

ACTS 306 October - December 1982
LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

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THE SALESIAN RECTOR AND ANIMATION

Rome, 16 July 1982

Dear Confreres,

My greetings to you as you prepare yourselves for the forthcoming General Chapter. I urge all to ponder deeply on the contents of the special issue (no. 305) of the *Acts of the Superior Council*. Let us all rise to the occasion in a spirit of profound prayerfulness.

At the time of writing, the *Rector's Manual* requested by GC21 has just been printed; and we hope it will soon be followed by a *Manual for Provincials*.¹ The *Rector's Manual* will prove a most important aid in the proper renewal of the Rector's function in the community, and it would be well for all confreres to become acquainted with it - for the proper animation of a community does not rest solely on the shoulders of the one in charge: it demands the sincere and fraternal collaboration of all.

Among the points calling for renewal in the role of the Rector, the *Manual* reminds us of the basic salesian aspect of his *ministerial priesthood*. The Congregation has issued forth from the current crisis with its wings slightly singed: we need to *replan our holiness* together,² we need to *strengthen our brethren*³ we have to build up the spiritual resources of the whole *Salesian Family*.⁴

All this demands a genuine renewal of the priestly ministry, its specific service of humility and power. This has nothing to do with "lexicalization": it is a matter of genuine spiritual and pastoral service. All members in the Church have this urgent need; and especially every member and community in the Salesian Family.

It is essential that we have clear ideas and strong convictions regarding the absolute primacy of pastoral action; it is urgent that we have a profound regard and care for the mystique of the ministerial priesthood. This is a need for all: confreres in general, our brothers, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, Cooperators, Don Bosco Volunteers, Past Pupils, and indeed all who participate in the great spiritual and apostolic movement of Don Bosco.

I should like to comment on this aspect presented by the new *Rector's Manual*, - and I offer to all confreres a number of thoughts that were proposed at various gatherings of rectors in several provinces. Whilst these considerations refer to rectors, they are of interest to all confreres.

May our good father Don Bosco help us to build up the same sentiments in the Congregation that he himself nourished daily in his own heart. Any diminution of his *Da mihi animas caetera tolle* could well mean a loss of salesian authenticity. It is especially at this spiritual and pastoral level that we must guard against superficiality.

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My dear rectors, I have been much exercised over this matter. We belong to the same family; you are my colleagues in the service of salesian authority; and so I offer you a few thoughts that I believe to be of the utmost importance. We are dealing with a basic aspect in the salesian superior, a dimension that belongs to our tradition: *the animation of the rector in a salesian community must be an exercise of the priestly ministry*.⁵

The very priesthood of the rector demands that he undertake this specific function of animation; this is the task assigned to him so that the vocation of his community and the local Salesian Family may be clarified and developed.

Rich charismatic tradition

¹GC21, 61d.

²ASC. no. 295. 303.

³ASC. no. 295.

⁴ASC. no. 304.

⁵Const. 35.

Three premises

1. The first question to be settled is why salesian tradition has always required the rector to be a priest, Such a principle must have certain practical implications. Rectors have always been priests - in accordance with the mind of Don Bosco and throughout the history of the Congregation. This fact does not derive from ecclesial or social requirements but from the practicalities of our charism. On this point I am not concerned to make a point but rather to shed some light on a task that is part of our very lives.

The basic observations I put to you should be your habitual way of thinking, a frame of reference for reviewal, a clear conviction that is part of your daily living. There is no call for flagwaving and more or less reopening discussions. It is merely a case of proposing certain considerations for all who are at the moment engaged in the ministry of salesian animation.

2. My second premise is that a person never achieves utter perfection in any particular undertaking; there are always defects and shortcomings. However, this does not mean that we should not present an important function as an attractive ideal in its completeness, with all its characteristics and requirements, and with the fullest description of its nature. As we prepare for action we need to lift up our eyes to the ideal; otherwise we lack the necessary urge for our activities and may go off at a tangent.

We are aware of the many and ever increasing difficulties, the mode of life in our houses, and the opinions of the confreres. Each one must do all in his power to meet the challenge.

However, let us be convinced that we are not alone in our service of animation: the Lord is with us. This is not just moralizing for the sake of encouraging or otherwise: it is an objective judgment solidly based on theology, and the rector should have an ever present awareness of it; it constitutes a vision of truth and objectivity that approaches the ideal and renders it possible. This certainty of the comforting presence of God spurs us on continually towards our goal and gives us renewed energy, for "I can do all things in him who strengthens me".

The last two General Chapters spoke of this matter explicitly and treated it as an element of our distinctive charism; and Pope Paul VI (in a letter from his Secretary of State at the beginning of GC21)⁶ called on us to preserve this characteristic constitutional disposition of our charism, namely that "the rector, enhanced by the charisms of his priestly ordination, should guide with ecclesial wisdom the various and ever growing ranks of those who wish to lead committed lives under the guidance of Don Bosco and in accordance with his spirit".

These are not doctrinal statements for religious institutes all and sundry: they are for our own salesian charism that was born and developed' in this particular way.

3. Regarding the third premise, I must confess to having been deeply worried about this over a number of years; and unfortunately my worldwide' travels have confirmed my fears. There is in the Congregation a dangerous "priesthood crisis" that could well lead to the ruination of our charismatic heritage, our pastoral principles and our salesian community way of life.

Although we have many priests in the Congregation we cannot say that the priesthood always functions as it should. Probably the root cause of this problem is the defective exercise of the priestly ministry in the salesian superior. It is with the charisms of priestly ordination that rectors and provincials must help other confreres to be genuinely salesian - priests to be specialists in the apostolate of the young; brothers to be more genuine religious (according to their own specific brand of laicism);⁷ other groups of the Salesian Family to be more faithful to Don Bosco in their apostolic endeavors; the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, the Cooperators, the Past Pupils, the Don Bosco Volunteers - all to unite in being bearers and promoters of the great spiritual and apostolic heritage received from our Father and Founder.

These thoughts really need to be further systemized, pondered and carefully written up with salesian objectivity. In these pages we shall discuss them in a simple away - but still in the hope of catching something of their depth and importance.

Full-time consecration

Don Bosco was a priest at the altar, in the pulpit and in the confessional; in the playground and the street; in the political turmoils of his times, in his dealings with government ministers, in his use of the media and in his cultural involvements - in fact everywhere and always.

⁶ GC21. 448-450

⁷ ASC. no. 298.

The rector must learn to imitate him even though there have since been many ecclesial changes in the exercise of the priestly ministry.

These days after Vatican II we have faced enormous variations: not because priestly consecration has changed, but because the problems facing us are different, as are our pastoral priorities and mode of commitment. In fact I have often asked myself when do I as Rector Major exercise my priesthood.

I remember some years back visiting my home town and saying Mass in the *Collegiata*; I got into conversation with a number of diocesan priests who were engaged in parish work, attending funerals, visiting the sick, preaching and catechizing - and I felt I was another kind of priest altogether. But I came to see that the Council documents list many types of priestly work.

In the final analysis however the answer is to be found in the permeating and pastoral grace of priestly consecration which enables a priest to do everything *as a priest*. This was exactly the case with Don Bosco: he was not a parish priest, yet he did everything under the pastoral urge of his *Da mihi animas*; indeed one could never say when he was *not* a priest!

In the light of all this we should ask the question, "When is a rector *not* a priest?"

This paradoxical question demands a deep knowledge of the sacrament of Holy Orders and the significance of priestly consecration.

The first point to note is that a salesian rector must have an explicit awareness and powerful conviction of this priority: the service he is called to render to the confreres and the members of the local Salesian Family is that kind of priestly ministry born and nourished in the grace and pastoral charisms of the sacrament of Holy Orders.

This is not a mere abstract statement of doctrine or a simple juridical disposition: it is a charismatic fact that derives from the salesian nature of the service of animation we owe to the community.

Witnessing to Christ, transcendent mediator

The priest's consecrated ordination binds him personally and sacramentally to Christ; he is qualified to act *in persona Christi* especially when he celebrates the Eucharist and administers the sacraments. God has consecrated him in the Church to live and labor directly linked with the mission and ministry of Christ himself. And we should remember that Christ gave us a priesthood totally distinctive and original, a priesthood exclusive to the new and everlasting covenant. In this New Covenant he is called "master in the Church of charity", "elder" and "shepherd".

Christ instituted a ministry that did not exist before his time. The priests of the Old Covenant belonged more to the culture of the people and were members of a special tribe. This priesthood was abolished. The incarnate Christ is the one and only true priest of the New Covenant. There is no longer any valid priesthood except that of Christ. Priesthood in others, in bishops and in us priests is the sacramental expression of his one and only priesthood. A priest is a priest not because he belongs to a particular tribe or clan, but purely and simply insofar as he is the sacramental expression of the mission and ministry that Christ came on earth to accomplish as the risen savior. It is through the mediation of our sacramental ordination that Christ, eternal and ever-living high priest achieves his holy mission today, yesterday and forever.

Ours is a distinctive and mysterious priesthood that rests on the fact of the resurrection.

In practical terms then, what is distinctive about our priesthood? One of today's "in" words describes its nature well: *pastoral*. Pastoral concern must be the enlightening and guiding force of every priest of Christ. Naturally this does not exclude or underrate other matters such as human, professional, cultural, economic or political values - far from it! However, pastoral concern is not of its nature cultural, economic, political or scientific; it has a very distinctive aspect. To understand it one must look solely to Christ, to what he achieved on earth and what he is doing today as the ever-mediating risen Lord of history.

At this point one realizes how anxious a priest should be to live to the full the pastoral and meaningful *Da mihi animas caetera tolle* as illustrated by the whole of Don Bosco's life. The priest and rector must witness to the historical transcendence of Christ; he must be a tireless worker in his mission, caring for and promoting it in others; the pastoral aspect must rank first in his community, taking precedence over and imbuing all other human activities. He should be first and foremost a sacramental reflection of Christ the mediator and good shepherd dedicated to his brothers and especially the young.

Again I stress that the pastoral aspect excludes nothing; indeed we are acting pastorally when we labor for human and cultural development. It is necessary then to see clearly, to ponder, to examine and assess one's work and never fail to give rightful place to the community's views and to imbue everything with this essential pastoral

aspect; opportunities for this will be found' in personal contacts, community action, meetings, monthly and tri-monthly retreats.

Total ecclesial awareness

Vatican II reminds us that the priest is a minister of the Church, a man of communion, a builder and leader of the community of believers; his heart beats in unison with Christ's Body, the Church, as it continues on with the Lord's mission among men. Thus it is that the soul of the priest is always vibrantly aware of the Church both universal and local.

Don Bosco's salesian tradition has always characteristically cherished a strong awareness of the universal Church, and this *sensus ecclesiae* takes on a pastoral vision of world-wide dimension, and a bold missionary concern.

There is also a lively awareness of the local Church that burgeons forth in a convinced and practical collaboration. Salesian rectors (with one exception!) do not live in the Vatican in close touch with the nerve-centers of the universal Church and with personal and direct relationship with the Pope. The salesian rector lives within the confines of a nation, a diocese, a parish, and his relationships are with the episcopal conferences, the bishop of the diocese and the local parish priests.

. As a priest he cannot cut himself off from the ensemble of the local Church at its various levels.

Thus a rector's consecrated ordination urges him on to foster within himself and others this pastoral sensitivity and to concern himself in a practical way with the life and activities of the local Church.

This ecclesial awareness implies a whole series of close ties with the Pope, the bishops and other priests. Vatican II rightly speaks of the priest as the bishop's *understanding and creative collaborator*. This special aspect of *pastoral collaboration* belongs to the very nature of Christian priesthood. It is not a mere optional extra that depends on the priest's personal generosity: it is an indispensable aspect of the priest's vocation insofar as he has been called and consecrated to carry out the true sacerdotal ministry of Christ.

To be a *bishop's collaborator* implies a great number of practical requirements in pastoral planning and activity. I understand of course that difficulties may arise and sometimes fairly serious ones. As a matter of fact in a plenary session of the *Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes* I attended (regarding mutual relations between bishops and religious) the bishops themselves aired quite a number of problems. But Don Bosco too had his share of such headaches, as we all know.

However, these particular difficulties are outside the scope of these pages. What we are seeking here is to look closely into the priestly soul, feel the beating of his heart, get to know his ideals, intuit his plans and aspirations, and take account of his special responsibilities that must be attended to even when problems and circumstances may cause him suffering.

Because the rector is a priest it means he must see that the significance and scope of his own and his community's pastoral labors are within the context of the Church; it means loving and helping others to live in total accord and collaboration with the Pope, the bishops and the clergy; it means fostering good relations with them, building up understanding, friendship, esteem and collaboration; and this is not done for the sake of diplomacy or simple convenience, but because it all constitutes an important part of his service to the salesian community.

Thus there must be attention, understanding and sensitivity for a great number of initiatives that will find their outlet in a well organized pastoral action under the guidance of the bishop and with the clear collaboration of the priests. Unfortunately there are still times when we religious and our undertakings show signs of the old days when we used to work separately in watertight compartments. Still, things are changing for the better - in some countries speedily, in others at a more leisurely pace.

The pastoral way from now on is to be totally ecclesial. The salesian rector must see collaboration as part of his priestly character; he must seek out the true ecclesial highway and obey the renewed traffic signs; in short he must look to the development of his community, its outlook, its activity all based on a deep *ecclesial awareness (sensus ecclesiae)*.

Characteristic ministerial tasks

The priestly ministry, as the unique sacramental representation of Christ our Lord, has a three-fold function:

the *ministry of the Word*) the *ministry of sanctification* and the *ministry of community leadership*. These functions are indicated in all the relevant documents of the Council and are always mentioned in the same order, as though to intimate a certain priority in them.

- In the priest's *service of the Word* he lives the values of God's revelation and makes known their saving truth.

- In his *service of sanctification* he concerns himself with the liturgy, the sources of grace, victory over sin, and growth in charity.

- In his *service of community leadership* he coordinates pastoral activities, fosters communion and carries out the spiritual government of the community.

These priestly services call for closer examination. It is to be noted that they constitute three aspects of the one ministry; they are functions intrinsically linked together, even though circumstances and responsibilities may put one or other to the fore.

By the sacrament of Holy Orders the consecrated priest is strengthened in a specific way: by the grace of pastoral charity he is helped in gathering together many ministerial activities into an harmonious unity; he is given a greater ecclesial sensitivity; he is able to witness to Christ's historical transcendency; he is sustained and comforted in his many pastoral activities and difficulties.

My dear rectors, take courage! Pastoral charity is a gift of the Spirit, and by virtue of priestly consecration we can rest assured that our sacramental character will receive it in abundant quantities.

Harbinger of the truth that saves

The Council informs us that a priest's first service is to meditate, contemplate, pray and understand (through his natural priestly knowledge) the nature of the saving truth he must communicate. I do not say the rector must be a scriptural or theological don; but the wider his knowledge in these areas the better. He should certainly be an assiduous student of the saving Word of Christ. He is not expected to read the Gospel with the scientific method of an exegete; but his reading should be able to sort out its saving truth and discover the liberating message it has for the people about him. He must translate the Word of God into a *message relevant for today's youths and adults*) for today's social and political events, today's ideological vagaries.

This serious meditation is no easy task; it is a reading not limited to the texts. Naturally the texts are needed; but they have to be accompanied by solid thinking about life and its happenings, about people (both good and bothersome, with their virtues and vices), about confreres, about youth. It is an exacting exercise to read, ponder, reflect, contemplate and pray. The rector who works much does an excellent job. Still, his first task is not to have a finger in every pie; nor to be a thinking recluse, but a contemplative, a man of prayer, always with salesian pastoral action in view. This is his prime priestly concern. The rector, the salesian superior, cannot simply be a man of action; nor a man who spends the day on his knees. This is just not the salesian way. From time to time he must sit at his desk with his books - not to become erudite but to understand the Gospel message and seek out authoritative directions to be communicated with pedagogical realism. My dear rectors, the message we must communicate is not to be found all readymade; it will not burgeon forth from a vacuum.

Our serious contemplation tunes us in naturally to Christ and his Gospel, where we find all the salvific values; but then we must needs apply their message to today's situations.

- We have two authoritative channels of mediation to guide us in our study of the salvation truth message we have to pass on to the salesian community and those about us - in other words through the salesian community to our young people, for the salesian community does not exist for itself but for the young and the local district.

The two channels are the *magisterium of the Church* and the *spiritual heritage of Don Bosco's charism*. The magisterium and our distinctive ethos will be our helps in translating the Gospel into a relevant message.

- *The magisterium of the Pope and the bishops*. Vatican II's doctrinal and pastoral directives are the great guides of our century as it approaches the third millennium and passes into future centuries.

Then we have the pastoral exhortations of the Holy Father _ his encyclicals, allocutions and other documents. The recent encyclical *Laborem exercens* is a fine example of how present day problems are tackled with an unprecedented depth of thought; it is a document that is perhaps somewhat difficult, but of extraordinary importance.

We have also the episcopal synods with their various relevant topics; the enlightening and helpful bishop's conferences in each nation; and the statements, suggestions and directions of the local bishops.

The rector as a priest will be especially aware of his duty to collaborate and will set about developing his specific duty to inspire. For this he must be acquainted with the pronouncements of the magisterium, have the documents available, read and meditate on them for others. Thus he needs both time and place for meditation in order to exercise his priesthood. This is a very different task from that of simply presiding at funerals.

It is here that we make a mark on history: the humble history of the local community and the local Church. This is priestly guidance in the name of Christ; this is the inspired proclamation of the truth that saves.

Don Bosco was an extraordinary example of this priestly role. He was a shepherd among the young and the working classes, a genuine contemplative, a practical genius, an heroic and tireless worker, an indefatigable communicator. He was an incredible man of action as well as a great reader an alert and well-informed operator, steeped in the Gospel, a contemplative of Christ, docile to the Pope and the magisterium; he was a man of deep study but not straining after heights of erudition; his deep concern was to improve the exercise of his priestly ministry. It would be a wonderful thing indeed if our rectors imitated Don Bosco in pursuing and communicating the truth that saves.

- The second channel is *our Congregation with its authentic salesian charism*; and in today's cultural changes it offers quite a number of practical directives.

The last two General Chapters have put our Congregation in step with the great and demanding principles of Vatican II and updated it to suit modern times. Furthermore there is the guidance from the Rector Major and his Council that deals with the needs and requirements of our vocation today: this is found in such texts as the *Acts of the General Chapters*, the *Ratio*, *Rector's Manual*, *Letters of the Rector Major*, and other special communications. These are aids that, together with the heritage of Don Bosco's writings and salesian spiritual tradition, constitute a wealth of enlightenment and guidance for our communities.

The provincial too, with his council, provides useful guidelines on even more practical matters.

All these things must be well considered by the rector, not in the way of passive observance (though this too is important), but in an active way - so that he will not be simply concerned that a number of prescriptions be carried out, but rather see them as truly a part of his priestly nature and activity and an effective exercise of his ministerial role of

prophet. It is up to the rector to see that the house benefits from this channel of mediation so that the confreres and the Salesian Family groups may enjoy a more relevant and genuine awareness of their own proper pastoral contributions.

Already in this first aspect of the sacerdotal ministry the priest-rector helps to put in focus all that the community should do in the pastoral dimension. To be an animator, a prophet of the truth that saves, calls for a number of requirements in the way of special preparation and dedication. Of course the recommendations regarding this service can be superficially and materially summarized as a list of duties, but this in the final analysis would achieve nothing. However, when they are considered within the profound framework of the priesthood, they really make an impact.

We must cultivate the conviction that this way of living out our proper priestly ministry can and will change things. It stirs up interest and is more satisfying, for the priest perceives the sacramental consecration of his ordination really coming to life, and enjoys a deep sense of participation in the mystery of Christ. Furthermore he is conscious of causing his own confreres to live and participate in this same mystery as they pursue their activities, and thus he encourages and strengthens the characteristic vocation of each.

You may be interested in one of the impressions I receive as I travel round the salesian world. One sees how cultural concerns and organizational worries overwhelm rectors and superiors; without noticing, they become passive in their priesthood, outmoded and outdated in spiritual and pastoral matters, despite the fact that they are men of culture in the field of the humanities or technology. It is indeed a great shame for a priest not to be up-to-date in his spiritual and pastoral ministry.

Furthermore the Congregation has an urgent need for spiritual directors, competent pastors, good confessors, untiring evangelizers. When I say that the Congregation has a certain "crisis in the priesthood" I refer primarily to these deficiencies. It must never be forgotten that within the priestly ministry the service of the Word that saves enjoys an important priority in modern times and is constantly emphasised by the Council.

The materialistic ideologies in so many societies today constitute a difficult challenge to us. Cardinal Garrone

once remarked to me, "Television, radio and in fact all the media leave no room for the priest. The choice is to become involved in some area of human development or appear as a relic of the past, a museum piece".

Yet the priest has inherited a pastoral mission that is of the utmost relevance today - even though its transcendence is perceived only by those who believe in the mystery of Christ and his Church.

The "trade" of a priest is to be a savior; and in these days who does not see the need of this? However, modern thinking, convictions and public opinion trends continually reject the validity of this function. It behoves us to swim against the current. We must not allow ourselves to be dispossessed of our priestly rights by the superficial selectiveness of secularism; otherwise we are simply allowing our priesthood to be destroyed.

Swimming against the current does not mean that we become soapbox controversialists: but it does mean having very clear convictions and energetically doing something practical about them. If ever history needed to restore appreciation of the priesthood it is today; for we see so many cultures in which the true Christian heritage is in danger of being entirely destroyed.

What has happened in these last few years? It seems to me that the sad situation in many Christian countries begins with the simple country folk being dazzled by the bright lights of the city, the shop windows, the streets, the technology all about them. They think their life in the country is antiquated; they suffer an inferiority complex; they begin to have doubts about the great values that have hitherto enlightened and sustained their lives, and little by little they lose sight of them. The neon lights have hidden the stars. The only hope is that people will quickly realize their error.

So many nations have moved from a countrified culture to the present citified way of living, with its pluralism, technology and consumerism. Public opinion is also dazzled by the bright city lights. In this secularist tradition there is scant room accorded to the great values of the Gospel.

All this should convince us clearly of the urgent need for a new evangelization; we are called as priests to engage in a youth apostolate on a grand scale and so build up a new society.

We must stand up like prophets and insist on our convictions; we must develop in our young people a solid critical faculty to help them cope with what they see and hear, and above all to achieve a sound knowledge of the history and mystery of Christ.

In this context it is patent how much our present day needs the priest and his ministry.

Let us look hard at our works, and rather than spend time analyzing possible crises in the priesthood let us make all speed to repair the damage. In his first address in St Peter's Square after his election the Pope proclaimed the need to open the doors to Christ. He appealed to economists, politicians and culturists "to have no fear: Christ is no one's alternative - but without him all human undertakings go awry".

In our own small world the rector must be the first and most attentive prophet to proclaim the salvation message of Jesus Christ.

Master and guide in holiness

The second aspect of the priestly ministry is to administer the vital energy of grace and to be the master and guide in holiness.

Before all others the rector is responsible for the daily outpourings of Christ's grace in his community and his young people; his too is the first responsibility for ongoing formation as an uninterrupted growth in each person's vocation to holiness. In particular he must be able to pierce through the hard layer of daily ups and downs and reach the deep deposits of the refined gold of Christ's grace.

The energizing and enriching springs of man's new life are basically two: the *Eucharist* and *Penance*.

My dear rectors, these two springs of grace must function well in our houses. It must again be stressed that it is not a question of carrying out an external norm of conduct: it is a matter of developing a profound conviction of the spiritual life. None of us can develop his spiritual life and salesian vocation without the grace of Christ. When we speak of grace we mean the flow of life that does not issue from us or from any human source no matter how noble it may be, but solely from Christ himself. It flows from him particularly through the sacramental mediation of *Eucharist* and *Penance*. In daily life, after the outflowing of grace in baptism, confirmation and (for priests) ordination, it is the sacraments of *Eucharist* and *Penance* that constitute the principal object of priestly care.

Here too we have the basis of our Preventive System: Eucharist and Penance celebrated according to Vatican II's ecclesiology must be reinstated as the prime movers in the community and pastoral life of our houses.

This is our practical way, our principal way, for the priestly guidance of our confreres along the path of holiness.

- In the first place the rector must give prime place to the *sacrament of the Eucharist*.

One may ask what is the significance of the Eucharistic celebration.

The Eucharist gathers together all the love and grace there is within each of us as a personal participation of life and activity in the Pasch of Christ. It is the exercise of the baptismal priesthood of all the members of the community; it is the offering of a person's own concrete existence (my body and my blood) as a "pure and pleasing sacrifice" in solidarity with Christ the victim.

The religious life is nothing other than an education for this; it helps us become living victims.

Thus the Eucharist is not to be reduced and limited to the moment of its sacramental celebration. Our whole lives must be centered in the Eucharist, in the conviction that it gathers together and offers to God what we are and what we do: our sentiments, our pains, our work and fatigue, our successes and failures.

It is obvious that a rector has to carry out a lot of planning and activity if he would achieve to the full the daily fruits of the liturgical ministry of his priesthood. Unfortunately I have seen at times that the Eucharist is no longer at the heart of a salesian house, and so pedagogically speaking it no longer represents the source and apex of the daily life of the community.

Speaking to the *Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes* the Holy Father maintained that he could not conceive of a religious community that did not have the tabernacle at the centre of its organized life.

Be sure of this: a rector who is genuinely concerned to cultivate this centrality of the Eucharist, who takes the requisite steps, who is understandingly insistent, will not have long to wait before he notices a higher level of spirituality in his community and a more adequate commitment in its apostolic activities.

Try to have an attractive chapel in the house for community use; it should become the very heart of our residence; all things should converge on the tabernacle; its should transform the community into a small but genuine "domestic Church".

Update your liturgical knowledge and do not allow your celebrations to lose the *sense of the sacred*. We are educators and so we ought to have a true appreciation and respect for liturgical symbols - vestments and gestures, proclamation of the Word, controlled, well-composed and creative intercessory prayers; and the liturgical seasons should be exploited to the full.

In the same SCRIS plenary meeting mentioned above, four Mother-Generals were invited to address the members. One of them complained of the great harm caused in certain of her communities by priests who manipulated the liturgy according to their personal and extravagant whims. She made a heartfelt plea that something be done to put an end to these harmful abuses.

Once it becomes fashionable to secularize the liturgy in this most uneducational way, all sense of the sacred is lost, the feeling for mystery is destroyed, and there is no end to the absurdities that may arise. There is no need to cite instances.

Let us then put our every effort into making the Eucharist the expression of our lives lived in daily self-oblation to God; this is a true priestly service of holiness to which we need to apply ourselves unceasingly.

- The rector must also give great importance to the *sacrament of Penance*. Psychologists and sociologists today have given us a more enlightened critical understanding of the person and the structures of living together. It is interesting to realize how much critical ability has developed; it is a measure of human maturity and objectivity, despite its occasional failures and lack of impartiality. The sacrament of Penance is an indispensable exercise in self-criticism in the most fundamental area of all, the subtle depths of the human personality. It is beyond the psychological and sociological that the inner sanctum of one's personal freedom lies, the primal source of good and evil. This is not to imply that in the world there are no unjust structures to be changed - assuredly there are plenty. But it is our Christian conviction that it is in the heart of man that the ultimate root of all evil lies - the evil of sin.

How necessary it is then to make sure that every community practice this self-criticism so that it may lay bare its failings and the causes of its errors. In this ministry of holiness the priest must lead both confreres and the young to a true understanding that sin exists, that sin caused the death of Christ, that sin destroys true life. We need to know how to do battle with sin.

In the early days of our Family there was a saintly boy whose motto was *Death rather than sin!*

The rector must be concerned with furthering everything that leads to a Gospel-based self-criticism. Occasions for this are the personal colloquy, community meetings, occasions of revision of life carried out in a family spirit and in the light of the Gospel; very special occasions too are the monthly and tri-monthly days of

recollection and the annual retreat. Every month, every term, every year, we should sincerely and humbly review our external failings (as individuals and as a community) in the consecrated salesian life and our duties regarding the evangelization of the young; such conversations would constitute a veritable grace for us all.

In this field perhaps there is a lack of updating and enlightened doctrinal guidance. There is much study required today regarding the sacrament of reconciliation, and provinces and houses should seek the help of competent, up-to-date and well-balanced persons to overcome the delay that leads to superficiality and ignorance.

This matter has been the subject of a number of documents from the magisterium; though it is possible that some confreres are not acquainted with them. The rector should have them handy, meditate on them and create a spirit open to the indispensable grace of the sacrament of Penance. The next episcopal synod, now in its preparatory stages, will discuss this very element of the Church's life: it should present us with some useful pointers.

We can only live our vocation properly with a constant input of the grace of Christ. In Don Bosco's mind the rector was also the confessor. It is in the administration of the sacrament of reconciliation that the priest becomes aware of and develops his special spiritual fatherliness. The salesian rector in our times is not the community confessor. However, if he never exercises his ministry of confessor he will lose the secret of fatherliness. Perhaps he will not be able to hear confessions every day: but he should aim at a few hours each week; and he should give priority to young people. It will be a source of much grace for him and he will grow in that fatherly kindness that so befits his office as rector.

It is one thing to speak with a confrere and correct him for a failing known through external circumstances, perhaps taking the line of juridical correction; it is a totally different thing to correct him in confession after his self-accusation (if such were still the practice with confreres in our houses). How would the rector react in such a case? He certainly would not want to dismiss him! He would feel a great affection for him, a fatherly concern. He would rather follow the course of friendship and help him with kindness to overcome his problems. This is what fatherliness is all about! However, if we never hear confessions at all, how shall we train ourselves in fatherly understanding?

A rector no longer hears the confreres' confessions; and if he habitually refrains from administering the sacrament of reconciliation he will unconsciously cease being a father and become a superior, an administrator, a manager. This would inflict a most grievous wound on the Congregation. Perhaps here we have touched on one of the more fundamental reasons of the crisis in the priesthood referred to earlier in this letter.

My dear rectors, if there is a church or a parish nearby, spend some hours in the confessional on Saturday evenings and Sundays and whenever possible. It is not time lost; it is not abandoning the community. Those who will thank you will be the very confreres who perhaps have criticized you for not being in your office when they wanted to see you. They will come to see that there is more in their rector than they realized; that he is more priestly, more salesian. They will see the reappearance of fatherliness.

When a rector is deeply concerned to have the Eucharist and frequent Confession as the pivots of his house, he then of necessity becomes a champion of a suitable and invaluable ongoing formation. It will be natural for him to look to the spiritual progress of his confreres, the development of the Salesian Family, and vocation guidance. He will easily see why his house must be transformed into a "formative community"; and he will earnestly go in quest of the indispensable means for achieving this.

All this makes it plain that the rector's role imports a host of delicate tasks that are not always visible to the eye of the inevitable critic; but they are very real and very necessary tasks: they will prevent him too from unduly busying himself in other people's tasks and will make of him a full-time priest dedicated to the salesian growth of his community.

Builder of ecclesial communion

The third aspect of the priestly ministry of the rector is the care of communion and pastoral coordination. Several sub-divisions of this aspect immediately come to mind, but I shall limit myself to two: *participation in the local Church* and *animation of the Salesian Family*.

- *Participation of the community in the local Church's organized apostolate* will imply also cultivating relations with the bishop, with the clergy, other religious, and the committed laity.

Once we used to say that the best rectors never left their houses. In today's circumstances neither a rector perpetually at home nor a rector who is never home rates top billing. A rector has to leave the house to cultivate relations with the local Church, to coordinate pastoral activities; and given the characteristic nature of our work,

he will need to be present at meetings dealing with civil, social and cultural matters.

It is patent that the grave problems of our times are not going to be solved by a single undertaking or even by a whole Congregation. The combined efforts of the whole Church are required, with the harmonious collaboration of all.

At the plenary meeting of the SCRIS I have already spoken of, Cardinal Poletti expressed his regret that in Rome certain Catholic activities had been closed down and reopened by organizations with non-Christian ideologies. These initiatives had been in difficulties because of certain legislation and regional and municipal activities; but if they had been seen as not the work of some small institute, but backed solidly by the whole local Church ready to react with a united front, the story would have been a different one: the authorities would have thought twice before proceeding against them - not so much for religious reasons but for political expediency. Just imagine how the problem of education could be changed if it were seen as the concern of all Catholics united solidly in every country and tackled on a world scale!

A wide range of contacts and a constant concern for interchange of ideas and coordination of activities are necessary for the following reasons. Firstly this ecclesial solidarity, non-existent a few years ago, has been encouraged by Vatican II and the first faltering steps have been taken in what promises to be a long road. Obviously such ecclesial solidity must be developed. Secondly we have to meet the challenge of a socialization that demands the communion and participation of all in civil events and institutions (and we are particularly interested in the cultural area); and lastly there are demands made by the momentous changes in society today.

Hence to govern a salesian community in these days requires a conscious effort to achieve solidarity and a new conception of the Church and society.

- The second objective is to build up brotherly communion and concordant aims in the community so that it will be a dynamic unit and an *animator of all the local Salesian Family*.

My dear rectors, the local Salesian Family is a most important part of your apostolate. All the groups of the Salesian Family have special need of your priestly ministry. A genuine salesian presence calls for more than the rector, the confreres and their young charges: it needs the participation of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, the Cooperators, the Past Pupils, the Don Bosco Volunteers et al., as well as all young people and the masses belonging to the apostolic movement launched by Don Bosco.

This vast horizon must come within the ken of the personal coordination of the rector, though he may charge someone else with certain services and animation. The local Salesian Family constitutes a much more extended field of Gospel activity, and the rector will be keenly aware of being its "salesian pastor": he must willingly take on the responsibility of helping this wider salesian presence to function in true harmony.

Don Bosco always sought to increase the field of collaboration; he did not limit himself to his salesians; he always worked for communion and mustered as many helpers as possible; he founded as an heir to the *Oratory Apostolate* an entire Family.

Furthermore the first concern of the all important matter of *animation* is not organization; nor is animation to be limited to a kind of "three-year plan"; its prime aim is to render the salesian charism effective in its totality, to understand it better, promote it, and to give it new life in the local Church.

These aims call for the great-heartedness and broadness of vision our priestly Founder had; and these qualities must take on concrete form in the local Church - not at the hands of us salesians alone but of all the sons daughters of Don Bosco. My dear rectors, you see that the whole Salesian Family is keenly desirous of your priestly services and all that pertains thereto, and all this is in accordance with the wishes of our Father and Founder.

Conclusion

Many other aspects could be considered. Here I have sought to gather together just a few thoughts on a topic that touches every rector's personal conscience as a consecrated priest. You will find these matters more amply expounded in *The salesian rector, a ministry for the animation and governing of the local community*, now printed and perhaps already in your hands. The charisms of priestly ordination invest the service of salesian authority with a role that enriches the whole community and all the various members of the Salesian Family.

Salvation history makes it plain that the sacerdotal ministry demands the total resources of the priest. The priestly mission is not a task performed by a mere employee who clocks in and out of work; it is a consecration that is full time all the time; it takes and transforms the whole psychology and energy of a priest's life. It is more than a mere job: it is a *way of life*. We are not priests for twenty hours a week; our consecration reaches down to the hidden forces of the whole person.

Don Bosco asks that his salesian rectors lavish their consecrated ecclesial service on all unstintingly. It is my opinion that if in our Congregation we see an increase in this sensitivity and this deeper appreciation of the priestly ministry, everybody will stand to gain - communities, confreres, the Salesian Family, and especially the innumerable protégés of our mission.

May these considerations help us to imitate Don Bosco and grow in the love of Christ the eternal high-priest ever alive to the needs of the young. In a special way our salesian brothers will be greatly appreciative, for they will see clearly that the priestly ministry is a *service of a pastoral nature* and indispensable for the plenitude of the salesian lay consecration which is the expression of their baptismal priesthood.

Grateful too will be the confreres in initial formation who aspire to a salesian vocation that is closer to the Gospel and more apostolically effective.

And grateful also our spiritual Family who are seeking a greater level of interior holiness.

May Mary Help of Christians help us to work more humbly and untiringly in the ministry of the priesthood; may this be her very special gift to our Congregation and the Salesian Family as we strive to renew our holiness.

Cordially in the Lord,

Father EGIDIO VIGANÒ,

Rector Major.