

LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

«So that they may have life and have it to the full»

(John 10,10)

FIVE FRUITS OF THE BICENTENARY

Rome, 25 July 2015

Feast of Saint James the Apostle

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1. A YEAR OF GRACE WITH SO MANY FRUITS

My Dear Confreres,

It is possible that when this letter reaches you we shall have already celebrated at Colle Don Bosco, with thousands of young people, the conclusion of this Bicentenary year of the birth of Don Bosco, that we formally opened also at Colle Don Bosco on 16 August 2014.

Certainly, in what remains of this year 2015 there will still be occasions of celebration in the many varied places of our Salesian world.

In the letter in no 419 of the AGC I wrote that the year we had begun as a celebration of the 200 years since the birth of Don Bosco would have two aspects: an external one, more public and official, and another interior and more intimate.

In harmony with what Pope Francis wrote in his message for the opening of the Year of Consecrated Life, a first aim is “to look to the past with gratitude,”¹ and one could say that we have done precisely this in our celebration of the Bicentenary, because we wanted to experience it as “an opportunity for us to feel gratitude to the Lord for two hundred years after the birth of Don Bosco, we are here as a gift from God to the young.”² And in this external, official and public aspect of the

1 Pope FRANCIS: Apostolic Letter to all consecrated persons on the occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life, Rome, 21 November 2014, I, 1

2 ACG 419, 27

hundreds of celebrations of all kinds that have taken place wherever there is a Salesian house, we have been able to acknowledge and give thanks for *this gift of God that Don Bosco is for the Church and the world*.

But just now I want rather to refer to the other aspect of the Bicentenary, more interior, more intimate, and which leads me to think, to wish and to dream what deep traces will be left by our living the unique, truly historical event, in our lives, in the heart of each one of my SDB confreres, and in my own heart.

It is this that is leading me to *dream*. I have a dream of some *fruits of the celebration of the Bicentenary* as I will now explain.

2. BECAUSE, ALMOST WITHOUT REALISING IT, THE CONGREGATION IS BECOMING KNOWN AT GREATER DEPTH

I should like to dream about some *fruits of the Bicentenary* which I think are really life-giving, because I am coming to realise that long before I could possibly visit all the countries and all Provinces I am getting to know the real situation of our Congregation pretty well.

After the GC27 finished on 12 April 2014 and following the first plenary session of the General Council, up to the present day I have been able to visit 27 countries - 8 in 2014 and 19 so far in this year 2015 - and, God willing, reaching a total of 32 in this year and a half. Certainly this has not been accidental but deliberately and carefully planned, well aware that the demands were almost excessive, but necessary given the singular nature of this year.

Added to the overview that each individual visit to the Provinces gives me is the knowledge that comes from the “snap-shots” that in fact are provided by the consultations that take place in the Provinces in view of the appointment of new Provincials. In addition there is the information and the opinions that the confreres themselves offer in these consultations regarding the Province. There have been 21 new Provincials appointed in these fifteen months.

Together with the General Council I have also had the opportunity to deepen our knowledge of some Provinces after the 7 Team Visits which have taken place and the serious examination that we made of two Regions, those of South Asia and of East Asia and Oceania.

For all these reasons I want to say to you my dear confreres, that with all that I have been able to visit, to get to know, to see for myself, reading and listening to all the advice I have been given, I feel in the position to be able *to have a dream about our Congregation*, in which the Lord and Don Bosco, always under the maternal gaze of our Mother the Help of Christians, are gifting us with these *fruits of the Bicentenary* of the birth of Don Bosco.

3. THESE MATURE FRUITS OF THE BICENTENARY

3.1. I have a dream of a Congregation of happy Salesians

Right from the start I invite you to overcome the very human temptation to think negatively, to think that I am saying this because we Salesians are not happy.

Just the contrary! That is not the case. I am convinced that the majority of us SDB are happy, very happy in living our vocation. That includes myself, since I too am very happy. However, I believe that we need to *come to a greater happiness, on everyone's part*, with no confrere remaining

on the sidelines on our journey, feeling that he cannot manage or that this goal is not for him. This goal is for everyone, since humanly speaking this profound desire is rooted in the heart of every man and woman, from the moment we are called into existence.

It is for this reason that I want to share with you my great dream. That of a Congregation of ours, in which every Salesian can *say to himself*, in his deepest being, in his heart, *in his true self: I am happy and I feel fully alive and full of joy living as a Salesian of Don Bosco*”

The Pope proposes to us as religious, this programme: “Being full of joy show everyone that following Christ and putting his Gospel into practice fills your heart with happiness. Infect those who are near you with this joy.”³

I believe, my dear confreres that this is the point: living our life more intensely and with joy. I could put it in my own words, but we have already said it in our last General Chapter in which we gave thanks to God “for the *fidelity* of so many confreres and for the *holiness that has been recognised by the Church* of some members of the Salesian Family. Every day we are in contact with adults and young people, confreres old and young, sick or at the height of their activity who bear witness to the fascination of the search for God, the radical approach of the Gospel lived joyfully and with a keen passion for Don Bosco.”⁴ It is a gift that we have in our Congregation: the thousands and thousands of confreres who every day are life-giving and who give their own lives with wonderful generosity. I am sorry for the pain of the confreres who do not feel this way. There are Salesian confreres who in their lives and in their hearts carry the burden of wounds, confreres who feel they are miserable, who show their sufferings! How much I wish that with the strength that comes from the Lord and with the affection and closeness of some other confrere they might have confidence and once again hope for something good in their lives. There are confreres going through difficult situations or those who have lost that fervour of the first Love we all felt at the Lord’s call; there are even perhaps confreres who are following a path that will bring them nothing worthwhile as Salesians of Don Bosco. How happy I would be if these confreres allowed themselves to be touched by God “to go that extra step”; how happy I would be if they let themselves be surprised by God. who without doubt always leads us to life situations far beyond our imaginings!

My dear confreres no matter how extensive or not our knowledge of Don Bosco may be, we are all certain of how important for Don Bosco the cheerfulness and happiness of his Salesians and his boys was, not without sacrifices, and of course with that central and essential point of living in God and for God. We have taken the most important and far-reaching decisions in our lives culminating in our ‘Yes’ to the Lord, and after that, all the rest ought to be a help to our living “whole-heartedly” more fully, conscious of our living a life full of significance and happy with it.

Already the SGC20, quoting *Evangelica Testificatio*, more than 30 years ago, told us that “the joy of being the Lord’s for ever is the incomparable fruit of the Holy Spirit. You have already had experience of it. Filled with this joy...learn to face the future with confidence.”⁵

To tell the truth, my dear confreres. what I am saying through this dream of happiness for each one of us is that our beautiful vocation and dedication should not be only a job, sometimes marked by exuberant joy, sometimes by an excessive activity that comes close to or reaches “activism,” that can

3 Pope FRANCIS: Message for the opening of the Year of Consecrated Life, 30 November 2014
Ibid., 4

4 GC27, n. 4

5 ET 55 quoted in SGC20, n. 22

extinguish that flame burning in us and can lead us to that “*practical dreariness*” that Pope Francis speaks about. I have a dream of a vocation in each one of us lived out as it was in Don Bosco, forgetful of oneself and ***full of passion for God and for the young.***

In fact among his many gifts, Don Bosco had the great ability to offer “to the emarginated youngsters of his time the possibility of living life as a feast, and faith as happiness.”⁶

As you can imagine, this dream of mine for each one of us is closely connected to what I have already been able to experience in these 15 months as Rector Major, thinking about each one of our confreres. For example I cannot hide from you my sadness every time a Salesian priest confrere writes asking me to facilitate his entrance into a diocese, after having first sought a Bishop willing to satisfy his aspirations. I ask myself: in these situations what remains of the love for Don Bosco and the enthusiasm with which we became Salesians? Has what has been experienced so far been only a form of pastoral work that can easily be changed for another ...? There comes to mind the incident of the young John Cagliero fiercely going over in his mind while walking up and down in the Valdocco courtyard the suggestion Don Bosco had just made to him. As we know this was the proposal to form a religious society in which the members would be called *Salesians*. After thinking it over he declared with the well-known expression: “monk or no monk, I am staying with Don Bosco”.

I have been thinking about that 14 May 1862, the day on which 22 young men together with Don Bosco made the first Salesian profession (BM VII, 101). They were ordinary lads who had grown up at Don Bosco’s side. They had had the courage to start a new Religious Congregation and to make their profession with great enthusiasm, with trust in what Don Bosco helped them see.

Thinking about our origins never ceases to move me and confirms the strong conviction I have that putting God in the first place in our lives and keeping young people in our hearts, especially the poorest ones and those who have most need of us, we are marked out – I would almost say “deterministically” – for happiness as Salesians of Don Bosco. I really believe this because it is certain, as it is said in the document of ‘Aparecida’, that “life grows when it is donated and is weakened in isolation and comfort. In fact those who most benefit from life are those who leave behind their security and are passionately engaged in the mission of communicating life to others.”⁷

3.2. I have a dream of a Congregation with Men of Faith filled with God

Why this dream? And why, you could ask me, are we not like that?

Once again I have to say that I am convinced of the depth of faith and the sense of God of thousands and thousands of our Salesian confreres. Why then this dream? This is the answer: thinking about the whole of our Congregation spread around the world, a delicate matter to which undoubtedly we need to give attention is that in many places, in many of the countries where we are working with so much dedication and generosity we are known for the work we carry out but what is not known is why we do what we are doing and where the vital deep motivation comes from. We are admired for our work with the young, our network of schools is greatly appreciated, and in these especially the technical training and work preparation. Our commitment to street children meets with great respect and support. The dedication and creativity found in many of the oratories is praised; our childrens’ homes and hostels for poor youngsters receive a great deal of attention etc

6 GC23, n. 165

7 Vth General Conference of the Latin-American and Caribbean Bishops’. *Document of Aparecida* (29 June 2007), n. 360

However, very often they cannot say who we are or even less why we are doing what we do and why we are living the way we live. And so this is my dream: that whoever were to meet a Salesian religious, or whoever were to come into contact with one of our communities would feel touched by the presence of men of faith, of a deep and proven faith, who in their simple way of living and acting, almost without wanting to would let their state as religious, men consecrated by and to God and by Him consecrated to the young shine out.

3.2.1. A journey of faith and the search for God

I believe my Brothers that this concern and perception is not new. In the documents of our Congregation we can see how the ‘great struggle’ in the SGC20 was precisely the tension between consecration and mission. And a magnificent work was brought to conclusion in the light of Vatican II, to identify our charism in a new way and at great depth and to reveal it in the wealth of our new Constitutions. There were many years of discernment in three General Chapters. The SGC20 and the GC21 which wisely considered the time of six years of experimentation for the new Constitutions insufficient and extended it for another six, and the GC22 in which there was already a deep maturing process in the concept of consecration as the ‘Action of God’.

I believe that in our Congregation we have no problem as regards our charismatic identity or with the harmony among all the elements that constitute it. From our Constitutions and the many other writings we find an abundant series of elements that enlighten and enrichen us.

The key is to be found in living our identity harmoniously. Many times we have said and recalled that we are not social workers nor are our works places for social service no matter how great the good we may be doing in them and through them. We are above all believers, persons consecrated by God in our religious state, and “how much good it does us when he once more touches our lives and impels us to share his new life! What then happens is that, ‘what we have seen and heard we are telling you’ (1 Jn 1, 3)”⁸

I am profoundly convinced, Brothers, that this is the path for which nowadays we have the greatest need. That of caring for, nourishing and deepening our faith (*being men of faith*), that we are doing everything that we are doing because we feel ourselves to have been attracted and fascinated by Jesus and that freely we have felt the great joy of saying “yes” to God the Father, who consecrates us also in religious profession (*men filled with God*).⁹

Reading some pages about religious life some time ago, I was greatly impressed by the account given by a religious woman who wrote that on a certain occasion in Vienna a Superior had spoken about an *atheism of old age* in some religious, men and women, and this Sister remarked that she was afraid that we all knew some religious sister (and male religious, we have to say to be fair¹⁰), who only had to open their mouth for their discontent to be apparent ..., and we could say *manifest the secret disenchantment with regard to God* ..., And she asked herself the question: “are perhaps our

8 Pope FRANCIS, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 264

9 Fr Vecchi describes the experience of consecrated life in this beautiful way: “The personal experience of someone who has felt called to this way of life: the exceptional brightness with which Christ makes himself present to us and the fascination that he has exercised over us, the wealth of possibilities that open up before our lives when one concentrates on God, the peace that is experienced in loving God with an undivided heart, the joy of giving oneself in the mission, the privilege of enjoying intimacy with Christ and participating in the Life of the Trinity.” in J.E. VECCHI, *Educatori appassionati esperti e consacrati per i giovani*. Roma, LAS 2013, 112

10 This is my own addition.

ways of thinking, judging and acting frequently conditioned by a faith that is asleep, by a relationship with our God without love?”¹¹

In the face of this testimony, I can hear echoing within me the question in the psalm: “Where is your God?” (Psalm 42,4), or that question we can ask: where are you my God? This seems to me to be the question and the life situation to which we need to give a great deal of attention, both personally and as communities, because not even working with youngsters and young people makes us immune to a life without love for God or with ‘the secret disenchantment with regard to God’.

3.2.2. Stay, love, bear fruit

These three words in the context of the icon of the Vine and the Branches (Jn 15, 1-11) which was a constant theme in our last General Chapter, are inviting us to become aware of the need to be thoroughly rooted in Jesus in order to remain firmly in Him, and through Him to live a life of fraternity that really is attractive and that leads us to serve the young.

For this reason really having a dream about a Congregation of men who are living by Faith and are full of God is to aim by this desire to make the **Primacy of God** a reality in our lives without ever forgetting that above all else we ought to be “seekers of God”¹² and witnesses to His Love for the young and among these for the poorest.

Our precious Constitutions, like a Gospel read in Salesian terms, are filled with this sense of God and this call to faith as was in an absolute manner the life and mission of Don Bosco.

In them we read that ‘as he works for the salvation of the young, the Salesian experiences the fatherhood of God’ (C. 12), maintaining a simple and heart-to-heart colloquy with the living Christ and with the Father, whom we feel close at hand. And so, conscious of God’s call to form part of the Salesian Society (cf. C. 22) and living out the sign of a loving encounter between the Lord who calls and the disciple who responds he makes one of the most lofty choices a believer can make (cf. C. 23). At the same time, immersed in the world and in the cares of the pastoral life, the Salesian learns to meet God through those to whom he is sent. (cf. C. 95).

My Brothers with the light that our Constitutions give us, I don’t think it necessary to add anything else with regard to this *dream*. I just repeat the invitation I gave you at the conclusion of the General Chapter. With the deepest conviction, in my first talk - in the so-called closing address, which has a clear intent of forward-planning – I told you that I refuse to accept that the “fragility we see in living the primacy of God in our lives” is something that is part of our Salesian DNA. No, I said at the time and I repeat it now. It is not, since it was not so for Don Bosco; on the contrary, he lived his whole life with deep faith, filled with God, and for this reason gave his life to the last breath for and always for the sake of his boys. He lived radically caught up in **God’s storyline**¹³ This is my dream today for our Congregation and for each one of us, Salesians of Don Bosco.

3.3. I have a dream of a Congregation of Salesians full of passion for the young, the poorest ones.

This is another of the dreams, an obvious fruit of the experience of this Bicentenary.

11 M. Beatrix Mayrhofer, SSND: *Paradigma innovador en la Vida Consagrada*. Revista Vida Religiosa - Monográfico-. Madrid, 5/2014 Vol 116, p. 65/(513)

12 GC27, n. 32

13 Cfr. GC27. *Closing Address of the RM; Point 2.2.1*

I am convinced of the precious value of the witness of so many confreres who are giving their lives every day with real educative and evangelising passion on behalf of the young; I am convinced that there are many Salesian centres that are looking at the poorest with a special preferential love.

I give thanks to the Lord for this, and I am saying to you as I did earlier: Brothers we have “to go further”, *all Salesians* in order to be those who with a heart like Don Bosco’s, with the heart like that of the Good Shepherd give the best of ourselves on behalf of the young. And Salesian houses which are not in a direct or indirect manner at the service of the poorest ought to cause us pain. We have to be *creative* so that everything that we do, think and decide in some way is for them, for those who have most need of us.

Pope Francis in the message already quoted says: “Wake up the world, illuminate it with your prophetic and countercultural witness!”¹⁴

I really think that our Salesian way of illuminating the world in a prophetic and countercultural way is with this radical approach in all of us and in all our presences. And don’t have the slightest doubt that in living and working in this way, and without any need for words, the message is challenging and with great power as a witness; and have no doubt that the means to reach the poorest will not be lacking. Let us remember Don Bosco’s firm trust in Divine Providence, when we provide the motives for this to happen certainly.

3.3.1. Because throughout the years we have always said and reminded ourselves what the path of our fidelity is

With this title I want to point out how in our Congregation there has always been the Official Teaching that has directed us towards the preferential option for the poorest young people. Then, every confrere, every local and provincial community, and at the very centre of the Congregation, we need to make it become reality. Pope Francis reminds us that the hope he invites us to have is not based on statistics or accomplishments, but on the One in whom we have put our trust (cf. 2 *Tim* 1:2), and invites us not to yield to the temptation to see things in terms of numbers and efficiency, and even less to trust in our own strength.¹⁵

In our Constitutions there are seven articles that refer to the poorest young people as our preferred option, and another five that direct our attention to the need to have solidarity with the poor. In our General Chapters we find a progressive succession of reminders concerning this “fundamental option” (as it was called at the Assembly of the Bishops of Latin-America of Puebla). The SGC20 spoke to us of channelling our efforts to the poorest of the young and to adults most in need, i.e. to those who have the least possibility of realising in their lives the designs of God.¹⁶ The GC21 issues an invitation to create new presences in areas of the rejected or excluded¹⁷, and the GC22 asks in a deliberation addressed to Provinces “to return to young people, to their world, their needs, their poverty, by giving them true priority expressed in a renewed educational, spiritual and affective presence among them. Let the confreres make the courageous choice of going to the poorest among them, relocating our works if necessary in the places where poverty is greatest.”¹⁸ In the same way the GC23 focused on educating young people to the faith, asks each Province to single out new and

14 Pope FRANCIS. Message for the opening of the Year of Consecrated Life

15 Cf. Pope FRANCIS, Apostolic Letter to all consecrated persons... 13

16 Cf. SGC20, n. 181, also in. 70, 71, 76, 181, 596, 603 and 612

17 Cf. GC21, n. 158, 159 and reference to GC20 nn. 39-44, 181, 515 and 619

18 Cf. GC22, n. 6

urgent frontiers with some work which will be a “sign” of our intention to go after those youngsters we have not yet reached.¹⁹

It is good to observe how steps have been taken in many Provinces involving and cooperating in this process confreres of many different sensibilities. If this is so what more do we still need to do? The answer is to continue this improvement until ..., until every Salesian would be dismayed when a poor boy or a poor girl could not find his or her place in a Salesian house, in Don Bosco’s house! Until every Salesian regrets not being able to care for every poor boy or girl who has need of us. If we feel this in our heart, we should not doubt that we shall always find solutions and we shall always be very faithful to this choice for the poorest youngsters. Take note.

3.3.2. Always seeking to serve, never power or money.

I imagine, Brothers, that most of you have read and meditated on the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*. If you have not yet been able to do so I would encourage you in this reading and meditation. I have no doubt that you will draw much fruit from it. Recently I meditated on the second chapter in which there is reference to the seeking after power and the idolatry of money.

Very beautifully our Constitution express which are the young people to whom we are sent: “The Lord made clear to Don Bosco that he was to direct his mission first and foremost to the young, especially to those who are poorer... and with Don Bosco we reaffirm our preference for the “*young who are poor abandoned and in danger*”, those who have greater need of love and evangelisation, and we work especially in areas of greatest poverty” (C. 26).

In the light of this expression also a fundamental and essential part of our charism, I can tell you, Brothers that when we follow this path we need not worry about the identity of our mission or about our fidelity. We are on the right path. If on the contrary we don’t concern ourselves about being with poor young people, those who have most need of us, and we remain comfortable in having power and economic means, we ought to be afraid. And I have to tell you that I feel worried in the face of confreres who exercise authority not as a service but as power, not as service but as power that enables them to have and to do things, even more so if they have in their hands economic resources, or seek to have them. Further on I shall refer to this again to explain what I want to say.

In *Evangelii Gaudium* the Pope quotes powerfully a classic text. It is the Father of the Church, Saint John Chrysostom, who says: “: “Not to share one’s wealth with the poor is to steal from them and to take away their livelihood. It is not our own goods which we hold, but theirs.”²⁰ The Pope reminds us of the globalization of indifference that makes us incapable of feeling compassion at the cry of pain of others, in a culture of prosperity that deadens us. (EG 54). With great force he draws our attention to a “throwaway” culture” that society has created in which the excluded are not the “exploited” but the outcast, the “leftovers”. (EG 53), and also to the *new idolatry of money* that appears as a new version of the worship of the ancient golden calf (cf. *Ex 32:1-35*) going on to say that “the thirst for power and possessions knows no limits.”(EG 56). He concludes clearly saying “Money must serve, not rule!” (EG 58).

The Pope is thinking about the Church and the world. I am looking at something much smaller, our Congregation, and I am convinced that it is in the service of our boys and girls and seeking their welfare, especially the poorest ones that our strength lies. It is natural to fall into the temptation of placing our hopes on numbers, on the works, on efficiency, but that is not the path to

¹⁹ Cf. GC23, n. 230

²⁰ Saint John Chrysostom, quoted in EG 57

follow. “Don’t be closed in on yourselves” the Pope says, “don’t be stifled by petty squabbles, don’t remain a hostage to your own problems... A whole world awaits us: men and women who have lost all hope, families in difficulty, abandoned children, Young people without a future, the elderly, sick and abandoned, those who are rich in the world’s goods but impoverished within, men and women looking for a purpose in life, thirsting for the divine.”²¹

What a great and specific challenge for us. It is for this reason that I have a dream for our Congregation after the Bicentenary of Don Bosco as that part of the Church that sees itself faithful in service, humility, poverty and with economic means solely at the service of the educative and evangelising mission. On this account I ask only that we help each other. That we help each other when sometimes authority is exercised more like power than service. That we help each other when people look for office, to be in charge; help when there is the risk of seeking as though for *an aim that gives purpose to one’s life* a management role, to be in charge of works (despite our saying that it is for the benefit of others). We have to help each other when money is used to have power, decision-making power over things and people; we need to help each other when the use and control of the money and economic means of the community and of the work are not clear or are not transparent ... Let us help each other. Brothers, let us always help each other with the truth and gospel freedom because these dangers also exist among us.

3.4. I have a dream of a Congregation of real Evangelisers and Educators in the Faith.

This is another of the concerns, Brothers, and a real dream that I know is not only mine. It can be found throughout the whole history of our Congregation, and there are hundreds of pages in our documents, in our Constitutions, General Chapters and so many statements of the Rector Majors, which urge that special attention be given to looking after that dimension of ours, of evangelisation and of being educators to the faith.

Why this dream? Because I really would not want these words of Fr Vecchi to be prophetic when referring to the primacy of evangelisation he said: “It can happen that under the pressure of a multitude of activities, concerned about structures and busy about organisation, we run the risk of losing sight of the horizon of our activity and appearing like so many activists or grass-root theorists, managers of works or structures, admirable benefactors but poor as explicit witnesses to Christ, mediators of his saving work, formers of souls, and guides in the life of grace.”²²

Reading this passage I felt that this was precisely the same conviction that had been growing in me during my years of Salesian life and at the same time I was pleasantly surprised to come across so many reflections of Fr Pascual Chávez which showed his conviction and commitment to leading us in this direction,²³ just as Fr Egidio Viganó²⁴ and also Fr Juan E. Vecchi²⁵ had done earlier.

21 Pope FRANCIS: Apostolic Letter to all consecrated persons..., 24

22 J.E. VECCHI, AGC 373, 36

23 P. CHÁVEZ, AGC 379, “*Dear Salesians, be saints*” 14, 15sq, 19sq; AGC 383, 70 sq; AGC 384, 19-20 and 25-28; AGC 386, 16-19 and 44sq;

24 E. VIGANÒ, cf. Circular Letters: *Salesian educational Project* (AGC 290); *New education* (AGC 337); *Educating to the faith in the school* (AGC 344); *We are educator-prophets* ” (AGC 346)

25 J.E. VECCHI, AGC 357, 19sq; AGC 362, 13-16;

What I am quoting is a demonstration of how the dimension of evangelisation and education to the faith is certainly a concern that can be found throughout the history of our Congregation, as I have already said.

Many other essential and motivating reminders come to us from our Constitutions. In these we find texts which tell us that “faithful to the commitments Don Bosco has passed on to us, we are evangelizers of the young, and the more so if they are poor” (C. 6), and as Don Bosco told us that the Congregation began with a catechism lesson, “for us too evangelizing and catechizing are the fundamental characteristics of our mission.” (C. 34), a mission that we carry out in this way: “We educate and evangelise according to a plan for the total well-being of man directed to Christ, the perfect Man” (C. 31), and this because we also really believe that “*God is awaiting us in the the young* to offer us the grace of meeting with him and to dispose us to serve him in them, recognising their dignity and educating them to the fullness of life.”²⁶

I would dare to say that all of us Salesians have received this formation and information, in one way or another. I really believe that if we meet with difficulties in carrying out our evangelising mission, in general it is not because we don’t know what is at the heart of our being Salesians, missionaries of the young. I think we really believe that “**Christ must be proclaimed.** To know him is the right of everyone,”²⁷ and as evangelisers and educators of the faith “we want (the young) to hear the voice of God the Father and come to know Jesus Christ. We are convinced that the offer of the Gospel brings unexpected power to the building of one’s personality and to the integral development that every young person deserves.”²⁸

I believe there are other challenges and other difficulties. One great challenge is the effort needed to take on this task and mission, in spite of the fact that very often it is difficult, when the young people are not exactly ready for it nor do they feel motivated by it. There are some continents – and the outstanding one I feel in this regard is Europe – where the explicit proclamation of the Gospel, even when this is done with the appropriate techniques and educational method does not always find a field suitable for cultivation. Then the reaction of drawing back is very human, or even more so that of stopping half-way and of spending more and more time with the introductory elements that open the way to an initiation to the faith. It is for this reason that the first great challenge is to be convinced of the highest importance that our mission has, and to find the necessary energy for us to become fully engaged in it, even though we know we shall not be received with enthusiasm nor attention. On the other hand, we need to be aware that these situations of difficulties, indifference and at times rejection have accompanied the work of evangelisation from the earliest times. Also quite often the diversity of the religious contexts slows us down in the proclamation of Jesus Christ, and we can stop short at social and humanitarian activity, which in itself is good, but if evangelisation and education to the faith do not form part of it we are only half-way there.

And to this challenge of coldness, indifference, including the rejection of a need for God in the various contexts in which we find ourselves are added other difficulties which I dare to call the high price that we pay as a result of some actions or decisions: a preoccupation with structures, the administrative burdens that we feel we must bear, the management, growth and overlapping of activities, and many other things restrict us in certain situations. Energy wears thin, vocational joy and happiness in being Salesians diminish or are killed off, and above all this can take us away from being

26 GC23, n. 95, also quoted in SALESIAN YOUTH MINISTRY DEPARTMENT, *Salesian Youth Ministry. Frame of Reference* Rome, 2014, 60

27 J. E. VECCHI, AGC 364, 18

28 SALESIAN YOUTH MINISTRY DEPARTMENT, *Ibid*, 64

among young people, and if we are not with them and always at their service evangelisation is not possible.

My dear confreres, with all my heart I would not want anyone of you to interpret my words as a sign of pessimism. We are not pessimists. On the contrary I continue to declare as I have for a long time now that we have a fine Congregation, in which, while not being without difficulties we are doing a great deal of good and we need to give great thanks to the Lord for this. However what I have mentioned as risks, fears, difficulties and limitations is nothing new. We know it and we have all heard it many times. The decisive issue will be the way we act after the appropriate analysis and diagnosis.

In this context I want to tell you that reading the letters of Don Rua, Don Albera and Don Rinaldi, addressed to the Congregation in the first decades of its existence, I greatly appreciated the direction they gave to them. They are simple letters, very familiar in style that try to capture the mood of the growth, development and organisation of the Congregation, with its lights and shadows and with the great challenges that were appearing, including among these the first world war. They are letters that point out the risk of “neglecting” what was central in Don Bosco: in short the “*Da mihi animas cetera tolle*”, our Evangelising and Educating nowadays, being totally dedicated to the young and for them. In the face of this challenge they did not hesitate to give simple but very strong reminders about not neglecting the fundamental reason for which Don Bosco gave life to the Salesian Society.

In harmony with this conviction of the Rector Majors - the first and most recent ones, in these pages I am speaking to you about what is deep in my heart. I firmly believe that in what I have decided to call “*My Dream – in five parts*”, I am presenting a great deal of the life and riches of our Congregation, and I have the great hope that we shall continue along this path, growing and advancing in what is fundamental, in what really makes us be what we are. Being with Provincials on various occasions I have told them that they should never allow the problems that they might encounter to obscure the view of the so much good and beautiful that each one has in his own Province.. Difficulties have to be faced up to, but it is much better to encourage each and every Salesian to go ahead giving the best of themselves, of what we are, that is to say showing in the way we live that as educators and evangelisers we are *people filled with passion for the young, involved in God’s storyline*, and that together with our fellow Salesian brothers, in our communities, and with so many educators, male and female, friends and committed lay-people we want to continue to bring to reality this dream of Don Bosco, with the same enthusiasm with which he succeeded in handing it on to his first Salesians and lay people so as to deserve the description given us by Paul VI, when he called us “missionaries of the young”.

3.5. I have a dream of a Congregation that is always missionary

3.5.1. Because it is a characteristic of our make up.

We read in our Constitutions: “People still awaiting the gospel message were the special object of Don Bosco's concern and apostolic effort. They continue to stimulate our zeal and keep it alive. *We look upon missionary work as an essential feature of our Congregation.*²⁹ Through our missionary activity we carry out a patient work of evangelisation by founding the Church within a group of people.” (C.30).

29 The *italics* is an emphasis of my own.

Allow me to recall here what we know very well: from his youth Don Bosco had a desire to become a missionary. Don Cafasso, accompanying him in his vocational discernment, “blocked” that path, telling him that the missions were not for him (cfr. BM 2, 160-161). However he always had this idea in mind and in his heart and he realised it through his sons. Starting on 11 November 1875, he chose from the group of his first Salesians those he would send to America to provide for the spiritual needs of emigrants and to bring the Gospel to people who did not know it. From that first expedition until the one due next 27 September 2015 there have been 146. Shortly after the first expedition of Salesians, year after year the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians also went to the mission lands. Nowadays this departure ceremony frequently includes the presence of lay missionaries male and female.

We should not forget a fact that speaks for itself and which I mentioned in a previous letter (AGC 419). At Don Bosco’s death, in America there were 153 Salesians, that is 20% of the Salesians at the time, as the catalogue of the Congregation for that year records.

In one of his letters written in 1912 Fr Paul Albera states, referring to Don Bosco: “The missions were a privileged subject of his talks and he knew how to inspire in hearts a strong desire to become missionaries, in such a way that it seemed the most natural thing in the world.”³⁰

I have always been convinced that the *missionary dimension is an essential and constitutive feature* of our identity as a Congregation. The more I have consulted our documents, the stronger has this conviction become, and what follows demonstrates this. The GC19 asked the Congregation to revive “the ideal of Don Bosco, who wished that the work of the Missions should be a permanent preoccupation of the Congregation, to the extent of being part of its nature and end,”³¹ and in his time Fr Vecchi wrote: “Since the missionary sense is not an optional trait but forms part of the Salesian spirit in every time and situation in the programming of the Rector Major and his Council we have proposed it to all the Provinces as an area of special attention.”³²

We know very well how Don Bosco, who never went to any far-away foreign land, worked with his boys in Valdocco enflaming in them and in his young Salesians this missionary passion, this zeal for spreading the Gospel. His various writings, the Salesian Bulletin and whatever appeared useful or timely was employed to spread this missionary dream.

3.5.2. Because the times we are living in insistently demand it

I am not with these lines presuming to say anything new in this regard. There is much valuable documentation. However, I do want to underline some things that I have very much at heart in what I have called my dream:

a.- The missionary dimension ought to be a characteristic feature of each one of us, because it forms part of the Salesian spirit in itself. This means that it is not something added on for some people. It is an essential part of our pastoral heart. Then for sure, many of our confreres hear this special and personal invitation from the Lord to be a missionary ‘ad gentes’.

30 Circular Letters of Don Paul Albera to the Salesians. Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco, Torino, 1965, 133

31 AGC n. 244, p 178

32 J.E. VECCHI, AGC 362, 8

b.- More than ever and in fidelity to the Gospel, to the Church and to Don Bosco our Congregation needs to continue to be missionary. On other occasions I have listed some missionary challenges that we have on the horizon and some fields where we need to strengthen the mission.

c.- Right now I renew my invitation to those who feel themselves called to the 'missio ad gentes et ad vitam' to accept the call so that we may carry out at a suitable time the appropriate discernment. I have received letters from confreres, usually young ones, who have told me that it was their desire to be missionaries but that their superior (sometimes the Rector, sometimes the Provincial) discouraged them or simply forbade them or did not give them permission.

Looking with the heart of Don Bosco, I think that I can say that no one should put obstacles in the way of these vocational calls that the Lord makes, and that difficulties at a local or provincial level should not impact on these generous desires. Let us never forget, my Brothers, that the Lord is much more generous than we can be.

Finally I should like to add that I believe the times are ripe and the needs of the mission advise it, so that in a coordinated manner and with the knowledge of the Rector Major through the Regional Councillor and the Councillor for the Missions, we can offer the help of the confreres of those Provinces that have more vocations, on a temporary basis for a fixed period of time, to other places and Provinces of the Congregation. My dear Provincials, be generous. Don Bosco was to an exceptional extent.

I conclude this letter that I have wanted to share with you, with lively affection and conviction, reminding my Salesian brothers, that this is the time to think about our Congregation, our Consecration and Mission, while always thanking the Lord for the life of each one.

There have been many visits this year to Valdocco. Shortly I shall be there again. I promise to remember you in my prayers to the Lord through the intercession of Don Bosco and our Mother the Help of Christians. She is not only the One who did everything with Don Bosco, but also the One who, as Mother of the Church and Help of God's People, is accompanying us as Evangelisers and Educators in the faith of our young people at this special historic moment that we are living.

To her we raise our prayer, with the words of Pope Francis in "Lumen Fidei":

Mother, help our faith!
Open our ears to hear God's word
and to recognize his voice and call.
Awaken in us a desire to follow in his footsteps,
to go forth from our own land and to receive his promise.
Help us to be touched by his love,
that we may touch him in faith.
Help us to entrust ourselves fully to him
and to believe in his love, especially at times of trial, beneath the shadow of the cross,
when our faith is called to mature.
Sow in our faith the joy of the Risen One.
Remind us that those who believe are never alone.
Teach us to see all things with the eyes of Jesus,
that he may be light for our path.
And may this light of faith always increase in us,
Until the dawn of that undying day
Which is Christ himself, your Son, our Lord!

With the Lord's Blessing and my very best wishes to each one of you, my Brothers.

Yours affectionately,

Ángel FERNÁNDEZ ARTIME, SDB

Rector Major