

1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

“COME OVER TO MACEDONIA AND HELP US” (Acts 16,9)

Presentation of the Northern European Region

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My dear confreres,

As I write to you I am already looking forward to Easter that we shall soon be celebrating, and so I want to send you my best wishes for a joyful and fruitful celebration of the mysteries of our salvation in the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. If we want to be Christians the first truth we must believe is precisely the confession of faith: “The Lord is truly risen and has appeared to Simon” (*Lk* 24, 34). And the final truth to which we must hold on if we want to continue to be Christians, is exactly the same: “if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (*Rom* 10, 9). To believe in the Lord’s death and resurrection and live as though already risen again is the foundation of the Christian life. “For Christ, our paschal lamb, has been sacrificed! Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (*I Cor* 5,7b-8). Against this background of Easter, I take the opportunity to express my thanks for all the expressions of sympathy, condolence and prayers on the death of my father, who is now living with the Risen Lord.

Before taking up the topic I want to deal with in this letter I would like to pass on to you, albeit briefly, two items of family news that are of interest. In the first place on 24 April will take place the beatification of Fr *Bronislaw Markiewicz*, founder of the Congregation of St Michael the Archangel (better known as “Michaelites”), who have been part of the Salesian Family since the year 2000. While we rejoice with the Superior General and all the members of the Congregation at this recognition by the Church of the holiness of their founder, we see in it a further confirmation of the validity of the charism of Don Bosco and of the Salesian Family as a way that leads to holiness.

The other item is of direct concern to our own Congregation. We have reached a point halfway through the six years following the last General Chapter, and have begun the *Team Visits*, a form of presence of the General Council in the different parts of the Congregation, which has become obligatory on the part of religious institutes in the present context of unity in decentralization and vice versa. These Visits enable the Regions to gain a more universal view of the Congregation, and they also make it possible for the Rector Major with his Council to keep a finger on the pulse of Salesian life and work in the various Regions. This time we have decided to

give particular attention to two themes: the communication, assimilation and putting into practice of the GC25, and the more important activities, dramatic challenges, available resources and future prospects of each Region and of the individual Provinces concerned. At the time I write this letter, we have already carried out two such Visits, to the Regions of Southern Asia and of East Asia and Oceania. It is not difficult to see that when the Visits have been completed to all the Regions, we shall be in a position to define the objectives of the next General Chapter and set in motion its preparation.

The study of the Regions takes place of course in another forum as well, that of the General Council, which continues with its programme of studying them one by one. And I am pressing on with my intention of presenting them to you in my letters. This time it is the turn of the Region of Northern Europe, which will conclude my presentation of Salesian Europe.

1. “Come over to Macedonia and help us” (Acts 16,9)

As the title of the letter, I have used this phrase from the well known and important dream of St Paul at Troas, during his second great missionary journey (*Acts* 15,41– 18,22). After a brief reference to the apostolic activity of strengthening the communities, normally through evangelization, baptism, the Eucharist and ministry (cf. *Acts* 15,41; 16,5), the author of the Acts points to the true protagonist of the Church: the Holy Spirit. He it is who guides us in choosing what steps to take, what new frontiers to open up, what doors to fling wide. Twice the text recalls how the Holy Spirit intervened by preventing Paul and his companions from going ahead with their own missionary project and directing them instead towards Greece and Europe: “A vision appeared to Paul in the night; a man of Macedonia was standing beseeching him and saying: “*Come over to Macedonia and help us*” (*Acts* 16,9)

This is a text that tells us a great deal, in the first place it shows us – as I have said already – that it is the Holy Spirit who guides the Church and opens the world to the Gospel; but it also shows us the opening of Europe to Jesus and his Church, which has had a very great influence on the cultural configuration of Europe of the present day after two thousand years of Christianity; we may note that this man of Macedonia, who is a kind of symbol of Europeans, asks for help, which is a request for evangelization. In the following verse, in fact, we read: “And when he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them” (*Acts* 16,10).

This text, memorable and prophetic at the same time as it is, recalls the past and outlines the future. The past and future of Europe is the Gospel. With more than a hundred years of history behind us, we Salesians will have a future in this Europe if we are able to dream by daylight, as did Don Bosco, contemplating the situation of the poverty, abandonment and bewilderment of young people; if we listen to their cry for help: “*Come over to Macedonia and help us*”, and if in reply to that call we discover (as Paul did) the need they have of Christ and his Gospel to fulfil their deepest desires, while we try in the meantime to form in them through education in each of our works, the man, the citizen, the professional.

2. The beginnings of Salesian work in the North European Region

The Northern Region is remarkable for its extraordinary historical, cultural, religious, economic and linguistic diversity, which represents to some extent the richness and complexity of the new Europe. Let us try, within the limitations of this letter, to pick out some significant features of the beginnings of our foundations and activities in the different areas of the Region.

2.1 Great Britain, Ireland-Malta, Holland and Northern Belgium.

In 1887 the Salesians came to Great Britain, a country with a Protestant culture, proud of its supremacy as the first industrial power, and with a small Catholic minority, made up mainly of immigrants from agricultural Ireland. When the Salesians reached **Ireland** in 1919, that country had just gained independence with an agonizing civil war and was in economic difficulties because of the loss of its traditional customers in England. Far different was the situation in **Belgium**, where the Salesians began work in 1890. There they found a recently industrialized country with great social imbalance and with a broadly liberal (and sometimes anticlerical) ruling class, but with the **Flemish** region strongly rooted in Catholic culture. The arrival in Holland was in 1928, when the largely Protestant country had been converted into a highly developed commercial centre with an overseas empire and vast agricultural enterprises, where Catholics were an isolated minority, socially and politically marginalized.

In such varied contexts it is not surprising that the beginnings of Salesian work developed in different ways with different results in the various places it took root.

2.1.1 Great Britain

Many may be unaware that it was Dominic Savio, with his serious words in 1855, who ratified England's entry into Salesian history: "*How many souls are awaiting help in England; if I had enough strength I would go at once and bring the people to God*". Through the influence of Archbishop Tobias Kirby, students of the Irish College used to frequent the Oratory near their hostel, and it was from these that Don Bosco was able to find the first group of young Irishmen who would all become pioneers of Salesian work not only in London but also in the Falkland Islands, Malta, Ireland itself and even as far as San Francisco.

Another Roman acquaintance, Countess Georgiana Stacpoole, offered to the Salesians the Mission and elementary school at Battersea in London, founded in 1874, where in 1887 Fr McKiernan and his first companions arrived, emerging from the fog.

The Salesian work developed strongly, including houses in England, Cape Town (1897) and Malta (1903), to such an extent that in 1902 the English Province was formally erected.

Immediately after the war of 1914-1918, Fr Francis Scaloni saw the need to give new life to the Province and in 1920 he opened the new novitiate and studentate at Cowley, Oxford.

From the outset a characteristic element of Salesian work in England has been direct involvement in parishes in very poor areas on the one hand, and on the other the development of primary and secondary schools strongly aimed at the finding of priestly vocations.

2.1.2 Ireland

In the same period the Salesians became established in *Ireland* (1919), at the inspiration of Fr Aloysius Sutherland and thanks to the invitation of Bishop Thomas Hallinan of Limerick, who had already been involved in Don Bosco's first project of 1874. They took over an abandoned property at Pallaskenry and transformed it into an aspirantate and agricultural school. Years later (1922) at Warrenstown in County Meath, another extensive property was left to the Salesians by legacy and in due course became a flourishing college of agriculture and horticulture. The pressure of the second world war led to the opening of a separate Irish novitiate and later an aspirantate at Ballinakill in 1941.

After Vatican II, with the decisions to erect a separate Ireland/South Africa Province in 1968 and to open the national seminary of Maynooth also to religious and so to University studies, new horizons were opened for Salesian Ireland.

2.1.3 Holland

Until 1928, if young Dutchmen wanted to become Salesians they had to go to Belgium, Germany or Italy. It was Mgr Poels, chaplain of the miners, who was responsible for Belgian Salesians going to Holland to begin a parish and oratory in the southern city of Lauradorp. In 1937, a house for aspirants was opened by the German Province at Leusden, near Amersfoort.

As soon as the war was over Holland became a separate Province, with Fr Hannibal Bortoluzzi chosen as its first Provincial. For sixteen years this jovial Salesian guided the growth of the Province. Boarding and day schools were opened and other youth works set up at Lauradorp; the Salesians committed themselves to various parishes and a considerable number left for the Missions in various parts of the Congregation.

2.1.4 Northern Belgium

The erection of the North Belgian Province dates only from 1959, but Mgr. Doutreloux, the famous social reformer, had already invited the Salesians of Liège (1890) in French-speaking southern Belgium to explore the rich vocational possibilities in the Flemish area of northern Belgium. And so a novitiate was established at Hechtel in Flanders, followed by the opening at Groot Bijgaarden in 1904 of one of the first centres of theological studies outside Italy, in what had become in 1902 the first Belgian Province with Fr Francis Scaloni as its inspiration and guide. In addition to their specific task of providing secondary and technical training for working-class youngsters in Belgium itself, the Flemish confreres offered themselves as pioneers for the inauguration of a Salesian mission in Central Africa, then known as the Belgian Congo (Congo, Burundi and Rwanda of the present day). This province too was very generous in sending out missionaries: the fact that there are still some 75 Belgian confreres scattered around the world speaks for itself.

After the subdivision of the Belgian Province in 1959 the Flemish Province, despite the falling off in vocations, expanded its own works for youngsters in difficulty, using rented accommodation and providing professional help for young ex-drug addicts.

2.2 Austria and Germany

The German-speaking part of the Region, comprising the countries of Austria and Germany, has a significant Salesian history.

2.2.1. Austria

In August of 1886 a group of Austrian citizens headed by a journalist, Joseph M. Schmidinger, had a meeting with Don Bosco at San Benigno Canavese, to ask for the foundation on Austrian soil of a Salesian work for the benefit of young people. Don Bosco did not say no, though he pointed out an obstacle in the lack of prepared German-speaking personnel, but he gave an assurance that sooner or later such a project would be realized.

Even though the Salesians had been in the then Hapsburg Austrian empire since 1887 (at Trento), they did not enter ethnic Austrian territory until 1903 by decision of Don Rua, who had a great desire to enter the capital of the Danubian empire. Fr Luigi Terrone (1875-1968), of Italian origin was sent as organizer and religious superior. The house of Vienna, dedicated to Mary Help of Christians, which came into being as the result of an agreement between the Salesians and the “Kinderschutzstationen Charitativer Verein für arme Kinder” Association did not last very long; at the root of the conflict was the strong Salesian conviction that they could not renounce their own preventive system, the sure guarantee of success in education.¹ The Salesians undertook the

¹ Cf. S. ZIMNIAK, *I salesiani e il «zurück zum praktischen Christentum» de icristiani di Vienna (1903-1921)*, in *L'Opera Salesiana dal 1880-1922. Significatività e portata sociale*. Vol. II: *Esperienze particolari in Europa, Africa, Asia*, ed. F. Motto (Istituto Storico Salesiano. Studi 17). Rome, LAS 2001, p. 267.

foundation of an autonomous work at Erdberg, one of the most densely populated but neglected districts of the Austrian capital, inhabited to a large extent by a working-class population already steeped in Marxist ideas. In the summer of 1909 a new Rector was appointed for the new Vienna foundation in the person of Fr August Hlond, who already had a good knowledge of the German language and culture. A year later the state's permission was given for the opening. With the first section of the oratory, the "*Knabenheim – Salesianum*", inaugurated in October 1910, the Salesian Society met an emergency deeply felt by the people of the area and, in general, of the whole capital: the provision of a sound educational project for the greater part of the children, who were deprived of any suitable means of recreation after school hours.

Even though it lasted only from 1916 to 1918, another work must be recalled. It was for the benefit of young students who were "refugees" from various countries: Italians, Poles, Slovenes, Croats, Jews and Romanians.² These youngsters were brought to the capital by the civil authorities and lodged in a house fitted out as a hostel, where they were entrusted to the Salesians. At the start there were 171 youngsters, who attended public schools in the city.

2.2.2 Germany

The Salesians tried several times to enter Germany before the Great War, but permission was denied for political reasons and because no need was felt at the time for such an educational institute.

On 29 November 1916, three Salesians led by Fr F. Niedermayer arrived in Würzburg to begin the first Salesian house in Germany, a fact that attracted the attention of the local press. Initially they took charge of about 75 apprentices and 10 middle school pupils. Later the numbers grew to about 160 apprentices, organised in groups. Because of the social and political circumstances, work of this kind was given priority. The first superior wrote to the Rector Major, Fr Paul Albera: "It is a truly Salesian work, very reminiscent of the early days of Don Bosco. Because of the present conditions in Bavaria and in the whole of Germany this work for youngsters of the working classes is the most necessary and it is what the Bishops expect from us. The festive oratories too will form a very important sector of our field of work. On the other hand it will be very difficult, if not indeed impossible, to open institutes with elementary or middle schools properly so-called, because the new laws prohibit private persons from opening such schools and those already existing are destined to disappear. In general the Salesians and the work of Don Bosco are highly esteemed in Bavaria and they are expected to play a large part in the salvation of working-class youngsters".³

Among the new Salesian foundations of this period should be mentioned the house of *Benediktbeuern*: it was formerly a Benedictine monastery, some 60 km. from the Bavarian capital, and was acquired in 1930. The work became important in the history of the Salesians of Germany because it developed into an important centre of formation for the personnel of Austria and Germany. Today it is an institution open also to the needs of the local Church and provides, in addition to courses in philosophy and theology, facilities for the study of pedagogical and social sciences; it is also a centre for the diffusion of Salesian spirituality, a successful youth centre, and finally an ecological and cultural centre, with a parish and youth hostel.

In 1935 the Salesian Society had 17 foundations in Germany, not counting the one at Stockholm in Sweden, founded in 1930: a progress that had taken less than 20 years! In view of the circumstances, in 1935 the Salesian superiors erected the German Province of St Boniface, with headquarters at Munich.⁴

² ASC E 963, letter P.Tirone-P.Albera 11.12.1916.

³ ASC E 963, letter F.Niedermayer-P.Albera 19.06.1919.

⁴ Consultation of the annual catalogue of the Congregation reveals that from 1919 there first appeared a Province called "German-Hungarian" and later "Austro-Hungarian". From 1935 there is a decree setting up a separate German Province with St Boniface as its Patron and headquarters at Munich. In 1954 the single German Province was divided

With the outbreak of the second world war some of the houses were closed or impounded by the military. But the greater blow was the calling up of many young Salesians, of whom some 140 lost their lives on various warfronts. Some were also put in concentration camps like Theodor Hartz (1887-1942) who died at Dachau, and Karl Schmidt (1904-1968).⁵

In the seventies the need was felt for new forms of Salesian apostolate, and centres of spiritual formation for young people were opened at Benediktbeuern, Ensdorf, Jünkerath and Calhorn (Oldenburg). Mention must also be made of a work of extraordinary value, the *Missionary Office of Bonn*. It is through this Office that very many projects both in Europe and in the Salesian missions were and still are being financed.

In October 1990 came the reunification of East and West Germany, which was a challenge also for the Salesians. Despite the reduced numbers of German Salesian personnel, in 1992 it was decided to make new foundations in the former German Democratic Republic, and specifically at Heiligenstadt (Thuringia) with a daily oratory (Offene Tür), a pastoral and social welfare centre, with another for marginalized youngsters with a youth centre, and at Chemnitz in Saxony with an oratory and youth and guidance centre: this latter work was carried out with the Cooperators playing a notable part. Nor can be omitted mention of another initiative launched in the same year (1992) when the Province of Cologne accepted responsibility for a mission in Ghana, within the context of Project Africa.

Today, at the request of the German Provinces, their reunification is being planned with a view to a more significant apostolate.

2.3 Poland

It seems that already about 1889 the study had begun of a project to send a first Salesian expedition into Poland. The Rector Major Don Rua had thought of choosing August Czartoryski as its leader, accompanied by Fr Bronisław Markiewicz and other Polish and Italian confreres, but Czartoryski's poor health ruled out such a project at the time. Meanwhile at the end of March 1892 the Superiors sent Fr Markiewicz to Galizia in Poland to take pastoral care of a small parish at a place called Miejsce, not far from the episcopal city of Przemyśl. Fr Markiewicz opened a house for the education of poor youngsters which he called "Don Bosco House", and in this way the first Salesian work on Polish soil began.

In 1897 Fr Markiewicz decided to separate himself from the Salesians of Turin, while the Polish Salesians who remained in the Congregation immediately accepted a proposal of the prince Bishop of Kracow, Cardinal Jan Puzyna, to found an institute in the little town of Oświęcim, a religious centre which in the opinion of the Bishop was capable of withstanding the spread of devastating socialist ideas among the young people of the working classes. In August 1898 Don Rua sent there the newly ordained Fr Franciszek Trawiński, and in the following autumn two clerics to help him.

In December 1899 the Superiors decided to send Fr Emanuele Manassero there as Rector. He was the true pioneer and organizer of the Salesian house of Oświęcim, which subsequently became known as the "Mother House" of the Polish Salesians. He soon won back and consolidated the wavering confidence of the people in the Salesian Society.

1904 saw the foundation of the second Salesian work in southern Poland in the small town of Daszawa, in the Stryj district of the province of Lviv, which now forms part of the territory of Ukraine. This house was opened to meet the ever more pressing need for a house of formation. As

into two: one in the north (St Boniface) with headquarters initially at Endorf, and the other in the south (Mary Help of Christians) based on Munich.

⁵ Cf Johannes Wielgoß, *P. Karl Schmidt SDB (1904-1968). Sechs Jahre priesterlicher Existenz in nationalsozialistischer Schutzhaft*, in «Archiv für mittelrheinische Kirchengeschichte» 49 (1996) 227-238.

its Rector and Master of novices was assigned Fr Peter Tirone, the future Catechist General of the Congregation.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the social question became ever more strongly felt, and some of the Bishops tried to provide a remedy through the setting up of educational institutions. One of these was the Latin rite Bishop of Przemyśl, Mgr Josef Sebastian Pelzer, canonised 18 May 2003. He wanted to have the Salesians in a densely populated area of his episcopal city, and there in fact they began their apostolate in 1907. As Rector Fr August Hlond, the future Cardinal Primate of Poland was chosen. The Polish Bishops were very keen on having a music school, and since no suitable building was available for the purpose, the Salesians offered their own institute for the purpose. The special higher institute for the formation of organists, founded 1 November 1916 under the direction of the young composer Fr Antoni Hlond, is something quite unique in the history of the Salesian Society. During his 47 years of activity he trained 570 qualified organists – a contribution and particular service by the Salesians to the Church in Poland as well as to civil society.

The period between the two wars witnessed a further flourishing of Salesian work. In 1933 32 houses were already in operation and the number of confreres had grown to more than 500. In consequence the Rector Major, Fr Peter Ricaldone, decided to take half the houses from the Province of St Stanislaus Kostka and set them up as the new Province of St Hyacinth with headquarters at Krakow.

The outbreak of the second world war was a sad blow for the Salesians in Poland. All the schools were closed, as well as nearly all the houses. The struggle for survival and the precarious nature of the lives of the confreres, linked with their subsequent wanderings and emigration during the years that immediately followed, left deep traces.

In the concentration camps 67 Salesians were killed by the Nazis, among them Fr Józef Kowalski, beatified on 13 June 1999, together with the five young martyrs of the Poznan Oratory. By the end of 1945 the Salesians had succeeded in reactivating all their centres of education and training. As a consequence, in 1948 8 professional schools and 4 technical institutions were in operation, together with 6 High Schools and 4 minor seminaries.

In the scholastic year 1947-48 the Communist government changed its attitude to non-state schools. With inflexible severity it began the gradual closure of all schools run by religious. After 1963 the professional school at Oświęcim was the only Salesian private school recognized by the State and the only Salesian professional school in the whole of Soviet dominated territory!

The passage to pastoral work in parishes had become inevitable, and this had a considerable influence on the change in the nature of the Salesian apostolate. Nevertheless the Polish Salesians strove to preserve their own characteristics by finding space and outlets for their specific mission.

The progress of the Salesians in Poland is eloquently confirmed by the fact that in 1979, notwithstanding the Communist regime, two new Provinces were erected: the Province of St Adalbert of Pila, made up of houses taken from the north-western part of the Province of St Stanislaus Kostka of Warsaw, and the Province of St John Bosco of Wroclaw comprising the houses detached from the Province of St Hyacinth in the south-west.

2.4 Lithuania and the countries of the former Soviet Union

In what is now called the Special Circumscription of the East were included various countries that belonged to the former Soviet Union, including Lithuania, but the latter merits a section to itself. It will be useful for us to be aware of the story of these Salesian foundations.

2.4.1 The countries of the former Soviet Union

The situation was unique, because in reality no activity of any religious Congregation could exist officially during the Communist regime. After 1940, despite everything, some Salesians decided to remain in the territories belonging to the Soviet Union so as to provide priestly ministry for the benefit of the Catholics who had to stay there.

It is our duty in particular to recall the courage of various Polish Salesians who remained in those territories at the risk of their lives. At least eleven of them, in fact, were slaughtered in the various republics of the Union. The few who survived the cruel persecution returned to Poland, but the others stayed at their posts, carrying out their priestly functions in very delicate circumstances until their death. An emblematic figure among them is the Polish Salesian Tadeusz Hoppe (1913-2003), who managed to carry out pastoral activity in various parts of Soviet territory, especially at Odessa in the Ukraine, from 1943 until his death in 2003.

Before the definitive falling apart of the USSR the Salesians were able to enter the former Soviet republics, take up again their former work in Ukraine and in Belarus and, indeed, start up activities in countries in which they had not yet been present: Russia, Georgia, and the Yakutia Republic. This enabled the Rector Major, Fr Egidio Viganò, in 1993 to erect the special Circumscription “Immaculate Heart of Mary” in Eastern Europe, with headquarters at Moscow and including the Salesian work scattered over the various states of the former Soviet Union. Most of the foundations are in Ukraine, Belarus and in Russia itself.

The Ukraine is deserving of special mention. There Salesian work within the present national boundaries goes back to 1904 (at Daszawa), but at that time it was a Polish Salesian work. Polish too were the foundations made between the two wars in the western part of what is now Ukraine, but was then an integral part of Poland. All this activity was cut short by the changes in national boundaries that began in 1944 and came to an end finally in 1945: the eastern territory of Poland became part of the Ukraine, which in 1944 became annexed in turn to the USSR as a Soviet republic.

For the story of Salesian work in Ukraine it must be recalled that in 1930 the Sacred Congregation for Extraordinary Ecclesiastical Affairs had written a letter to the Rector Major Fr Philip Rinaldi, inviting him, in the name of the Holy Father, to undertake a work of promoting schools and institutes of arts and trades for the purpose of fostering Catholic instruction and education among the poorer classes, of seeking out some young people called to the religious state and training them in Italy with the preservation of their Greek-Catholic rite, and so prepare for the erection of a religious province of oriental rite. The proposal was repeated in 1932 to Fr Ricaldone.

That same year a first group of young Ukrainians were sent to Italy for their formation, with others joining them in the years that followed. In 1951 the Apostolic Visitor for the Ukrainians in Western Europe entrusted to Ukrainian Salesians the minor seminary for Ukrainian boys from all over the world.

In 1991 the proclamation of independence and religious freedom in the Ukraine allowed the Salesians of that country to return to their homeland after many years of waiting in hope. They began work with a parish and oratory at Lviv (Leopoli); in 1994 the house for the aspirantate and prenovitiate was opened at Obroshyno and in 2001 at Lviv the first Ecumenical Salesian Youth Centre. In the following year a Professional School was inaugurated, recognized by the State.

This development has now led the Rector Major with his Council to erect the first Delegation of the Ukrainian Byzantine Rite so as to foster a fruitful implanting of Don Bosco’s charism in that country. Alongside the Salesians of the Byzantine rite there are others too of the Latin rite, who carry out an apostolate among the Catholics (mainly of Polish extraction) who belong to that rite.

2.4.2 *Lithuania*

The first Salesian work in Lithuania was begun in 1934 at Skirsnemunė, and for political reasons was incorporated into the “Sacred Heart” Central Province of Turin rather than one of the

Polish Provinces. At Kaunas, Lithuania's capital at that time, was founded the second Salesian work in the country with a parish and festive oratory, and the teaching of catechism in the state schools. A year later another foundation was made at Saldutiškis, with a parish and the teaching of catechism in schools. In 1940 a Provincial delegate was appointed in the person of Fr Anthony Skeltys for Salesian work in Lithuania.

But in 1944 Lithuania became annexed to the USSR as a republic, and so began a harsh persecution of the Church, including all the religious institutes. As well as the sequestration of ecclesiastical property there was a direct attack on the clergy, as a result of which many priests ended up in Soviet gulags, including some Salesians.

Only in 1989, with the fall of the "Berlin wall", was it possible to think of re-establishing the Salesian charism in the country. The relatively rapid decline of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1994 made it possible for more official Salesian activity to begin, even though some difficulties remained. At present the Salesians are working at Vilnius (the capital of Lithuania) and at Kaunas.

2.5 Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Croatia

In the coordination of the Region, the Salesian provinces of some countries, because of their cultural affinity or for geographical reasons, have been linked together in a consulting group under the patronage of Sts. Cyril and Methodius (with the abbreviation CIMEC). Let us now look briefly at the Salesian history of these countries.

2.5.1 Hungary

Although on 23 May 1880 Antal Lonkay, a well known figure in the mass media of Hungary at that time, the director and proprietor of the daily "Magyar Allam", was enrolled as a member of the Association of Salesian Cooperators, more than forty years were to pass before there was a first Salesian foundation in Magyar territory.

In 1913 the Primate of Hungary. Mgr John Czernocjh, through Canon Francis Robitsek, suggested that the Salesians take over the sanctuary of the Holy Cross (in Hungarian *Szentkereszt*), at Péliföld. The Superiors of Turin sent Fr Tirone to make contact with the Primate and assess the proposal. Fr Tirone went there and, despite some objections, recommended acceptance in view of future development. The Primate, by a rescript of 26 October 1913, gave to the Society of St Francis de Sales the Sanctuary of the Holy Cross at Péliföld. In autumn of the same year some Hungarian Sons of Mary were sent there. The Slovenc Fr Francis Walland was sent to guide the house and take pastoral care of souls.⁶

In the autumn of 1919 work was begun at Nyergesújfalu, with a college and hostel, grammar school and pastoral care. The same activities were inaugurated at the house of Rákospalota founded in 1924. And we may add that in the scholastic year 1925-1926 there were 23 clerics in the studentate of philosophy and 8 candidates in the novitiate – a state of affairs that promised well for the future and encouraged further openings.

And in fact in 1925 was inaugurated the house of Esztergom-Tábor, which shortly afterwards became the studentate of philosophy and theology, with other forms of educational activity. As the number of houses in Hungary began to rise – in 1927 foundations were made at Ujpest and Visegrád and in 1929 at Szombathely – it was decided in 1929 to erect the Province of "St Stephen the King", with Fr Pływaczyk as Provincial.

⁶ Cf. S. ZIMNIAK, *Salesiani nella Mitteleuropa. Preistoria e storia della provincia Austro-Ungarica della Società di S. Francesco di Sales (1868 ca. - 1919)*. (Istituto Storico Salesiano. Studi 10), LAS, Rome 1997, p. 205-206.

The constant progress of Salesian work in Hungary is reflected in the number of Salesians; at 1 January 1940 the Province had 189 confreres, of whom 125 were in formation (novices and students of philosophy and theology), with 32 Salesian Brothers!

A promising future was opening up before the Hungarian Salesians, but unfortunately it was blocked by the outbreak of war. Nevertheless, in the years 1947-48 the Salesians were still able to make new foundations (at Miskolc, at Sajólád, at Tanakajd and elsewhere), but these were the last before the Church's period of struggle. The really hard time for the Church, and so also for the Salesians, began with the intervention of the Soviet Union after the revolution of October 1956, which began at Budapest. From the time of those tragic events until the year 1989 the Hungarian Salesians were no longer able to engage in activities inherent in their charism. Today, though with difficulties stemming from the past, the Hungarian Province is being rebuilt.

2.5.2 Slovenia

The knowledge of Don Bosco and his work in Slovene territory goes back to the 1860s; before the Salesians came there at all, there was a consistent number of Salesian Cooperators. Don Rua yielded to the insistent requests of these Cooperators, and especially to those of one of the most zealous pastors of the Slovene Church at that time (the Archbishop of Ljubljana, Mgr Anton B. Jeglič, 1850-1937), who offered them a small castle at Rakovnik, not far from the Slovenian capital.⁷ The first group of Salesians arrived at Rakovnik on 23 November 1901, led by Fr Simon Visintainer, who had been chosen as the first Rector.

In 1907 the second Salesian work in Slovenia in the small town of Radna was opened: a novitiate of international character, even though the majority of the candidates were from Poland; it functioned later also as a studentate of philosophy. Even the third Salesian work "Marijanišče", opened in 1912 in the village of Veržej, was not directed originally to Slovenes, but to German Sons of Mary who wanted to transfer from Penango (Piedmont-Italy) to somewhere nearer home.

In 1919 political freedom enabled the Salesians to take up again their full apostolate in the first house of Rakovnik and a period of new foundations followed in the whole of Slovenia. The prospects of continued development led to the erection in 1922 of the Province of Sts Cyril and Methodius with headquarters at Ljubljana; in it were incorporated the first Salesian houses of Croatia and Czechoslovakia. The first superior, with the role of Visitor, was the Italian Fr Peter Tirone, who was succeeded in 1926 by the Pole Fr Stanisław Pływaczyk and, from 1929, by the Slovene Fr Franc Walland.

The bright hopes for the future changed suddenly with the outbreak of war, especially when Yugoslavia entered in 1941. The war led to some deaths among Salesians, eliminated through the work of the Yugoslav Communist Party.

In the years of détente, around 1955, the Salesians chose fresh areas for new work for the benefit of the local Church; they offered themselves for missions among the people, and even prepared manuals suitable for this kind of apostolate (printed in the form of leaflets or in *Sejalec* (the review for preachers). After 1955 Fr Walter Dermota began an activity for the preparation of catechetical aids and in 1963 managed to set up the very successful Salesian Catechetical Centre.

1989 saw a historic turning-point. The Salesians were given back their boarding schools of Veržej, Celje and Rakovnik-Ljubljana, and as soon as 1991 were able to open the first Catholic high school in Slovenia (Želimplje). In the meantime other Slovene Salesians carried out an apostolate among their co-nationals living outside the homeland at Opicina-Italy, Klagenfurt-Austria and among the emigrants at Hamilton (Canada). Slovene Salesians have been working in Albania from the beginning of Salesian work in that country.

⁷ Cf S. ZIMNIAK, *Salesiani nella Mitteleuropa. Preistoria e storia della provincia Austro-Ungarica della Società di S. Francesco di Sales (1868 ca. - 1919)*. (Istituto Storico Salesiano. Studi 10), LAS, Rome 1997, p. 118ss.

2.5.3 *Slovakia and the Czech Republic*

In this case too the arrival of the first Salesians was preceded by the springing up of a nucleus of Salesian Cooperators. The first young men from Bohemia, Moravia and Slovakia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries went to houses in Piedmont, where several of them chose to embrace the Salesian religious life. The superiors in Turin, seeing the continued influx of candidates from what was then Czechoslovakia, set aside for them in 1921 the Salesian house of Perosa Argentina.

The first Salesian house in Slovakia was opened near Šaštín in 1924. The Salesians were offered an ancient monastery, together with the national sanctuary of Our Lady of Sorrows. It was changed into a formation centre for future personnel, and in the same year the Slovaks from Perosa Argentina were transferred to it.

1927 saw the foundation of two more Salesian houses at Fryštak, the first house in Bohemia, and at Vráble (Slovakia). In the Slovak capital, Bratislava, the Salesians became established in 1933 when they opened a daily oratory, took over pastoral care of the parish and launched various forms of apostolate. At Moravská Ostrava a house was opened that was at first a studentate of philosophy and later became also the studentate of theology and the novitiate for Bohemian and Moravian candidates.

The surprising increase of foundations in Czechoslovakia led in 1935 to the decision to withdraw the houses from the Slovene Province and unite them in the new Province of St John Bosco, with headquarters at Moravská Ostrava.

In Prague, the capital of Bohemia, in 1936 the Salesians opened a daily oratory and boarding school and took up pastoral work. In the same year they also went to Trnava (Slovakia), where amongst other things they started up a hostel for students, a middle school, and a festive oratory. They also accepted a group of Sons of Mary. In the following year (1937) at Žilina they began a festive oratory, a hostel and catechetical work in the public schools.

The development was surprising. In 1939, only fifteen years after the opening of the first Salesian work, the Province of St John Bosco had 227 confreres! Striking also was the number of confreres in formation – 180 of them, of whom 48 were Brothers!

This unusual flourishing of foundations in Czechoslovakia, combined with the painful political situation caused by the Nazi occupation of Bohemia and Moravia, and then the setting up of an autonomous government in Slovakia, led in 1939 to the Slovak houses being erected into the new Province of Mary Help of Christians with headquarters at Bratislava.

The world war rendered Salesian life difficult, especially in the so-called German protectorate, but it did not paralyse it altogether. Some Salesians were sent to concentration camps, among them Fr Stefan Trochta, the future Cardinal. After the war the Salesians were able once again to take up their activities and even intensify them. The radical change took place in 1948, the year in which Czechoslovakia became a people's democracy. The Communists began an all-out onslaught against the Church, beginning with the suppression of all religious orders. In the spring of 1950 a concentration camp was set up for religious, to which 260 Salesians were taken! For the Salesians it was the beginning of a catacombs period that was to last until December 1989.

The Salesians of both Provinces took up their apostolate once again with great zeal, helped by confreres coming back from exile. The time of resumption of activities produced a missionary opening in various countries which offered some of their confreres for the missions. We may recall that there are now Slovak confreres working in countries of the former Soviet Union (at Baku – Azerbaijan), while the Salesians of the Czech Republic have gone, among other places, to Bulgaria where they have begun a work for youngsters in difficulty.

2.5.4 *Croatia*

The beginning of the work of Don Bosco in Croatia had a slower start than in neighbouring countries, partly because of a less direct knowledge of Salesian educational institutions.

The first Salesian house in Croatia was opened in 1922 in the capital Zagreb, where the Salesians accepted a boarding school offered by the Archdiocese and began a festive oratory – though in fact the first Salesian work on Croatian soil had already taken place at the town of Rijeka (Fiume) in 1918.

The second Salesian work began in 1929, also in the Croat capital at Zagreb-Knežija. This was followed in 1936 by a foundation in the ancient city of Split: this involved the running of an orphanage and boarding school and in addition of an oratory which was started up, together with teaching in the state schools.

The outbreak of the Second World War did not pose many obstacles to Salesian activity. Even after it became one of the six autonomous republics of the new State of Yugoslavia, the Salesians were able to carry out their apostolate, though naturally within the limits permitted. In fact in 1948 they were able to open a work at Zagreb-Rudeš and in the following year another at Zadar-Arbanasi. The progressive development of the work allowed the Superiors in 1972 to erect the Croatian Province of St John Bosco, with headquarters at Zagreb. In a manner similar to those of Slovenia, the Croatian Salesians had become strong in the catechetical field, recently opening a “Salesian Catechetical Centre” at Zagreb and, in addition, a publishing house “Katehetski salezijanski centar”.

2.6 Two factors that contributed to the early development

I do not want to end this account of the beginnings without some reference to two elements that played an effective part in preparing the way for the foundation of Salesian work in central and eastern Europe, especially in some of the countries of the Danubian empire; both were present before the arrival of the Salesians.

2.6.1 The “Salesian Bulletin”

In 1895 the Superiors authorized the publication of the German edition of the Bulletin, which took the name “*Salesianische Nachrichten*” (Salesian News). Of the first number, twenty thousand copies were printed. The following year saw serious thought given to its publication in Polish, and the regular publication of the Polish edition “*Wiadomości Salezjańskie*” (Salesian News) began with fourteen thousand copies.

After the successful publication of the German and Polish editions, from 1903 the Salesians set about publishing also a monthly edition in Hungarian, with the title “*Szalézi értesítő*” (Salesian Bulletin). It should be noted that in Germany and Austria, as also in Hungary, there was at this time not a single Salesian house!

The publication of the Bulletin in the Slovene language began in January 1907 with the title “*Salezijanska Poročila. Glasilo salezijanskih sotrudnikov*” (The Salesian Word. Voice of the Salesian Cooperators), and was the last of the central and Eastern European language Bulletins to be published before the outbreak of the first world war.

One of the secrets that ensured the Bulletin’s unchallenged success was its international dimension on which Don Bosco had insisted, and which saved it from having a regionalistic character, and it seems that this also led to its surprising welcome in the countries of central and eastern Europe, already so deeply wounded by continual struggles with nationalistic roots. It was seen as a magazine aimed primarily at the good of young people in need of education and instruction, without regard to their social or national origin. The space in it dedicated to the missions presented the Salesians as a religious society of universal range, and at the same time caused them to be looked on with favour. Moreover the monthly publication revealed dynamic

progress through the continual information about the ever more numerous openings of houses in Italy and beyond its shores. After Don Bosco's death, he became a focus of attention through articles of every kind. He was presented as one of the greatest contemporary educators; he had not limited himself to a single country but had planned a work equally valid for Europe and other continents. In short, he was presented as a very attractive and inspiring figure.

2.6.2 *The Salesian Cooperators*

The Cooperators have played a decisive part in implanting the Salesian ethos in the different countries of Europe. They spread most rapidly in Slovenia, in Germany (with Austria and Switzerland), in Poland and in Hungary. In all these countries the Cooperators' Association was there before the Salesians! A careful analysis of the necrology of both Cooperators and benefactors at the back of the Bulletin also shows that they were spread over all social classes.

In Slovenia the Association took off in lively fashion while Don Bosco was still alive. Some of the members even met him personally. In 1896 there were two big gatherings of Slovene Cooperators, the first on 29 January and the second on 26 May, both of them at Ljubljana; the driving force behind them was the well remembered diocesan priest Fr J. Smrekar, helped by other priests and lay people. About the year 1900 there were more than 1,600 registered Slovene Cooperators.⁸ One of their aims was naturally to get the Salesians to come to Slovenia, and specifically to Ljubljana.

Among the Poles also, the "Cooperators' Union" came into existence in Don Bosco's lifetime. He used to recruit them among those still in occupied Poland and also among those living abroad. From the first Polish records it is clear that there were members in 1884, but the possibility of members even earlier than that cannot be excluded. According to the Polish Bulletin there were 16 thousand Cooperators in July 1897, and in December of the same year their number had risen to 25 thousand. Two years later they had reached 55 thousand. And also among Poles living outside the country they had reached a considerable number.

In Hungary a most enthusiastic member of the Association was Antal Lonkay, the director and proprietor of the daily "*Magyar Allam*". Don Bosco himself had enrolled him on 23 May 1880 at the Valdocco Oratory as the first Hungarian Cooperator.⁹ In his desire to make the Association known in Hungary, among other things Lonkay translated the Cooperators' Regulations and published them at Budapest in 1882. This led to Don Bosco becoming well known to the Hungarian public while he was still alive, and according to the Hungarian Bulletin there would have been 6,000 Hungarian Cooperators in 1902.

The Association also experienced dynamic growth in German-speaking countries, especially in Germany and Austria. In 1899 the German Cooperators were about 40 thousand in number.

It is not surprising therefore that in central and eastern Europe the Salesians found consistent material and moral support. It must be said that without the various activities and collaboration of the Cooperators with the Salesians, Don Bosco's work in those geographical areas could never have had the impact, foundation and development that it experienced.

3. **The present context of our mission**

The rather long and somewhat complex story of Salesian work in the Northern European Region serves to show us how Don Bosco's charism can be implanted everywhere, how it can grow strongly and also resist in the face of the kind of adverse circumstances we have described. How

⁸ Cf B. KOLAR, *Lo sviluppo dell'immagine salesiana...*, p. 155.

⁹ ASC A 187, at the bottom of a copy of the letter G.Bosco-A.Lonkay of 16-04-1884; cf also «L'Unità Cattolica», Torino, 25 maggio 1880, p. 490.

much we can learn from the Salesians of this Region! And I am convinced that they themselves can draw enlightenment and inspiration to face successfully the challenges of the present day, no longer characterized by war and persecution but by a creeping secularism, a reductive globalisation, and a dechristianisation of culture.

The Region is in the midst of a deep and rapid process of transformation of a Europe which for centuries has seen its people fighting against each other, with constantly changing frontiers between nations (Lithuania, Poland, Ukraine, Germany, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Russia, etc.); a Europe that has witnessed the “forced immigration” of entire peoples in Russia, the obligatory “transfer” of Poles and German people in Silesia, the events of the Sudetans in the Czech Republic; a Europe that dreams of unity and has decided to turn over a new leaf in its history and give its backing to peace, to the freedom of countries and of all its citizens, to the development in solidarity of all the countries within it, and which has recently adopted a Constitution that can keep it united in diversity.

3.1 The new Europe

This is the new Europe, which in the past was able to create rich cultural expressions and is now decisively headed towards the development among all European citizens of a sense of belonging to one people, while committing itself to systems for social security and all individual freedoms. A Europe which, after the widening of its boundaries, knows nonetheless the gap between extreme riches on the one hand (a GDP of 32,000 US\$ in Switzerland and 1.9% unemployment) and extreme poverty on the other (a GDP of 1.90 US\$ in Bosnia-Herzegovina with 60% unemployment).

This is the new Europe, which is running the risk of losing its ‘soul’, the fruit of two thousand years of Christian history which made it all one as a continent. Today’s Europe is in fact indebted to the valuable contributions of Augustine, of Thomas Aquinas, of Rembrandt, of Michelangelo, of Raffaele, of Leonardo, of Shakespeare, of Montesquieu, of Spinoza, of Bach, of Galileo, of Newton, of Kant, of Goethe, of Einstein and others.

This is the new Europe which has given to the world men and women of the highest stature: St Benedict, St Francis of Assisi, St Dominic Guzman, St Ignatius of Loyola, St Francis Xavier, St Boniface, St Willibrord, St Thomas of Canterbury, St Patrick, St Adalbert, St Hyacinth, Sts Cyril and Methodius, St Stephen King of Hungary, St Catherine of Siena, St Teresa of Avila, Fr Damian De Veuster, St Edith Stein, and a host of other saints.

This is the new Europe which is no longer at ease with its soul and is blotting out its history, or at least reducing it to the influence of Athens, Rome and Paris, and to a situation in which the Church and the gospel message are struggling to find a place in this “home for everyone”. It is the case of a Europe, at least as regards its western part, which in the words of John Paul II, “*gives the impression of ‘silent apostasy’ on the part of people who have all that they need and who live as if God does not exist*”.¹⁰

The fact is that in some parts of Europe there is clearly a need for a first proclamation of the Gospel, because there is an increasing number of the non-baptised, either because of the notable presence of immigrants belonging to other religions, or because children of families with a Christian tradition behind them have not been baptised due perhaps to the Communist domination of the past or to a widespread religious indifference.

This is the Europe we must discover and to which we must open up the Gospel, a true mission territory for first evangelisation. And all this must be done with the zeal and enthusiasm of Paul

¹⁰ *Ecclesia in Europa* n. 9.

who responded to the cry for help from the man from Macedonia, but also with the intelligence of one who is aware that what is at stake is the heart of the Gospel, God revealed in Jesus who died on the cross. We must proclaim a God who is compassionate, who has a predilection for the poor, the weak, the widow, the stranger – a God so human that he himself became a man who suffered and by his passion gave us back the dignity we had lost, and filled us with hope.

It is true that this new evangelisation of Europe needs new evangelisers. For this reason the Salesians must get ready for this wonderful task of contributing to the restoration of Europe's soul, by putting Jesus Christ and his Gospel at the centre of personal and community life, by strengthening the love of (and faith in) our own charism, by acquiring an ever greater knowledge and esteem of the eastern "lung" of the Church and of the Congregation, concentrating on a love that will benefit the poor, the needy, the abandoned and those at risk, learning to dialogue and be tolerant in a context that becomes ever more multi-cultural and pluri-religious.

3.2 The youth situation

My earlier letters on the Western European Region and the Region of Italy and the Middle East have provided a picture of the youth situation in western Europe. Roughly speaking this description is true also of the youth situation in the western part of the Northern European Region. For this reason I want to dwell rather on the youth situation in the central and eastern part of Europe which is generally less well known.

Going by the Report of UNICEF's Innocenti Centre of Research at Florence, entitled "*Young People in Societies in Transformation*", which analyses the experiences of the "generations of transition" in 27 countries of central and eastern Europe, there exist in these countries 65 million young people between the ages of 15 and 24. Of these 26 million (41%) are students, 21 million (32%) are working, and 18 million (27%) are neither one nor the other. These figures are eloquent in themselves, but even more so from the standpoint of our mission.

The Report sees in the "transition generation" *an enormous resource* for the region (and not only for the region) in this era of rapid economic and social transformation. It recommends the development of policies for the benefit of the young which aim at supporting families, communities and society, as well as the young people themselves.

The Report also asserts that the success or failure of adolescents and young people often has its roots in infancy; it is fitting therefore to *invest in small children*. And a conclusion follows that is of great significance for us: happy and healthy youngsters do not spring up out of the blue. They are persons who have begun life as babies and have developed their potentiality through education. I cannot fail to recall at this point the appeal made by Cardinal Ratzinger during the meeting of European Provincials when, in reply to a question as to what he himself expected from the Salesians of Europe, he declared with clarity and conviction: "the prophecy of education".

Until 1989, that is before the fall of the Berlin wall, unemployment was practically nonexistent in the greater part of the countries of the region. Now it has become an enormous problem with more than 40% of young people unemployed; many have been out of work for more than a year.

Between 1989 and 1998 the birth rate fell by a third or more in most of the countries, and indeed by a half in Armenia and Estonia. If the present trend is maintained, the number of young people between 15 and 24 in central Europe will drop by a third in the next twenty years.

The Report reveals also a generation whose health is threatened. About half a million of those who in 1989 were in the 5 to 14 age-group are no longer alive today. In 1998, in the whole area, 85,000 people died between the ages of 15 and 24, Many of these deaths were due to accidents, acts of violence, homicide, suicide, and natural causes like infectious diseases and complications in pregnancy.

Although in some of the countries in transition the suicide rate among youngsters between 15 and 24 has decreased, in 16 countries it has gone up and has more than doubled in Lithuania, in Belarus, in Russia and in Turkmenistan. The rate is particularly high, and is still rising, in Slovenia, in Estonia, in Latvia, in Ukraine and in Kazakhstan.

The Report asserts moreover that young people of poor families, from rural areas, of ethnic minorities and the disabled, form an unusually high percentage of those who abandon school at an early age or who never go to school at all.

All these indications describing the youth situation in the central and eastern part of Europe are certainly of great value to us for the fulfilment of our mission among the young.

3.3 The Salesian situation of the Region at the present day

The Northern European Region was set up by the GC24. At present it includes 16 Provinces, together with the Special Circumscription of the East with headquarters in Moscow, and one Provincial Delegation (Malta). In its recent plenary session the General Council also approved the constitution of a Delegation of Ukraine-Byzantine rite in the Ukraine.

The Region covers 25 countries in 3 continents, and a total of 21 different languages are used.¹¹

Many Provinces, with great generosity, have accepted responsibility for the Salesian mission in other countries.¹² Other provinces maintain a close link with their foundations which have now become part of autonomous circumscriptions: the North Belgian Province with the Democratic Republic of the Congo and with Bangui in the Central African Republic; the three German-speaking Provinces with Ghana; the Province of Great Britain with Liberia.

3.3.1 Coordination

The Region does not function as a single Provincial Conference, because of the wide variety of contexts. For the purpose of fostering interprovincial collaboration, four areas have been created:

- The Provincial Conference of the four Polish Provinces (Piła-Kraków-Warsaw-Wrocław) and the Circumscription of the East with headquarters in Moscow.
- The Provincial Conference of the three German-speaking Provinces (Cologne-Munich-Vienna).
- The Sts. Cyril and Methodius Consulting Group (CIMEC), bringing together five Provinces (Czech Republic, Croatia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Hungary).
- The Consulting Group of the “Atlantic Area” which includes the four English and Dutch-speaking Provinces (North Belgium, Great Britain, Ireland-Malta, Holland).

3.3.2 Salesians

¹¹ (Europa, Asia, Africa): Austria, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Belarus, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Georgia, Germany, Great Britain, Holland, Hungary, Ireland, Jugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro), Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Russian Federation (+Jakutia Republic), Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland, Tunisia, Ukraine.

¹² The Province of the Czech Republic in Bulgaria (Kazanlak e Jambol); the Croatian Province in Bosnia-Herzegovina (Zepce); the North German Province in Sweden (Sooedertalje); the South German Province in Switzerland; the Ireland-Malta Province in Tunisia (Manouba); the Warsaw Province in Russia (Kaliningrad) and shortly in Moldavia; the Pila Province in Sweden (Stockholm); the Slovak Province in Azerbaijan (Baku) and in Siberia (Jakutsk and Aldan); the Province of Slovenia in Montenegro (Podgorica) and in Serbia (Beograd e Tusla). It must also be kept in mind that the Eastern Circumscription developed the mission in Russia, Belarus, Lithuania, Ukraine, Georgia and the Jakutia Republic.

In September 2004 the Region had 2,751 professed confreres and 52 novices. As in the other Regions of Europe this represents a diminution. In fact since 1996 the number has fallen by 472 confreres.

The average age in the Region is 55 years, but it varies widely from one Province to another. The youngest is Poland-Krakow (42 years), the oldest is Holland (72 years).

The majority of the novices are to be found in Poland (30); the Provinces of the CIMEC (with the exception of Slovakia), which at the beginning of the '90s were still getting a good number of candidates, have seen a fall in the number of novices. A modest improvement is taking place in Slovenia and Croatia, and the development of Ukrainian confreres of Eastern Rite gives rise to hope.

More problematic are prospects in the Atlantic area of the Region and in that of the German-speaking Provinces, where very few candidates are entering (except in Great Britain which this year has three novices).

In 1996 the Region had 498 confreres in temporary vows. Now it has 240. Closer examination reveals the great differences that exist across the Region in this respect:

- 153 temporarily professed confreres belong to the four Polish Provinces and the Circumscription of the East; 71 are in the CIMEC area, of whom there are 51 in Slovakia alone; the Atlantic area has 16 and the German-speaking area 9.

- From 2002 a tendency towards stabilisation can be detected of vocations in the Provinces of Croatia, Poland-Piła, Poland-Wrocław, Poland-Kraków, Slovenia and in the Circumscription of the East. The only Province showing a slow decline is Slovakia.

- Malta, the Provincial Delegation of Ireland, appears to be somewhat different. The Delegation has 34 confreres (9 of them in initial formation). With an average of 48 years, it is showing signs of growth. This implies that Malta has a religious and ecclesial environment far different from that of Western Europe. At the request of the Bishops, the confreres have recently taken responsibility for the training of workers in Youth Ministry in the island.

3.3.3 Brothers

At present the Region has 249 Brothers, of whom 23 are in temporary vows; they represent 9% of the total number. In 1996 they were 237, with 42 temporarily professed. It should be noticed that 8 of those in temporary vows are in Slovakia.

3.4 The situation of the different areas

3.4.1 *The Atlantic Area and that of the German-speaking Provinces (Austria, North Belgium, Germany-Cologne, Germany-Munich, Great Britain, Ireland-Malta, Holland)*

These Provinces have an admirable Salesian history, written with great dedication, with attachment to Don Bosco and love for the Congregation. They have a great story behind them of missions "ad gentes" and have had many vocations in the post-war years up to 1975. Now they are experiencing a massive fall in vocations to the Salesian life and suffering a rapid ageing process. This means at the same time a lessening of the Salesian presence among young people, which in turn weakens the witness to Salesian life among the youngsters themselves.

The average age is 62 years, but there has been no diminution in the enthusiasm for our charism. But at the same time *an uncertainty* has arisen about the future, due primarily to the lack of vocations and the vocational frailty of young confreres.

These Provinces run and animate outstanding works of great significance and high educative quality: 18 Middle Schools, 15 Senior Schools, 11 Professional Schools, 11 social welfare centres, 38 youth centres, 34 oratories, 19 boarding establishments, 11 youth hostels, 97 parishes, 35 houses

for young people in difficulties, 12 works for ethnic minorities, 7 houses of spirituality with appropriate animation teams, 5 festive oratories, 4 ecological centres (of which the one at Benediktbeuern is of particular importance at European level), a very significant commitment in free time with schools for animators, and the volunteer movement which is particularly well developed in Germany, Great Britain and Holland.

Many of the works are managed by lay people, well trained from a Salesian point of view, thanks to a long tradition among the lay people themselves. I would like to mention in particular the formation institute for laity in North Belgium and the work of the *Jugendpastoral Institut* at Benediktbeuern. Evident among our collaborators also is a growing number of non-believers, but they have a great empathy for Don Bosco and his style of education; this is a sign of hope for us, but at the same time a challenge for the future significance of Salesian works.

There is a growing conviction that we must make the best possible use of the energies of the available confreres, select some significant works, have the courage to define a new set-up in our works or entrust to the laity those we consider of less significance, and take up new ones, modest in structure, for and with young people, and above all bear witness with more conviction to our own faith in Jesus Christ.

3.4.2 The Area of Poland and the Circumscription of the East.(Poland-Warsaw, Poland-Kraków, Poland-Pila, Poland-Wroclaw, Circumscription of the East)

This area provides a different kind of panorama. It has about 1,200 confreres, with an average age of 44 years.

The present situation, with its sensitivity and peculiar nature, are unintelligible without a knowledge of the story of the Catholic Church in these countries, of the forgetting of Poland by Europe after the second world war, of the story of the Church in Greek-Catholic Ukraine, of the Armenian Catholic Church and of the Orthodox Church during the 80 years of Communist domination.

Our mission is carried out especially in parishes (155) and chapels-of-ease (160). Nearly every parish has an oratory (100) or youth centre (81). These provinces look after 9 sanctuaries. In Poland there has been a considerable development of the schools, so that in the past nine years the Provinces have taken up again or inaugurated 24 middle schools, 23 senior schools and 10 technical schools. Houses for young people in difficulties have been opened at Trzciniec, at Rumia and at Kielcow. The new works are greatly esteemed by the youngsters, by their parents and by the civil authorities with whom we often work in collaboration. The great challenge is to make these schools and works meaningful from a Salesian standpoint because of the growing number of lay people involved. It makes all the more necessary the role of the SDB community as the animating nucleus of the work, the practice of the preventive system and the Salesian formation of the laity involved. A decisive element for the development of the charism, especially in Poland, is the commitment of numerous confreres to the teaching of religion in state schools. It can be said that nearly all the confreres working in parishes are involved in this in some way.

The years since 1993 have seen the birth and growth with great courage of the Eastern Circumscription comprising the countries of the Russian Federation, Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine and Georgia. It has many bright prospects, even though there are factors holding back its development at present: vocational frailty, the difficult ecumenical dialogue between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, the attitude of the State to the Catholic Church which is not yet officially recognised, and the lack of Salesian personnel to be able to develop the Salesian mission in all its fullness. Nonetheless the Circumscription has been able to open some works of great significance: a house for street-children in Moscow, the school of graphic arts at Gatchina, while not forgetting the 'frontier works' at Jacutsk, at Aldan in Siberia, the parishes at Smarhon and Minsk in Belarus, and the increase in number of the confreres of oriental rite at Lviv in the Ukraine.

When we speak of this area we can never forget the Polish and Ukrainian confreres who fell in the war, in concentration camps or in far-off Russia. We remember them, express our gratitude for the witness they gave, and keep them in our prayers.

3.4.3 The CIMEC Area (Czech Republic, Croatia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Hungary)

The Area has 649 confreres, with an average age of 53.6 years. It has known a bitter persecution during the years of Communism. In the hearts of many older confreres remains the indelible memory of the death of so many confreres and friends, the closing of all the works in 1950, the years of labour in the factories – the catacomb years, in fact, especially in the Czech Republic, in Slovakia, Slovenia and Lithuania. What pages of Salesian holiness have still to come to light and be written! Despite all the difficulties and the lack of contact with the Centre of the Congregation, the charism still existed and remained very much alive. I cannot fail to recall the wonderful story of the ‘*Chalupki*’ in the Czech Republic, true schools of Salesian spirit during the clandestine period and of the involvement of lay cooperators in the Salesian mission which resulted in so many vocations to the Congregation and the Salesian Family.

The mission is carried out mainly in parishes (119) and chapels-of-ease (120), in the commitment of free time to oratories (45) and youth centres (41), and to 2 middle schools and 6 senior schools. One need think only of the school at Zepce (Bosnia-Herzegovina) on the frontier between Serbian, Moslem and Croat cultures; of the school for gypsies at Kazincbarcika (Hungary); of the technical school at Zilina and the commitment for the gypsies at Bardejov (Slovakia); of the Higher Institute of Social Pedagogy and Theology at Prague (JABOK) and the Theological Faculty at České Budjevoce; of the senior school with a boarding section at Zelimlje (Slovenia); and finally of the works for ethnic minorities in Slovenia, Hungary and the Czech Republic.

These Provinces are still investing much energy in refounding the Congregation. We can say that the process of recovering the houses confiscated during the Communist regime is now over, but there remains a certain lack of “legal right of possession,” and frequent changes in the laws make us still feel insecure when it comes to making decisions.

We now have to get down to redefining our own identity after years without freedom, and this naturally explains a great sensitivity about the particular history and culture.

The area is brimming with hope, especially if we succeed in a sound imposition of the charism, in forming communities centred on Christ and close to young people, and in having the courage to choose new foundations aimed at the education and evangelisation of poor youngsters.

3.5 Interprovincial collaboration

One aspect to be emphasized is the interprovincial collaboration achieved in recent years. Examples are:

In the area of initial formation the Higher Institute of Benediktbeuern in southern Germany is outstanding; it functions as a centre of formation for the three German-speaking Provinces and for some students from the Provinces of Central Europe. The Institute is called upon to play a notable part in the initial and ongoing formation of confreres and lay people of the Region and in dialogue between the two spiritual lungs of Europe.

In Poland the preparation for perpetual profession takes place in common for confreres of the four Provinces.

Some Provinces (Austria, North and South Germany, the Eastern Circumscription, Croatia and Slovenia) send candidates to houses of formation in some Italian Provinces: the novitiate at Pinerolo, the postnovitiate at Nave and for the study of theology at Turin-Crocetta. These Provinces are very grateful to those of Italy for this valuable service they provide for the formation of the young confreres.

The interchange of confreres in initial formation (much to the fore in the '90s) especially from Poland to Italy, Germany, Great Britain and Ireland, has now practically ceased. The reduction in the number of candidates, and more especially certain questions about the style of community life and youth ministry, sometimes made it difficult for the students to return to their own Provinces.

In the area of ongoing or continued formation there is the annual formation week for Provincial Councillors and Rectors of the Provinces of Slovakia and the Czech Republic.

In Poland an updating course at international level is organized for confreres after seven years of priesthood. There is also the quinquennium, the annual meeting of Brothers, the course for new Rectors, the Federation of Salesian Schools, and the scientific Review '*Seminare*' under the direction of some professors.

Mention must also be made of the extensive programme of ongoing and continued formation for the three German-speaking Provinces, organized by the *PastoralJugendzentrum* in Benediktbeuern, which is the only Youth Ministry "workshop" at a higher level in the Region.

In the area of youth ministry there are many interprovincial initiatives: the annual or biennial meetings for young animators of the Region at Vienna (Austria), at Benediktbeuern (Southern Germany), at Groot-Bijgaarden (North Belgium: *Eurizon*) and at Prague.

In the area of the volunteer movement there is collaboration among the Provinces of the Atlantic Area and the German-speaking Provinces with those of Poland, of the CIMEC and with the Circumscription of the East.

From the year 2000 the "*Don Bosco Youth-net*" has been in operation; it brings together twelve Salesian associations from European Provinces for the animation and pastoral service of young people.

Finally must be noted the annual meeting of those responsible for youth ministry of the German-speaking Provinces and the National Centre for youth Ministry in Poland.

As far as the cultural aspect is concerned, the English-language schools in Ireland provide a fine service for confreres who want to study that language.

In the publishing field there is growing collaboration between the twelve publishing houses of the Region under the guidance of the *Don Bosco Verlag* in southern Germany.

Finally mention must be made of the *process of unification* between North Belgium and Holland, and between Germany-Cologne and Germany-Munich, which will conclude with the creation of the new Province of Germany (GER) and the setting up of the Provincial Delegation of Holland, both on 15 August 2005.

4. The sectors of Salesian life and mission

4.1 Initial formation

In the Region there are 18 prenovitiates, 10 novitiates, 12 postnovitiate houses, 11 studentates of theology and three houses for the formation of brothers.

In the Atlantic Area, the scarcity of new entrants has led to the progressive dismantling of the various structures of formation: the use of the Institute of Maynooth in Ireland, Oud-Heverlee in North Belgium, and almost all the novitiates. In some Provinces the lack of students and of formation guides has led to a policy of no longer preparing professors and formation personnel. It is obvious therefore that these Provinces must always look for interprovincial collaboration in this field.

The German-speaking Provinces have decided to send their novices to Pinerolo, where they have the experience of an international novitiate. For the subsequent stages they will continue to send the confreres to Benediktbeuern where, in a well structured environment rich in Salesian experience, a sound formation is ensured in philosophy, social pedagogy and theology.

Poland has 3 novitiates (Czerwińsk, Swobnica, Kopiec), 3 postnovitiates and 3 theologates (Łąd, Łódź and Kraków). Here the formation is guaranteed by well qualified formation teams and by the number of confreres in initial formation. But the question is being raised as to whether a restructuring of the formation houses is needed to concentrate the resources and maintain the high standard.

The Circumscription of the East has closed the novitiate at Oktiabrskij and the studentate at Saint Petersburg as places for initial formation, and the whole structure of this stage of formation is being reviewed. The increase in number of Ukrainian confreres of oriental rite prompts us to prepare structures of formation 'in loco'. For the moment two prenovitiates are operating in the Ukraine, one for each of the two rites. For successive stages the confreres are sent elsewhere.

Croatia and Slovenia send their novices to Pinerolo with the option of continuing subsequent studies in Italy. They have set up a prenovitiate. Hungary will send its novices to Pinerolo but subsequent stages will take place in Hungary itself.

Slovakia has its own structures for prenovitiate, novitiate, postnovitiate and theology. The Czech Republic too has its own structures, but this year will send its single novice to Slovakia. It has its own well structured prenovitiate at Sebranice.

The desire for interprovincial collaboration is not lacking in the Region, but is strongly deterred by language difficulties. Any such collaboration requires on the part of the candidates the study of another language; this is always enriching but not always easy.

With regard to initial formation I repeat that Benediktbeuern offers a consistent structure with a strong team of well qualified teachers. It could become to a greater extent an international centre of formation in the Region.

4.2 Salesian formation of lay people

This is something else that takes place in many different ways. In the Atlantic and German-speaking Areas it is well organized. In Ireland it takes place through the group "*Ethos*" in collaboration with the FMA. In Great Britain it is done through "*The Governors*", and in North Belgium by a structured two-year programme for all lay people involved in schools and in houses for young people at risk, and through the "Centre of Formation" (*Vormingscentrum*). In Germany they have a vast programme of formation for lay people together with Salesians; it is organised by the *JugendPastoralInstitut* from Benediktbeuern.

In Poland the formation of lay personnel in schools is usually left in the hands of head teachers. In this matter it may be possible to draw up a project at interprovincial level.

In the CIMEC too the situation varies from one Province to another. Hungary organises meetings at provincial level. Slovakia concentrates on the formation of lay animators. Croatia and Slovenia give their attention mainly to the formation of laity involved in parishes; in schools the formation is entrusted to the head teachers.

Some Provinces, with the expenditure of much energy, have set up higher Institutes where Salesians and laity can become qualified: Benediktbeuern (Austria, North and South Germany), the Faculty of Theology of České Budejovice (Czech Republic), the Salesian Higher Institute of Christian Education at Warsaw (Poland), the JABOK special school of social pedagogy and theology (Czech Republic), the Salesian Higher Institute of Economy and Commerce (Poland-Warsaw), Courses of Salesian formation (North Belgium).

In general the Region is outstanding for the notable number of qualified confreres who have not only a university degree but also a diploma in education.

4.3 Youth Ministry

In Europe there are two main challenges to pastoral work among young people: the dechristianization of a Europe closed in on itself, which has lost the thread of its Christian legacy and in which many young people are living with a great religious hunger but are often unclear and confused, and the challenge of the new kinds of material and spiritual poverty and of immigration which afflicts youngsters in particular and gives rise to a growing social exclusion.

Facing these challenges, youth ministry finds itself called upon in the first place to live more radically the commitment to evangelisation, as a response to the intensive search of young people for meaning, as a means of fostering the values of personal dignity and zest for life, and as an explicit way of making contact with the Lord Jesus and with faith journeys; and at the same time it must be inclusive, overcoming the different forms of youthful marginalisation, seeking ways of integration, of interreligious dialogue and of intercultural experience, of giving help to the family, etc.

Youth ministry in the Region is looking for practical ways to give a decisive response to these challenges. While traditional structures of encounter and education (schools, parishes etc.) are becoming ever more difficult to manage and are losing their impact – especially in the western part of the Region – new possibilities are arising for making contact with the young, for prompting them to positive objectives: youth groups and movements, houses of spirituality, projects for the accommodation and education of the very poor and of young immigrants in particular, welcoming environments, opportunities for young people to take the lead etc.

And so, for example:

In the Flemish part of Belgium youth pilgrimages are being made to the places of the origin of our charism, and there are spirituality weekends and weekend retreats for young people organised by the team of the *Oasecentrum* of Groot-Bijgaarden; in Malta there are the activities of ‘SPYS’ and the ‘Live-ins’ at Dingli.

Prominent in Poland are the new and promising youth movements: ‘*Pustynia Miast*’, ‘*Saruel*’, ‘*Oasi*’, ‘*Ministranti*’, *Silos*, with various pilgrimages and regular youth encounters such as ‘*Savonalia*’ (Kraków), and ‘*Pielgrzymka ministrantow*’ (Wrocław), Scouts, vocational camps etc.

In the CIMEC also there are interesting experiences: in Slovenia the Association ‘*Mladinski Ceh*’ and the ‘*Skala*’ project; in Croatia ‘*Don Boscofest*’, youth groups, and ‘*Campus ministry*’; in Slovakia associations of altar-servers, spiritual and educative projects, youth festivals, *Lumen* and the ‘*Domka*’ activities. In the Czech Republic there is the Salesian Youth Movement and that of Salesian clubs for young people. In Hungary there are well attended meetings at Peliföldszentereszt for workers and animators engaged in youth ministry.

In the German-speaking area there are the efforts of the “Don Bosco Haus” at Vienna together with ‘*Eurotreff*’ and ‘*Jupa - Tagung*’. In Germany there is also the significant activity of ‘*Aktionszentrum*’ at Benediktbeuern and the houses of spirituality at Calhorn and Jünkerath.

At Regional level there is not yet a project of collaboration involving all the Provinces, but there are many initiatives for the young organised at regional or interprovincial level. In recent years the “*Don Bosco Youth net*” has come into being; it is a structure coordinating various Salesian youth organizations of the European Provinces.

The various pastoral projects involve many lay people, teachers, animators and members of the Salesian Family; they testify to a significant extent the way the young are taking the lead.

I think that in the Region we must encourage and strengthen this development of youth movements which are so evidently lively, creative and attractive. Still true are Fr Vecchi’s words in a letter to the Provincials of the Western Area of the Northern European Region: “I think it is necessary in all the works to put the emphasis on the development of youth ministry with schemes of evangelisation for all, emphasising at the same time formational processes and a clear plan of

Christian spirituality for those who show themselves willing and able to take up more decisively the task of seeking out and following up vocations”.

This means creating the conviction that the SYM is a true Salesian work; it means drawing up a plan of pastoral action for families; it means closer collaboration with initiatives of the local Church, often not known to us; it means giving more importance to pastoral work among university students, and gradually reaching a closer coordination at interprovincial and regional level.

4.4 Pastoral work for vocations

Within youth ministry, pastoral work for vocations merits special attention. The Plan of animation and government of the Rector Major with his Council for the six-year period 2002–2008 for the Northern European Region had foreseen among other things the creation of a new “vocational culture”. This appeal has found an echo in every Province, and the method of implementing it has been studied by the Region’s Provincials. Here are some points that have emerged.

In the Atlantic and German-speaking Areas we have to admit that our works and structures, though of the highest educative quality and guided with great dedication and competence by confreres and laity, are proving to be environments ever less suitable for prompting vocations to the consecrated life. The few candidates we have seem rather to come from the “movements” with a strong identity and spiritual dimension (prayer groups, pilgrimages, etc.) or from outside our environments altogether.

In the Circumscription of the East, in Poland and in the CIMEC on the other hand, schools and parishes remain the primary settings where youngsters find their vocation, even though ever greater importance must be given to the aspect of Salesian spirituality in the groups and movements.

Many Provinces now have prayer groups or organise periods of adoration for vocations. It is clear that prayer creates a mentality, leads to a conversion, gives us courage in making proposals and sustaining them, but above all it emphasises the grace and primacy of God in our lives. And this in fact is the proper frame of reference. I would like to recall some significant initiatives in this regard.

Salesian Poland has witnessed a great development of the “Salesian youth movements” marked by a powerful spirituality and mission among the young, such as ‘*Saruel*’, ‘*Pustynia Miast*’ e ‘*SPE*’, from which many vocations come. The animation of our young confreres in parishes during youth retreat days or “vocation weeks” must not be overlooked. The Warsaw Province has begun this year a process of twelve steps for young people open to Christ’s call in their lives.

It is good also to see how in Slovakia pastoral work for vocations has become an integral part of pastoral work in movements and in youth centres.

The Czech Republic, one of the most secularised countries of Europe, and especially Bohemia, has had for years a suitable and well qualified model of aspirantate and prenovitiate at Sebranice.

Croatia successfully reopened two years ago the aspirantate at Podsused, near Zagreb. Slovenia too has reopened its prenovitiate.

In the Ukraine as a first step in vocational pastoral work in the territory, aspirantates have been opened for candidates of both Latin and Byzantine rites.

In Germany there are reception communities in operation at Benediktbeuern, Bamberg, Regensburg and Chemnitz.

In the light of these experiences I think it important to direct our attention to the following elements for an authentic pastoral work for vocations:

– *The presence and witness of the Salesian communities:*

- ensuring that the communities are visible, as regards their daily routine, their environment, and especially as regards brotherly relationships among the confreres;
 - that they are able to bear witness to the “sequela Christi” in poverty, chastity and obedience;
 - that they live the preventive system among the young, freeing themselves from other commitments that take them away from young people and obscure the significance of our life as consecrated people.
- *Programmes of spirituality and service that are decisive and of high quality:*
 - offering to youngsters who show willingness clear spiritual ways forward, and then setting up among them creative groups after the style of the old sodalities, which provide opportunities for the young to take the initiative in line with the principle “the first evangelisers of the young are the young people themselves”;
 - seeing to it that the youngsters are followed up personally.
 - Strengthening our work in the *university* field and collaborating more closely with the initiatives of the *local Church*.

4.5 Social communication

This sector of the Region is in a state of growth. Most of the Provinces have a provincial newsletter, while in others the letter of the Provincial serves the same purpose of information.

The Region publishes the Salesian Bulletin in 15 different editions, including a Russian edition that began in January 2004. There are 14 publishing houses, 17 bookshops and 7 printing establishments. The big publishing houses, like “Don Bosco Verlag” in southern Germany and “Portal” in the Czech Republic, specialise in pedagogical and psychological publications. The other houses concentrate rather on books supporting our mission among young people and families. Collaboration is being consolidated between some of these publishing houses, led by that of the Munich Province of Bavaria. A first modest step in collaboration has been the publication in seven languages of a small book for children “Rosie goes to Church”; it was printed in the Czech Republic. More recently a book on the Saints for children has been published, and a third is in preparation with the title: “With you, children, through the liturgical year”.

Of particular significance is the work of the publishing house of Gatchina in Russia, which is gradually finding its place in Russian society and the local Church.

At the urging especially of young confreres, deeply sensitive to the new technologies, websites have been developed for parishes, youth centres, schools and Provinces; this calls for education to a well-balanced use of this form of communication through information technology.

It is my hope that our work in this field may increase, and that social communication may become an important dimension of our mission. I think it of primary importance for formation, for animation of the Salesian Family and promotion of our charism, especially in Eastern countries, that as soon as possible we have available the fundamental texts of the charism and of our Salesian literature in the different languages. Greater attention needs to be given to our Salesian history over the last fifty years, which reveals how the Congregation, almost without contact with the Centre, has developed and discovered models of pastoral work to meet the circumstances. It is a history of which we can be proud, which we must never forget, and which has so much to teach us!

4.6 The Missions

Commitment of the Region to the missions has a long and wonderful history. The Region still has 340 missionaries working in different continents, including the 70 confreres who have the pastoral care of the “Catholic missions” in Germany.

In the eastern part of the Region special mention is due to the noble dedication of Poland, especially in Africa, and at the time of the creation of the Circumscription of the East; to the courageous commitment of Slovakia in Siberia and Azerbaijan, to the generous presence of Slovenia in Serbia and Montenegro, of Croatia in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and of the Czech Republic in Bulgaria.

Naturally in recent years, because of the decline in vocations and the conviction that Europe itself is becoming ever more a mission territory – especially as regards its western part – the number of missionaries going to other continents has fallen dramatically; but the Provinces remain open to this ecclesial dimension of our charism and, with great generosity, allow those confreres to depart who have asked to go to the missions. In this connection our thanks are due to all the Provinces of the Region and to the missionary confreres themselves.

It is also right to emphasise that all the Provinces take good care of missionary confreres returning home definitively to their Province of origin. A very valuable service is provided in this regard by the Mission Offices of the Region, by their missionary animation, the welcoming of confreres returning from the missions and the collecting of funds for the support and extension of the Salesian mission all over the world. And so in Austria we find the “Jugend Eine Welt”; in North Belgium “DMOS-COMIDE”; in Germany-Cologne the “Missionsprokur” and the “Jugend Dritte Welt” in Bonn; in Germany-Munich the “Missionprokur” at Beromünster in Switzerland; in Great Britain the “Missions Office”; in Ireland-Malta the “Missionary Office”. In Poland there is a Missions Office in Warsaw, and in Holland the Missionary office.

While expressing, in the name of the whole Congregation and of the missionaries in particular, our gratitude to all these Offices for helping us to fulfil the Salesian mission in the world, I invite all of them to seek a greater synergy in harmony with Provincial projects so as to give rise to even greater promotion in the Provinces themselves and to ever more effective help for the Salesian missions. This is the way to create in the confreres a mentality which looks on missionary promotion as an essential part of a Province’s mission, to make our confreres and lay collaborators aware of the fact that we are all called to be missionaries in our own countries, especially in the western world, and that we have to carry out an explicit evangelisation by trying to bring to maturity in young people the choice of a way of life, including the Salesian way.

4.7 The Salesian Family

The Salesian Family is well established in the Region and in some Provinces is undergoing a real revival. But for the future there is need for greater collaboration between its various branches, based on the conviction that Don Bosco wanted to start up a great spiritual and apostolic movement at the service of young people, the Salesian Family, and which having the Rector Major as its centre of unity, today still bears his charism and continues his mission. It is because of this understanding that I am insisting everywhere on the need to create a greater synergy, while respecting the identity of each Group, so that we can work together wherever we may be in the world.

In some Provinces there is a “Consulting group” for the Salesian Family, which has been found to be a suitable instrument for the animation of the whole Family.

The *FMA* have a consistent and important presence in the Region, with 166 communities. Collaboration is in general very positive. It may be useful to note that in Poland the person responsible for Salesian schools at national level is an *FMA*; in Ireland another *FMA* is responsible for the formation of lay personnel in the work of the two Congregations through the “Ethos group”, and in Northern Belgium the *FMA* take part in the government and animation of the Salesian schools. There are many fields too in the area of youth ministry and the use of spare time where there is excellent collaboration.

The *Cooperators Association* has a significant presence in the Region with 211 “Centres” and more than 5,500 members.¹³ We can never forget that in many Provinces of the Region the existence of our Congregation is due to the enthusiasm and intervention of the Cooperators with our father Don Bosco and his successors.

I would like especially, as a sign of gratitude, to point to the significance of the Cooperators in the CIMEC Area and in Poland during the Communist regime. Without their active presence the Congregation would not have survived.

It can be said that the Cooperators are very much linked with the Salesians and Salesian work. With them we truly live the family spirit and collaboration in the mission. A field still to be cultivated as a vocational resource for the Association include the Volunteers and the numerous leaders, adults and young people involved in the Salesian Youth Movement.

The life of the *Past Pupils’ Association* varies from one Province to another. In some it is well established with a well structured organisation (North Belgium, Great Britain, Germany-Munich, Malta), in others it is in process of starting up again (Poland, Croatia, Slovakia), and in still others (such as Austria, Germany-Cologne, Ireland, and the Czech Republic) there is animation but few links with the Federation.

Some *ADMA* groups exist in the Region (Great Britain, Poland-Piła, Slovakia, Slovenia, Czech Republic).

The *Don Bosco Volunteers (VDB)* are some 274 in number, with the majority of them in the Czech Republic which has 5 groups with 44 members, in Poland which has 50 members, and especially Slovakia with 15 groups and 150 members.

In Malta there is the *CDB* with 5 members.

A word needs to be said about the Michaelites, the “Congregation of St Michael the Archangel” (CSMA) founded, as I said when speaking about Salesian work in Poland, by Fr Bronislaw Markiewicz who will be beatified on 24 April. The Congregation has 320 confreres, of whom 217 are in Poland and 103 in other countries. They include 17 Brothers and 36 confreres in initial formation.

5. Future prospects

5.1 For all the Provinces of the Region

After covering the history of the different Provinces that make up the Region of Northern Europe, so different in their context, kind of work and available human resources, I feel the need to say something about future prospects, keeping in mind on the one hand the great commitment of the confreres, who live their vocation with exemplary dedication, enthusiasm and competence, and who believe in the young, in the prophetic value of education in Europe at the present time, and in the unique value of Don Bosco’s preventive system in evangelization. And remembering on the other hand the marked decline in number of vocations, at least in some areas, of vocational frailty, of the falling numbers of confreres working directly with young people, and consequently of our progressive separation from the world of youth.

¹³ In the Czech Republic there are 24 groups with 505 members and 129 aspirants, and some groups carry on their own work. In Croatia the Cooperators are increasing in number: there are 11 centres with 650 members and they have some excellent formation material available. In Slovakia there are 25 centres with 700 members; half the groups are in towns where the SDB are not present and, as elsewhere, some groups conduct their own oratory. Slovenia has 6 groups with 85 members, and Hungary has 8 groups. Poland has 67 centres with 2,063 members; the Association has its own structure and formation and is recognized as a “juridical body”.

With the GC25 we affirm that “in the midst of a pluralistic world, searching for new models for life and meaning, yet marked by dramatic situations of poverty and oppression, consecrated life today can be significant if, like the ‘house built on the rock’, it is founded on the unconditional commitment to Jesus Christ, anchored in the evangelical call to holiness, and placed on the frontiers of the Church’s mission” (GC25, 2).

How then do we see the Congregation’s future in this Region? What decisions must we take to continue to be this “Salesian European element” that has so much to offer to the Congregation?

I offer the Provincials, the members of Provincial Councils and all the confreres some practical guidelines to outline a present designed to have a future in the Region.

5.1.1 Live the zeal and enthusiasm of ‘Da mihi animas, caetera tolle’.

Since the future will depend on persons who are fired up, whose lives are inspired by the educative and evangelizing zeal of Don Bosco, we are called upon to rediscover the very roots of our charism, the joy and confidence of those early days, even in our own Province; to make a priority of evangelisation in the oratorian sense, offering to young people paths of faith, personal follow-up and schools of prayer; fostering a structured and unified youth ministry at local and provincial level by ensuring the presence of the dimension of pastoral work for vocations; giving the Salesian Youth Movement its proper place; taking up again reflection on the content of the GC23 and the manual of Youth Ministry, so as to ensure the genuine identity of our environments and proposals; to enliven various projects with a clear vocational aim and process; to give a missionary animation to our pastoral initiatives and processes and stimulate the mission “ad gentes” among both confreres and volunteers; to establish model parishes with a clear Salesian ethos and gradually abolish parishes ‘ad personam’; to remain open to the launching of new works or flexible initiatives of reduced dimensions; to approach with courage new areas of poverty – youngsters at risk, ethnic minorities, those far away from the Church; to promote the Salesian charism in the neighbourhood with the help of the means of social communication; to renew attention to our identity and to the promotion of the vocation of the Salesian Brother.

5.1.2 Create communities that prompt “family life”.

Youngsters have need of witnesses, of persons and groups whose lives manifest a new way of living, who clearly demonstrate in the ordinary circumstances of every day that living in love is worthwhile. For this reason we must accept the fact that the local community makes the primary contribution to ongoing formation. Hence the importance of properly appreciating the family moments foreseen by the Constitutions, for example, the house council, the assembly of the confreres, the community day, the monthly and quarterly retreats, the Good Night, the Rector’s conferences; taking particular care to follow up community Rectors; concentrating, in harmony with the Provincial Organisational Plan, on some works particularly significant from a Salesian standpoint and grouping together confreres available for the projects involved, thus creating strong and visible communities which will serve as a driving force for the development of a Salesian approach in all our works; developing a strategy that will enable us to close or to hand over our other works to lay people or to official bodies; properly organising the Salesian formation of lay people, where this is still lacking; strengthening the conviction that we are the “animating nucleus” of a wide movement based on the Salesian Family and on all the collaborators who share in the Salesian mission.

5.1.3 Renew and deepen our spiritual life.

Since the education and evangelization of young people in Europe at the present day calls for Salesians marked by an intense life of the spirit, who can speak of God to the young and bring him to them, we must put at the centre of our personal and community life Christ, the life of prayer and sacramental life; we must organise community life against the background of the centrality of this fundamental aspect; we must make good use of the suggestions given us by the Constitutions in this regard, living tranquilly in obedience, chastity and poverty; consolidating or intensifying our moments of prayer for vocations in every community. A support for the Region can come from Benediktbeuern if we make of it a centre of formation and of Salesian spirituality, and as a “Forum” for dialogue between the two lungs of Christian Europe.

5.2 For the different parts of the Region

5.2.1 Atlantic, German-speaking and CIMEC areas

This group of Provinces faces the challenges of a serious promotion of Salesian vocations; of fostering greater interprovincial collaboration in the field of initial and ongoing formation, in the field of youth ministry, in that of social communication, and with regard to schools.

5.2.2 Area of the Polish Provincial Conference

This group of Provinces has the task of integrating the Congregation’s “Ratio Fundamentalis” into the curriculum of formation of the confreres, so as to ensure the specific aspects of Salesian formation; of beginning a study on the possible restructuring of the formation houses; of continuing the strengthening of the structures of animation and government of the Conference of Polish Provinces; of building up the national centre of youth pastoral work; of promoting in the local communities the different groups forming part of the Salesian Youth Movement; of taking up again the initiative suggested by Fr Vecchi in 1999 to “*set up an interprovincial catechetical centre and a central national publishing centre open also to educative and cultural initiatives. This will enable you to dialogue with culture and to intervene in the world of youth with incentives for the confreres and lay people working with them*”; of ensuring that our schools are seedbeds of the Salesian spirit, equipping them with the means suitable for this purpose; of establishing for the schools consistent Salesian communities who will be the “animating nuclei of the work” by creating teams for pastoral work, ensuring the presence of the Rector of the community in the government of the school and of the animating presence of Salesians among the pupils; of being open to the poor in greatest need and following up the teaching of catechism; and of developing the “Salesian Scholastic Centre” and furnishing it with offices for animation and government.

5.2.3 The Circumscription of the East

With the aim of fostering the development of the work in the different countries of the Circumscription, the General Council – in the last plenary session – studied and approved proposals and the accompanying motivations put to them by the Provincial and his council after the recent Provincial Chapter.

As a result it was decided to detach the works and confreres of Lithuania from the Special Circumscription and assign them to the Milan Province.

In the Ukraine, on the other hand, a Delegation of the Byzantine-Ukrainian Rite has been set up within the main Circumscription; it is made up of confreres of oriental rite.

Conclusion

I cannot conclude the presentation of this Northern European Region without referring with joy to the Salesian holiness by which it is characterized. It is in fact a Region particularly rich in witnesses who have been able to testify to their hope, the majority of them in times of war and persecution; they have passed on their faith and the charism of Don Bosco, and rendered it fruitful by their blood.

Those *Beatified* include Fr Józef Kowalski and the five young oratorians of Poznan: Edward Klinik, Franciszek Kęsy, Jarogniew Wojciechowski, Czesław Józwiak, Edward Kazimierski, who were beatified at Warsaw on 13 June 1999; and Fr August Czartoryski, beatified at Rome on 25 April 2004.

Those declared *Venerable* include Fr Rudolf Komorek, of Polish origin and a missionary in Brazil who died there at the age of 59.

And among the *Servants of God*, we can list Sister Laura Meozzi (FMA), who worked in Poland from 1921 till her death thirty years later; Cardinal August Hlond, founder of the Congregation of Christ the King; Fr Ignazio Stuchly, of the Czech Republic; Fr Jan Świerc, Fr Ignacy Antoniowicz, Fr Ignacy Dobiasz, Fr Karol Golda, Fr Franciszek Harazim, Fr Ludwik Mroczek, Fr Włodzimierz Szembek, Fr Kazimierz Wojciechowski, all members of the Krakow Province martyred in the Auschwitz concentration camp (1941-42); Fr Franciszek Miśka (Poland-Pila), martyred in the concentration camp at Dachau, 30 May 1942; Fr Alois Mertens (North Belgium); Fr Jose Vandor (Hungary), sent to Cuba as a missionary in 1936 – he remained there until his death.

And then there is a whole array of *martyrs* who deserve to be remembered (even though no canonical process has yet been started for them): Cl. Ernest Anžel, Bro. Jože Brancelj, Bro. Jože Bregar, Bro. Anton Hočevar, Cl. Franc Hrustelj, Bro. Janez Jenko, Cl. Anton Kastelic, Bro. Anton Kovač, Cl. Janez Krainc, Bro. Anton Lavrih, don Melhior Lilija, Bro. Franc Lindič, Cl. Stefan Lopert, Bro. Janez Lotrič, Cl. Franc Miklič, Cl. Jože Pasič, Cl. Stanko Pungeršek, Bro. Alojzij Rakar, Bro. Marja Rom, Bro. France Stopar, Cl. Anton Segula, Cl. Jože Serjak, Cl. Bernard Stuhec, Cl. Dominik Tiselj, Cl. Mirko Tratnik, Cl. Stanko Tratnik. All these were members of the Slovenian Province who, after the Nazi occupation during the second world war, were compelled to cease their practical training, study of theology and situation as Brothers and young priests to be enrolled in the armed forces. After the agreement with Tito had been made, the “*domobranci*”, that is all those who had taken refuge with the Anglo-Americans were sent back to Yugoslavia, where nearly all of them were killed and buried in the karstic trenches of Kočevje or the coal mines of Hrastnik and Lasko.

A similar fate befell Fr Giovanni Matkowics, from Hungary, killed near Yan Fa in China 19 May 1945; Fr Jan Dolata, from Poland, killed by the Soviets in 1945; Fr Ludwik Cienciąła, from Poland, killed 30 May 1945; Fr Vojtich Basovnik, from the Czech Republic, died 12 December 1955; Fr Juozapas Gustas, from Lithuania, assassinated in 1958 at Krasnojarsk (Siberia).

Among other heroic figures are Cardinal Stephan Trochta of the Czech Republic, arrested by the Gestapo and deported to Mauthausen and Dachau. In 1947 he was appointed Bishop of Litoměřice by Pius XII and harshly persecuted by the Communist regime between 1948 and 1968. In 1969 he was named Cardinal “*in pectore*”, an appointment made known only on 5 March 1973, one year before his death.

The Servant of God Jan Leopold Tyranowski, a Polish layman, was an animator and organiser of the religious life of youngsters in the Salesian parish of Kraków-Dębniki, especially after the Salesians had been arrested on 23 May 1941. His work was also of vocational significance, because from the “Living Rosary” Circle some future Salesians emerged, and his mother Apolonia Hrobak

was a Salesian Cooperator. He can be considered the first spiritual director of a certain workman at Solvay, Karol Wojtyła, now Pope John Paul II.¹⁴

Finally Bl. Władysław Bądziński and Bl. Wojciech Nierychlewski were both members of the Congregation of St Michael the Archangel (Michaelites), Polish martyrs of the second world war and beatified at Warsaw on 13 June 1999.

To the intercession of all of these who have shared the passion, death and resurrection of Christ I entrust this Region, so rich in Salesian holiness, and all the Congregation. May they obtain for us the grace to be credible, eloquent and effective witnesses to the young people of today's Europe who, like the man from Macedonia to Paul, call to us: "*Come over to Macedonia and help us*".

With this letter I end the presentation of the three Regions of Salesian Europe. I think it opportune to conclude by renewing the great convictions I presented to the European Provincials at the end of the meeting we had from 1 to 5 December last year.

- Europe is the right place for Salesians because in it the young people, especially those most at risk, need the charisma of Don Bosco.
- The young are our *raison d'être*, because they were given us as our vocation and mission, and we have great need of them as they too have of us.
- Education is the most precious gift we can offer them for their integral development, even to the extent of fullness in God, and is our contribution to the leavening of European culture at the present day.
- Our task is to speak of God to the young and bring Him to them as He has been revealed in Christ Jesus, the supreme manifestation of the mystery of God and Man, through evangelisation.
- The Oratory is the homeland of the Salesian charism; more than a structure it is a kind of relationship between educators and youngsters.

We know the process will be a long one, but in what has been already achieved we can see the seeds of the future, and so we commit ourselves during the coming years to the giving of a new face to Salesian work in Europe.

We want to overcome our fears and resistance by renewing our zeal for God lived in enthusiasm for the young, and giving new life to Don Bosco, to his mind and heart, to his charism and apostolic creativity.

May Mary, Mother of the Church and of our faith, educate us in it and make us zealous and convinced witnesses.

With every best wish for a happy Easter,

Fr Pascual Chávez V.

¹⁴ Cf John Paul II "Gift and mystery" p. 32.