 181.

⁴⁸ GC27, p. 126.

⁴⁹ GC22, 110.

general, the reality today is a testament to the fact that to embrace this path, follow it and integrate it into the life of the provinces and the confreres is not so obvious and easy. This issue too will have to be addressed by our GC28.

Don Bosco, always a man for human relations, dialogue and friendship, was constantly looking for collaborators. Already in 1972 our SGC20 said that “we too must be generously ‘open’ in sharing responsibility in our pastoral work with lay people, who have ‘a proper and indispensable role in the mission of the Church’.”⁵⁰ In the same Chapter, 47 years ago, it was already envisaged that the laity “should be the ones to take over much of the administration that up to now has been done by us”;⁵¹ we were invited to “seek the collaboration of the laity in the administrative section of the work, eventually electing lay representatives to the board of administration”.⁵² Present-day reflection makes us understand that the shared mission is much more than a delegation of administrative functions. About this there is no doubt, but it often happens that just when it comes to handing administrative functions over to them, some confreres offer more resistance. And yet, it is precisely in this matter that we are asked to carry out tasks and programmes “in consultation with the laity who share our responsibility in pastoral work”.⁵³

The Rector Major’s report to the GC21 offered an important statement in this regard. It said: “We must recognize that, especially today, not only or primarily out of necessity but for obvious reasons of ecclesiology and pedagogy, we need lay people who can be knowledgeable and capable collaborators who effectively integrate with us in our educational, pastoral and evangelizing work”.⁵⁴ Confreres, this is the road we have entered upon. In the coming years our Congregation must take decisive steps in this direction. But, does all this apply in places where there is an abundance of vocations? Certainly. Above all, because such a step will make us much more free with regard to the institution and will offer us many opportunities on a personal level to concentrate a lot of our energies directly on our evangelizing, catechetical and pastoral mission.

I am writing this, knowing full well that this is a “sensitive and uncomfortable” matter. Sensitive and uncomfortable like everything that has been said previously on the matter of clericalism - both by myself, and in his time by Fr. Pascual Chávez. In any case, the unpopularity of certain issues cannot take away the courage to highlight them. It is a duty associated with my service. I invite the whole assembly to be courageous on this point.

“Lay people have the right to the role of collaboration and shared responsibility; and for this they must be prepared.”⁵⁵ This was written by the GC21. I have already pointed out some reasons why the Congregation is very clear on this point: “When lay collaborators are convinced Christians, their presence affords our young people a wider array of models of the Christian life; they give the Salesians greater opportunities to spend themselves in their specific field of animation; and they provide the opportunity for a greater dialogue and allow for a broader and more updated dialogue in the face of problems of family and occupation”.⁵⁶

The choice lies in our hands. Life shows us that it is the right way. All that is necessary is to overcome our resistance for the sake of a mission that will be in a position to establish new, positive and contagious ways of carrying out the shared mission between Salesians and lay

⁵⁰ SGC20, 428.

⁵¹ SGC20, 393.

⁵² SGC20, 620.

⁵³ SGC20, 439.

⁵⁴ GC21, 66.

⁵⁵ GC21, 76.

⁵⁶ GC21, 77.

people. I would like to emphasize that the initial formation of the new generations of Salesians must face this reality directly.

4.6. With an ability to intervene in and accompany the new changes in the communication paradigm

We are on the threshold of a completely new era in the field of social communications.⁵⁷ Already in 1971 the Pastoral Instruction *Communio et Progressio* highlighted the existence of this totally new reality. Today, contemplating the world in which we live and the area of social communications, we find ourselves exactly in the situation that was only sketched out 48 years ago.

Everywhere we hear it said that we are experiencing a change of “paradigm”. In a short time, technologies, habits and human mentalities have changed. In the next decade, in the 2020s, big changes are expected on a global scale. Many countries are already immersed in the world of “artificial intelligence”, communication with 5G technology, “Big Data”, biotechnology, the use of nanotechnologies, etc.

It is clear that we are in an era of profound changes that are affecting not only our way of thinking and acting, but also our religious life and the way we express our consecration and our faith. As educators, every day we observe adolescents and young people rapidly changing their habits, their ways of seeing, thinking and understanding the world, their personal and group relationships, and their fundamental values of existence, the world and God (which they show in their manifestations of faith or indifference).

There is taking place in the world a development of the mass media and an increase of online communication platforms whose contents are being generated by the users themselves. This category includes *blogs*, *online forums*, and the different *online* media that allow a person to create and share a lot of content. Among the most important platforms are the main social networks (at present, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram... and tomorrow, others) which are defined as “global digital communication platforms that bring together a large number of users”. These social networks and their privileged “Internet” channel have become fundamental tools of “intensive” and “essential” usage for youth socialization, raising the dilemma about what is virtual, what is real, and how the virtual is always “real” because it is a part of life.

The places where young people live are not just physical spaces, but “digital places” which become converted into real places because young people and many adults too meet there at any moment and at any time. There they make their voice and their presence heard. This virtual universe grows exponentially in an exchange of communication that reduces distances between the macrogroups of “unknown friends” who connect and communicate with each other.

One can catch a glimpse of the new world of relationships with a simple process called “interaction”. A continuous feedback is maintained among the young people who inhabit the universe of the three “www”. And in this interaction an infinite number of messages, photographs and videos are exchanged together with their contents, making the number of young people immersed in the world of their screens grow in what could be the future of today: captured in their modern “smartphones”, they become “prosumers”, that is, at one and the same time, consumers and producers of information, and even of knowledge.

This reality needs to be further described and explored in greater depth. For us, educators of the young, it is more than evident that our educational outlook and practice cannot be an

⁵⁷ Cf. *Communio et Progressio* 181, 187, quoted in *SGC20*, 442.

apocalyptic, negative and indifferent attitude towards the reality we have described. On the contrary, there has to be an “intelligent” and “active” attitude on our part, one that implies an in-depth and integral understanding of the limits and possibilities offered by these means. As we commit ourselves to accompany our young people, we shall have to try to acquire a knowledge of the new languages, make them our own in order to understand them and dialogue with them in a critical manner.

Referring to the press, the means of communication of his time, Don Bosco wrote: “Please do not neglect this very important aspect of our mission”⁵⁸; and in his circular letter to the Salesians dated 19 March 1885, he said: “The press was one of the main enterprises that Divine Providence entrusted to me. I have no hesitation in calling this medium divine, since God himself has made use of it for the regeneration of man.”⁵⁹ And to the future Pope Pius XI, he went so far as to say: “Don Bosco always wants to be in the vanguard of progress in such things”.⁶⁰

→ I ask myself whether as educators of the young our Congregation and the Salesians of today and tomorrow will be able to prepare themselves always more and always better for this **new digital context** in which young people live.

→ I ask myself whether as educators of young people we understand, reflect upon, take part in and deepen our understanding of the reality of *social networks* to the point of becoming competent in interacting with the young people we meet.

→ And, there remains a challenge for us educators. Let us ask ourselves if the formal educational programmes that we offer in our schools, parishes, oratories and in the IUS will be “sensitive” and “permeable” enough to be in tune with young people and their “digital world”.

This is a dimension of such importance that we cannot neglect it, as though it were not something *vital and fundamental* in the evangelization and education of young people. And because it is so vital and fundamental, it must be given serious consideration in the formation of the new generations of Salesians; it is a field in which they, “digital natives”, are called to be, like us, educators and evangelizers of young people in our Congregation where we educate and evangelize “particularly by means of social communication”.⁶¹

CONCLUSION: EXORCIZE THE TEMPTATION TO DISCOURAGEMENT AND AFFIRM THE HOPE THAT COMES FROM THE LORD

I conclude this Report. I have prepared it with passion and conviction and I would have a lot more to share. Maybe we could do it in dialogue over the next few days as I respond to your questions.

I want to end by making my own the words pronounced by Fr. Egidio Viganò in his speech at the closing of the GC23. He said: “There is no need for me to repeat here what has already been authoritatively said by the Chapter. All I want to do is *exorcise any temptation to*

⁵⁸ *Epistolario* IV, p. 321.

⁵⁹ *Epistolario* IV, pp. 318-319.

⁶⁰ *BM* XIX, p. 298.

⁶¹ *Const.* 6.

discouragement: the document is full of fine things, but what can we do about it in this house and with these confreres? Of course, there will be practical difficulties to be faced.

We must react, and start from ourselves; we must be convinced that in every house there are many more possibilities than we sometimes imagine; and above all we must increase our trust in the real and active presence of the Spirit, in the energy of the resurrection given by Christ in the sacraments, in Mary's constant motherly help, in the intercession of Don Bosco and our saints and all the heavenly court".⁶²

Ultimately, the difference between optimism and hope lies specifically in faith. There are times when we can be optimistic if the data we handle gives us favourable results, but this is a fragile and ephemeral attitude. Day after day, we must begin our journey, not so much with optimism as with hope, a hope that has its roots, yes, in faith and in the presence of the Spirit. A hope that knows what it means to have a Mother, the Help of Christians, who continues to *do everything* as she accompanies the family of Don Bosco; and a Father, Don Bosco, who continues, even through poor human mediations, to guide this work which is not even his but the *fruit of the Spirit*. *May this same Holy Spirit guide us in the task of this Chapter which the whole Congregation has entrusted to us.*

A fraternal embrace from your brother,

Fr. Ángel Fernández Artime SDB
Rector Major

⁶² GC23, 352.