

# Prophets of Forgiveness and Gratitude

In these times, where day after day the news communicates experiences of conflict, war, and hatred, how great is the risk that we as believers end up being drawn into a reading of events reduced merely to a political level, or limit ourselves to taking sides for one faction or another with arguments tied to our own way of seeing things, our own interpretation of reality.

In Jesus' discourse following the Beatitudes, there is a series of "small/great lessons" that the Lord offers. They always begin with the verse "you have heard that it was said". In one of these, the Lord recalls the ancient saying "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" (Mt 5:38).

Outside the logic of the Gospel, this law is not only uncontested but may even be taken as a rule expressing how to settle scores with those who have offended us. Obtaining revenge is perceived as a right, even a duty.

Jesus presents himself before this logic with a completely different, wholly opposite proposal. To what we have heard, Jesus says, "But I say to you" (Mt 5:39). And here as Christians, we must be very careful. The words of Jesus that follow are important not only in themselves but because they express in a very concise way His entire message. Jesus does not come to tell us there is another way to interpret reality. He does not approach us to broaden the spectrum of opinions about earthly matters, particularly those touching our lives. Jesus is not just another opinion – He himself embodies the alternative to the law of revenge.

The phrase, "but I say to you," is fundamentally important because now it is no longer just the spoken word, but Jesus himself. What Jesus communicates to us, He lives. When Jesus says, "do not resist an evil person; if anyone slaps you on

the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also" (Mt 5:39), He lived these very words himself. Certainly, we cannot say of Jesus that He preaches well but acts poorly in His message.

Returning to our times, these words of Jesus risk being perceived as the words of a weak person, reactions of someone no longer capable of responding but only of enduring. Indeed, when we look at Jesus offering Himself completely on the wood of the Cross, this may be the impression we get. Yet we know perfectly well that the sacrifice on the cross is the fruit of a life that begins with the phrase "but I say to you". Because everything Jesus told us, he ultimately took upon Himself fully. And by taking it fully, He managed to pass from the cross to victory. Jesus' logic apparently communicates a losing personality. But we know well that the message Jesus left us, which He lived fully, is the medicine this world desperately needs today.

Being prophets of forgiveness means embracing good as a response to evil. It means having the determination that the power of evil will not condition my way of seeing and interpreting reality. Forgiveness is not the response of the weak. Forgiveness is the most eloquent sign of that freedom which can recognise the wounds evil leaves behind, but those same wounds will never become a powder keg fuelling revenge and hatred.

Responding to evil with evil only widens and deepens humanity's wounds. Peace and harmony do not grow on the soil of hatred and revenge.

Being prophets of gratuity requires from us the ability to look upon the poor and the needy, not with the logic of profit, but with the logic of charity. The poor do not choose to be poor, but those who are well-off have the possibility to choose generosity, kindness, and compassion. How different the world would be if our political leaders in this scenario of growing conflicts and wars had the wisdom to look at those who pay the price in these divisions – the poor, the marginalised,

those who cannot escape because they cannot manage so do so. If we start from a purely horizontal reading, there is cause for despair. We have no choice but to remain closed in our grumbling and criticisms. And yet, no! We are educators of the young. We know well that these young people in our world are seeking reference points of a healthy humanity, of political leaders capable of interpreting reality with criteria of justice and peace. But when our young people look around, we know well they perceive only the emptiness of a poor vision of life.

We who are committed to the education of the young have a great responsibility. It is not enough to comment on the darkness left by an almost complete absence of leadership. It is not enough to remark that there are no proposals capable of igniting young people's memory. It falls to each of us to light that candle of hope in this darkness, to offer examples of humanity fulfilled in daily life.

Truly, it is worth being prophets of forgiveness and gratuity today.

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## **The Syndrome of Philip and the Syndrome of Andrew**

*In the Gospel account of John, chapter 6, verses 4-14, which recounts the multiplication of the loaves, there are certain details that I dwell on at length whenever I meditate on or comment on this passage.*

It all begins when, faced with the 'large' hungry crowd, Jesus invites His disciples to take responsibility for feeding them. The details I refer to are, first, when Philip says it is impossible to answer this call due to the sheer number of

people present. Andrew, on the other hand, points out that “there is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish,” only to dismiss the possibility with a simple remark, “but what are these for so many?” (v.9).

I simply wish to share with you, dear readers, how we Christians—who are called to share the joy of our faith—can sometimes, unknowingly, be affected by either Philip’s syndrome or Andrew’s syndrome. At times, perhaps, even by both!

In the life of the Church, as well as in the life of the Salesian Congregation and Family, challenges are never lacking and never will be. Ours is not a call to form a group where people merely seek to be comfortable, without disturbing, and without being disturbed. It is not an experience of pre-packaged certainties. Belonging to the body of Christ must not distract us or remove us from the reality of the world as it is. On the contrary, it urges us to be fully engaged in the events of human history. This means first and foremost, looking at reality not only with human eyes but also, and above all, with the eyes of Jesus. We are called to respond guided by love, which finds its source in the heart of Jesus—that is, to live for others as Jesus teaches us and shows us.

### **Philip’s Syndrome**

Philip’s syndrome is subtle, and for this reason, it is also very dangerous. His analysis is correct and accurate. His response to Jesus’ invitation is not wrong. His reasoning follows a very straightforward and flawless human logic. He looked at reality with his human eyes, with a rational mind, and concluded that it was unfeasible. Faced with this “calculated” approach, the hungry person ceases to concern me—the problem is theirs, not mine. To be more precise in light of our daily experiences, the refugee could have stayed home; they shouldn’t bother me. The poor and the sick must deal with their own issues, and it’s not my place to be part

of their problem, much less to find them a solution. This is Philip's syndrome. He is a follower of Jesus, yet his way of seeing and interpreting reality remains stagnant, unchallenged, light-years away from that of his Master.

### **Andrew's Syndrome**

Then there is Andrew's syndrome. I wouldn't say it's worse than Philip's, but it comes close to being more tragic. It is a subtle and cynical syndrome; it sees some possible opportunity but doesn't go further. There is a tiny glimmer of hope, but humanly speaking, it's unworkable. So, both the gift and the giver are disqualified. And the giver, who in this case has the 'misfortune' of being a boy, is simply willing to share what he has!

These two syndromes are still with us today, in the Church and even among us pastors and educators. Crushing a small hope is easier than making room for God's surprise—a surprise that can make even the smallest hope blossom. Allowing ourselves to be conditioned by dominant clichés, avoiding opportunities that challenge reductive interpretations, is a constant temptation. If we're not careful, we become prophets and executors of our own downfall. By stubbornly clinging to a human logic—'academically' refined and 'intellectually' qualified—the space for an evangelical reading becomes increasingly limited and eventually disappears.

When this human and horizontal logic is challenged, one of the defensive reactions it provokes is that of 'ridicule.' Those who dare to defy human logic by letting in the fresh air of the Gospel will be mocked, attacked, and ridiculed. When this happens, strangely enough, we can say we are on a prophetic path. The waters are stirring.

### **Jesus and the Two Syndromes**

Jesus overcomes both syndromes by "taking" the loaves, which were considered too few and therefore irrelevant. He opens the door to that prophetic and faithful space we are called to inhabit. Faced with the crowd, we cannot settle for self-

referential readings and interpretations. Following Jesus means going beyond human reasoning. We are called to look at challenges through His eyes. When Jesus calls us, He does not ask for solutions but for the gift of our whole selves—with all that we are and all that we have. Yet, the risk is that, faced with His call, we remain stuck, enslaved by our own thinking and clinging to what we believe we possess.

Only in generosity, grounded in abandonment to His Word, do we come to gather the abundance of Jesus' providential action. "So, they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves left by those who had eaten" (v.13). The boy's small gift bears astonishing fruit only because the two syndromes did not have the final word.

Pope Benedict XVI commented on the boy's gesture, "In the scene of the multiplication, the presence of a boy is also noted, who, faced with the difficulty of feeding so many people, shares the little he has: five loaves and two fish. The miracle does not come from nothing, but from an initial modest sharing of what a simple boy had with him. Jesus does not ask for what we do not have, but shows us that if each one offers the little they have, the miracle can always happen anew. God can multiply our small gesture of love and make us sharers in His gift" (*Angelus*, 29 July 2012).

Faced with the pastoral challenges before us, faced with the deep thirst and hunger for spirituality that young people express, let us not be afraid, let us not cling to our own things or ways of thinking. Let us offer the little we have to Him, trusting in the light of His Word—and may this, and only this, be the enduring criterion of our choices and the guiding light of our actions.

*Photo: Evangelical miracle of the multiplication of loaves and fishes, stained glass window at Tewkesbury Abbey in Gloucestershire (United Kingdom), an 1888 work created by Hardman & Co*

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# Message from Father Fabio Attard on the Feast of the Rector Major

*Dear Confreres, dear Collaborators in our Educative Pastoral Communities, dear young people,*

Allow me to share with you this message that comes from the depths of my heart. I communicate it with all the affection, appreciation and esteem I have for each and every one of you as you are engaged in the mission of being educators, pastors and animators of young people on all continents.

We are all aware that the education of young people increasingly requires significant adult figures, people with a solid moral backbone, capable of transmitting hope and vision for their future.

While we are all committed to walking with young people, welcoming them into our homes, offering them educational opportunities of every kind and type, in the variety of environments in which we work, we are also aware of the cultural, social and economic challenges we face.

Alongside these challenges, which are part of every pastoral educational process, since it is always a continuous dialogue with earthly realities, we recognise that, as a consequence of situations of wars and armed conflicts in various parts of the world, the call we are living is becoming more complex and difficult. All this has an effect on the commitment we are carrying out. Yet, it is encouraging to see that despite the difficulties we face, we are determined to continue living our mission with conviction.

In recent months, the message of Pope Francis and now the words of Pope Leo XIV have continually invited the world to face this painful situation, which seems like a spiral that is growing at an alarming rate. We know that wars never bring peace. We are aware, and some of us are experiencing it first-hand, that every armed conflict and every war brings suffering, pain and increases all kinds of poverty. We all know that those who ultimately pay the price for such situations are the displaced, the elderly, children and young people who find themselves without a present and without a future.

For this reason, dear confreres, dear collaborators and young people throughout the world, I would kindly ask you that on the feast of the Rector Major, which is a tradition dating back to the time of Don Bosco, every community around the feast day of the Rector Major celebrate the Holy Eucharist for peace.

It is an invitation to prayer that finds its source in the sacrifice of Christ, crucified and risen. A prayer as a testimony so that no one remains indifferent in a world situation shaken by a growing number of conflicts.

This is our gesture of solidarity with all those, especially Salesians, lay people and young people, who at this particular moment, with great courage and determination, continue to live the Salesian mission in situations marked by war. They are Salesians, lay people and young people who ask for and appreciate the solidarity of the whole Congregation, human solidarity, spiritual solidarity, charismatic solidarity.

While I and the entire General Council are doing everything possible to be very close to everyone in a concrete way, I believe that at this particular moment, such a sign of closeness and encouragement should be given by the whole Congregation.

To you, our dear brothers and sisters in Myanmar, Ukraine, the Middle East, Ethiopia, East of Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, Haiti and Central America, we want



to say loudly that we are with you. We thank you for your witness. We assure you of our human and spiritual closeness.

We continue to pray for the gift of peace. We continue to pray for our confreres, lay people and young people who in very challenging situations continue to hope and pray for peace to emerge. Their example, their self-giving and their belonging to the charism of Don Bosco are a powerful witness for us. They, together with many consecrated persons, priests and committed lay people, are modern martyrs, living witnesses engaged in education and evangelisation who, despite everything, as true shepherds and ministers of evangelical charity, continue to love, believe and hope for a better future.

All of us accept this call to solidarity with all our hearts. Thank you.

*Prot. 25/0243 Rome, 24 June 2025*

*don Fabio ATTARD,*

*Rector Major*

*Foto: shutterstock.com*

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## **The New Headquarters of the Salesians. Rome, Sacro Cuore (Sacred Heart)**

*Today, the original vocation of the Sacred Heart House sees a new beginning. Tradition and innovation continue to characterise the past, present, and future of this significant work.*

So often did Don Bosco desire to come to Rome to

open a Salesian house. From his first trip in 1858, his goal was to be present in the Eternal City with an educational presence. He came to Rome twenty times, and only on his last trip in 1887 was he able to realise his dream by opening the Sacred Heart house in Castro Pretorio.

The Salesian Work is located in the Esquiline district, established in 1875, after the breach of Porta Pia and the Savoy's need to build the ministries of the Kingdom of Italy in the new capital. The district, also called Umbertino, has Piedmontese architecture. All the streets are named after battles or events related to the Savoy state. In this place that recalls Turin, there had to be a Temple, which was also a parish, built by a Piedmontese, Don Giovanni Bosco. Don Bosco did not choose the name of the Church, but it was the will of Leo XIII to revive a devotion, more relevant than ever, to the Heart of Jesus.

Today, the Sacred Heart House is completely renovated to meet the needs of the Salesian Central Headquarters. From the time of its foundation to the present day, the house has undergone several transformations. The Work began as a Parish and International Temple for the spread of devotion to the Sacred Heart. From the beginning, Don Bosco's declared goal was to build a home next door to accommodate up to 500 poor children. Fr. Rua completed the Work and opened workshops for artisans (arts and crafts school). In the following years, the middle school and classical high school were opened. For some years, it was also the seat of the university (Pontifical Salesian Athenaeum) and a training house for Salesians who studied at Roman universities and were involved in the school and oratory (among these students there was Fr. Quadrio). It was also the headquarters of the Roman Province first and of the Circumscription of Central Italy from 2008. Since 2017, due to the move from Via della Pisana, it has become the Salesian Central Headquarters. Renovation began in 2022 to adapt the spaces to the function of the Rector Major's house. Don Bosco, Fr. Rua, Cardinal Cagliero (his apartment was located on the first floor of Via Marsala),

Zeffirino Namuncurà, Monsignor Versiglia, Artemide Zatti, all the Rectors Major successors of Don Bosco, and Saint John Paul II, Saint Teresa of Calcutta, and Pope Francis have lived or passed through this house. Among the directors of the house, Monsignor Giuseppe Cognata served (during his rectorship, in 1930, the statue of the Sacred Heart was placed on the bell tower).

Thanks to the Sacred Heart, the Salesian charism has spread to various neighbourhoods of Rome. In fact, all the other Salesian presences in Rome have been an offshoot of this house: Testaccio, Pio XI, Borgo Ragazzi Don Bosco, Don Bosco Cinecittà, Gerini, the Pontifical Salesian University.

### **Crossroads of Hospitality**

From the beginning, there have been two determining characteristics of the Sacred Heart House:

1) *Catholicity*, in that opening a house in Rome has always meant for the founders of religious orders a closeness to the Pope and a broadening of horizons at a universal level. In the first conference to the Salesian Cooperators at the monastery of Tor De' Specchi in Rome in 1874, Don Bosco stated that the Salesians would spread throughout the world and that helping their works meant living the most authentic Catholic spirit;

2) *attention towards poor young people*: the location near the station, a crossroads of arrivals and departures, a place where the poorest have always gathered, is inscribed in the history of the Sacred Heart.

In the beginning, the House took in poor children to teach them a trade, and later, the oratory gathered the children of the neighbourhood. After the war, the shoeshine boys (boys who shined shoes for people leaving the station) were gathered and cared for first in this house and then moved to Borgo Ragazzi Don Bosco. During the mid-1980s, with the first immigration to Italy, young immigrants were hosted in collaboration with the nascent Caritas. In the 1990s, a Day Centre gathered children as an alternative to prison and

taught them the basics of reading and writing and a trade. Since 2009, an integration project between young refugees and young Italians has seen many initiatives of welcome and evangelisation flourish. The Sacred Heart House has also been the headquarters of the National Centre of Salesian Works of Italy for about 30 years.

### **The New Beginning**

Today, the original vocation of the Sacred Heart House sees a new beginning. Tradition and innovation continue to characterise the past, present, and future of this significant work.

First of all, the presence of the Rector Major with his council and of the confreres who take care of the global dimension indicates the continuum of Catholicity. It is a vocation to welcome many Salesians who come from all over the world and find in the Sacred Heart House a place to feel at home, experience fraternity and meet with Don Bosco's successor. At the same time, it is the place from which the Rector Major animates and governs the Congregation, tracing the lines to be faithful to Don Bosco in the present.

Secondly, there is the presence of a significant Salesian place where Don Bosco wrote the letter from Rome and understood the dream of the nine years. Inside the house there will be the Don Bosco House Museum of Rome, which, distributed on three floors, will tell the story of the Saint's presence in the eternal city. The centrality of education as a "thing of the heart" in his Preventive System, the relationship with the Popes who loved Don Bosco and whom he first loved and served, the Sacred Heart as a place of expansion of the charism throughout the world, the difficult path of approval of the Constitutions, the understanding of the dream of the nine years and his last educational breath in writing the letter from Rome are the thematic elements that, in an immersive multimedia form, will be revealed to those who visit the Museum.

Thirdly, the devotion to the Sacred Heart

represents the centre of the charism. Don Bosco, even before receiving the invitation to build the Church of the Sacred Heart, had oriented young people towards this devotion. In *The Companion of Youth* there are prayers and practices of piety addressed to the Heart of Christ. However, with the acceptance of the proposal of Leo XIII he becomes a true apostle of the Sacred Heart. He spares no effort to seek money for the Church. The attention to the smallest details infuses his thought and devotion to the Sacred Heart into the architectural and artistic choices of the Basilica. To support the construction of the Church and the house, he founded the **Pious Work of the Sacred Heart of Jesus**, the last of the five foundations created by Don Bosco throughout his life together with the Salesians, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, the Salesian Cooperators, the Association of Devotees of Mary Help of Christians. **It was erected for the perpetual celebration of six daily masses in the Church of the Sacred Heart in Rome.** All the members, living and deceased, participate through the prayer offered and the good works performed by the Salesians and young people in all their houses.

The vision of the Church that derives from the foundation of the Pious Work is that of a “living body” composed of the living and the dead in communion with each other through the Sacrifice of Jesus, renewed daily in the Eucharistic celebration in service of the poorest young people. The desire of the Heart of Jesus is that all may be one (*ut unum sint*) as He and the Father. The Pious Work connects, through prayer and offerings, the benefactors, living and deceased, the Salesians of the whole world and the young people who live at the Sacred Heart. Only through communion, which has its source in the Eucharist, can benefactors, Salesians and young people contribute to building the Church, to making it shine in its missionary face. The Pious Work also has the task of promoting, spreading, deepening devotion to the Sacred Heart throughout the world and renewing it according to the times and the feeling of the

Church.

### **The central station for evangelising**

Finally, attention to poor young people is manifested in the missionary will to reach the young people of all Rome through the Youth Centre open on Via Marsala, right at the exit of Termini station where about 300,000 people pass every day. A place that is home for the many Italian and foreign young people, who visit or live in Rome and are thirsty, sometimes unconsciously, for God. Moreover, various poor people, marked by the fatigue of life, have always crowded around Termini station. It is another open door on Via Marsala, in addition to that of the Youth Centre and the Basilica, that expresses the desire to respond to the needs of these people with the Heart of Christ. In fact, the glory of His face shines in them.

Don Bosco's prophecy about the Sacred Heart House of April 5, 1880, accompanies and guides the realisation of what has been told:

*But Don Bosco looked further into the future. Our own Bishop John Marengo recalled a mysterious remark he made which we should not let time obliterate. On the very day he accepted that burdensome assignment, Don Bosco asked him:*

*– Do you know why we accepted that house in Rome?*

*– No, he answered.*

*– Listen, then. We agreed because one day, when there will be another Pope and he shall be the right one, we shall set up our headquarters there to evangelise the Roman countryside. It will be no less important a task than that of evangelising Patagonia. Then will the Salesians be acknowledged and their glory shine forth! (BM XIV, 474)*

*don Francesco Marcoccio*

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# When the Lord Knocks

*A confrere told me, "Father, we only need your closeness, your listening, your prayer. This consoles us, encourages us, and gives us strength and hope so that we can continue to serve the young, the poor and wounded, the frightened and terrified!"*

On March 25, 2025, the Church celebrates the Solemnity of the Annunciation of the Angel Gabriel to Mary. One of the most significant solemnities for the Christian faith. On this solemnity, we remember the initiative of God who becomes part of that human history that he himself created. On that day in the Holy Eucharist, we recite the Creed, and when we profess that the Son of God became man, we believers kneel as a sign of amazement at this wonderful initiative of God before which we can only kneel.

In the experience of the Annunciation, Mary is afraid: "Do not be afraid, Mary," the Angel tells her. After she has expressed her questions, being assured that it is God's plan for her, Mary responds with a simple phrase that remains for us today a reminder and an invitation. Mary, the Blessed among women, simply says, "Let it be done to me according to your word."

Last March 25, the Lord knocked on the door of my heart through the call that my brothers at the 29<sup>th</sup> General Chapter addressed to me. They asked me to make myself available to take on the mission of being Rector Major of the Salesians of Don Bosco, the Congregation of St. Francis de Sales. I confess that at that moment I felt the weight of the invitation, moments that disorient because what the Lord was asking of me was not a light thing. The point is that when the call comes, we as believers enter that sacred space where we strongly feel the fact that it is He who takes the initiative. The only path

before us is to simply abandon ourselves into the hands of God, without ifs, ands, or buts. And all this is naturally not easy.

### **“You will see how the Lord works”**

In these first weeks, I am still asking myself like Mary, what is the meaning of all this? Then little by little I begin to arrive at that consolation that one of my Provincials once told me: “When the Lord calls, it is He who takes the initiative, what is done depends on Him. You just keep yourself ready and available. You will see how the Lord works.”

In light of this personal but very broad experience, because it concerns the Salesian Congregation and the Salesian Family, I immediately turned to my dear Salesian brothers. From the first moment, I asked them to accompany me with their prayer, their closeness, their support.

I must confess that in these first weeks I already feel that this mission must be inspired by Mary. After the Annunciation by the Angel, she set out to help her cousin Elizabeth. And thus, I set out to serve my brothers, listening to them, sharing with them, and reassuring them of the support of the entire Congregation, especially for those who live in situations of war, conflict, and extreme poverty.

I was struck by the comment of a Provincial who is experiencing an extremely difficult situation with his confreres. After a very fraternal conversation, he said to me, “Father, we only need your closeness, your listening, your prayer. This consoles us, encourages us, and gives us strength and hope so that we can continue to serve the young, the poor and wounded, the frightened and terrified!” After this comment, we remained silent, he and I, with some tears falling from his eyes and, I must say, also from mine.

After the meeting, I remained alone in my office. I asked myself if this mission that the Lord is asking me to accept is not perhaps that of making myself a brother alongside my brothers who suffer but hope? Who fight to do good for the



poor and have no intention of stopping? I felt a voice inside me saying that it is worth saying 'yes' when the Lord knocks, whatever the cost!

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# **Final Address of the Rector Major at the conclusion of the General Chapter 29**

*Dear confreres,*

We have come to the end of this experience of the 29th General Chapter with hearts filled with joy and gratitude for all that we have been able to experience, share and plan. The gift of the presence of the Spirit of God that we have prayed for daily in morning prayer as well as during our work through conversation in the Spirit, has been the central strength of the General Chapter experience. We asked that the Spirit play a leading role, and this has been given to us abundantly.

The celebration of any General Chapter is like a milestone in the life of every religious congregation. This also applies to us, to our beloved Salesian Congregation. It is a moment that gives continuity to the journey from Valdocco that continues to be experienced with commitment and carried forward with zeal and determination in various parts of the world.

We have come to the end of this General Chapter with the approval of a Final Document that will serve as a chart to navigate the next six years – 2025-2031. We will see and feel the value of this Final Document to the extent that we are able to maintain the same dedication to listening, the

same care to letting ourselves be accompanied by the Holy Spirit who has marked these weeks, once this Salesian Pentecost experience has concluded.

Since the beginning, when the Rector Major Fr Angel Fernández Arttime made the ***Letter of Convocation of the 29th General Chapter*** public on 24 September 2023, in ***AGC 441***, the motivations that were to guide the Pre-Chapter work were clear and subsequently, the work of the General Chapter itself. The Rector Major wrote that,

*The chosen theme is the result of a rich and profound reflection that we have carried out in the General Council on the basis of the answers received from the Provinces and the vision that we have of the Congregation at this time. We were pleasantly surprised by the great convergence and harmony we found in the many contributions from the Provinces, which had a lot to do with the reality we see in the Congregation, with the path of fidelity that exists in many sectors and also with present challenges. (AGC 441)*

The process of listening to the provinces that led to the identification of the theme for this General Chapter is already a clear indication of a listening methodology. In light of what we have experienced in recent weeks, the value of the listening process is confirmed. The way in which we first identified and then interpreted the challenges that the Congregation is determined to face has highlighted our typical Salesian atmosphere, a family spirit which does not seek to avoid challenges, which does not try to standardise thinking, but which does everything possible to arrive at that spirit of communion where each of us can recognise the way to be Don Bosco today.

The focal point of the challenges identified has to do with the fact that “it refers to the centrality of God (as Trinity) and Jesus Christ as Lord of our lives, without ever forgetting young people and our commitment to them” (ACG 441). The way the General Chapter developed testifies not only

to the fact that we have the ability to identify challenges but that we have also found ways to

bring out agreement and unity, recognising and treasuring the fact that we are in different continents and contexts, different cultures and languages. What is more, this atmosphere confirms that when we look at reality with Don Bosco's eyes and hear today, when we are truly passionate about Christ and dedicated to young people, then we discover that this diversity becomes a wealth, that journeying together is beautiful even if it is tiring, that together we can face challenges.

In a world fragmented by wars, conflicts and depersonalising ideologies; in a world marked by economic and political thinking and models that remove the active role that young people can play, our presence is a sign, a "sacrament" of hope. Young people, regardless of skin colour, religious or ethnic affiliation, ask us to put forward proposals and places of hope. They are the sons and daughters of God who expect us to be humble servants.

A second point that was confirmed and reaffirmed by this General Chapter is the shared conviction that "if fidelity and prophecy were lacking in our Congregation, we would be like the light that does not shine and the salt that does not give flavour" (AGC 441). The point here is not so much whether we want to be more authentic or not, but the very fact that this is the only path we have and it is the one that has been strongly reiterated here over these weeks: to grow in authenticity!

The courage shown during some moments of the General Chapter is an excellent premise for the courage that will be asked of us in the future on other issues that came out of this General Chapter. I am sure that this courage here has found fertile ground, a healthy and promising ecosystem that holds great promise for the future. Having courage means not letting fear have the last word. The parable of the talents clearly teaches us this. The Lord has given us only one talent: the Salesian charism, concentrated in the

Preventive System. Each of us will be asked what we have done with this talent. Together, we are called to make it bear fruit in challenging, new and unprecedented contexts. We have no reason to bury it. We have so many reasons, so many cries from young people who urge us to “go out” to sow hope. Don Bosco already experienced this courageous step, filled with conviction, in his time, and today he asks us to experience it like he did and with him.

I would like to comment on some points that are already found in the Final Document and which I believe can serve as pointers to encourage us on the journey over the next six years.

## **1. Personal conversion**

Our journey as a Salesian Congregation depends on the personal, intimate and profound choices that each of us decides to make. Broadening the background against which we need to reflect on the theme of personal conversion, it is important to remember how, over these years after the Second Vatican Council, the Congregation has embarked on a journey of spiritual, charismatic and pastoral reflection that has been masterfully commented on by Fr Pascual in his weekly talks. This interpretation and contribution further enriches the important reflection that the Rector Major Fr Egidio Viganó left us in his last letter to the Congregation: Reading the Founder’s Charism at the Present Day (AGC 352, 1995). If today we talk about a “change of era”, Fr Viganó wrote in 1995:

*The reinterpretation of our Founder’s charism has kept us busy for the last thirty years, And in our task we have been helped by two great beacons of light: the first is the Second Vatican Council, and the second the epoch-making acceleration of history at the present time.” (AGC 352, 1995).*

I am referring to this journey of the Congregation with its riches and heritage because the matter of personal conversion is the space where this journey of the Congregation

finds its confirmation and further impetus. Personal conversion is not an intimate, self-referential affair. This is not a call that only touches me in a way that is detached from everything and everyone. Personal conversion is that special experience from which a renewed pastoral care will emerge. We can see the Congregation's journey because it finds its starting point in the heart of each one of us. It is from here that we can notice the continuous and convinced pastoral renewal. Pope Francis condenses this urgent cry in a single sentence: "The Church's closeness to Jesus is part of a common journey; "communion and mission are profoundly interconnected" (*Christifideles laici* no.32 , *Evangelii Gaudium* 23).

This leads us to discover that when we are insisting on personal conversion we must be careful not to fall into an intimist interpretation of spiritual experience on the one hand, and, not underestimating what is the foundation of every pastoral journey on the other.

In this call of renewed passion for Jesus, I invite every Salesian and every community to take the concrete choices and commitments that as a General Chapter we

believed to be urgent for a more authentic educative and pastoral witness seriously. We believe that we cannot grow pastorally without this attitude of listening to the Word of God. We recognise that the various pastoral commitments we have, the ever-increasing needs that confront us and that testify to unceasing poverty, risk taking away the necessary time to "be with him." We already find this challenge at the very beginning of our Congregation. It is about having clear priorities that strengthen our spiritual and charismatic backbone that gives soul and credibility to our mission

Fr Alberto Caviglia, when commenting on the topic of "Salesian Spirituality" in his *Conferences on the Salesian Spirit* writes:

*What was most astonishing for those who studied Don Bosco during the canonisation process was the discovery of his*

*incredible work of building the inner man.*

*Cardinal Salotti... in reference to the study he was then engaged in, told the Holy Father that "in studying the voluminous Turin processes, more than the external grandeur of his colossal work, [he] was struck by the inner life of the spirit, from which the whole prodigious apostolate of Ven. Don Bosco originated and was nourished."*

*Many are only familiar with the external work that seems so impressive, but are largely ignorant of the wise, sublime edifice of Christian perfection that he had patiently erected in his soul by practising the virtue of his state every day, every hour.*

Dear brothers, here we have our Don Bosco. It is this Don Bosco that we are called to discover today:

*We study and imitate him, admiring in him a splendid blending of nature and grace. He was deeply human, rich in the qualities of his people, open to the realities of this earth; and he was just as deeply the man of God, filled with the gifts of the Holy Spirit and living "as though he saw him who is invisible."*

*These two aspects combined to create a closely-knit life project, the service of the young. He realized his aim with firmness, constancy and the sensitivity of a generous heart, in the midst of difficulties and fatigue. "He took no step, he said no word, he took up no task that was not directed to the saving of the young... Truly the only concern of his heart was for souls" (C 21).*

I would like to recall here an invitation from Mother Teresa to her sisters a few years before her death. Her dedication and that of her sisters to the poor is known to everyone. However, it is good for us to hear these words of hers written to her sisters: However, it is good for us to listen to these words of hers written to her sisters:

*Until you can hear Jesus in the silence of your heart, you will not be able to hear him say "I am thirsty" in the hearts of the poor. Never give up this intimate and daily contact with Jesus as a living and real person, not just as an idea ("Until you can hear Jesus in the silence of your own heart, you will not be able to hear Him saying, "I thirst" in the hearts of the poor. Never give up this daily intimate contact with Jesus as the real living person – not just the idea", in <https://catholiceducation.org/en/religion-and-philosophy/the-fulfillment-jesus-wants-for-us.html>).*

Only by listening in the depths of our hearts to those who call us to follow him, Jesus Christ, can we truly listen with an authentic heart to those who call us to serve them. If the radical motivation of our being servants does not find its roots in the person of Christ, the alternative is that our motivations are nourished by the soil of our ego. And the consequence is that then our own pastoral action ends up inflating the same ego. The urgency of recovering the mystical space, the sacred ground of the encounter with God, a ground in which we have to take off the sandals of our certainties and our ways of interpreting reality with its challenges over these weeks, has been repeated many times and in various ways.

Dear brothers, here we have the first step. Here we give proof if we really want to be authentic sons of Don Bosco. Here we prove if we really love and imitate Don Bosco.

## **2. Getting to know Don Bosco not only loving Don Bosco**

We are aware that one of the central challenges we have as Salesians is to communicate the good news through our witness and through our educative and pastoral proposals in a culture that is undergoing radical change. While in the West we talk about the indifference to religious proposal that is the result of the challenge of secularisation, we notice how the challenge takes other forms in other continents, first of all in the shift towards a globalised culture that radically

shifts the scale of values and lifestyles. In a fluid and hyper-connected world, what we knew yesterday has radically changed today: in short, we are dealing here with the oft-mentioned question of the change of epoch.

With this change affects every area, it is positive to see how, since the SCG (1972), the Congregation has been on a continuous journey, until today, rethinking and reflecting on its educative and pastoral proposal. It is a process that responds to the question "what would Don Bosco do today, in a secularised and globalised culture like ours?"

Throughout this process we recognise how, from its very origins, the beauty and strength of the Salesian charism lies precisely in its inner capacity to dialogue with the history of the young people we are called to encounter in every age. What we have been contemplating at Valdocco, in this Salesian holy land, is the breath of the Spirit that guided Don Bosco and that we recognise as continuing to guide us today. The Constitutions begin precisely with this foundational and fundamental certainty:

*"Through the motherly intervention of Mary, the Holy Spirit raised up St John Bosco to contribute to the salvation of youth ...*

*The Spirit formed within him the heart of a father and teacher, capable of total self-giving. "I have promised God that until my dying breath I would dedicate myself entirely to my poor boys."*

*To ensure the continuation of this mission, the Spirit inspired him to initiate various apostolic endeavours, first among them our Society.*

*The Church has acknowledged God's hand in this, especially by approving our Constitutions and by proclaiming our Founder a saint.*

*From this active presence of the Holy Spirit we draw strength for our fidelity and support for our hope. (C 1).*

The Salesian charism contains an innate invitation



to place ourselves before young people in the same way that Don Bosco placed himself before Bartholomew Garelli... "his friend"!

All this sounds very easy to say, and it comes across as a friendly exhortation. In reality, it conceals within itself an urgent invitation to us, the sons of Don Bosco, to re-present the Salesian charism in a suitable and meaningful way in today's world, wherever we may find ourselves. However, there is an essential condition that allows us to undertake this journey: a true and profound knowledge of Don Bosco. We cannot say that we truly "love" Don Bosco if we are not seriously committed to "knowing" Don Bosco.

Often the risk is to settle with a knowledge of Don Bosco that fails to connect with current challenges. With a superficial knowledge of Don Bosco, we are really poor in the charismatic baggage that makes us his authentic sons. Without knowing Don Bosco, we cannot and do not end up embodying Don Bosco in the cultures where we are. All our efforts in this poverty of charismatic knowledge results only in charismatic cosmetic operations, which in the end are a betrayal of Don Bosco's very legacy.

If we want the Salesian charism to be capable of engaging in dialogue with today's culture, today's cultures, we must continually deepen our understanding of it, both in itself and in light of the ever-changing conditions in which we live. The foundation we received at the beginning of our initial formation, if not seriously deepened today, is not sufficient – it is simply useless if not even harmful.

In this direction, the Congregation has made, and continues to make, a tremendous effort to reread the life of Don Bosco and the Salesian charism in light of the current social and cultural conditions throughout the world. It is a legacy we have, but we run the risk of not knowing it because we fail to study it as it deserves. The loss of memory risks not only makes us lose touch with the treasure we have, but also risks making us believe that this treasure does not

exist. And this would be really tragic not so much and only for us Salesians, but for those crowds of young people who are waiting for us.

The urgency of this deeper understanding is not merely intellectual in nature, but responds to the thirst that exists for a serious charismatic formation of the laity in our Educative and Pastoral Communities (EPCs). The Final Document deals with this issue often and systematically. The lay people who today share in the Salesian mission with us are individuals eager for a clearer and more meaningfully Salesian formation proposal. We cannot truly experience these spaces of educational and pastoral convergence if our language and the way we communicate the charism lack the depth of understanding and the proper preparation needed to spark curiosity and capture the attention of those who share the Salesian mission with us.

It is not enough to say that we love Don Bosco. True “love” for Don Bosco implies the commitment to know and study him, not only in the light of his time, but also in the light of the great potential of his relevance in the light of our time. The Rector Major, Fr Pascual Chávez, made an invitation to the entire Congregation and the Salesian Family for the three years that preceded the “Bicentenary of the birth of Don Bosco 1815-2013”. (Fr Pascual Chávez, *Strenna* 2012, “*Let us make the young our life’s mission by coming to know and imitate Don Bosco*” [AGC 412]) It is an invitation that is more relevant than ever. This General Chapter is a call and an opportunity to strengthen the historical, pedagogical, and spiritual knowledge of our Father and Teacher.

We recognise dear brothers, that at this point this issue connects with the previous one – personal conversion. If we do not know Don Bosco and if we do not study him, we cannot understand the dynamics and efforts of his spiritual journey and consequently the roots of his pastoral choices. We end up loving him only superficially, without the true ability to imitate him as a profoundly holy man. Above

all, it will be impossible to inculturate his charism today in different contexts and situations. Only by strengthening our charismatic identity will we be able to offer the Church and Society a credible witness and a meaningful and relevant educative and pastoral proposal to young people.

### **3. The journey continues**

In this third part, I would like to encourage the entire Congregation to keep alive the focus on certain areas where, through the various **Resolutions** and concrete commitments, we have sought to give a sign of continuity.

The area of animation and coordination of marginalisation and youth distress has been an area in which the Congregation has been very committed over recent decades. I believe that the response by the provinces to growing poverty is a prophetic sign that sets us apart and finds all of us determined to continue to strengthen the Salesian response for the poorest.

The provinces' efforts in the area of **promoting safe environments** continue to find a growing and professional response in the provinces. The effort in this area is a testimony that this is the right direction to affirm the commitment to the dignity of all, especially the most vulnerable.

The area of integral ecology emerges as a call for greater educative and pastoral work. The growth of attention in educative and pastoral communities to environmental issues requires a systematic commitment to promote a change in mentality. The various proposals for formation in this area found in the Congregation should be acknowledged and accompanied.

There are also two areas that I would like to invite the Congregation to consider carefully for the coming years. They are part of a broader perspective of the Congregation's efforts. I believe these are two areas will have substantial consequences for our educative and pastoral processes.

### 3.1 Artificial intelligence – a real mission in an artificial world

As Salesians of Don Bosco, we are called to walk with young people in every environment in which they live and grow, even in the vast and complex digital world. Today, Artificial Intelligence (AI) presents itself as a revolutionary innovation that can shape the way people learn, communicate and build relationships. However, as revolutionary as it may be, AI remains exactly that: artificial. Our ministry, rooted in authentic human connection and guided by the Preventive System, is profoundly real. Artificial intelligence can assist us, but it cannot love like we do. It can organise, analyse and teach in new ways, but it can never replace the relational and pastoral touch that defines our Salesian mission.

Don Bosco was a visionary who was not afraid of innovation, both at the ecclesial level and at the educational, cultural and social levels. When this innovation served the good of young people, Don Bosco went ahead with astonishing speed. He took advantage of the press, new educational methods and workshops to lift young people up and prepare them for life. If he were among us today, he would undoubtedly look at AI with a critical and creative eye. He would see it not as an end but as a means, a tool to amplify pastoral effectiveness without losing sight of the human person at the centre.

Artificial Intelligence is not just a tool: it is part of our mission as Salesians living in the digital age. The virtual world is no longer a separate space but an integral part of young people's daily lives. AI can help us respond to their needs more efficiently and creatively, offering personalised learning paths, virtual mentorship, and platforms that foster meaningful connections.

In this sense, artificial intelligence becomes both a *tool* and a *mission*, as it helps us reach young people where they are, often immersed in the digital world. While embracing AI, we need to recognise that it is just one aspect

of a larger reality that encompasses social media, virtual communities, digital storytelling, and much more. Together, these elements form a new pastoral frontier that challenges us to be present and proactive. Our mission is not simply to use technology, but to *evangelise the digital* world, bringing the gospel into spaces where it might otherwise be absent.

Our response to AI and digital challenges must be rooted in the Salesian spirit of optimism and proactive engagement. Let us continue to walk with young people, even in the vast digital world, with hearts full of love because they are passionate about Christ and rooted in the charism of Don Bosco. The future is bright when technology is at the service of humanity and when the digital presence is full of authentic Salesian warmth and pastoral commitment. Let us embrace this new challenge, confident that the spirit of Don Bosco will guide us in every new opportunity.

### **3.2 The Pontifical Salesian University**

The Pontifical Salesian University (UPS) is the University of the Salesian Congregation, of all of us. It is a structure of great and strategic importance for the Congregation. Its mission is to bring the charism into dialogue with culture, the energy of Don Bosco's educative and pastoral experience with academic research, so as to develop a high-profile formation proposal at the service of the Congregation, the Church and society.

From the outset, our University has played an irreplaceable role in the formation of many confreres for roles of animation and government and still performs this valuable task. In an era characterised by widespread disorientation about the grammar of the human being and the meaning of existence, by the disintegration of the social bond and the fragmentation of religious experience, by international crises and migratory phenomena, a Congregation like ours is urgently called to face the educative and pastoral mission by making use of the solid intellectual resources that are developed within a university.

As Rector Major and as Grand Chancellor of UPS, I would like to reiterate that the two fundamental priorities for the University of the Congregation are *the formation of educators and pastors, Salesians and laity, at the service of young people* and the cultural – historical, pedagogical and theological – deepening of the charism. Around these two pillars, which require interdisciplinary dialogue and intercultural attention, the UPS is called upon to develop its commitment to research, teaching and the passing on of knowledge. I am therefore pleased that in view of the 150th anniversary of Don Bosco's text on the Preventive System, a serious research project has been launched in collaboration with the FMA's "Auxilium" Faculty to focus on the original inspiration of Don Bosco's educational practice and to examine how it inspires pedagogical and pastoral practices today in different contexts and cultures.

The governance and animation of the Congregation and the Salesian Family will certainly benefit from the cultural work of the University, just as academic study will receive valuable nourishment by maintaining a close connection with the life of the Congregation and its daily service to the poorest youth around the world.

### **3.3 150 years – the journey continues**

We are called to give thanks and praise to God in this jubilee year of hope because during this year we remember the missionary commitment of Don Bosco which arrived at a very significant moment of development in 1875. The reflection that the Vicar of the Rector Major, Fr Stefano Martoglio, offered us in *Strenna 2025* reminds us of the central theme of the 150th anniversary of Don Bosco's first missionary expedition: ***recognising, rethinking and relaunching***.

In the light of the 29th General Chapter that we are concluding, it helps us to place this invitation in the six-year period ahead of us. We are called to be ***grateful*** because "it makes the fatherly nature of every beautiful accomplishment evident. Without recognition, gratitude, there

is no capacity to accept.”

To gratitude we add the duty to **rethink** our fidelity, because “fidelity involves the ability to change”, in obedience towards a vision that comes from God and from interpreting the ‘signs of the times... Rethinking, then, becomes a generative act in which faith and life come together; a moment in which to ask ourselves: what do you want to tell us Lord?”

Finally, the courage to **re-launch**, to start over again every day. As we are doing in these days, we look far ahead, “welcoming new challenges, relaunching the mission with hope. (Because the) Mission is to bring the hope of Christ with clear and conscious awareness, linked to faith.”

#### 4. Conclusion

At the end of this concluding address I would like to present a reflection by **Tomas HALIK**, taken from his book ***The Afternoon of Christianity was*** The author, in the last chapter of the book entitled “The Society of the Way”, presents **four ecclesiological concepts**.

I believe that these **four ecclesiological concepts can help us to positively interpret the great pastoral opportunities that await us**. I offer this reflection with the understanding that what the author proposes is intimately related to the heart of Salesian charism. It is striking and surprising that the more we venture into a charismatic, pastoral as well as pedagogical and cultural interpretation of the current reality, the more the conviction is confirmed that our charism provides us with a solid basis so that the various processes that we are accompanying find their rightful place in a world where young people are waiting for hope, joy and optimism to be offered to them. It is good that we recognise with great humility but at the same time with a great sense of responsibility how Don Bosco’s charism continues to provide guidelines today, not only for us, but for the whole Church.

##### *4.1 Church as the people of God on pilgrimage through history.*

***This image outlines a Church on the move and grappling with incessant change. God moulds the Church throughout history, reveals himself to her through history, and imparts his teachings to her through historical events. God is in history (HALÍK, Tomáš, Afternoon of Christianity, p. 229)***

Our call to be educators and pastors consists precisely in walking with the flock in this history, in this constantly changing society. Our **presence in the various “courtyards of people’s lives”** is the sacramental presence of a God who wants to meet those who seek him without knowing it. In this context, “**The sacrament of presence**” acquires an inestimable value for us because it is intertwined with the historical events of our young people and of all those who turn to us in the various expressions of the Salesian mission – the **COURTYARD** or playground.

***4.2 The ‘school’ is the second vision of the Church – school of life and school of wisdom. We live in an era in which, in the public space of many European countries, neither a traditional religion nor atheism dominates, but rather agnosticism, apathy and religious illiteracy prevail... In this era it is urgently necessary that Christian society is transformed into a ‘school’ following the original ideal of medieval universities, which arose as a community of teachers and pupils, a community of life, prayer and teaching (HALÍK, Tomáš, Afternoon of Christianity, pp. 231-232).***

Retracing Don Bosco’s educative and pastoral project from its origins, we discover how this second proposal directly touches the experience we currently offer to our young people: **school and vocational training**. They are educational paths which are an essential tool for giving life to an integral process where culture and faith meet. For us today, this space is an excellent opportunity where we can witness to the good news in the human and fraternal, educational and pastoral encounter with so many people and, above all, with so many children and young people who feel



they are accompanied toward a dignified future. The educational experience for us pastors is a lifestyle that communicates wisdom and values in a context that encounters and goes beyond resistance and that dissolves indifference through empathy and closeness. Walking together promotes a space of integral growth inspired by the wisdom and values of the Gospel – the **SCHOOL**.

*4.3 The Church as a field hospital... for too long, face to face with the diseases of society, the Church has limited itself to morality; now it is faced with the task of rediscovering and applying the therapeutic potential of faith. The diagnostic mission should be carried out by the discipline which I have suggested be called kairology – the art of reading and interpreting the signs of the times, the theological hermeneutics of the facts of society and culture. Kairology should devote its attention to times of crisis and changing cultural paradigms. It should see them as part of a ‘pedagogy of God’, as the opportune time to deepen the reflection on the faith and renew its practice. In a certain sense, kairology develops the method of spiritual discernment, which is an important component of the spirituality of Saint Ignatius and his disciples; it applies this method when it delves into and evaluates the current state of the world and our tasks within it (HALÍK, Tomáš, *Afternoon of Christianity*, pp. 233-234).*

This third ecclesiological criterion goes to the heart of the Salesian approach. We are not present in the lives of children and young people to condemn them. **We make ourselves available to offer them a healthy space of (ecclesial) communion, enlightened by the presence of a merciful God who places no conditions on anyone. We develop and communicate our various pastoral proposals precisely with this perspective of facilitating the encounter of young people with a spiritual proposal capable of enlightening the times in which they live, of offering them hope for the future. The proposal of the person of Jesus Christ is not the result of sterile confessionalism or blind proselytism, but the**

discovery of a relationship with a person who offers unconditional love to all. Our testimony, and that of all those who live the educational and pastoral experience as **community**, is the most eloquent sign and the most credible message of the values we wish to communicate in order to share them – the **CHURCH**.

*4.4 The fourth model of the Church... it is necessary that the Church establish spiritual centres, places of adoration and contemplation, but also of encounter and dialogue, where it is possible to share the experience of faith. Many Christians are concerned that in a large number of countries the network of parishes, which was formed a few centuries ago in a completely different socio-cultural and pastoral situation and within a different interpretation of the Church's self, is fraying (HALÍK, Tomáš, Afternoon of Christianity, pp. 236-237).*

The fourth concept is that of a “**home**” capable of communicating **welcome, listening and accompaniment**. A “home” in which the human dimension of each individual's story is recognised and, at the same time, the possibility is offered to allow this humanity to reach its maturity. Don Bosco rightly calls “home” the place where the community lives its call because, by welcoming our children and young people, it is able to ensure the conditions and pastoral proposals necessary for this humanity to grow in an integral way. Each of our communities, each “house” or home is called to be a witness to the originality of the Valdocco experience: a “home” that intersects with the history of our young people, offering them a dignified future – the **HOME**.

In our Constitutions, Art. 40 we find the *synthesis of all these “four ecclesiological concepts”*. It is a synthesis that serves as an invitation and also as an encouragement for the present and the future of our educative and pastoral communities, of our provinces, of our beloved Salesian Congregation:

Don Bosco's Oratory a permanent criterion

Don Bosco lived a pastoral experience in his first Oratory which serves as a model; it was for the youngsters a home that welcomed, a parish that evangelized, a school that prepared them for life, and a playground where friends could meet and enjoy themselves.

As we carry out our mission today, the Valdocco experience is still the lasting criterion for discernment and renewal in all our activities and works.

Thank you.

Rome, April 12, 2025

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## With Don Bosco. Always

*It makes a difference whether or not a General Chapter is held in one place or another. Certainly, in Valdocco, in the "cradle of the charism", we have the opportunity to rediscover the genesis of our history as well as the originality that constitutes the heart of our identity as consecrated persons and apostles of youth.*

In the ancient setting of Valdocco, where everything speaks of our origins, I am almost obligated to recall that December of 1859, when Don Bosco made an incredible decision, unique in history: to found a religious congregation with some young boys.

He had prepared them, but they were still very young. "For a long time I have been thinking of founding a Congregation. Now is the time to get down to business", Don Bosco explained simply. "Actually, this Congregation is not being born now: it already existed in that set of Rules that you have always observed by tradition... Now it is a matter of moving forward,

of formally establishing the Congregation and of accepting its Rules. But know that only those who, after serious reflection, want to make the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience in due course will be enrolled... I will give you a week to think about it."

There was an unusual silence as they left the meeting. Soon, when they began to speak, it could be seen that Don Bosco had been right to proceed slowly and cautiously. Some muttered under their breath that Don Bosco wanted to make them friars. Cagliero paced the courtyard overwhelmed by conflicting emotions.

But the desire to "stay with Don Bosco" prevailed in the majority. Cagliero came out with the phrase that would become historic: "Friar or not, I'm staying with Don Bosco".

At the "accession conference," held on the evening of December 18, they were 17.

Don Bosco convened the first General Chapter on September 5, 1877, in Lanzo Torinese. There were twenty-three participants, and the Chapter lasted three full days.

Today, for the 29th Chapter, there are 227 capitulars. They have come from all over the world, representing all Salesians. At the opening of the first General Chapter, Don Bosco said to our confreres, "The Divine Saviour says in the Holy Gospel that where two or three are gathered in His name, there He Himself is in the midst of them. We have no other purpose in these gatherings than the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls redeemed by the precious Blood of Jesus Christ." We can therefore be certain that the Lord will be in our midst, and that He will lead things in such a way that everyone feels at ease.

### **An epochal change**

The evangelical expression, "Jesus called those He wanted to be with Him and sent them out to preach" (*Mk 3:14-15*), says that Jesus chooses and calls those He wants. We too are among these. The Kingdom of God is made present, and those first Twelve are an example and a model for us and for our

communities. The Twelve are ordinary people, with strengths and weaknesses. They do not form a community of the pure, nor even a simple group of friends.

They know, as Pope Francis has said, that “We are not living an epoch of change so much as an epochal change”. In Valdocco, these days, there is a climate of great awareness. All the confreres feel that this is a moment of great responsibility.

In the life of the majority of the confreres, of the provinces, and of the Congregation, there are many positive things, but this is not enough and cannot serve as “consolation,” because the cry of the world, the great and new poverties, the daily struggle of so many people – not only poor but also simple and hardworking – rises up strongly as a request for help. These are all questions that must provoke and shake us and not leave us at ease.

With the help of the provinces through consultation, we believe we have identified on the one hand the main causes of concern and on the other, the signs of vitality of our Congregation, always expressed with the specific cultural traits of each context.

During the Chapter, we propose to concentrate on what it means for us to truly be Salesians passionate about Jesus Christ, because without this we will offer good services, we will do good to people, we will help, but we will not leave a significant impression.

The mission of Jesus continues and is made visible today in the world also through us, His envoys. We are consecrated to building ample spaces of light for today’s world, to be prophets. We have been consecrated by God and have been called to follow His Beloved Son Jesus, to truly live as if we have been redeemed by God. Therefore, once again, the essential point is all about the Congregation’s fidelity to the Holy Spirit, living, with the spirit of Don Bosco, a Salesian consecrated life centred upon Jesus Christ.

Apostolic vitality, like spiritual vitality, is a commitment in favour of young people, of children, in the most varied poverties, therefore we cannot stop at offering only

educational services. The Lord calls us to educate by evangelising, bringing His presence and accompanying life with opportunities for the future.

We are called to seek new models of presence, new expressions of the Salesian charism in the name of God. This should be done in communion with young people and with the world, through “integral ecology,” in the formation of a digital culture in the worlds inhabited by young people and adults.

Also, there is a strong desire and expectation that this will be a courageous General Chapter, in which things are said, without getting lost in correct, well-packaged phrases, but which do not touch life.

We are not alone in this mission. We know and feel that the Virgin Mary is a model of fidelity.

It is good to return in mind and heart to the day of the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of 1887 when, two months before his death, Don Bosco said to some Salesians who, moved, looked at him and listened: “So far we have walked on what is certain. We cannot err; it is Mary who guides us.”

Mary Help of Christians, Our Lady of Don Bosco, guides us. She is the Mother of us all, and it is she who repeats, as at Cana of Galilee in this hour of the CG29, “Whatever He tells you, do it.”

May our Mother Help of Christians enlighten and guide us, as she did with Don Bosco, to be faithful to the Lord and never to disappoint young people, especially those most in need.

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## **New Rector Major: Fabius Attard**

We are pleased to announce that Fr. Fabius Attard is the new Rector Major, the eleventh successor of Don Bosco.

Brief information about the new Rector Major:

Born: 23.03.1959 in Gozo (Malta), diocese of Gozo.

Novitiate: 1979-1980 in Dublin.

Perpetual profession: 11.08.1985 in Malta.

Priestly ordination: 04.07.1987 in Malta.

He has held various pastoral and formative positions within his home province.

He was for 12 years the General Councillor for Youth Ministry, 2008-2020.

Since 2020 he has been the Delegate of the Rector Major for the Ongoing Formation of Salesians and laity in Europe.

Last community of belonging: Rome CNOS.

Languages known: Maltese, English, Italian, French, Spanish.

We wish Fr. Fabio a fruitful apostolate and assure him of our prayers.

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## We are Don Bosco, today

*“You will complete the work I am starting; I will make the sketch, you will add the colors” (Don Bosco)*

Dear friends and readers, members of the Salesian Family, in this month's greeting in the Salesian Bulletin, I will focus on a very important event that the Salesian Congregation is experiencing: the 29th General Chapter. Every six years, this assembly takes place in the journey of the Salesian Congregation, the most important that the Congregation can experience.

Many things are a part of our lives, and this Jubilee year is giving us many important events. However, I want to focus on this because, even if it seems far from us, it concerns us all.

Don Bosco, our Founder, was aware that not everything would end with him, but that his would surely be just the beginning of a long journey to be undertaken. At the age of sixty, one day in 1875, he said to Don Giulio Barberis, one of his closest collaborators: "You will complete the work I am starting; I am making the sketch, you will add the colors [...] I will make a rough copy of the Congregation and I will leave to those who come after me the task of making it beautiful." With this happy and prophetic expression, Don Bosco was outlining the path that we are all called to take; and the General Chapter of Don Bosco's Salesians is fulfilling this in these times to its fullest in Valdocco.

### **The prophecy of the candy**

Today's world is not that of Don Bosco, but there is a common characteristic. It is a time of profound changes. Complete, balanced, and responsible humanisation in its material and spiritual components was the true goal of Don Bosco. He was concerned with filling the "inner space" of the boys, forming "well-formed minds," "honest citizens." Today, this is more relevant than ever. Today's world needs Don Bosco.

In the beginning, there was a very simple question for everyone: "Do you want an ordinary life or do you want to change the world?" Can we still talk of goals and ideals today? When the river stops flowing, it becomes a swamp. The same is so with human beings.

Don Bosco never stopped moving forward. Today he does so with our feet.

He had a conviction regarding young people: "This most delicate and precious portion of human society, upon which the hopes of a happy future are founded, is not innately perverse... because if it sometimes happens that they are already corrupted at that age, it is rather due to thoughtlessness than to consummate malice. These young people truly need a helping hand that takes care of them, nurtures them, guides them..."

In 1882, in a conference to the Cooperators in Genoa: "By



removing, instructing, and educating young people in danger, it is good for the whole of civil society. If young people are well educated, we will have a better generation over time." It is like saying: only education can change the world.

Don Bosco had an almost frightening capacity for vision. He never says "until now," but always, "from now on."

Guy Avanzini, an eminent university professor, continues to repeat: "The pedagogy of the twenty-first century will be Salesian, or it will not be."

One evening in 1851, from a first-floor window, Don Bosco threw a handful of candies among the boys. There was an outburst of joy, and a boy, seeing him smile from the window, shouted: "Oh Don Bosco, if only you could see all the parts of the world, and in each of them so many oratories!"

Don Bosco fixed his serene gaze in the air and replied: "Who knows if the day will come when the children of the oratory will truly be scattered all over the world."

## **Looking afar**

What is a General Chapter? Why take up room with these lines on a topic that is specifically for the Salesian Congregation? In the constitutions of life of Don Bosco's Salesians, in article 146, the General Chapter is defined as follows:

*"The General Chapter is the principal sign of the Congregation's unity in diversity. It is the fraternal meeting in which Salesians carry out a communal reflection to keep themselves faithful to the Gospel and to their Founder's charism, and sensitive to the needs of time and place.*

*Through the General Chapter, the entire Society, opening itself to the guidance of the Spirit of the Lord, seeks to discern God's will at a specific moment in history for the purpose of rendering the Church better service."*

The General Chapter is therefore not a private matter for the consecrated Salesians, but a very important assembly that concerns all of us, that touches the entire Salesian Family and those who have Don Bosco within them, because at the centre are the people, the mission, the Charism of Don Bosco,

the Church, and each one of us, of you.

At the centre is faithfulness to God and to Don Bosco, in the ability to see the signs of the times and the different places. It is a faithfulness that is a continuous movement, renewal, ability to look afar and, at the same time, keep our feet firmly planted on the ground.

For this reason, about 250 Salesian brothers have gathered from all over the world to pray, think, discuss, and look afar... in faithfulness to Don Bosco.

Also, from the construction of this vision, the new Rector Major, the successor of Don Bosco and his General Council, will be elected.

This is not something outside your life, dear friend who is reading, but within your existence and in your "affection" for Don Bosco. Why do I tell you this? So that you accompany all this with your prayer: the prayer to the Holy Spirit to help all the capitulars to know the will of God for a better service to the Church.

I believe that the GC29, I am sure, will be all this. It will be an experience of God to clean up other parts of the sketch that Don Bosco left us, as has always been done in all the General Chapters in the history of the Congregation, always faithful to his design.

Confident that even today we can continue to be enlightened to be faithful to the Lord Jesus in fidelity to the original charism, with the faces, music, and colours of today.

We are not alone in this mission, and we know and feel that Mary, Mother Help of Christians, the Helper of the Church, a model of fidelity, will support the steps of each one of us.

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# Good, trustworthy and courageous slaves

*In this Jubilee year, in this difficult world, we are invited to stand up, restart, and walk in a new life on our journey as men and believers.*

The prophet Isaiah addresses Jerusalem with these words: «Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you». (Is 60:1). The prophet's invitation—to rise because the light is coming—seems surprising, as it is proclaimed in the aftermath of the harsh exile and the numerous persecutions that the people have experienced.

This invitation resonates today for us who celebrate this Jubilee year. In this difficult world, we too are invited to stand up, restart, and walk in a new life on our journey as people and believers.

All the more now that we have had the grace, yes, because it is a matter of grace, to celebrate in liturgical remembrance the Holiness of John Bosco. Let us not make a habit of it: Don Bosco is a great man of God, brilliant and courageous, an unrelenting apostle because he is a disciple deeply in love with Christ. For us, a father!

In life, having a father is extremely important; in faith, in following Christ, it is the same: having a great father is an invaluable gift. You feel it within you, and his believing experience stirs your life. If this is true for Don Bosco, why can't it be so for me?

This is an existential question that sets us in motion and changes us, in the spirit of the Jubilee, becoming “renewed,” “changed” people. It is the profound meaning of the feast of Don Bosco that we have just celebrated, for all of us: to imitate, not just admire!

In this Jubilee year that we are living, with the

theme of Hope, the presence of God, which accompanies us, Don Bosco is a clear and strong reference!

Speaking of Hope, Don Bosco writes, as I have taken up in this year's Strenna text:

«The Salesian» –Don Bosco said, and speaking of the Salesian, he speaks to each of us who reads – «is ready to suffer cold and heat, hunger and thirst, weariness and disdain whenever God's glory and the salvation of souls require it»; the inner support of this demanding ascetic ability is the thought of paradise as a reflection of the good conscience with which he works and lives. «In all we do, our duty, work, troubles or sufferings, we must never forget that [...] the least thing done for his name's sake is not left forgotten; it is of faith that in his own good time he will give us rich recompense. At the end of our lives as we stand before His judgement seat He will say, radiant with love: "Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master (*Mt 25:21*) ».

«In your work and sorrow never forget we have a great reward stored up for us in heaven». And when our Father says that the Salesian exhausted by too much work represents a victory for the whole Congregation, it seems to suggest a dimension of fraternal communion in the reward, almost a community sense of paradise!

Stand up, Salesians! This is what Don Bosco asks of us.

### **«Rejoice! In saving others, you save yourself»**

Don Bosco was one of the great figures of hope. There are many elements to demonstrate this. His Salesian spirit is permeated by the certainties and industriousness characteristic of this bold dynamism of the Holy Spirit.

Don Bosco was able to translate into his life the energy of hope on two fronts: the commitment to personal sanctification and the mission of salvation for others; or better – and here lies a central characteristic of his

spirit–personal sanctification through the salvation of others. Let us remember the famous formula of the three steps: “Rejoice, in saving others, you save yourself.” It seems like a mnemonic game said so simply, like a pedagogical slogan, but it is profound and indicates how the two aspects of personal sanctification and the salvation of others are closely linked.

Monsignor Erik Varden states: «Here and now, hope manifests itself as a glimmer. That does not mean it is irrelevant. Hope has a blessed contagion that allows it to spread from heart to heart. Totalitarian powers always work to erase hope and induce despair. To educate oneself in hope is to practice freedom. In a poem, Péguy describes hope as the flame of the sanctuary lamp. This flame, he says, “is always a descending border, in the depths of night.” It enables us to see what is now, but also to foresee what could be. To hope is to stake one’s existence on the possibility of becoming. It is an art to be practiced assiduously in the fatalistic and deterministic atmosphere in which we live».

May God grant us the gift to live this Jubilee year in this way!

May we all walk this month with this vision that “shines in the darkness,” with Hope in our hearts, which is the presence of God.

I recommend that, this month, you pray for our Salesian Congregation, which will gather in General Chapter; and accompany us all with your prayer and your thoughts, so that we may be faithful, as Salesians, to what Don Bosco wanted.