

HOMILY AT THE MASS AT COLLE DON BOSCO
His Eminence Card. Severino Poletto
23rd February 2014

Preface

I would like to thank the Rector Major and his collaborators for the invitation to preside at this Mass at the beginning of your 27th General Chapter. It is a pleasing opportunity for me to pray for you and with you and to offer you some reflections from my heart, both in meditating on the word of God that has just been proclaimed or going back over my memory of the very many occasions I have had to get to know your Congregation especially over the years I have been a bishop and in a very particular way during my ministry as archbishop of Turin, Don Bosco's diocese and the cradle of your religious family.

So today, celebrating this Mass right where Don Bosco was born, you have a particular reason for asking yourselves about your fidelity to his charism and his plan for your life and pastoral activity.

Herewith are some points I would like to invite you to reflect on so you can tackle the work of the Chapter with a genuinely supernatural outlook, and so that in each one's conscience these questions might take priority: what is the Lord saying or what would Don Bosco himself think about the quality of pastoral and spiritual life of today's Salesians, and what are the Church and the world expecting of our great religious family?

1. Back to the roots

We are approaching celebrations for the bicentenary of Don Bosco's birth. So beginning your General Chapter in the place where Don Bosco was born, was educated in a solid Christian faith, especially by Mama Margaret, has symbolic value: indeed it expresses the need to go back to the roots and seriously question yourselves on "*the extent to which*" and "*how*", two hundred years later, you are continuing his charism, although in different cultural and social circumstances. It seems to me that the words the Lord addresses to us through the Prophet Isaiah are appropriate for this occasion: "*Listen to me, you who pursue integrity, who seek the Lord: consider the rock you were hewn from, the quarry from which you were cut*" (Is 51:1). And paraphrasing a verse from Ps. 87, here you could say with gratitude to the Lord and to Don Bosco: "Since all were born here" (Cf Ps. 87:4).

Starting afresh again from here keeps the flame of Don Bosco's apostolic zeal alive, so well expressed in his "*da mihi animas, cetera tolle*", which in practice extends to everyone to whom your apostolate is addressed, but in a very special way it refers to the young, who for your Founder were the exclusive field of his educational work and still today, especially today, must be for you too the privileged object of your apostolic task in the Church and the world.

Today's young people are such a variegated universe needing preparation, dedication without sparing energy and needing so much patience in awaiting the results of your educational work. The youth problem is a real challenge for everyone because the Gospel value we proclaim struggle to reach the hearts of the young, and our proposals don't seem to impact much on their hearts. This also is the case for those frequenting our oratories and educational settings, because there is a widespread drift towards a worldly mentality and behaviours that can wash over even the ones we think are amongst the best. This is not a pessimistic picture but a realistic one, because it is often the case that we note that

the young people who frequent our places are sometimes far from practising the moral values of Catholic teaching in their personal lives.

And here, the insight of Don Bosco's educational strategy emerges for all its value, the strategy expressed in the well-known *preventive system* where the three key words "*reason, religion and loving kindness*" need to find right understanding and effective realisation. Reason will lead young people to understanding the motivations which lie at the basis of their true human development, while religious values ought not be presented solely as a set of moral rules but especially as a journey of faith which encounters a real person, Jesus Christ, the only one who truly loves them to the point where he gave his life to demonstrate the extent of his love. This message needs to be presented in a style that is not one of imposition, but of love: the young person should perceive that our greatest joy comes from spending all our energies so that he or she can be happy and fulfilled as a human being and a Christian.

In order to accompany young people on this educational journey we must not overlook offering them some concrete proposals: having a spiritual guide who becomes a real father for the soul, faithfully practising daily personal prayer and especially by educating them to a brief but serious meditation on the Word of God, and finally helping them realise their duty of dealing with the Lord and their spiritual director so they can direct themselves responsibly towards a plan of life that is sincere and a free response to what the Lord expects of them.

2. Called to be a living presence in the Church and the world

Faced with the challenges that come from the world and especially from the young, so different today than they were in the past, we have a duty to prepare them by listening to the reminder from the Word of God just proclaimed in this celebration and which must resound in the General Chapter as a new call for each of you and for the entire Congregation. In the text from Leviticus (19:1), the first Reading, the Lord warns us: "*Be holy, as I the Lord your God am holy*". Here is the real secret to being purposeful and credible. Whoever we encounter should perceive with evident clarity that we are "*men of God*". Holiness is living in harmony of ideas and communion of life with the Lord. Whoever has God in his heart cannot exempt himself from letting this beloved and well-guarded treasure to shine through. We should not presume to think we have arrived at the goal of holiness, but every day we should recommence our commitment to be "*seekers after God*" and then communicate to others, especially the young, his infinite and personal love.

Saint Paul tells us in the second Reading (1 Cor 3:16-23) that "*we are temples of God and the Spirit of God dwells in us. If someone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him, because the temple of God is sacred and you are that temple*".

These are the primary objectives of a Chapter such as this one. On the one hand the Gospel we have listened to is inviting us to a leap of quality in our spiritual life. Your Rector Major, in the preparatory document for the General Chapter (p.19) writes: "*The affirmation of the Absolute nature of God requires from us a prophetic leap*". Only this will allow us to overcome the danger of the mediocrity that Jesus asks us to distance ourselves from, as we heard in the Gospel: "*Have you understood what I said...But I say to you*". This "*but I say to you*" which is the goal of a proper spiritual life, because all the "*sermon on the mount*" is Jesus' appeal to not be content with half measures but to aim high, to the peak of perfection. We heard these words: "*Be perfect then as your heavenly Father is perfect*". So we are all reminded of the duty to raise the level of the consecrated quality of our lives. What can most threaten a serious ideal of holiness is "*the idolatry of activism*" as your Rector Major also says so well. Throwing ourselves excessively into work, even ministry,

can give us the illusion that salvation is our work and we can believe we are good Salesians more for what we do than who we are. The primacy of God in fidelity to prayer and in a constant nurturing of our interior life is the guarantee that being consumed by pastoral tasks will be accompanied by right intention, and this makes us Salesians who bring Jesus Christ and not ourselves and our qualities, to the many people who, despite how it looks to the contrary, still have a profound nostalgia for God.

3. My prayer for you

You will deal with many issues in the great work that you will do over the weeks of this Chapter. I want to express three priorities that I will keep in my prayer for you during the Chapter:

a) I ask the Lord to develop in all of you a sense of belonging to the Salesian Family. This means being seriously intent on the important value of “fraternity” be it in small or large communities, in the whole Congregation. Whenever we are caught up in personal projects or silly self-affirmations we obscure our charism and Don Bosco cannot bless our efforts from heaven.

b) I also pray that you and your religious family may have an ever greater capacity to go out from your enclosures and bear in mind that if Don Bosco has sent you into the world then the whole world is your field of action. A sense of mission, the courage to be where there is need of the Gospel, openness to everyone is so necessary even here in the ancient traditional Catholic settings, and do not content yourselves with having many groups of youngsters around you, while forgetting the very many others far from us and as a consequence no longer feeling they belong in the Church... this is what we need to have in mind in our pastoral planning today, as Pope Francis reminds us. He often speaks of the duty to be out on the periphery, not only where there is material poverty, but especially where there is great spiritual poverty.

c) Finally let me assure you of a special prayer intention that the Lord may enlighten you in the choices you have to make of a new Rector Major and his closest collaborators. First of all however I would like to express my personal gratitude to Fr Pascual Chávez Villanueva both for the mutual friendship we have nurtured and for how he has lead you over these twelve years with great wisdom and a heart truly inspired by God. He has been a living representation of the charism and of Don Bosco’s spiritual fundamentals. Now in view of the new elections, you need dutiful discernment in harmony with the prayer that the disciples in the Upper Room, led by Peter, did before adding Matthias to the Apostolic College: “*Lord, show us which of these two you have chosen*”(Acts 1:24). So it is not just letting ourselves be guided by human motivations but by supernatural criteria.

Conclusion

Let us entrust this hard work to the special protection of the Help of Christians so that all may take place in a climate of prayer and fellowship, and so that at the end each of you can say that you have accepted the invitation Mary addressed to the servants at Cana in Galilee at the wedding feast where Christ worked his first miracle: “*Do what Jesus tells you*” (Jn 2:5).

Finally, we also need to remind ourselves of this warning from Jesus, where he makes a distinction between what has been given at a personal level and what has been entrusted at a community level. You re entrusted with all the Salesians around the world. Therefore Jesus invites you to recall the great responsibility you have in these words: “*When a man*

has had a great deal given him, a great deal will be demanded of him; when a man has had a great deal given him on trust, even more will be expected of him". (Lk 12:48).
May the Lord bless the work you have begun and bring it to positive fulfilment!