



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO MEMBERS OF THE 26th GENERAL CHAPTER
OF THE SALESIAN CONGREGATION**

Clementine Hall

Monday, 31 March 2008

Your Eminence,

Dear Members of the General Chapter of the Salesian Congregation,

I am pleased to meet you today as your Chapter is now reaching its conclusion. I first of all thank Fr Pascual Chávez Villanueva, Rector Major, for the sentiments he has expressed on behalf of you all, confirming the Congregation's will to work with the Church and for the Church always, in full harmony with the Successor of Peter. I thank him too for the generous service he has carried out in the past six years and offer him my good wishes for his recent renewal in office. I also greet the members of the new General Council who will help the Rector Major in his task of animation and in the governance of your whole Congregation.

In the [Message I addressed to the Rector Major at the beginning of the Chapter](#), and through him to you, the Chapter Members, I expressed certain expectations that the Church has of you Salesians and I also offered several ideas for the progress of your Congregation. Today, I intend to take up again and examine some of these recommendations in the light of the work you are doing. Your 26th Chapter is being celebrated in a period of great social, economic and political change, of heightened ethical, cultural and environmental problems and unresolved conflicts between races and nations. Moreover, in our time, communication between peoples is more intense, there are new opportunities for knowledge and dialogue and a livelier exchange on the spiritual values that give meaning to life. In particular, the appeals young people make to us and especially their questions about the fundamental problems are linked to their intense longing for a full life, authentic love and constructive freedom. They are situations that test the Church and her ability to proclaim Christ's Gospel today with its promise full of hope. I therefore warmly hope that the entire Salesian Congregation, thanks to the results of your General Chapter, may live with

renewed dynamism and fervour the mission for which, through the maternal intervention of Mary, Help of Christians, the Holy Spirit brought it into being in the Church. I want today to encourage you and all Salesians to continue on the path of this mission in full fidelity to your original charism, already in the context of the upcoming second centenary of Don Bosco's birth.

With the theme "*Give me souls, take away all else*", your General Chapter's aim was to revive apostolic zeal in every Salesian and throughout the Congregation. This will help give Salesians a better defined profile so that they may become increasingly aware of their identity as people consecrated "for the glory of God" and increasingly on fire with pastoral zeal "for the salvation of souls". Don Bosco wanted the choice of consecrated life to guarantee the continuity of his charism in the Church. Today too, the Salesian movement can only grow in fidelity to its charism if a strong and vital nucleus of consecrated people continues to form its core. Thus, in order to strengthen the identity of the Congregation as a whole your first commitment consists in reinforcing the vocation of each Salesian so that he may live in full fidelity to his call to the consecrated life. The entire Congregation must strive to be ceaselessly "a living memorial of Jesus' way of living and acting as the Incarnate Word in relation to the Father and in relation to the brethren" (*Vita Consecrata*, n. 22). May Christ be the centre of your lives! It is necessary to let oneself be seized by him and to start out afresh from him always. May everything else be counted "as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus" and as "refuse, in order that I may gain Christ" (Phil 3: 8). It is here that ardent love for the Lord Jesus is born, the aspiration to identify oneself with him, assuming his sentiments and way of life, trusting abandonment in the Father and dedication to the evangelizing mission that must characterize every Salesian: he must feel chosen to follow the obedient, poor and chaste Christ in conformity with Don Bosco's teaching and example.

The secularization process gaining ground in contemporary culture unfortunately does not spare even communities of consecrated life. For this reason it is necessary to watch over forms and lifestyles that risk weakening Gospel witness as well as rendering pastoral action ineffective and the vocational response fragile. I therefore ask you to help your confreres preserve and revive their faithfulness to the call. Jesus' prayer to the Father before his Passion, asking that he keep in his name all the disciples that he had given him and that none of them be lost (cf. Jn 17: 11-12), is particularly appropriate for vocations of special consecration. "The spiritual life must therefore have first place in the programme" of your Congregation (*Vita Consecrata*, n. 93). May the Word of God and the Liturgy be sources of Salesian spirituality! In particular, may *lectio divina*, practised daily by every Salesian, and the Eucharist celebrated every day in the community, nourish and support Salesian spirituality! From this will be born the authentic spirituality of apostolic dedication and ecclesial communion. The flourishing of your Congregation will be guaranteed by fidelity to the Gospel lived *sine glossa* and to your Rule of Life, particularly an austere way of life and Gospel poverty practised consistently, with faithful love for the Church and the generous gift of yourselves to youth, especially the neediest and most disadvantaged.

Don Bosco is a shining example of a life marked by apostolic zeal, lived at the service of the

Church in the Congregation and in the Salesian Family. At the school of St Joseph Cafasso, your Founder learned to make his own the motto "*Give me souls, take away all else*", as the synthesis of a model of pastoral action inspired by the figure and spirituality of St Francis de Sales. This model fits into the horizon of the absolute primacy of God's love, a love that succeeds in shaping passionate personalities eager to contribute to Christ's mission to set the whole earth ablaze with the fire of his love (cf. Lk 12: 49). Besides the ardour of God's love, another characteristic of the Salesian model is awareness of the inestimable value of "souls". This perception by contrast generates an acute sense of sin and its devastating consequences in time and in eternity. The apostle is called to cooperate with the Saviour's redeeming action in order that no one be lost. "Saving souls", precisely as St Peter said, was thus Don Bosco's *raison d'être*. His immediate successor, Bl. Michele Rua, summed up the life of your beloved Father and Founder in these words: "He did not give way, he did not speak, did not turn his hand to any task that did not aim at the salvation of young people.... He truly had only their souls at heart".

This is what Bl. Michele Rua said of Don Bosco. Today, it is also urgently necessary to nourish this passion in every Salesian's heart. Thus, he will not hesitate to venture daringly into the most difficult milieus of evangelizing action for young people, especially for those who are materially and spiritually the poorest. He will have the patience and courage even to propose to young people that they live in total dedication in consecrated life. He will have an open mind in order to identify the new needs of young people and listen to their prayers for help, possibly leaving to others areas that have already been consolidated by pastoral interventions. For this reason the Salesian will face the totalizing demands of the mission with a simple, poor and austere life, sharing the living conditions of the poorest of the poor, and will have the joy of giving more to those who have received less in their lives. May his apostolic enthusiasm become so contagious that others also catch it. The Salesian thus becomes a champion of what the apostolate means, helping first of all young people to know and love the Lord Jesus, to let themselves be fascinated by him, to cultivate evangelizing commitment, to love their own peers, to be apostles to other young people like St Dominic Savio, Bl. Laura Vicuña and Bl. Zepherin Namuncurà and the five young Blessed Martyrs of the Oratory of Poznan. Dear Salesians, may you be committed to forming lay people with apostolic hearts, inviting them all to walk in the holiness of life that develops courageous disciples and authentic apostles.

In the [Message I addressed to the Rector Major at the beginning of your General Chapter](#), I wished to present in spirit to all Salesians the [Letter I recently sent to the faithful of Rome](#) concerning the anxiety about what I called a great *educational emergency*. "Educating has never been an easy undertaking and seems to be becoming increasingly difficult today; thus, many parents and teachers are tempted to give up their task and do not even succeed in understanding what the mission entrusted to them truly is. Indeed, too many uncertainties, too many doubts are circulating in our society and our culture, too many distorted images are transmitted by the media. It thus becomes difficult to propose to the new generations something valid and reliable, rules of conduct and worthwhile objectives to which to devote one's life" ([Address at the Presentation of a](#)

Letter on "The Urgent Task of Education", 23 February 2008). Actually, the most serious aspect of the educational crisis is the sense of discouragement that overcomes many educators, parents and teachers in particular as they face the difficulties of their task today. I therefore wrote in the Letter cited: "The soul of education, as of the whole of life, can only be a dependable hope. Today, our hope is threatened on many sides and we even risk becoming, like the ancient pagans, people "having no hope and without God in the world", as the Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians of Ephesus (Eph 2: 12). "What may be the deepest difficulty for a true educational endeavour consists precisely in this: the fact that at the root of the crisis of education lies a crisis of trust in life", which is basically nothing other than distrust in the God who called us to life. In the education of youth it is extremely important that the family play an active role. Families frequently have difficulty in facing the challenges of education; they are often unable to make their own contribution or are absent. The special tenderness and commitment to young people that are characteristic of Don Bosco's charism must be expressed in an equal commitment to the involvement and formation of families. Your youth ministry, therefore, must be decisively open to family ministry. Caring for families does not mean taking people away from work for young people; on the contrary, it means making it more permanent and effective. I thus encourage you to deepen the forms of this commitment on which you have set out; this will prove advantageous to the education and evangelization of the young.

In the face of these multiple tasks, your Congregation must assure its members in particular a sound formation. The Church urgently needs people with a solid and profound faith, an up-dated cultural training, genuine human sensitivity and a strong pastoral sense. She needs consecrated people who devote their lives to being on these boundaries. Only in this way will it be possible to evangelize effectively, proclaiming the God of Jesus Christ and thus the joy of life. Your Congregation must therefore devote itself to this formative commitment as one of its priorities. It must continue to take great pains in training its members without being satisfied with mediocrity, overcoming the difficulties of vocational weakness, encouraging solid spiritual guidance and guaranteeing educational and pastoral quality in continuing formation.

I conclude by thanking God for the presence of your charism at the service of the Church. I encourage you in achieving the goals that your General Chapter will propose to the entire Congregation. I assure you of my prayers for the implementation of what the Spirit will suggest to you for the good of youth, families and all the lay people involved in the spirit and mission of Don Bosco. With these sentiments and as a pledge of abundant heavenly gifts, I now impart my Apostolic Blessing to you all.