

RECTOR MAJOR'S HOMILY
FOR THE OPENING EUCHARIST OF THE 28TH GENERAL CHAPTER

Sunday, 16 February 2020

My dear confreres!

We have greeted each other earlier and I have welcomed everyone to Valdocco! Now I am doing so here, *in this holy Salesian place which is the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians*.

So, welcome to Valdocco and to this Basilica where our Father so often prayed with his boys.

Welcome to Valdocco, where the Holy Spirit has made *the Salesian spirit* flourish and mature *in Don Bosco* for the good of the Church.

Welcome to Valdocco, where we were all born as Salesians. To the Becchi, birthplace of our father Don Bosco, and Valdocco, place of the first permanent Oratory and the birth of our Congregation. They are full of significance and meaning for each of us. I have said on various occasions that here, in Valdocco, everything speaks to us.

Welcome to the Twenty-Eighth General Chapter here in Valdocco, where we return sixty-two years after the last Chapter celebrated here.

Today, the Lord is calling us and blessing us, the Help of Christians is welcoming us into her house, and there is no doubt that Don Bosco is happy to see such a representation of his sons from all over the world at a new General Chapter with much greater numbers than the first one he presided over at Valsalice, with twenty-three chapter members.

Undoubtedly we have come together here with very many experiences and expectations in our hearts. And we have come in order to be a human mediation of the action of the Holy Spirit over the next seven weeks. If this were not the case, then it would not be a General Chapter of the Society of St Francis de Sales. It would simply be a congress like so many others, like those held every day by thousands of institutions of all kinds.

This presence of the Spirit is the foundation of our hope that we will continue to be faithful to Don Bosco and his mission. The One who raised up and guided Don Bosco, that is, the Holy Spirit, is actively present in our midst. His presence will allow us to bring about our union with Don Bosco and our communion in "Salesianity". In the same manner in which he led our *Father* to realise the mission to which he was called in the Church and world of his times, the Spirit will also accompany us in responding to the needs of our times today. The Holy Spirit of God will help us, given his driving force and our availability, to allow ourselves to be shaped by Him, to "be with Don Bosco and with his times", as Fr Albera once wrote. Or better still, he will help us *to be with Don Bosco today*, to be the Salesians that young people, families, society need today.

This is what the word of God speaks of today through Saint Paul, who refers to the true wisdom that is not of this world, nor of the rulers of this world, nor of people of power. On the contrary, it is the wisdom of God which has remained hidden and which God has revealed for our good.

Saint Paul goes on to say that this Wisdom has been revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit knows all things well, even the depths of God.

And this will demand that as Chapter members at this moment of our Congregation's history we recognise our own inadequacy, turn to the Spirit without whom we can do nothing of substance for the Kingdom of God, and adopt a stance of supplication, listening and docility. As the SGC20 said: "In order to carry out the discernment and renewal needed, it is not enough to have historians, or theologians, or politicians, or organisers: what is needed are men who are known to be "spiritual", men of faith, sensitive to the things of God and ready for courageous obedience, as was our Founder. True *fidelity to Don Bosco* consists not in copying him outwardly, but in imitating Don Bosco in his fidelity to the movements of the Holy Spirit."¹

Over these coming weeks we will be asking ourselves how to be Salesians of Don Bosco today, people consecrated by God who are capable of testifying to his Love, especially to the young, the poorest and most needy of them today. We know that the mission that the Lord has entrusted to us has a goal that far exceeds our poor strengths; yet we are not alone. It is his generous initiative. He calls us to the Salesian mission in religious life and establishes his Covenant with us in the *consecration* that suffuses our way of being and acting.

Our Father was called by God to carry out a youthful and popular apostolic service within the Church and this is how he spent his life as a priest, his charism as a founder and also his total giving of himself to the Lord. Enlightened by the Spirit and allowing himself to be advised by those who aided him at the time, he founded the Society of St Francis de Sales (18 December 1859): a society of consecrated *individuals* who had no other purpose than that of offering the Church *apostles who were totally dedicated, consecrated* to the service of the young.

Our GC28 aims to help the Congregation by showing how we can continue to be those same apostles today, dedicated to the service of youth in today's world and contexts.

In all of this journey we know that together with the Holy Spirit we too, as was the case for our Father, will have a teacher, Mary, the Woman of Faith, which – as Romano Guardini writes – "*is a faith that perseveres through what cannot be understood, waiting for the light of God to arrive.*" She takes us by the hand in this General Chapter of ours. In looking upon Her we will experience how *God can surprise us, the God who asks for our fidelity and the God who is our strength.*

I see in this a programme for our Chapter:

- I truly believe that it is in the **docility** we show to the Holy Spirit that our God will surprise us as *Salesians of Don Bosco for the young people of today.*
- In the **fidelity** with which we continue to respond, our God *will ensure that our Congregation is on the right path.*
- In the **hope** with which we contemplate our future in the light of faith, our God will give us the strength to continue to dream, like Don Bosco, for what is best for our young people, especially those who are most in need of us.

Docility, fidelity and hope: Lord, fulfil your will in us. Amen!

¹ SGC20, 18.