

«DREAM... AND MAKE PEOPLE DREAM!»

A pedagogical and pastoral reading of Pope Francis' *Message to GC 28*

Rome, 24th April 2020

The 28th General Chapter, somewhat like the First Vatican Council, will be remembered as an interrupted Chapter. Not by the Italian troops who entered Rome, but by an invisible and aggressive virus that has spread so quickly around the world that it blocked everything.

We started with great enthusiasm on Saturday 16th February and we had to finish, according to the schedule, on Saturday 4th April. Instead we had to suspend this beautiful moment of grace on Saturday 14th March, exactly after 4 weeks of work. We had the time to study the report of the Rector Major on the state of the Congregation, to live some moments of initial spirituality and to work on the first and second nucleus of the Chapter theme. We finished with the election of the new General Council for the six-year period 2020-2026. We have returned home a bit stealthily like the Israeli army after the death of Absalon (cf. 2 Sam 19:4) - in truth some of us have not yet done so, because they are still stuck in Valdocco - without a *final Document* that could give us a sort of "shared map" for the next six years. Only the first draft of the first nucleus was presented to the assembly, which was substantially accepted as a whole, and the work of the commissions on the second nucleus was done. The members of GC 28, given the circumstances, entrusted to the General Council, through an official vote, with the task of reworking what was produced.

Waiting for what our superiors will tell us and give us, what do we have left of this experience? Perhaps only one thing, Pope Francis' *Message to GC 28*. I believe that this text is a precious navigational chart, because it is a small program for our charismatic renewal. Reading it and meditating on it we have understood that the Holy Father not only loves us, but also wants our good and has our Congregation at heart. Everyone has understood that what he wrote to us is not just a speech of circumstance, but is the word of a father that comes from the heart and asks everyone to start again from Don Bosco, inviting us to realize what he has repeatedly called "Valdocco option".

For this reason I thought it appropriate to offer a brief pedagogical-pastoral commentary on the *Message to GC 28*, which we must consider first of all a gift from a friend. The intention of what follows is therefore an invitation not to forget the words that the successor of Peter addressed to our Congregation.

A technical note for reading. The following text is deliberately "meditative". References to other Salesian and ecclesial documents have been avoided – the many quotations that will be found between quotation marks «» refer only and exclusively to Pope Francis' *Message to GC 28* – to offer a simple fraternal reflection that helps individual Salesians, religious communities and pastoral educational communities to take possession of the richness of the words the Holy Father has given us. In view of this objective, at the end of each point some questions are proposed for personal or community deepening.

Francis invites us to return to the steps of Don Bosco

The *Message* sent by Francis to GC 28 comes from his pastoral heart. It is evident, reading it all in one go, that it has nothing formal or cold, but everything smells of that familiarity typical of the Salesian charism. There is nothing generic, but everything is calibrated to our charism. If we compare it with other messages written to different Congregations and religious institutes in the circumstances of their General Chapters, we see that here we have a personal message, thought and desired for us at this moment in history. We know that many times Francis hands over an official written text and then speaks from the heart. We do not know how the meeting scheduled for Friday afternoon, March 6, - when the Holy Father had planned to be among us in Turin, in a gesture of exquisite delicacy, attention and closeness - would have gone. I imagine he would have read it with some personal comments. Probably he would not have said much else, because in this *Message to GC 28* he expresses his pastoral style to the full: his concern for the young, especially the poorest; his tension so that the religious may once again become prophets for the Church and for the world; his special friendship with Don Bosco's sons.

I like to think that this message has already materialized in the Synod on young people: from October 2016,

when the theme of the Synod was made public (“Young people, faith and vocational discernment”) until 25 March 2019 (when the post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christus vivit* was signed) the universal Church tried to take the world of youth seriously in the light of the Gospel and the changing times in which we are immersed. It was a “Salesian Synod”, because the whole Church was concerned with what we care about more than anything else: young people!

If we now begin to look at all five points of the *Message to GC 28*, we can say that the fundamental reason that runs through it is the invitation to the Congregation to make a real “Valdocco option”. It immediately springs to mind that this is the dominant theme of the whole text, declined in various ways. Certainly, the Pope takes a cue from the fact that GC 28 takes place in Valdocco, “mother house” of the Congregation and place of gestation of the charism. It is precisely a maternal place, where the Salesian spirit took shape. But it is not only a matter of romantic memories or a choice of convenience: being in Valdocco for Francis becomes a desire, that of returning to the source of the charism. We know that if we want to draw on the purity of water we have to go back up to the source, where the water flows out directly from the rock. In Valdocco, symbolically, exactly this happens! We return to the source, where we can find the fullness and purity of the Salesian charism. “Valdocco option” means first and foremost this.

Valdocco is therefore for all of us, sons of Don Bosco, a gift and a challenge. We do not know how GC 28 would have ended without the emergency of the Coronavirus which did not allow us to complete it, but we do know how the four weeks we lived together in Don Bosco’s house went: we appreciated the liturgical and familiar quality of the solemn celebrations which took place in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians; we lived daily prayer in the different rooms built and frequented by Don Bosco; we prayed daily in front of our beloved Father, asking him to have a creative fidelity to the charism. Everything in Valdocco speaks of Salesian holiness and being immersed in all this was really a good experience. All the capitulars felt that living the General Chapter at Valdocco was a very special gift and grace.

However, “Valdocco option” is not only contemplation of past history, but strength to face the present of the life of the world, the Church and the Congregation. It means to try to understand how to make concrete today that style of action which characterised Don Bosco deep inside and which found its first and paradigmatic realisation in Valdocco. No one has reached Valdocco to return to the past, but everyone has done so with the intention of looking for the right inspirations to live today’s challenges to the full and to prepare the future of the charism, convinced that our season is neither better nor worse than the one Don Bosco lived, but it is simply different. So the invitation to enter in the “Valdocco option” means meeting with Don Bosco to have enlightenment on how to live the charism today: to take from our holy founder the fundamental principles, his own style, singular intuitions, substantial dynamics. But in our context.

Concretely the *Message to GC 28* consists of five points in which Pope Francis invites us «to remain in creative fidelity to your Salesian identity». If we look at them in an overall view, we can glimpse a very interesting scheme, which focuses on the theme of presence and which lives of a continuous and natural cross-reference between pedagogy and pastoral ministry:

- A. *Reviving the gift you have received*
- B. *The “Valdocco option” and the gift of youth*
- C. *The “Valdocco option” and the charisma of presence*
- B'. *The “Valdocco option” in the plurality of languages*
- A'. *The “Valdocco option” and the ability to dream*

Let us try to analyse point by point, trying to seize the focal points touched by Pope Francis. We could say that they are the five levers for renewal. They take their cue from two main sources: on the one hand the synodal journey and on the other the “Working tool” of GC 28. The fruitful encounter of these two sources generated the five points of the *Message to GC 28*.

Discernment, the root of pastoral renewal

The first point of the *Message to GC 28* invites the Salesians to *revive the gift they have received*. Every charism is not something dead that must be kept in a cemetery, but a living fire that must be continually enlivened so that it may illuminate and warm. Francis affirms that «to live faithfully the charism is something richer and more stimulating than simply abandoning, rebuilding or re-adapting houses or activities; it involves a change of mentality in the face of the mission to be accomplished». None of us must simply redo what Don Bosco

did, almost in a literal and passive form. This would be to follow a logic of “repetitive fidelity”, typical of photocopiers; different instead is the “creative fidelity” of the Holy Spirit, who continually makes all things new. The latter always avoids two extremes – «neither adapting to the culture of fashion, nor taking refuge in a heroic but already disembodied past» – and enters into the rhythm of discernment, which can only help us to revive the charismatic gift we have received (cf. 2 *Tim* 1:6-7).

We are called to make Don Bosco’s spirit our own to reinterpret it in the renewed context in which we live and work. It is necessary, from this point of view, to know how to distinguish adequately between the “mission of the Church”, which is always the same for all ages and for all territories, and the “pastoral care of the Church”, which is always different in every time and in the diversity of contexts. Don Bosco’s mission is certainly our mission – “to be signs and bearers of God’s love for the young”, one could synthetically say – but pastoral care depends on many factors which today are in continuous and sudden change. This is why Francis begins this first point by saying that «to think of the figure of the Salesian for the young people of today implies accepting that we are immersed in a moment of change, with all the uncertainty that this can generate. No one can say with certainty and precision (if you could ever do that) what will happen in the near future on a social, economic, educational and cultural level».

This is where the craft of discernment comes into play, rooted in «a double docility: docility to the young and their needs and docility to the Spirit and to all that He wants to transform». As a Congregation we are called to learn as soon as possible and in the best possible way to discern, not to become Jesuits – it is known in fact that this specific sensitivity was brought into the Church by the sons of Saint Ignatius of Loyola and that Francis has repeatedly affirmed that in this moment of “change of era” the gift of discernment is something that must become the patrimony of all the components of society and the Church - but to be Salesians capable of taking a deep look at the changes taking place: discernment, first and foremost, invites us «to cultivate a contemplative attitude, capable of identifying and discerning the focal points. This will help us to enter into the journey with the spirit and the contribution proper to Don Bosco’s sons and, like him, to develop a “valid cultural revolution” (*Laudato si*, n. 114). This contemplative attitude will allow you to overcome and go beyond your own expectations and programmes».

Discernment comes from contemplation. Why? Because it is that spiritual gaze, animated by the Holy Spirit, that helps us to recognize the presence and action of God in human history. It is a gaze that starts from reality and finds there the action of the Spirit in the folds and wounds of humanity. What are the appeals that come to us from God starting from the reality of today’s youth? What is God asking us through the voice of young people, especially the poorest? How are we responding to the challenges that come to us from our time? These are the starting questions that can activate an authentic discernment, which always starts from that capacity to recognize what is happening in history through the eyes of the Father, with the feelings of the Son and the light that comes from the Spirit. Discernment does not stop at contemplation, but leads to action, because it comes to identifying precise and concrete choices to realize for the good of the young.

Rightly, starting from this attitude of discernment, «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, capable of making all things new (cf. *Rev* 21:5)». Discernment focuses on Jesus, Lord of time and history, present in the lives of young people and at the root of all changes: «This attitude of hope is capable of establishing and inaugurating educational processes alternative to the prevailing culture». Therefore, Francis exhorts us, «neither triumphalists nor scaremongers, men and women who are cheerful and hopeful, not automated but artisans; capable of “showing other dreams that this world does not offer, of witnessing to the beauty of generosity, service, purity, fortitude, forgiveness, fidelity to one’s vocation, prayer, the struggle for justice and the common good, love for the poor, social friendship” (*Christus vivit*, n. 36)».

Starting from this first introductory point, the fundamental content of the path that we are invited to walk together in the following four points unfolds. Because after all, we must recognize that «the “Valdocco option” of your 28th General Chapter is a good opportunity to confront with the sources and ask to the Lord: “*Da mihi animas, coetera tolle*”».

In what way, as individual Salesians, as a religious community and as a pastoral and educational community, are we putting in action authentic processes of discernment, capable of generating alternative processes to get out of the vicious circle of “it has always been like that”?

The courage to immerse yourself in the reality and the pedagogy of trust

The second point of the *Message to GC 28* is exquisitely pedagogical: *The Valdocco option and the gift of young people*. Francis shows here that he is an authentic connoisseur of our charism and its intimate secret. We could summarize it in two words: courage and trust.

First of all, the *courage to go to reality*. Taking up the historical event that gave rise to the Salesian charism, Francis states with great finesse in a very precious note contained in his *Message to GC 28*: «Thanks to the help of the wise Cafasso, Don Bosco discovered who he was in the eyes of the young prisoners; and those young prisoners discovered a new face in Don Bosco's gaze. So together they discovered the dream of God, who needs these meetings to manifest Himself. Don Bosco did not discover his mission in front of a mirror, but in the pain of seeing young people who had no future. The Salesian of the XXI century will not discover his own identity if he is not able to suffer with "the quantity of healthy and strong boys, of awake wits, who were in prison tormented and completely deprived of spiritual and material nourishment... In them was represented the obnoxiousness of the homeland, the dishonour of the family" (cf. *Memoirs of the Oratory*); and we could add: of our own Church».

Don Bosco not only confronted reality, standing in front of it. He immersed himself completely in it, he got his hands dirty with reality. If we think about it carefully, it is the logic of incarnation, a sign of the divine pedagogy, which is first and foremost a choice of total sharing with the life of men. It is the breaking down of every "safety distance", of every "wall of separation". And in doing so, we know, we enter a zone of risk, of tension, of fear. In these pandemic months, we know it very well: people who approach those who are infected risk being infected in turn. We know how many nurses, doctors, priests and religious lost their lives in this proximity of service. Proximity is always risky and it takes great courage and great love to be close to young people, especially the poorest. To share their uncertainty, to enter the world of their fragility, to become discarded with them.

But this Don Bosco did, with great courage and putting his "ecclesiastical career" at risk. He was not afraid to enter in the world of the young people: «The Salesian Oratory and everything that arose from it, as the *Memoirs of the Oratory* tell us, was born as a response to the lives of young people with a face and a story, which set in motion that young priest unable to remain neutral or immobile in the face of what was happening». Don Bosco, like Jesus, remained neither indifferent nor immobile, but with an act of response to the appeals of the Lord, he entered into an «act of permanent conversion», which involved and complicated «his whole life and the lives of those around him».

We know that there are pastoral cares of distance and discipline, or pharisaic ones that look down on young people from top to bottom, and youth ministries that think of young people as simple and passive recipients of a pastoral proposal conceived and planned by adults without them. Salesian pastoral care is not like this, because it is born of a very precise pedagogical option, which we can call without error the *pedagogy of trust*. It starts from a very clear premise: from the conviction that in every young person dwells grace, that even in the one whom we consider the most unfortunate there are gifts and talents, that every educator is called to see and value.

Thus we come to the great theme of trust, that is, the certainty that young people, before being wounded by sin and the negative events of life, are children of a God who has always loved them and has always filled them with His love and gifts. This is what Don Bosco learnt by Saint Francis of Sales, the one who more than others in the Church has recognised the presence of God's love in everything, even in the waste stone. Just as Jesus discarded by the builders became a cornerstone, the discarded youth became the cornerstone of the rising Salesian Congregation. Just as the Father rehabilitated Jesus through the Resurrection, so Don Bosco made young people protagonists through his educational mission, which aims was first of all to rehabilitate young people and make them authentic subjects of the mission.

This is also our history, not only that of the young people, and it is precisely in this sense that Francis affirms that young people, «in turn, have helped the Church to meet again with its mission». This is precisely so, and it should be reaffirmed with great strength, because here lies the prophetic power of Don Bosco's charism: «Far from being passive agents or spectators of the missionary work, they became, starting from their own condition - in many cases "illiterate religious" and "social illiterates" - the main protagonists of the whole process of foundation. Salesianity was born precisely from this encounter capable of arousing prophecies and visions: to welcome, integrate and make the best qualities grow as a gift for others, especially for those marginalized and abandoned from whom nothing is expected». We can never forget that young people are the co-founders of the Salesian Congregation!

From the courage to go to the reality and from the powerful pedagogy of trust comes that ability to involve

every young person and adult to share their talents, to create an environment in which everyone feels that they are subjects of the mission, to generate a form of Church in which all forms of “clericalism” are banned: in all our work «the Salesian will be expert in summoning and generating this type of dynamics without feeling that he is the master». And, adds Pope Francis, «to find in the least the fruitfulness typical of the Kingdom of God» is not «a strategic choice, but a charismatic one».

What risks do we take today for the sake of young people? Do we really trust in the young? Do we have the courage to involve them in our pastoral educational mission?

Mission, heart of vocation and soul of formation

The “Valdocco option” and the charisma of presence. This is the title of the third point of the *Message to GC 28*. We have arrived, in my humble opinion, at the pedagogical and pastoral heart of what the Pope wishes to communicate to us. The fundamental theme of GC 28, we know, is about the profile of the Salesian: *What Salesian for today’s young people?* And at this central point we enter strongly into this theme, focusing on the relationship between vocation, formation and mission. In the “Working Instrument” of GC 28 – which certainly Francis had in his hands and which summarizes the contributions of the Provincial Chapters – the question of the strategic link between formation and mission was raised in various points, affirming the necessary unity and denouncing at times the difficulty of linking these two realities not often adequately connected.

On the other hand, the Synod on young people has several times underlined the intimate link between vocation and mission, stating strongly that the idea of vocation has nothing self-referential, but is always a call to the “ecstasy of life”, that is, to go out of oneself to meet the others. For this reason, every man *is a mission* and one should not say superficially that he *has a mission*: the mission is in the order of being, of identity, of the original form, and not of having, as if it were an extrinsic and possessed good. And even when we speak of “outgoing Church” we allude to the same dynamic, because the Church in fact, as a community subject, lives by this same logic: it can be fully itself only when it comes out of itself! We can say the same for the Congregation: when it comes out of itself and goes out to meet young people, it is truly itself; and vice versa, when it locks itself in itself to try to survive, it renounces its own identity, which can only be intrinsically missionary.

Starting from these first indications it becomes clear that mission is the heart of vocation and the soul of formation. Pope Francis is fully convinced of this. He affirms that «we are not formed *for the mission*, but that we are formed *in the mission*, from which our whole life revolves, with its choices and priorities. Initial and ongoing formation cannot be a prior, parallel or separate instance of the identity and sensitivity of the disciple. The mission *inter gentes* is our best school: from it we pray, reflect, study and rest. When we isolate ourselves or distance ourselves from the people we are called to serve, our identity as consecrated persons begins to disfigure and become a caricature». Our Constitutions go exactly in this direction when in Article 3 they state that “the mission gives our whole existence its concrete tone”.

This fundamental stance is invaluable because it places vocation and formation in their correct pedagogical and pastoral position with regard to the mission. And this is then developed in the *Message to GC 28* in three very precise directions. The first indicates two negative positions to be overcome; the second is the positive proposal; the third indicates two necessary consequences. But let us go in order.

The first position to overcome invites us to get out of *clericalism*. After all, if we think about it, the clericalist posture despises baptismal grace. It thinks that it is the sacrament of order (or the religious profession) that makes us subjects of the mission. While we all know that the platform of the mission is baptism, which makes us all “missionary disciples”. Clericalism, as a «distorted experience of ministry» is a great obstacle to the mission of the Church: «It is the personal quest to occupy, concentrate and determine spaces by minimizing and annulling the anointing of the People of God. Clericalism, living the call in an elitist way, confuses election with privilege, service with servility, unity with uniformity, discrepancy with opposition, formation with indoctrination. Clericalism is a perversion that fosters functional, paternalistic, possessive and even manipulative links with the rest of vocations in the Church». Here it is a matter of cutting short, taking a position as a Congregation so that this attitude is completely banished from our ordinary relations styles.

The second position to overcome is that of *rigorism*, which grows in times of fragility, where we are all in search of certainties, security and solidity: «It claims to govern and control human processes with a

scrupulous, severe and even petty attitude in the face of its own or others' (especially others') limits and weaknesses». Rigidity is first of all a form of defence in the face of the complexity of the world in which we live: we defend ourselves with detachment, distance and judgment; with the obsessive control of people, who are thus deprived of their freedom of expression; with the expulsion of difference, which also becomes an obsessive search for homologation; with a systemic lack of love and mercy, undermining at the root the trust and familiarity of relationships, which alone can guarantee a healthy educational environment; with the verticality of an authority that risks to becoming perverse because it does not help anyone to grow, as it should be in its nature; with a return to the past for fear of daring the risk of discernment.

Having emphasized these two obstacles to overcome, the proactive and fruitful position consists in this precise invitation: «I encourage you to continue your efforts to make your houses an "ecclesial laboratory" capable of recognizing, appreciating, stimulating and encouraging the different calls and missions in the Church», because «evangelization implies the full participation, and with full citizenship, of every baptized person». This, if we think about it well, is Don Bosco's initial intuition at Valdocco. We all remember the lovely episode that brought Don Bosco to our holy land: he was looking for a space to continue his "oratory", and Pancrazio Soave offered him an environment to make a "laboratory". In the end Don Bosco's oratory became an "ecclesial laboratory" of pedagogical and pastoral renewal capable of giving rise to a specific charism in the Church. A place where all vocations were present and active: there were lay people who were co-responsible from outside and inside for Don Bosco's work, there were priests who gave their time, there was Mamma Margherita and other mother figures, there were above all young people who participated in the mission with Don Bosco and who were his first and main partners in his educational and pastoral work.

This proposal is in full development in the Congregation: it is the recognition and full appreciation of the "pastoral educational community" as the subject of the mission. It is nothing other than the path generated by the Second Vatican Council and taken seriously by our Congregation since the 24th General Chapter held in 1996. It is an unstoppable chain of exciting achievements, but one that unfortunately still meets with resistance, as we can well see from the fact that it was conceived as the third nucleus of GC 28. We could not deal with it, but it is enough to reread the "Working document" in the third part to get an idea of the lights and shadows that characterize the season we are living.

Francis' suggestion, after having placed the generative nucleus of his proposal, is followed by the invitation to value two original figures of the Salesian charism, with the intention of verifying and correcting the two dangers listed above: «In this sense, I am thinking concretely of two presences of your Salesian community, which can help as elements from which to compare the place occupied by the different vocations among you; two presences which constitute an "antidote" against any clericalist and rigorist tendency: the Salesian Brother and women».

What does charisma call us, first and foremost? This is the answer: «The first call is to be a joyful and gratuitous presence among the young people». Francis speaks to us consecrated men and asks us to return with our existence to respond to what God has called us to be: «A sign of gratuitous love of the Lord and to the Lord in his young people which is not defined primarily by a ministry, a function or a particular service, but by a presence. Even before things to do, the Salesian is a living reminder of a presence in which availability, listening, joy and dedication are the essential notes to arouse processes. The gratuitousness of presence saves the Congregation from any activist obsession and from any technical-functional reductionism». Very clear words, which do not need any comment, but only to be taken in a radical form, recognizing that precisely «the Salesian Brothers are a living expression of the gratuitousness that the charism invites us to guard».

How does the charism manifest itself, mainly? Without any doubt through a maternal, welcoming, loving attitude. This is why Francis asks himself and asks us: «What would have become of Valdocco without the presence of Mamma Margherita? Would your houses have been possible without this woman of faith?». It was very significant that one of the last community acts we were able to live together during GC 28 was the inauguration of a bronze statue of Mamma Margherita in the act of welcoming a poor young man to Valdocco. The reception is always maternal, even when it is not directly a mother who is making it! It is our charisma of welcoming, therefore maternal before paternal. We know that there is a wide debate going on about the presence and role of women in society and in the Church, which the synodal journey on young people has also nourished and supported. The Salesian charism is a family, confidential, maternal charism. For this reason the observation comes naturally: «Without a real, effective and affective presence of women, your works would lack the courage and the capacity to decline presence as hospitality, as home». The first element of the "oratorian criteria" lies in being a welcoming home and this aspect is clearly linked to the

presence of women, because without a mother it is difficult to have a home. The Salesian charism is generated by two mothers: Mary Help of Christians, who since the dream of nine years is recognized as Don Bosco's teacher, and Mamma Margherita, from whom the saint of young people learns that concrete love - together with reason and religion - will become the pillars of the Salesian educational method.

Is the pastoral educational community really the subject of the mission today? Is the Salesian house in which we live a "permanent laboratory" of pedagogy, spirituality and mission?

Inculturation and interculturality of the Salesian charism

The fourth point of the Message to GC 28 invites us to observe the charism from another perspective, that of its universality: *The "Valdocco option" in the plurality of languages*. Don Bosco's horizon was from the beginning "Catholic", that is, universal, unable to exclude anyone from his embrace: we know that even in lack of personnel in the first Salesian houses in Italy and Europe he sent the first missionaries to Argentina!

The experience of a General Chapter, like that of a Synod, is an experience of plurality, diversity in unity and certainly not uniform homologation. It is enough to remember, during the four weeks that we lived together in Valdocco, the evening prayer organized by the different Regions: how many unknown and incomprehensible languages, how many different styles of prayer, how many plural ways of relating to the Lord. And yet we all felt always in full harmony through such great expressive diversity! Pluralism, which many times frightens us and makes us close in on ourselves, in the light of faith is a great blessing, because in the light of the Gospel it marks the redemption of Babel on the day of Pentecost!

But here we need to go deeper, because Francis' invitation is clear: «The universal presence of your Salesian family is a stimulus and an invitation to guard and preserve the richness of many of the cultures in which you are immersed without trying to "homologate" them». Today there is a strong temptation to uniformity, which arises from fear of the others. Globalization seeks to impose on everyone a single model, an exclusive thought, a standardized and repetitive style. This is a real epochal disease that infects everyone a little bit, and in order to heal it requires a renewed conversion of the heart. Because we all know that communion in the Christian sense can only be generated by the maintenance of our singularity, which can only in this way contribute to the beauty and symphony of the whole. If we were all equal there would be no communion, but only trivial homologation. For this reason Pope Francis often speaks of the form of the Church as a polyhedron and not as a sphere: the latter refers to the uniformity of a single-coloured wall, the polyhedron instead to the diversity of the mosaic made up of many stones that only in their harmonious relationship make possible to achieve something beautiful and original.

Today we speak more willingly of *inculturation* – which is that ability to identify the seeds of the Word present in every human culture, where grace always precedes the presence of the Church and the proclamation of salvation – and of *interculture*: with the latter term we must understand the specific richness that emerges from the encounter of different cultures that can fertilize each other in a real exchange of gifts, creating new relational dynamics that enrich the heritage of the existing. Francis, pushing in this precise direction, in his *Message to GC 28* confirms that «Christianity does not have a single cultural model» to which other cultures should conform, denying their specificity.

During the special Synod on Amazonia we were edified as Salesian family, because we were able to rediscover some missionaries who did not at all upset the culture in which they were inserted, but fully assumed not only the language, but also the customs of the people to whom they were sent. They evangelized through a dialogue capable of listening with respect and valuing with wisdom the elements of the local culture and transforming them according to the grace of the Gospel. Blessed Sister Maria Troncatti, the Servant of God Rudolf Lunkenbein and the great Louis Bolla, to mention only those most cited at the last Synod. They fully realized the invitation that Pope Francis addressed to us all: «Strive to make Christianity capable of taking on the language and culture of the people of the place». The invitation is clear and repeated: «The Salesian is called to speak in the mother tongue of each of the cultures in which he finds himself».

The Salesian Congregation is in full metamorphosis. In the opening days of each General Chapter the detailed report of the Rector Major on the "state of the Congregation" is presented. From the data offered to us at the beginning of GC 28 we can see so many changes taking place that we easily see the "geography" of the Congregation is slowly changing: Africa is a continent pregnant with a future, which needs to strengthen its formative itineraries, especially the initial ones; Europe continues its numerical decline and aging, despite

the fact that it continues to have resources of thought and means for the mission; the great continent of Asia, where the majority of the world's youth population resides, continues to be a fertile ground for the charism; the American continent, while maintaining a high religious sensibility, is experiencing some vocational struggles that make us think. Now these magmatic movements, slow but significant in the medium and long term, invite us to enter with courage and joy into a new season of confrontation, enrichment and implementation of the Salesian charism.

We said it at the beginning, and we repeat it with strength: charisma is not an unscratchable and unchangeable granite block, but a burning fire that must be constantly nourished and that therefore is called to renew itself in order to continue to be itself. It is a matter of valuing the new contributions to make the charism itself grow because, as Pope Francis assures us, «the unity and communion of your family is able to assume and accept all these differences, which can enrich the whole body in a synergy of communication and interaction where everyone can offer the best of himself for the good of the whole body. Thus Salesianity, far from being lost in the uniformity of tonalities, will acquire a more beautiful and attractive expression and will be able to express itself “in dialect” (cf. 2 Mac 7:26-27)».

Finally, Francis refers to a new “common language” that has entered our world transversally, namely «the irruption of virtual reality as the dominant language». Recognising that this is «a space of mission», he also warns against certain dangers, because the digital environment «can lock us in ourselves and isolate us in a comfortable, superfluous virtuality that is little or not at all committed to the lives of the young, the brothers in the community or to apostolic tasks». Here we need to be very careful because «the individualistic retreat, so widespread and socially proposed in this largely digitalized culture, requires special attention not only to our pedagogical models but also to the personal and community use of our time, our activities and our goods».

How do we take into account that the Salesian charism lives on a continuous exchange of gifts?
How are we dealing with the current metamorphosis of the Congregation?

Draw on the grace of the beginning

The last words of the *Message to GC 28*, in reality the shortest and most concise, refer us to a constant experience throughout Don Bosco's life, to a special grace that accompanied his every step: *The “Valdocco option” and the ability to dream*. From the beginning to the end of his existence our founder dreamed, learning from dreams to believe in God who guided him and realising what he dreamed with obstinacy, in the certainty that through that special language God was manifesting himself in his life: «With them the Lord made his way in his life and in the life of your whole Congregation by expanding the imagination of the possible». We can venture the idea that the Lord, through dreams, accompanied Don Bosco directly, dilating his heart: indeed «dreams, far from keeping him asleep, helped him, as happened to St Joseph, to take on another depth and another measure of life, those that arise from the bowels of God's compassion».

If we think about it, what is missing in our world today and in our time is the ability to imagine. We, as a Church and as a Congregation, until a few decades ago, had “great narratives” that gave us life and strength to accomplish great undertakings, dreams that we have constantly delivered with joy to our people and our young people, and that have profoundly shaped our personal and community existence: the drama of salvation history, the certain hope in eternal life, the enthusiasm of missionary adventure, the aspiration to holiness, the enchantment of self-giving in the life given to young people in the form of religious consecration, the certainty of adhering to a full and abundant form of life.

Conquered by the immanent horizon of our age, today we risk being crushed on the present without cultivating a positive vision of the future. In this way we cannot see any way to transcend the earthly experience we are living day after day. The imagination has shrunk and the measure of life has become narrow and self-referential, closed in comfortable, protected and safe spaces. I was very impressed by the voice of the young people at the Synod, who at various moments along the shared journey said that they are often forced to give up their dreams, so much so that many of them have even stopped dreaming. And what happens to a young person who stops dreaming? In my opinion he loses the soul of youth itself, which after all consists in looking to the future with joy and hope. But we can also ask ourselves: what happens to a Congregation that renounces to foster its dreams and even gives up dreaming? And again: what happens to a Church incapable of cultivating dreams? To stop dreaming is to kill hope, and to let our lives be dominated

by “sad passions” and “dark passions”: despair, depression, presentism, negative judgment about everything, the inability to see the good that exists, the death of the desire to seek ways out, and the inability to fight for a better world, letting oneself be transported downwards. Without dreams, we are not yet dead, but we are not even alive! Without dreams, our life is on the path of Judas, who no longer sees any light in his path. A life that gives up dreaming is destined for sadness.

The Church and the Congregation will be able to give rise to a new season only if they are able to touch the hearts of young people on the level of imagination, if they succeed in awakening in them high ideals for which it is worth playing life to the end, presenting the faith as an adventure capable of mobilizing existence, offering it a positive and exciting meaning. Capturing the ability to desire a full and abundant life is what has made faith into something attractive and desirable in all the different eras of Christianity’s history. Are we still able to tell the faith as something exciting and able to awaken the hearts of our contemporaries? It seems to me that in the prophetic invitation of Pope Francis – «Dream... and make people dream!» - there is a little bit of that.

And so at the end of the day the *Message to GC 28* resounds in our hearts, which in an exquisite and familiar good night invites us to reinvigorate in us that capacity to dream which is the unequivocal sign of the vitality of our educational charism: «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. Know that the rest will be given to you in addition. Dream of open, fruitful and evangelizing houses, capable of allowing the Lord to show so many young people his unconditional love and to allow you to enjoy the beauty to which you have been called. Dream... And not only for you and for the good of the Congregation, but for all young people deprived of the strength, light and comfort of friendship with Jesus Christ, deprived of a community of faith that sustains them, of a horizon of meaning and life».

It is nothing more, it seems to me, than a pedagogy of faith and prophecy. Faith to which we are invited through dreams, which are a prophecy of the future and a blessing for us, for young people and for all those who share with us a passion for education. Dreams for Don Bosco were prophecies destined to come true: the dream brought him forward in faith, pushed him to dare the unimaginable, to risk it all. It is God, who through dreams, accompanied him step by step, making him a prophet for the good of all young people, no one excluded.

How are we feeding our imagination? What are our great dreams?