 Reading time: 4 min.

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.