**A SIGNIFICANT INITIATIVE**

**THE SALESIAN BIBLICAL ASSOCIATION (ABS)**

*Ivo Coelho*

*General Councillor for Formation*

[AGC 424, January-June 2017, pp. 108-112]

During the recent seventh world convention of the Salesian Biblical Association (ABS), held at Ratisbonne, Jerusalem, 21-27 August 2016, I was impressed by the biblical competence of the participants, but even more by their clear Salesian identity and desire to collaborate in the mission of don Bosco. This, I think, is something very precious, because it is part of the *raison d’être* of this association, and it made me think that the ABS is an initiative that deserves to be better known, appreciated and promoted within the congregation.

The ABS was born in Cremisan in 1982, in response to the need felt to work out a Salesian response to the observation of *Dei Verbum*, that the goal and result of scientific study of the Bible is pastoral action.[[1]](#footnote-1) The Cremisan meeting itself – the first world convention of Salesian biblists – was convoked at the initiative of Fr Egidio Viganò, Rector Major. Already in this meeting, the statutes of the association were drawn up; they were approved *ad experimentum* by Fr Viganò on 19 March 1983, and definitively on 8 December 1989, with a revision being approved by Fr Pascual Chávez on 6 May 2005.

The objectives of the association are as follows:

1. Updating of and collaboration among the members, whether professors or pastoral agents involved in catechesis and/or biblical apostolate.
2. Promotion of biblical animation in the Congregation and sharing of experiences within the Salesian Family.
3. Biblical service in the Church according to the Salesian charism.

Since 1982, the ABS has met every five years: at Frascati and Turin in 1998, with the participation of Fr. Viganò and Cardinal Antonio M. Javierre, SDB; at Tlaquepaque, Mexico in 1993; at Cremisan, 1999; at Krakow in December-January 2005; and at Ratisbonne, Jerusalem in 2011 and in 2016. The conventions are centred around basic aspects of the Salesian charism or else on topics of contemporary interest in the church. Since the fourth convention the ABS has opened its doors to other members of the Salesian Family. Since 1989, the association has also been a member of the Catholic Biblical Federation.

Besides the annual *Bolletino di collegamento* containing information about the biblical activities of the members, new initiatives, and publications, the Acts of the various conventions have also been published: *Parola di Dio e carisma salesiano* (1989);[[2]](#footnote-2) *Parola di Dio e evangelizzazione dei giovani.* (1994);[[3]](#footnote-3) *Parola di Dio e spirito salesiano* (1996);[[4]](#footnote-4) *La tua parola è luce sul mio cammino* (2000);[[5]](#footnote-5) *Ripartire da Cristo, Parola di Dio* (2005);[[6]](#footnote-6) *Atti del VI Convegno Mondiale dell’ABS* (2011).[[7]](#footnote-7)

In addition, the association also offered reflections to the members of GC26 under the title *Passione apostolica. “Da mihi animas”* (2008),[[8]](#footnote-8) and another to GC27, entitled *Testimoni della radicalità evangelica. Una riflessione biblica y salesiana* (2014),[[9]](#footnote-9) also available in Italian and English. In the bicentenary of Don Bosco’s birth, the ABS published another volume of *lectio divina*: *Luz para mis pasos. Lectio divina sobre las citas bíblicas de las Constituciones SDB* (2016), also available in Italian and English.[[10]](#footnote-10)

It is right to acknowledge also the contributions of many members of the ABS in different areas of the congregation and of the church: study trips in the Holy Land organized by the Department of Youth Ministry and Catechetics of the UPS, involving Maria Cimosa, Corrado Pastore, Xavier Matoses and others; archaeological excavations carried out by Andrzej Strus at the tomb of St Stephen at Beitgemal; Jozef Heriban’s pioneering efforts to offer biblical resources in the Slovakian language; the work of Carlo Buzzetti in the field of inter-confessional translations of the Bible; the researches of Mario Cimosa on the Septuagint; the contributions of Cesare Bissoli in the area of the Biblical Apostolate of the CEI; Giorgio Zevini’s zealous diffusion of *lectio divina*; Frank Moloney’s international reputation as an exegete, and his stint as Dean of the Faculty of Theology at the Catholic University of Washington; Gianni Barbiero’s long years of teaching at the Biblicum in Rome; the work of Francesco Mosetto in the Associazione Biblica Italiana, of which he was president; and the scholarly labours and publications of Juan José Bartolomé.

*In the near future, the association would like to offer Salesians a two-week retreat-cum-pilgrimage to the Holy Land in Italian, Spanish and English, as well as a two-week pilgrimage for youth animators from the Italian-speaking area. I hope there will be a good response to these initiatives.*

As I write about the ABS, I find it opportune to make a few general considerations about the place of the Word of God in Salesian life

Let me begin by recalling that the Word of God is “the first source of all Christian spirituality.”[[11]](#footnote-11) I feel the need to say this clearly in the light of a temptation with which I am all too familiar, to downplay the importance of the Word in favour of a spiritualty or mysticism that goes “beyond the Word.” I have always felt that it was in the light of this pervasive New Age influence that John Paul II invited the whole church to a rediscovery of the ancient practice of *lectio divina*,[[12]](#footnote-12) and that GC25 proposed it as a practice for Salesians and for young people.[[13]](#footnote-13)

It is amazing to see the importance that Don Bosco gave to the Word, in a context that was quite different from our own post-conciliar one. He described the Christian as “one who is guided by the divine Word,”[[14]](#footnote-14) and the *Companion of Youth* as a book of devotions adapted to the times and to young people, providing religious ideas “based on the Bible.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

Don Bosco’s successors have followed his example. Fr Paolo Albera called the Bible “the *liber sacerdotalis* par excellence,” and asked that the study of the Bible “be given precedence over every other study.”[[16]](#footnote-16) Fr Egidio Viganò pointed out that the Word of God is not so much a response to our questions as an initiative of God that calls us into question. The educator, he said, must be conscious of and loyal to precisely this characteristic of the Word of God. His pedagogical preoccupation must not lead him to ignore his pastoral commitment as prophet of the gospel.[[17]](#footnote-17) The Rector’s manual promulgated by Fr Viganò is incisive on this point: “We who are so active have to be convinced that every action springs from the intimate movement of the heart by which God unites us to himself. In this way our actions are a consequence of the Word, whom we receive and who reveals Himself to us, and of the free interior consent of a loving heart. We are not just responding to stimuli which come from the environment, nor even to some sort of vital impulse or an irresistible ‘will to accomplish.’ It is rather the fulfillment of His will.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Fr Pascual Chávez, in his turn, is passionate: “I yearn for the day when we could dedicate a bit more of our time to welcoming Jesus and hearing his word, ‘the only thing necessary’ (Lk 10,42).”[[19]](#footnote-19) If it is God who calls us and entrusts young people to us, we must have his Word in our hands each day, so that we might “walk side by side with the young so as to lead them to the risen Lord.” (C 34) Our recent general chapters have also insisted abundantly on central place of the Word of God in our lives.[[20]](#footnote-20)

The ABS is one of the expressions of the love of the congregation for the Word of God. It is an organ of collaboration and coordination of all Salesian biblical experts and pastoral agents that is in the process of involving the Salesian Family in an ever more significant way. It is marked by a deep sense of belonging to the congregation, as witnessed by the themes it chooses to study and the contributions it has made to various general chapters and to the promotion of *lectio divina*. *The present letter is a warm acknowledgement of its spirit and activity, and at the same time an invitation and encouragement to all Salesian biblists to form part of the association in some way*. This is not merely a question of “what’s in it for me?” – for surely there are larger and more prestigious associations, meetings and conferences, in which we must no doubt be present. It is a question of a celebration of our fraternity, and at the same time also of what we can do together to accompany the congregation and the Family in its response to the Word and in its service to those to whom we are sent.

We will continue to be Salesian educators only if we take the Sacred Scriptures daily into our hands (C 87), allowing ourselves to be transformed by them (DV 25). Only thus will we be able to help our confreres and the members of the Salesian Family, and above all the youth, to discover the hidden treasure that we encounter in the word of God – the person of Jesus Christ.

Let us entrust ourselves to the heart of Mary, and let us entrust to her also the work of the ABS. We ask that we might belong to the school of Mary, so as to learn from her to welcome and to contemplate the word, to keep the word in our hearts and to proclaim it with joy and enthusiasm.

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1. *Dei Verbum* chapter 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. C. Bissoli (a cura di), *Parola di Dio e Carisma Salesiano.* Atti del II Convegno Mondiale dell’Associazione Biblica Salesiana. Villa Tuscolana (Frascati), 23-26 agosto 1988, Roma, 1989. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. F. Perrenchio (a cura di), *Parola di Dio e evangelizzazione dei giovani.* Atti del III Convegno Mondiale dell’Associazione Biblica Salesiana. Guadalajara-Tlaquepaque, Mexico, 29.08 -08.09.1993, Roma, 1994. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. ABS, *Parola di Dio e Spirito Salesiano,* Elledici, Leumann To, 1996. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. M. Cimosa – A. Strus (a cura di), *La tua Parola è luce sul mio camino.* Atti del IV Convegno Mondiale ABS su “Parola di Dio e Formazione salesiana”. Cremisan, Israel, 23.08 -2.09.1999, Roma, 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. C. Pastore – R. Vicent (a cura di), *Ripartire da Cristo, Parola di Dio.* Lectio divina e vita salesiana, oggi. Atti del V Convegno Mondiale ABS, Kraków, Polonia, 27.12.2004 -3.01.2005, Roma, 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. F. Mosetto (a cura di), *Atti del VI Convegno Mondiale,* Gerusalemme, 22-31 agosto 2011. Bolletino ABS, nº 24, Roma, 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. C. Pastore – R. Vicent (a cura di), *Passione apostolica. “Da mihi animas”*, Elledici, Torino, 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. J. J. Bartolomé – R. Vicent (a cura di), *Testimoni della radicalità evangelica.* Una riflessione biblica e salesiana, Elledici, Torino, 2014. Edizione in spagnolo, a cura di J. J. Bartolomé, CCS, Madrid, 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. J. J. Bartolomé – X. Matoses (a cura di), *Luce sui miei passi.* Lectio divina sulle citazione bibliche delle Costituzioni SDB, Elledici, Torino, 2016. Edizione in spagnolo, a cura di J. J. Bartolomé, CCS, Madrid, 2016; edizione in inglese, a cura di J. J. Bartolomé – S. J. Puykunnel, Kristu Jyoti, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Vita Consecrata* 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See *Novo Millennio Ineuente* 39. “Pope John Paul II has pointed out to the whole Church the example and the doctrine of St. Teresa of Avila who in her life had to reject the temptation of certain methods which proposed a leaving aside of the humanity of Christ in favor of a vague self-immersion in the abyss of the divinity.” (Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, Letter to the Bishops of the Cahtolic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation, 15 October 1989. See <http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19891015_meditazione-cristiana_en.html> (01.11.2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. GC25 47, 61, 73, 185. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Giovanni Bosco, *Il mese di maggio consacrato a Maria Ss. Immacolata* (Torino 1858), in *OE* X (Roma 1976) 356. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Giovanni Bosco, *Memorie dell´Oratorio* 169. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Lettere circolari di D. Paolo Albera ai Salesiani* (Torino 1922) 394-395. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Egidio Viganò, “Il progetto educativo salesiano,” ACS 290 (1978) 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *The Salesian Rector: A ministry for the animation and governing of the local community* (Rome, 1986) n. 180. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Pascual Chavez, *Witnesses of the Living God: Nature and Future of Consecrated Life. A Salesian Vision* (Bengaluru: Kristu Jyoti Publications, 2013) 120 = Pascual Chavez, “‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life’ (Jn 6,69). The Word of God and Salesian Life Today,” ACG 386 (2004) 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See GC26 10, 11, 32-35, 37, and GC27 5, 34, 52, 64.2, 65.2, 65.3, 67.4. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)