

## ***Message of Pope Francis***

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### ***To the Participants to the General Chapter of the Salesians***

***Valdocco, February 16 - April 4, 2020***

[Provisional translation]

Dear brothers!

My affectionate greetings! I thank God for the opportunity of this moment of sharing along the journey you are now carrying on.

It is meaningful that, after several decades, God's Providence has led you to celebrate the General Chapter in Valdocco - the place of memories - where the foundational dream became a reality and took its first steps. I am sure that the youthful noise and the chattering of the Oratories will be the best music, the most effective one for the working of the Spirit who is going to rejuvenate the charismatic gift of your Founder. Do not close the windows to this background noise... Let it be your companion and let it keep you alert, perhaps uneasy, and courageous in your discernment; allow these voices and songs, in turn, to recall within you the faces of many other young people who, for various reasons, find themselves like sheep without a shepherd (cf. Mk 6:34). This youthful shouting and this anxiety will keep you alert and awake against any type of self-imposed anaesthesia and will help you to remain faithful in a creative way to your Salesian identity.

#### ***Revive the gift you have received***

Reflecting on the profile of the Salesian for today's young people implies accepting that we are immersed in a moment of change, with all the uncertainty coming along with that. No one can confidently and precisely say what is going to happen in the near future, at a social, economic, educational and cultural level – had such a presumption ever worked through? -. The flimsiness and the “fluidity” of events, but especially the speed of things happening and being communicated, implies that whatever kind of forecasting is destined to be reformulated as soon as possible (cf. Ap. Const. *Veritatis gaudium*, 3-4). This perspective is further accentuated by the fact that your works are oriented in a particular way to the world of youth, which is by its nature a world in motion and in continuous transformation. This calls for a double docility: docility to young people and their needs and docility to the Spirit and to what he intends to transform

Taking this situation responsibly – both at personal and community level - involves letting go of a rhetoric that prompts us to repeat again and again that “everything is changing”, and which, when we keep on just reiterating it, ends up

freezing us in a paralyzing inertia, that deprives your mission of the *parrhesia* expected from the disciples of the Lord. Such an inertia can manifest itself also by a pessimistic outlook and an overall attitude towards the reality surrounding us, not only about the transformations occurring in the society but also in relation to one's Congregation, our brothers and the life of the Church. Such an attitude eventually turns out in "boycotting" and preventing any response or alternative process, or in reinforcing the opposite stand: a blind optimism, capable of dissolving the strength and the rejuvenating energy of the Gospel, preventing the realistic acceptance of the complexity that situations require and of the prophecy that the Lord invites us to bring forward. Neither pessimism nor optimism are gifts of the Spirit, because both come from a self-referential vision, whereby we may tend to value ourselves only based on our own strengths, abilities or capabilities, preventing us from contemplating what the Lord is already doing and wants to accomplish among us (cf. Post synodal Ap. Exhort. *Christus Vivit*, 35). Neither adaptation to the fashionable cultural trends, nor taking refuge in a heroic past, bygone and disembodied. In times of change, it is good to stick to the words of Paul to Timothy: "For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands, for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of strength and love and self-control" (2 *Tim.* 1:6-7).

These words invite us to *cultivate a contemplative attitude*, able to identify and discern the crucial points. This will help to move forward with the spirit and the typical contribution of the children of Don Bosco and, like him, to unleash a "valuable cultural revolution" (Enc. *Laudato siï*, 114). This contemplative attitude will enable you to overtake and move even beyond your own expectations and plans. We are men and women of faith, which entails being passionate for Jesus Christ; and we are well aware that both our present and our future are imbued with this apostolic-charismatic strength, called to continue to permeate the lives of many young people abandoned and in danger, poor and needy, excluded and discarded, deprived of their rights, of a home... These young people are waiting for eyes full of hope, capable of counteracting any kind of fatalism or determinism. They expect to make eye contact with Jesus who tells them "that in all the dark or painful situations [...] there is a way out" (Post synodal Ap. Exhort. *Christus Vivit*, 104). It is there that our joy dwells

Neither pessimistic nor optimistic, the Salesian of the XXI century is a man full of hope because he knows that his centre is in the Lord, able to make all things new (cf. *Rev.* 21:5). This alone will save us from living in an attitude of resignation and defensive survival. Only this will make our life fruitful (see Homily, 2nd February 2017), because it will make it possible for the gift received to continue to be experienced and expressed as good news for and with today's young people. This basic attitude of hope is able to give raise and open the way to alternative educational processes compared to the ones of the prevailing culture that, in not a few situations - both as a consequence of poverty and extreme poverty or as a result of affluence, which in some cases can be on the extreme side too - , ends up suffocating and killing the dreams of our young people, condemning them to a deafening and creeping conformity, not rarely even with

narcotizing effects. Neither triumphalists nor alarmists, instead cheerful and hopeful men and women, not automated devices but craftsmen; able to “point to ideals other than those of this world, testifying to the beauty of generosity, service, purity, perseverance, forgiveness, fidelity to our personal vocation, prayer, the pursuit of justice and the common good, love for the poor, and social friendship” (Post synodal Ap. Exhort. *Christus Vivit*, 36).

The “Valdocco option” of your 28<sup>th</sup> General Chapter is a good opportunity to go back and engage yourselves with the sources and ask from the Lord: “*Da mihi animas, cetera tolle*”.<sup>1</sup> *Tolle* especially all that, along the way, you went on incorporating and perpetuating, and which, although in another time it might be an appropriate response, now prevents you to configure and shape in an evangelically significant way the Salesian presence within the various situations your mission sets before you. This requires, on our part, to overcome the fears and apprehensions that may or may not arise from having believed that the charism could be narrowed down or identified with certain works or structures. Living faithfully the charism is something richer and more stimulating than simply abandoning, restructuring or redesigning houses or works; it involves a change of mentality in the face of the mission to be accomplished.<sup>2</sup>

### ***The “Valdocco option” and the gift of young people***

The Salesian Oratory and everything that shot up from it, as *the biography of the Oratory* narrates, was born as a response to the life of young people, each one with a face and a life story, who set in motion that young priest unable to remain neutral or inert before what was going on. It was much more than a gesture of goodwill or kindness, and even much more than the outcome of a plan based on “numeric-charismatic feasibility”. I see it as an act of continual conversion and a response to the Lord who, “tired of knocking” on our doorstep, is now waiting for us to go and seek him and to meet him... Or he waits for us to let him out, when he knocks from within us. A conversion that involved (and complicated) his whole life and the lives of those around him. Don Bosco not only does not separate himself from the world, searching for holiness, but he let himself be involved and he chooses how and in which world to live in.

By choosing and accepting the world of children and young people abandoned, without work or formation, he made them experience in a very tangible way the fatherhood of God and provided them with tools to narrate their life and their story, through the light coming from unconditional love. They, in their turn, helped the Church to embrace once again her true mission: “The stone

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<sup>1</sup> A motto fire branded in the early missionaries. I remember Don Giacomo Costamagna’s letter to Don Bosco where, after telling him about the difficulties of the journey and the various failures they had to face, he concludes by saying: “We unanimously ask for one thing only: to be able to go to Patagonia soon to save countless souls”. The awareness of being sent to search for souls in the suburbs and to stay faithful to such a purpose beyond any apparent failure is an identity trademark, on the basis of which to check and evaluate the authenticity of the charism: “*Da mihi animas, cetera tolle*”.

<sup>2</sup> Let’s remember the warning coming from the Lord: “You put aside the commandment of God to observe human traditions” (Mk. 7:8).

which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone” (Ps. 118:22). Far from being passive agents or spectators of missionary work, they became, starting from their very condition - in many cases “religious illiterates” and “social illiterates” - the main protagonists of the entire foundational process.<sup>3</sup> Salesianity is born precisely from this encounter, able to inspire visions and prophecies: to welcome, integrate and enhance the best qualities as a gift for others, especially for those marginalized and abandoned, from whom you do not expect anything. Paul VI said it clearly: “The Church is an evangelizer, but she begins by being evangelized herself ... This means that she has a constant need of being evangelized, if she wishes to retain freshness, vigour and strength in order to proclaim the Gospel” (Ap. Exhort. *Evangelii nuntiandi*, 15). Each charism needs to be renewed and evangelized, and in your case above all by the poorest young people.

Those encountered by Don Bosco yesterday and by the Salesians today are not mere recipients or end receivers of a strategy planned in advance, but living protagonists of the oratory yet to be fulfilled.<sup>4</sup> Through them and with them the Lord shows us his will and his dreams.<sup>5</sup> We could call them co-founders of your houses, where the Salesian will be an expert in prompting and enhancing this type of dynamics, without setting himself as their master or even feeling that way. A unity, that reminds us that we are “A Church which goes forth” and mobilizes us for this: a Church able to let go of comfort zones, safe and in some occasions privileged positions, in order to find in the last the typical fertility of the Kingdom of God. It is not a strategic, but rather a charismatic choice. A fruitfulness sustained and based on the cross of Christ, which remains a scandalous injustice for those who have blocked their sensitivity in the face of suffering or have come to terms with injustice towards the innocent. “As a Church, may we never fail to weep before these tragedies of our youth. May we never become inured to them, for anyone incapable of tears cannot be a mother. We want to weep so that society itself can be more of a mother” (Post synodal Ap. Exhort. *Christus Vivit*, 75).

### ***The “Valdocco option” and the charism of presence***

It is important to believe that we are not trained *for the* mission, but that we are trained *in the* mission, around which our whole life rotates, with its

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<sup>3</sup> Thanks to the help of the wise Cafasso, Don Bosco discovered who he was in the eyes of the young people in prison; and those young prisoners discovered a new face in Don Bosco’s gaze. So together they discovered the dream of God, who needs these encounters to manifest himself. Don Bosco did not discover his mission before a mirror, but in the pain of seeing young people who had no future. The Salesian of the XXI century will not discover their identity if it is not able to suffer with “large numbers of young lads, fine healthy youngsters, alert of mind, idle there, infested with lice, lacking food for body and soul... In them was represented the reproach of homeland, the dishonour of the family” (Memoirs of the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales, ch. 11); and we could add: of our own Church.

<sup>4</sup> Today we see how in many regions the youth are the first to rise up, organize and promote causes worth fighting for. Your Salesian houses, far from preventing this awakening, are called to become spaces that can stimulate this consciousness of being Christians and citizens. We recall the heading of this year Strenna of the Rector Major: “Good Christians and upright citizens”.

<sup>5</sup> I urge you to constantly keep in mind all those who do not partake in these instances, but nevertheless we cannot ignore; otherwise we turn into a closed group.

choices and priorities. Initial and ongoing formation cannot be considered as something prior, parallel or separate from the identity and the disciple's sensitiveness and perception. The *inter gentes* mission is our best school: it is starting exactly from it that we pray, reflect, study, rest. When we isolate ourselves or we turn away from the people we are called to serve, our identity as consecrated becomes disfigured and turns just into a caricature.

In this sense, one of the obstacles we can find is not coming from an external situation to our communities, but rather touches us squarely and directly, due to a distorted experience of ministry ... and does us a lot of harm: clericalism. It is the personal quest of wanting to occupy, concentrate and control spaces, minimizing and even wiping out the anointing of God's People. Clericalism, living out the call in an elitist way, confuses the 'election' with the privilege, service with subservience, unity with uniformity, discrepancies with opposition, formation with indoctrination. Clericalism is a perversion that promotes within the rest of vocations in the Church a kind of relationships that are functional, paternalistic, possessive and even manipulative.

Another obstacle we encounter - widespread, and even justified, especially in this time of precariousness and fragility - is the tendency towards rigorism. By confusing authority with authoritarianism, it claims to govern and control human processes with a scrupulous, severe and even mean attitude towards one's own or towards others' limitations and weaknesses (especially towards others). The rigorist forgets that wheat and weeds grow together (cf. Mt. 13:24-30) and "not everyone can do everything, and that in this life human weaknesses are not healed completely and once for all by grace. In every case, as Saint Augustine taught, God commands you to do what you can and to ask for what you cannot" (Ap. Exhort. *Gaudete et exsultate*, 49). St. Thomas Aquinas, with great insight and spiritual acumen, reminds us that "the devil deceives many. Some attracting them to commit sins, others instead attracting to an excessive rigidity towards those who sin, so that if he cannot catch them with vicious behaviours, he leads to perdition those he already has caught, using the rigor of prelates, who, not correcting them with mercy, lead them to despair, and that's how they get lost and fall into the devil's net. And this happens to us, if we do not forgive sinners".<sup>6</sup>

Those who accompany others in their growth should be people with great horizons, capable of blending together limits and hope, thus helping to always look forward with a sense of perspective: a saving perspective. An educator "who is not afraid to set limits and, at the same time, abandon himself to the dynamic of hope, expressed in his trust in the Lord of processes, it is the image of a strong man, who is guiding what does not belong to him, but to his Lord".<sup>7</sup> We are not allowed to suffocate and prevent the strength and the grace lying within what is possible, whose realization always hides a seed of new and good Life. We

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<sup>6</sup> Super II Cor., Chap. 2, lect. 2 (at the end). The passage commented by St. Thomas is 2 Cor. 2:6-7 where, regarding the one who have afflicted him, St. Paul writes: "Now you should forgive and encourage him all the more, or he may be overwhelmed by the extent of his distress".

<sup>7</sup> J. M. BERGOGLIO, *Meditazioni per religiosi*, 105.

learn to work and to trust in the times of God, that are always greater and wiser than our myopic standards. He does not want to destroy anyone; he wants to save everyone.

There is therefore an urgent need to find a way of formation whereby the fact that evangelization implies the full participation of every baptized, with all the 'citizenship rights', is fully embraced. It means the acceptance of every baptized with all his potential and limitations - and not only of "skilled players" (cf. Ap. Exhort. *Evangelii gaudium*, 120); a kind of participation where service, and service to the poorest, become the backbone which helps to reveal and give better life testimony to our Lord, "who came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mt. 20:28) I encourage you to continue to try your best in making your houses an "ecclesial workshop", capable of recognizing, appreciating, stimulating and encouraging the various calls and missions within the Church.<sup>8</sup>

In this sense, I am thinking concretely of two presences within your Salesian community, which can help as elements from which to recognize the place taken by the diverse vocations among you; two presences that constitute an "antidote" against any clerical and rigorist tendency: the Coadjutor Brother and Women.

The Coadjutor Brothers are a living expression of the gratuitousness that the charism invites us to cherish. Your consecration is first and foremost the sign of a gratuitous love of the Lord and for the Lord in his young people, that is not primarily defined by a ministry, a function or a particular service, but through a presence. Even before the things to be done, the Salesian is a living memory of a presence in which availability, listening, joy and dedication are the essential notes, through which processes are prompted and enhanced. The gratuitousness of presence saves the Congregation from any activist obsession and from any technical-functional curtailment. The first call is to be a joyful and free presence among young people.

What would become of Valdocco without the presence of Mama Margaret? Would your houses at all been possible without this woman of faith? In some regions and places "there are communities that have long preserved and handed on the faith even though no priest has come their way, even for decades. This could happen because of the presence of strong and generous women who, undoubtedly called and prompted by the Holy Spirit, baptized, catechized, prayed and acted as missionaries. For centuries, women have kept the Church alive in those places through their remarkable devotion and deep faith" (Post synodal Ap. Exhort. *Querida Amazonia* 99).

Without a real, effective and affective presence of women, your works would lack the courage and the ability to interpret your presence in terms of hospitality, and make it a home. In face of a rigor that tends to exclude, we must learn to generate the new life of the Gospel. I invite you to promote dynamics in which the

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<sup>8</sup> An ecclesial vocation, before being an act that differentiates or implies complementarity, is an invitation to offer a specific gift in view of the growth of others.

woman's voice, her gaze and her actions - appreciated in her singularity – are echoed as well in the decision-making processes; as an actor who is not just auxiliary, but rather constitutive of your presences.

### ***The “Valdocco option” in the plurality of languages***

As in times far gone, the myth of Babel tries to impose itself once again in the name of the global world. Huge systems create a global and digital communication network capable of interconnecting the entire planet, with the serious danger of standardizing cultures in a kind of monolithic bloc, depriving them of their essential characteristics and of their resources. The universal presence of your Salesian family is a stimulus and an invitation to safeguard and preserve the wealth of many of the cultures in which you are immersed without trying to “standardize” them. On the other hand, strive and do your best to enable Christianity to take on the language and culture of the local people. It is sad to see that in many places the Christian presence is still seen and felt as a foreign component (chiefly European); a situation that is also found in formation itineraries and lifestyles (cf. *ibid.*, 90).<sup>9</sup> On the contrary, we will let ourselves be inspired by that story about Don Bosco, who, at the question in which language he most liked to speak, replied “the one my mother thought me: it is the one in which I can more easily communicate.” Firm in this conviction, the Salesian is called to speak in the mother tongue of each of the cultures in which he finds himself. The unity and communion of your family is able to take on and welcome all these diversities, which can enrich the whole body in a synergy of communication and interaction where everyone can contribute the best of himself for the good of the whole body. In this way the Salesian spirit, far from getting lost in a uniformity of tones and nuances, will acquire a more beautiful and attractive expression ... It will be able to express itself in “dialect” (cf. *2 Mac.* 7:26 to 27).

At the same time, the irruption of virtual reality as predominant language in many countries where you carry out your mission requires, first, to recognize all the possibilities and the good things it produces, without underestimating or ignoring the impact it has on creating bonds, especially on the emotional level. Nor are we, consecrated adults, immune from all this. The widespread (and necessary) “pastoral of the screen” asks us to live the web in an intelligent way, recognizing it as a mission territory,<sup>10</sup> which requires, in turn, to place all the necessary mediations so not to remain prisoners of its circularity and its peculiar - and dichotomic - logic. This trap - even in the name of the mission - can lock us in ourselves and isolate us in a comfortable and superfluous virtual reality, very little or not at all dedicated to and engaged with the life of young people, of the

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<sup>9</sup> See Ap. Exhort. *Evangelii gaudium*, 116: “The history of the Church shows that Christianity does not have simply one cultural expression, but rather, remaining completely true to itself, with unswerving fidelity to the proclamation of the Gospel and the tradition of the Church, it will also reflect the different faces of the cultures and peoples in which it is received and takes root.”

<sup>10</sup> Today, in fact, “What is called for is an evangelization capable of shedding light on these new ways of relating to God, to others and to the world around us, and inspiring essential values. It must reach the places where new narratives and paradigms are being formed” (Ap. Exhort. *Evangelii gaudium*, 74).

brothers in the community or with apostolic commitments. The network is not neutral, and the power it has in shaping culture is very high. Under the avatar of virtual closeness, we can end up blind or distant from the concrete life of people, flattening and impoverishing the missionary vigour. The individualist self-centredness, so widespread and so fashionable in this culture largely digitized, requires a special alertness not only concerning our pedagogical models but also with regard to the personal and community way of spending time, and managing our activities and our assets.

### ***The “Valdocco option” and the ability to dream***

One of the “literary genres” of Don Bosco are his dreams. With them the Lord made his way in his life and in the life of your whole Congregation, by enlarging the capacity to imagine all what is possible. The dreams, far from keeping him asleep, helped him, as it happened as well to St. Joseph, to sense and follow another tone of life, another measure, born out of the depths of God’s compassion. To truly and concretely live out the Gospel became possible ... He dreamed it and shaped it in the form of the oratory.

I wish to offer you these words as the “good nights” in every good Salesian house at the end of the day, inviting you to dream and to have indeed great dreams. Be assured that the rest will be given you in addition. Dream open houses, fruitful and evangelizing; homes that allow the Lord to manifest to many young people his unconditional love and allow you in return to enjoy the beauty to which you have been called. Do dream ... And not just for yourselves and for the good of the Congregation, but for all young people without strength, deprived of the light and comfort of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith that sustains them, devoid of a horizon of meaning and life (Ap. Exhort. *Evangelii gaudium*, 49). Do dream ... and make others dream as well!

Rome, Saint John Lateran, 4<sup>th</sup> March 2020