

Good night of the Provincial of VIE
“The Salesians in Vietnam: growth and challenges”
10 April 2014

On behalf of all Salesians in the Province of Vietnam-Mongolia, I would like to greet the Superiors and members of the General Chapter 27. In this good night, I would like to share with you the situation of the Salesians in the Province. I want to tell you (1) about the historical background, (2) the growth of our province and (3) some challenges to our mission to the youth of today in VN.

I. A socio-historical background: Struggle for survival and continuation of Salesian mission

1. At the end of the Vietnam War 1975, all of our foreign missionaries were expelled. The very young Salesians in Vietnam were likened to orphans! It seemed that everything was upside down! Together with the local Church, Salesian communities suffered many trials. Some were put in jail, others went home; others tried to adapt to the new socio-political situation which was very anti-religious. They joined in the labor services or military services or performed whatever necessary for the survival.

2. To get through this period of trial, our Salesians had to adopt to themselves a prudent strategy which is very similar to that of the communists: "To be with people; where people are, there the party lives". The Salesians took a crucial deliberation: to be one with the working class and ordinary men and women. Hence, our Salesians accepted to work in parochial settings. Beside pastoral works, they labored in the field as farmers, or in state-run corporatives, quite a few times with empty stomach.

This period seemed to be that of darkness when the seeds were sown under the soil, waiting for the right time to grow. A precious experience we got from this period, however: *to understand and impact the people, it is necessary to be with them, to share their burden of life and to learn from their own way of life.*

II- Growth

1. In 1986, the Salesians in Vietnam saw some light at the end of the tunnel. They immediately paid attention to the formation of young Salesians. They re-started the process of formation which was interrupted for a decade. Those who finished their specific formation could be ordained "unofficially", i.e. without the formal permission of the Government, though some risks or troubles could occur to the ordained ones. In fact, it did for some of us.

2. By 1995, the Province discussed intensely and made some very important deliberations: (1) to re-start the vocation ministry with the recruitment of candidates in view and to give them a formation as good as possible. For the Province, that was the key for growth. No provincial chapter passed without vocation ministry and formation in agenda. Living under a dictatorial regime, we learned a precious lesson: person is more valuable than structures or institutes! Many of our past schools and institutes were confiscated by the government, sometimes without any notice. Instead, if there are persons, activities will be re-launched, new structures or institutes set up. (2) to be actively present to the young. Each community should welcome them, offering them a good environment to play, to learn and to pray. (3) to instill the spirit of Don Bosco into popular piety with some strong biblical dimension; (4) to make Don Bosco known to the youths and the people. Quite a lot of booklets about Don Bosco and his spirit were translated to hand out to the young and working-class people in various ways; (5) to render pastoral services to families and the

young. For the Salesians, families are the seed-beds of vocations. At the same time, some confreres courageously initiated certain works for college students, for example, opening hostels to provide the latter with good accommodation and safe and good environment for studies and practices of piety. A number of lay men and women collaborated with these initiatives. In fact, the Province successfully recruited many consecrated vocations among college students living in Salesian hostels.

3. The celebration of 50th anniversary of Salesian presence in Vietnam in 2002 really marked a turning point. The ecclesial authorities highly appreciated the Salesian contribution to the Church in Vietnam. The Government acknowledged with some favor the presence of Salesians. They appraised our good will in preparing the young for a better society. Visibly, the coming of Don Bosco's casket to the country seemed a miracle as it caused enormously spiritual and educational impact upon the local church and the society.

4. Besides, in 1996, the first two Vietnamese Salesians were sent out as *ad gentes* missionaries. From then on, a missionary fire has been kindled. The young Salesians have felt ready to the needs of the Congregation and the Universal Church. Some failures and mistakes took place anyway. The Province has made its strong commitment, however, to prepare the young Salesians as best as possible for the *ad gentes* missions.

5. Some lessons have been learned from this history of the Province:

* *Priority must be granted to persons rather than to Institutes or constructions or activities.* Therefore, it recognizes that investment in formation is never sufficient!

* *Inculturation of Don Bosco's charism* into the working class and the poor youth emerges as a decisive factor for Salesian presence in a particular area. The influence of Don Bosco does not depend on large institutes but in the extent of Don Bosco's charism and spirituality to be incarnated into the mind-set of the people and their way of educating their children. Otherwise, it will be only superficial success! The Church tells us to implement the triple dialogue: with the poor, with local religions and with cultures.

III. Challenges

1. The Province *has to meet the need for formation guides.* It is an urgent need as formation cannot be done well without the accompaniment of the guides who are experienced and qualified, capable to enter dialogue with the candidates and with the signs of the time.

2. Generally speaking, *the intellectual and academic level of the young is still low.* The system of communist education promotes a passive rather than critical way of learning. How to respond to this challenge seems beyond the capacity of the formation teams in formation houses!

3. Also, *basic human formation seems missing* in the present situation. Practical atheism, consumerism and laxism have devastated many traditionally cultural values of Vietnam. Education is nothing less than preparation for job. The hierarchy of values has been turned upside down. That is why Vietnam nowadays seems more chaotic. Without the basic human foundation, the change of Vietnam is very superficial.

4. To survive in a country, economically poor but 'rich' in corruption, self-defensive lifestyle has reigned for years. Lies and irresponsibilities have been accepted as something "normal".

Also, so far, the Vietnamese Catholics have paid high respect to the clergy. For a number of young people, to become a priest is a visible goal which can bring about reputation to their "extended family". Moreover, amid the sea of poverty, priesthood and religious life could be seen as a mean to reach a comfortable and easy life: good education, high qualification and respect, even wealth. Not a few candidates enter religious life without right intention or concern of the charism and mission of the

congregation. They want to enter any religious Institutes or Orders. That' all. Therefore, you can imagine, how hard the discernment will be when young candidates have breathed in such an atmosphere. For us, *a serious process of vocation discernment* is a must, a necessity. We are doing our best to respond to this challenge.

For conclusion, let me say this: After a long period under the communist regime, together with a big temptation from current secularism, the Salesians in Vietnam still experience the willingness to *live the primacy to the Gospel as the crucial challenge*. Their whole future and splendor decisively depends on it.

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