

WORLD CONGRESS OF SALESIAN COOPERATORS

CLOSING ADDRESS BY THE RECTOR MAJOR

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Before mentioning any names, I would like to offer a reflection. These are indeed moments that leave a deep impression, and first of all, I would like to highlight an aspect that we cannot afford to forget.

This is a **governing body**. We are not here simply to spend three days of joy and camaraderie. It was not necessary for 350 people to come to Rome for this: everyone could have experienced that joy at home, together with other Cooperators. We are here, however, for an experience of governance and leadership, and each and every one of you is here because you bear a responsibility. You are not here because you had nothing else to do; you are here because you have been called. And this must never be forgotten, because when there is no true governance, everyone ends up 'governing'. This is called 'anarchy'. When, on the other hand, there is governance, then we walk together, leaving no one behind, and those at the front adjust to the pace of the community.

In this context, I would like to remember Fr Pascual and Fr Ángel, from whom the Congregation and the entire Salesian Family continue to benefit deeply. I take this opportunity to thank our two Rectors Major Emeritus, Fr Pascual and Cardinal Ángel. I would like us to give them a round of applause, because, in the wake of all the Rectors Major who have succeeded Don Bosco, from Don Rua onwards, the Rector Major is the father of the Salesian Family; he guarantees its unity and communion. And, thank God, we Salesians and we members of the Salesian Family hold this very dear. Don Bosco unites all the groups, and this is a precious gift that we must cherish, for it is very easy to lose. And this depends, once again, on governance.

I would therefore like to offer this introduction, because the four words I now wish to share with you help us to look to the future with hope, serenity and calm. The Spirit who worked in Don Bosco continues to work in us today, and we must be aware of this. That gift, that talent which is the Salesian charism, has been entrusted to us, and we cannot bury it out of fear or inertia, for the Lord will call us to account for it.

So here are the four words.

I take the first word from Fr Pascual's homily this morning, when he spoke to us of Paul who wished to go to one place, but the Spirit led him elsewhere.

The first word is **listening**. Listening is synonymous with humility: we do not have all the answers, because often we do not even know the questions precisely. These are not simply 'new' questions, but sometimes unthinkable, unprecedented ones. If we are not humble, if we do not pause to understand the questions before giving answers, we run the risk of becoming presumptuous, building our house on sand rather than on rock. Humility means putting God at the centre, and not our own ego. It means recognising that the call comes from Him, not from our own initiative; that the mission is His, not our personal project.

This, my dear friends, is fundamental. We hear it in the Gospel of these days: 'You did not choose me, but I chose you'.

If we look at Don Bosco's early years at the Convitto, we see that Cafasso did not ask him to organise football matches or catechism sessions. Rather, he said to him: 'Come with me, get to know the city, listen to the city with the ears of your heart, look at it with the eyes of your heart'. In *the Memoirs of the Oratory*, Don Bosco shares with us his reflections on the sheer scale of human misery. This reality took him by surprise, for he had never experienced anything like it in Chieri, nor in Castelnuovo, nor in the small houses at the Becchi. And Cafasso asked him, first and foremost, to listen.

At a certain point, Don Bosco wanted to pursue his own project: he packed his bags and prepared to leave, saying in essence: "I'm leaving, I'm going on a mission." Cafasso, a wise man, stopped him and said: "Leave your bags there. Wait. Calm down. Spend a year with Borel and the Lord will show you his way."

You see, the theme of listening is not primarily an action, but an inner attitude of humility: I listen. Generosity, on its own, is not the ultimate criterion, nor even the only one.

We want to respond to the poor. Of course we must respond, but first we must listen to Him: what, where, how, when.

Humility is the fruit of intimacy with God; it is not a purely voluntary exercise. Humility arises from intimacy with God, with his Word, from opening our hearts to his Spirit. It is there that we find the sources that encourage us, the strength that shows us the way and sustains our legs and our hands.

Listening begins on a personal level, by listening to oneself.

This is the story of Augustine, which Pope Leo, an Augustinian, conveys in a thousand different ways. Augustine is perhaps the 'finest mind' that humanity has ever produced. He sought, he had all the tools – he was

intelligent, sharp, brilliant – and he sought for a long time. At a certain point, however, he stops and, turning inwards, realises: ‘You were within me, and I was seeking you outside.’ He uses three Latin words: *intimior, intimo, meo* (more intimate than my innermost self). You were present within me, and I, on the other hand, was outside myself.

This applies to each of us: finding the time to listen to ourselves, to the God who dwells in the sanctuary of our conscience. Listening is not merely an act of humility, but – if I may use the term – a gesture of true intelligence, of authentic wisdom.

Those who are wise, those who are truly intelligent, know how to be with themselves; they are not afraid to do so, because within themselves they carry the Divine.

The next three words come from Pope Francis, when he inaugurated the synodal journey. They are three words I have heard again in recent days in Antonio Boccia’s very precise report, in Mother Chiara’s commentary, in some group work in which I took part, and in listening to the young people.

The second word is **communion**. Don Bosco did not use the theological language we have today, but he had the same insights. Union with the Salesian communities, with the local communities, unity among the members of the Association.

Today Don Bosco would say: let us create communion, let us weave networks. But true and authentic communion is the fruit of intimacy with God. Communion is not merely an organisational process. From the Gospel perspective, communion is participation in the communion of the Father and the Son in the Spirit. It is not abstract theology: it is the most concrete truth, in which the human makes room for the divine. The human is called to rise up, to receive that love which Jesus receives from the Father, to live it in the power of the Spirit and to enter into this dynamic.

If, on a personal level, we remain honest before God, this experience immediately becomes communion.

There will never be true communion unless it is the fruit of intimacy with God. Humility, then, coincides with intimacy with Him.

When we see the possibility of rifts, fragmentation, and divisions, we are called to bring the balm of unity, forgiveness, and peace. Let us fix our gaze on the cross, remembering Mamma Margaret and Don Bosco.

But beware: if intimacy with God is lacking, human nature, with all its frailties, enslaves us. And we begin to reason only on a horizontal, level: ‘Ah,

what they've done to me! Ah, why did that person...'. If we choose that path, it is the end.

The family spirit is not a passing emotion. The family spirit is humanity illuminated by the person of Christ.

Nor is it a sort of 'Everything passes, let's just let it go'. No. The spirit of family is welcoming people with their wounds, because I know my own wounds and I feel welcomed by Jesus. I have no reason to reject another person because of their wounds.

Communion, therefore, is not a technique, but docility to the action of the Spirit, which leads me to say that, when I reason and perhaps I am angry – and perhaps I am even right – that cannot be the final decision. I then place myself before Jesus and ask him: 'Lord, what do you ask of me?'. Herein lies our strength. But this strength must be nourished by the contribution of each and every one of us.

Young people today – as we have heard – long for authentic adults; they want to see communities of Salesians, groups of Cooperators, Salesian Cooperators, people who love one another. This is something rare in our culture. Young people are looking for leaders who speak a language of peace, not of aggression, not of war, not of bullying, not of arrogance. They are looking for people whose strength lies in their inner freedom.

We are well aware that, at this particular moment in history, the dominant language is often one of conflict, of war as a means of relating, one of the bullying of those who believe themselves to be strong and think they can do whatever they want.

When this language dominates, it is the weakest, the elderly, the children and the poor who pay the price. And young people suffer, because they feel powerless, unable to act.

That is why we must be leaven. Our communities and groups must nurture the spirit of family as the most beautiful and greatest gift; a gift that cannot be measured, but which is desired, sought after, and is a source of comfort. How many young people in our oratories say that their real family is the oratory? They have no other point of reference.

Communion. Let us ensure that our style of leadership, through example, promotes a calm, free and serious listening that fosters communion, with all the wounds we bear, with all the difficulties, with all the crosses we are called to bear.

The third word is **mission**. Mission means being sent to listen and, together – listening and communion – to grasp the cry of young people. To recognise,

welcome and discern the cry of young people, because, as in Paul's dream we heard this morning, it is there that the Spirit speaks to us. It would be a sin on our part to let that cry pass in vain, without allowing ourselves to be challenged by it. The Lord speaks to us through the young people to whom we are sent to serve. Fr Pascual once remarked: 'Young people are our theological locus', the place where the word of God (*theou logos*) resounds.

When we look into the faces of our young people to contemplate in them the face of the forsaken Christ, when we approach them with an attitude of welcome, listening, accompaniment, empathy and patience, we are in fact listening to the Spirit. Let us therefore welcome this cry.

Young people are not asking for extraordinary things. They are asking for what is simplest and, precisely for this reason, deepest. They are asking for space, not so much physical space, but space in our hearts.

They ask for acceptance; they want to feel expected and welcomed. They seek sincerity, in a world saturated with fake news.

When we know the personal stories of some young people – who perhaps on social media, on Facebook, show that 'everything is fine' – we know that those young people are asking for patience. Sometimes they arrive like a 'volcano': why? Because they need to entrust their anger to someone who knows how to respect it, because anger is part of their story. It must not be condemned out of hand.

The violence of our young people should not simply be condemned, but should be met with love, within sincere and meaningful relationships.

Mission also means recognising our limitations. Often we have only 'five loaves and two fish', nothing more. And yet we risk saying: 'No, these are mine.' Instead, Jesus tells us again and again: 'Five loaves and two fish are more than enough.' Because they are in his hands. If they remain only in our hands, they become poison, because they feed our selfishness.

The Lord knows full well what we are made of. We are not the saviours of the world: there is already one, and that is enough. We follow him, with our five loaves and two fish.

Let us ensure that our enthusiasm for serving the poor does not become an ideology, is not the result of a purely political choice or a mere operational project, but springs from a genuine understanding of need, in accordance with the logic of the Gospel. If our enthusiasm is not channelled by the Spirit, it risks failing to hear the true cry of the poor.

Almost forty years ago, in 1988, John Paul II published *Christifideles Laici* which later inspired our GC24 (1996): *Salesians and the Laity*. I would like

to read a sentence which, twenty-five years later, Pope Francis takes up again in *Evangelii Gaudium*.

St John Paul II writes: 'Communion and mission are profoundly connected with each other, they interpenetrate and mutually imply each other, to the point that communion represents both the source and the fruit of mission: communion gives rise to mission and mission is accomplished in communion.'

This is why, when Don Bosco emphasises the family spirit, he is not thinking of an environment of mere protection, but of a 'divine' environment, one of perspective, in which the human is elevated so that it may then be sent forth.

Pope Francis takes up the same theme: The Church's closeness to Jesus is part of a *common journey*, and communion is essentially configured as '*missionary communion*'. An intimacy that is not insular, closed in on itself.

For us, the spiritual dimension is fundamental. We thus understand Don Bosco's great insight: he did not offer his co-workers merely spiritual practices, the Eucharist, the Word, the sacraments, or retreats. All this was lived out for the sake of the young people, for their benefit.

Spirituality: closeness to Jesus on a common journey. Communion: not insular, but missionary, faithful to the Master's model. 'It is vital that today the Church goes out to proclaim the Gospel in all places, on every occasion, without delay, without reluctance, without fear. The joy of the Gospel is for all people and excludes no one.'

The final word is **participation**. Here great care is needed, because participation means the 'how' of translating all this into practice. It is not a simple individual decision. It is necessary, calmly and listening to the Spirit, to discern, seek, find and inhabit real spaces of collaboration. If participation were to remain merely a 'horizontal choice', we would not get very far, because it would remain a purely human project.

When faced with difficulties, we often react with purely human criteria. Instead, we are called to place everything in the light of the Spirit: what does the Word tell us? Where is the Spirit leading us? Where do we want to go, or 'to Macedonia'?

Participation, then, means avoiding 'spaces of conquest', avoiding the erection of 'alternative altars'.

Discernment and participation mean fostering spaces of convergence and collaboration: both within the Association and within the wider bosom of the Salesian Family.

Will it be easy? No. But who ever said we chose the easy path?

Let us therefore look to the path of participation under the guidance of the Spirit as a response to his call and his guidance. The journey itself is already part of the destination, because along the way we learn to recognise our limits and our potential more clearly, the desire to help others grow whilst recognising that we too must grow. Pope Francis states that this is where the “crucial point” lies.

The word ‘participation’, in a beautiful address by Pope Francis on 9 October 2021 – on the weekend when the synodal process began, accompanied the following day by a homily that forms a whole with it – is outlined as follows:

-The words “communion” and “mission” can risk remaining somewhat abstract, unless we cultivate an ecclesial praxis that expresses *the concreteness of synodality* at every step of our journey and activity, encouraging real involvement on the part of each and all. I would say that celebrating a Synod is always a good and important thing, but it proves truly beneficial if it becomes a living expression of “being Church”, of a way of acting marked by true participation. This is not a matter of form, but of faith. Participation is a requirement of the faith received in baptism.’

Dear friends, I wanted to share this reflection with you – perhaps a rather long one – so that what we are experiencing during these days may consolidate and strengthen our journey.