 Reading time: 8 min.

On Sunday, February 16th, 2025, at Valdocco, Turin, the twenty-ninth General Chapter of the Salesian Congregation will begin. This event is the main sign of unity of the Congregation in its diversity. We talked about this with Fr Alphonse Owoudou, the Regional Councillor for Africa-Madagascar and Chapter Moderator

Can you introduce yourself?
My name is Alphonse Owoudou, a Salesian of Don Bosco, originally from Cameroon (ATE Vice Province) in Africa. In April 2025, I will celebrate my 56th birthday. I am currently the Regional Councillor for Africa-Madagascar. Before taking on this role within the General Council, I was the Superior of the ATE Vice Province, Equatorial Tropical Africa.

My journey first took me to Gabon as a young Salesian priest and diocesan chaplain for youth. Subsequently, I continued my studies in psychology at the Pontifical Salesian University (UPS). I then reached Lomé, Togo, where I had completed my novitiate and post-novitiate; I returned there after 12 years as a member of the formation team. I then had the responsibility of the current Don Bosco Institute of Higher Studies.

In 2015, I returned to ATE to be part of the provincial animation team. Happy to reunite with my confreres and my country after 20 years, I initially served as Vice Provincial from 2015 to 2017, before being appointed Provincial in June 2017. This period allowed me to discover my Province, its works, and the large educational and pastoral community across a territory of six nations, later reduced to five with the birth of the ACC Province.

Since CG28 in 2020, I have the immense privilege of serving as Regional Councillor, ensuring the link between the 15 Provincials of Africa-Madagascar and the General Council, in accordance with Article 140 of our Constitutions. This mission has allowed me to discover and better understand the richness, complexity, and beauty of Salesian Africa, a region full of history, promises, challenges, and resources.

What is the role of the Moderator?
In the context of the General Chapter, the role of the Moderator is primarily to ensure technical coordination and the regularity of processes before and during the

Chapter. He presides over the Technical Commission, is responsible for preparing the work schedule, the working document prepared by the Pre-Chapter Commission, as well as the recommendations of the Rector Major or the Vicar for the proper conduct of Provincial Chapters and election rules.

Assisted by his secretariat and the General Secretary, the Moderator also takes care of validating the elected delegates by verifying the numbers from each Province, thus ensuring the legitimacy of their participation in the General Chapter. He sends the Provincials the necessary forms for the minutes and templates for contributions from the Provincial Chapters, groups of confreres, and individual members. Once these contributions are collected, he organizes, classifies, and prepares them. He introduces the members of the Pre-Chapter Commission to the central theme of the General Chapter in order to collaboratively develop the document that will serve as the basis for reflections and debates during the Chapter sessions.

The General Chapter is often defined as “the main sign of the unity of the Congregation in its diversity”. It is in this spirit that the Moderator must guide and facilitate exchanges so that this unity is fully manifested, thanks to careful preparation and well-structured discussions.

Why is the Chapter so important for the life of the Congregation?
The General Chapter is crucial for the life of the Congregation because it represents “the main sign of the unity of the Congregation in its diversity”. It is a moment when Salesians come together to reflect on how to remain faithful to the Gospel, to the charism of Don Bosco, and to the needs of the times and places where they carry out their mission. Guided by the Holy Spirit, Salesians discern God’s will to better serve the Church and youth at a specific moment in history.

In addition to this spiritual dimension and reflection on the mission, the General Chapter plays a central role in the governance of the Congregation. It is during the Chapter that elections or re-elections of the Rector Major, his Vicar, and other members of the General Council take place. This electoral process allows the Congregation to choose the leaders who will guide the Salesian mission for the coming years. These elections are fundamental because they ensure not only continuity but also the vitality and adaptation of the Congregation to current challenges.

The Chapter is also an opportunity to review and adapt the Salesian mission to

present times. For example, during the 29th General Chapter, one of the central themes is the “weakening of charismatic identity” perceived within the Congregation, and discussions are planned to address this concern. Additionally, legal issues that have remained pending since the previous Chapter will also be addressed.

In summary, the General Chapter is a time of discernment, decision, and renewal, allowing the Congregation to better respond to the needs of today’s world while electing the leaders who will guide this mission in unity and fidelity to Don Bosco.

What is the theme of the Chapter?
The central theme of the 29th General Chapter is, “Passionate about Jesus Christ, dedicated to young people”, with the subtitle “Living our Salesian vocation faithfully and prophetically”. This theme invites us to return to the essence of our consecrated identity, centred on Christ and the young. It is a call to renew the very heart of the Salesian vocation, to rekindle the spiritual and apostolic fervour that must animate every Salesian.

Concretely, this means deepening our spiritual life, dedicating ourselves more to prayer and contemplation, while remaining firmly committed to the young, especially the poorest and most marginalised. The Chapter invites us to be not only educators and pastors but also prophetic witnesses of the Gospel in a changing world. In other words, it is not enough to carry out works; it is necessary that these works deeply reflect our passion for Christ and our commitment to the young.

The theme also highlights three major priorities for renewal: spiritual life and formation, increased collaboration with laypeople and members of the Salesian Family, and finally, a courageous review of the governance structures of the Congregation to adapt them to the current needs of the mission.

Who are the participants?
The 29th General Chapter brings together a total of 226 Chapter members and a team of 45 confreres and collaborators responsible for logistics and other services. Specifically, this includes:

14 members of the General Council, including the General Secretary;
the General Procurator and the Emeritus Rector Major;
2 Chapter members from the General House (RMG);

2 from the Pontifical Salesian University (UPS);
22 from the Southern Cone Region;
27 from Inter-America;
27 from East Asia-Oceania;
29 from the Mediterranean Region;
32 from Africa;
33 from South Asia;
and, 36, the largest group, from Central-Northern Europe.
These Chapter members will arrive at the General Chapter as bearers of the discernment and hope of the 13,544 Salesians registered for this important event. During GC29, 93% of the assembly will be made up of clerics and 7% of Brothers.

What are your concerns?
I feel overall serene, especially after the entire “synodal” journey we have just gone through since that famous month of July 2023, with a resilience that I admire.

We have worked intensively in the 92 provinces and 7 regions, as well as within the General Council. Furthermore, the Technical Commission, the Juridical Commission, and the Pre-Chapter Commission have worked with a great sense of sacrifice and admirable flexibility to prepare for this important and perhaps unique turning point. I am convinced that God will help us face the challenges of this Chapter that, in the mind of the Rector Major emeritus, Cardinal Ángel Fernández Artime, was to be prophetic and a bearer of renewal.

That said, my “concerns” naturally align with those of all my confreres, whose reflections have been summarised in the *Instrumentum Laboris*, derived from the 244 documents we received. Among the main ones is the issue of charismatic identity. Many express fear that our Salesian charism is gradually losing its specificity and that we risk becoming similar to any social organisation. This could weaken the effectiveness of our mission, as what makes us unique is precisely our ability to unite social action and a spiritual witness rooted in faith. This is why the first sentence of the Constitutions, like a creed, tells us that we are a masterpiece of God for His glory and for the holistic salvation of His children.

There is also concern about the growing secularisation and de-Christianisation of our societies, not only in the West. This reality makes it more difficult for us, Salesians—and I bet it is the same for all consecrated persons and religious confessions—to proclaim and live openly the faith in the public sphere. These

challenges require an adaptation of our vision and pastoral methods, particularly in accompanying young confreres and new generations.

Another important theme is that of integral ecology and digital culture. The Chapter will certainly emphasise the need for us, as the last three popes have repeated since the beginning of this millennium, to adapt to the digital world in which young people live today, integrating greater attention to the environment, our “common home”, in all aspects of our mission.

Finally, there is an urgency for renewal in our spiritual, fraternal, and apostolic life. It is important not to let ourselves be absorbed exclusively by practical activities but to rediscover spiritual vitality at the centre of our action. This involves more intense prayer, a more solid and inculturated formation, and better collaboration within the Salesian Family and with laypeople, who are called to play an important role in our mission. This call for collaboration is not new, but the context of the Synod on Synodality brings a more powerful and better-articulated scope.

Will there be surprises?

There may be surprises during this 29th General Chapter, due to the breadth of its agenda and the expressed desire to make “courageous decisions” and adopt a “more prophetic” stance. In any case, this is what many of us hope for.

Among these surprises, one of the key aspects could concern the review of governance and animation structures. The Chapter may choose to significantly rethink the General Council, making it more agile and better suited to the current needs of the Congregation. Rethinking can also mean maintaining the existing structure but living and managing it better. This could also include a re-evaluation of electoral processes to ensure that the chosen leaders are the result of a more collegial, linear, and transparent process.

Another potentially significant point concerns synodality, particularly in closer collaboration with laypeople. This could translate into a deeper shared governance, in line with the approach “with and for the young”. By strengthening this synodality, the Salesian mission could not only renew its commitment to the young but also become truly prophetic by embodying a model of participatory leadership and co-responsibility with laypeople. This would be a strong sign that the spirit of communion and collaboration is at the heart of our charism.

Moreover, as the *Instrumentum Laboris* already emphasises, there are strong expectations that this Chapter will be a moment of courage and prophecy. It is likely that GC29, instead of multiplying exhortations, will decide to focus on a few key priorities, in accordance with the signs of the times. Among these priorities, particular attention could be given to the implementation and strengthening of the protocol for the safeguarding of minors and vulnerable persons, ensuring that every Salesian work is a safe and protected place for all. Education to peace and peaceful coexistence could also feature among the central themes, especially in contexts marked by violence or conflict.

Finally, contemporary issues such as the digital mission, integral ecology, and social justice could be the subject of bold decisions, taking into account the diversity of contexts in which the Salesian charism must express itself today. By focusing on concrete areas, the Chapter could provide profound and coherent responses to current challenges while respecting the richness of the various local realities.

Thus, the decisions made could reflect this synodal and prophetic dynamism, centred on Christ and the service of the young, paving the way for a renewed Salesian future faithful to its evangelical commitment.

In summary:

Context
The 29th General Chapter of the Salesian Congregation will be held at Valdocco, Turin, from February 16th to April 12th, 2025, and will bring together 226 Chapter members to reflect on the future of the Salesian mission.

Role of the Moderator
– technical coordination: develop the schedule, organise the work, and prepare the basic documents;
– validation of participants: verify the eligibility of delegates, ensure their legitimacy, and collect their contributions;
– thematic preparation: introduce the members of the Pre-Chapter Commission to the main theme of the Chapter to develop a working document that will guide the debates;
– ensure that exchanges fully reflect the unity and diversity of the Congregation, fostering collective reflection and spiritual discernment.

Importance of the Chapter
– spiritual approach: reflect on fidelity to the charism of Don Bosco, to renew missionary fervour;
– governance approach: elect leaders for the coming years;
– adaptive approach: respond to contemporary challenges, such as the weakening of charismatic identity or growing secularisation.

Theme
Central: “Passionate about Jesus Christ, dedicated to young people – Living our Salesian vocation faithfully and prophetically”.
Core areas:
– spiritual life and formation: strengthen prayer, contemplation, and spiritual formation;
– collaboration with laypeople: promote shared leadership with members of the Salesian Family;
– review of governance structures: adapt structures to current realities for a more effective mission.

Challenges and issues
– charismatic identity: reaffirm Salesian specificity to avoid becoming an ordinary social organisation (like an NGO);
– secularisation: adapt pastoral methods for effective proclamation of faith;
– digital world and ecology: integrate digital and environmental issues into the mission;
– spiritual renewal and collaboration: intensify prayer and strengthen cooperation with laypeople and youth.