

“Is it better to be poor and healthy than to be rich and sick?”

Exactly one year before the beginning of the 27th General Chapter, two people are presented to us Salesians transmitting a special message to the congregation. One of them is Pope Francis. His first days and weeks in Rome were turbulent, unfamiliar and full of surprises. Now it is difficult to even imagine how it was before without him. He is always present in the media, but also in our conversations and reflections. With his talent to convey big truths and directives in brief statements, he hits the mark over and over again: the Gospel is our guideline. Our Rector Major was quite impressed by the Pope Francis’ quote “when we confess Christ without the Cross, then we are not disciples of the Lord: We are mundane, we are bishops, priests, cardinals, but we are no longer disciples of the Lord”. With this clear statement, the Pope gets to the core of the topic of our next General Chapter: A radical change of our lives to create a better world for the youth!

Our everyday life as brothers is often defined by many trifles, we get tired because we do not manage to get everything organized, to find time for everybody who needs us and also our prayer life often deteriorates when it ranks secondary to all our other commitments. The nearest thing has often great difficulties to catch our attention. In this conjunction, it is good when a man as Pope Francis puts our lives in question to reset our focus once again on Christ as Pope Benedict XVI. We have to pay attention not to perceive just one little excerpt of the Pope’s personality as some photographers do. We have the chance to reflect on his message with the statements of our Rector Major, thus, gradually coming closer to Jesus Christ and his Gospel.

During our first personal encounter with the Pope not only his firm handshake was surprising, but his eyes which talk, capture and transmit somewhat of his optimism. But we must not be misled, this Pope is not one satisfied with superficial greetings, events etc. He is as clear and firm as Benedict XVI in his requests to the cleric and members of orders: Whoever wants to go aboard the ship of the church needs to put his oar in!

The second role model accompanying us on the way to the General Chapter is Stefan Sandor¹. The happy news reached us that the first decree of Pope Francis recognized Stefan’s martyrdom which initiated his quick beatification. I can only recommend every Salesian not only to read but to reflect on Stefan’s story, his life as a brother up to the moment of his violent death.

Because like Stefan Sandor, each Salesian needs to read the tracks presented by history and fellow human beings, after which he needs to dare to take his own steps. Just as the disciples when they found the empty tomb, we have to examine the signs of despair for tracks of happiness and hope. This is the only way to become content, happy and religious people and to invite others to implement Don Bosco’s ideas into the present. Stefan Sandor adopted Don Bosco’s life philosophy by not remaining at the surface but by walking through his life with open eyes and attentive ears.

¹ Killed in Hungary in 1953

Stefan had many options for evasion and could have chosen a comfortable life as a brother in the workshop and in his community. However, he took particular care and stood up for such people of whom the rulers expected blind obedience but whose human dignity they did not recognize. Don Bosco and Stefan Sandor brought Christ into our daily life, they understood themselves as instruments of His love and, consequently, had to endure many disappointments until their death.

They experienced that the one who expects Christ only on the horizon of his own imagination builds up his own obstacle against gaining experience with fellow human beings. The upcoming General Chapter shall take the experience gathered during the Province Chapters (or at a Salesian Brother Congress) and shall reflect on how we Salesians can prepare ourselves for the future. Unfortunately, as at each Chapter, regrets shall be voiced regarding the dropping number of brothers and requests shall be filed to put more effort into calling young men for this vocation. Everything has been said already (look EAO Brother's Congress Cambodia 2006), but there is a lack of implementation: We have to develop answers in form of attractive offers, more room and more time for young people, better training for catechists and companions if we wish to invite young men to share their lives with us and the youth. This option for the youth which we Salesians approached in a very every-day style and practical manner so far, fits the Pope's attitude: Get away from the compassion rhetoric based on just thinking of the poor and donating them some of our time and strength, to a changed life situation in our communities to grant each Salesian education, health, work, happiness and much more to enable him to become an even more faithful follower of Don Bosco in order to effectively configure our youth ministry.

Here in Rome many people were interviewed on St. Peter's Square. Over the first days, astonished statements could be heard that the Pope seems to be so normal, now people clearly demand not only changes behind the walls of the Vatican but also on the management level of dioceses, parishes and within the orders. During his Wednesday Audience Addresses, visits at parishes and meetings with politicians, Pope Francis tirelessly tries to convey his message that the source of strength for a change to the better must be found in the relationship of each individual person with God, in the trust in the Word of Jesus. The Pope defines the direction: "Whoever does not pray to God, prays to the devil." These directives require decisions from us and show us that each one of us must undertake the way on his own. Even we Salesians have to ask ourselves what are the impacts of this Pope's Credo from Latin America who takes seriously his demand for modesty, proximity to people, humility, honesty and mercy. The theological, philosophical and spiritual causes for a world in which God seems to have been lost as reflected on by Pope Benedict XVI, have received an intermediary in the person of Pope Francis who will implement those in concrete actions, with hopefully more weight for the local churches and their committed Catholics. As Salesians we can be confident that this Pontificate shall have a fruitful influence on the vocations in the church. Each one of us must contribute to support the Pope in "teaching the youth wisdom and orientation" gathered and experienced by the church and her representatives during the history. This also includes transmitting the lifestyle of Stefan Sandor, Artemide Zatti and our other Saints of the Salesian family.

The next General Chapter scheduled for the beginning of 2014 shall have to give a concrete answer to the directives given by the Pope and each one of us must not fear to sustain injuries just like Cardinal Bergoglio: "It's true that when you get out into the street, there can be accidents. However, if the church remains closed in on itself, does not get out, remains self-referential, it gets old. Between a church that suffers accidents in the street, and a church that's sick because it's self-referential, I have no doubts about preferring the former."

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