

27th General Chapter's message to Salesians

Dear confreres,

All of us who have taken part in the 27th General Chapter wish to share with you the extraordinary experience we have had over these months, called to Rome in the Lord's name and sustained by the power of His Spirit. For each one of us the Chapter has been an event of grace to which we wish to testify when we return home. When we take up our tasks and concerns once more we would like to tell you that "What marvels indeed he did for us and how overjoyed we were!" (Ps 125/126:3).

IN THE BEGINNING THERE WAS VALDOCCO

We commenced our journey in the Salesian Holy Land, at Valdocco, a location for the Gospel and daily miracles. We went there as people who are tracing a river back to its source. Our thirst was quenched and the fresh water of our origins gave us refreshment. Our father's story is an ever new invitation. We sought inspiration from his life and and what he offers so we could revive his charism today. Rediscovering Don Bosco has helped our evangelical vocation to take root more deeply and has revived the reasons for giving ourselves for the Kingdom as he gave himself, on behalf of the poorest of the young. Being "witnesses to the radical approach of the Gospel" is precisely the invitation of the General Chapter, and what we are passing on to you.

GOD GIFTED US WITH A FATHER

When we came back to Rome we began our work of demanding reflections and decisions. Fraternal spirit and common seeking made it possible for us to weave warm and sincere relationships amongst us immediately. These gave us a first-hand experience of multicultural abundance and the prophecy of fraternity during the days of the Chapter.

God then gifted us with a father. While we express our gratitude for the outstanding and fruitful ministry of Fr Pascual Chávez Villanueva, we feel that the election of Fr Ángel Fernández Artime as Rector Major and tenth Successor of Don Bosco was a gift of Providence for us all, for the entire Salesian Family and for the young. His open and sincere smile, his simplicity, his great humanity and spontaneous rapport with each of the confreres immediately let us see the face of the promised father in him: "A new Rector Major will be chosen who will take care of you and your eternal salvation. Listen to him, love him, obey him, pray for him..." (Don Bosco). Thank you, Fr Ángel, for your heart of the good shepherd and for your generosity.

FRANCIS FASCINATED US

A very special and intense occasion was our meeting with Pope Francis. He made us welcome and in blessing us he blessed each one of you and the young people the Lord has entrusted to us. His word, which was precise and trenchant, touched our hearts. He reminded us that must be, like Don Bosco, men of the Gospel who live our daily lives simply and generously, austerely and freely. He reminded us that our father taught us to love the young with the loving kindness that is proper to the Preventive System and that makes God's tenderness for the weakest of his children present.

He asked us insistently to go out to the peripheries where the young dwell and where we see their various forms of poverty more acutely. He begged us to spare no effort in assigning our best individuals to the poorest, those who have no prospects and no future. Really, Pope Francis set fire to our Salesian hearts. His embrace was an expression of sincere affection for Don Bosco's sons and as he took our hands in his it renewed the filial devotion to Peter's Successor that Don Bosco always wanted his Salesians to have. The Holy Father's message will remain in our hearts and will be a programme for all of us to follow.

GOING AGAINST THE FLOW, IN HOPE

The theme of our General Chapter, the Gospel's radical approach, has aroused deep reflection, stimulating us to conversion. What we have experienced over these weeks is already in anticipation of the journey we wish to undertake with all of you and with our educative and pastoral communities. We have dreamed of the future and now we commit ourselves to making it a reality.

United with the vine like new branches (cf. Jn 10:1-10), we Salesians dream of consecrated life which is able to question the culture and social reality in which we live when we live it with profoundly evangelical attitudes,. For our communities we want a simple lifestyle, one marked by the joy of the Gospel and passion for the Kingdom. We want to live as men who are marked by a strong experience of God, with their feet on the ground, able to give reason for the hope we bear in our hearts, our life completely given over, authentic, whole. We are committed to seeking out the peripheries and deserts where the most abandoned young people are.

We will be significant today if we go against the flow. When we are surrounded by individualism, then fellowship, fraternity becomes a credible alternative. We take up the challenge of building communities in which we learn to move from "I" to "we", always putting our brother's good before our own. We must be able to open up room for acceptance and dialogue which can help heal wounds through mature and regenerating relationships. We need to be decisively committed to humanising our common life so we overcome loneliness and can multiply mercy. Taking the risk of pardon and peace makes our way of living credible in our world; makes our proclamation more clearly evangelical. For Francis, this is the pastoral conversion of mercy and tenderness.

REFOCUSED

Aware of the new ecclesial moment we are living through, we are convinced that our consecrated life is a cry against selfishness and self-reference: it is about meeting the needs of others and beginning from our poor and supportive lifestyle. Our cloister is the world of the young who are in difficulty and our prayer is our hands raised up and our action in giving dignity back to those who are most excluded. This is why we cannot spare our energy, nor do we have any more time for "our things", or to close ourselves within our personal interests. We are faced with an exodus which will help us reach another land, one promised a thousand times over: the land of the most abandoned and poorest. As Salesians we will find our Tabor there.

Francis invited us to place ourselves at the frontiers, on the margins, on the peripheries of the world, in the existential deserts where there are many like sheep without a shepherd and who have nothing to eat (cf. Mt 9:36). This is the key to interpretation which the Pope offers us to refocus ourselves: to seek other vistas offering us different points of view and which help us interpret reality beyond ourselves. This is the challenge for religious life today: thinking and living in a way that refocuses our way of looking at reality where we are too certain of ourselves, too settled in guaranteed works, too occupied with structured and satisfying work. When we think of the renewal of our Congregation, do we not have here a criterion of significance that can help us offer new horizons to our structures? It is not so easy to refocus, but it is urgent to do so if we want to continue to be faithful to God's call.

Dear confreres,

Over these days we have felt the breath of the Spirit "making all things new" (Ap 21:5). This is the moment to go to work on the guidelines for the way ahead which our General Chapter is proposing to us. Moved by the power of the Holy Spirit and enlightened by Him, we want to "put out into the deep" (Lk 5:4), navigate towards deeper waters in our consecrated life and mission to the young and ordinary people. We sense the urgency of boldly proclaiming the liberating Gospel of Jesus Christ, good news for the little ones and the poor. And if, seeing the dedication of our life, and our joy, someone should ask: "Why are you doing this?" we will answer in all freedom that God fills our life and his great love is challenging us so that the young "may have life and have it to the full." (Jn 10:10).