

SALESIANS AND UNIVERSITIES TODAY

1. History and development

University institutions were not foreseen in the original program of "works" of the Salesian Congregation. The system of works was devised with a view to a service for the group for which we work by preference, youngsters of the "educative" age, especially those who are poor or of modest condition in life. To be convinced of this, one need only look through the "list" of works and activities which throughout the years have been included in the text of the Constitutions, and the objectives assigned to them. There is not even a remote reference to this kind of activity.

There is a hint, however, of a somewhat higher level of formation in the opening of high schools or similar institutes in other countries (albeit few in number until after the World War) which could provide a higher goal to aim at for many youngsters. The same may be said of the regularization and a search for a higher level of studies for Salesians in appropriate centres, which culminated in the foundation of the PAS and the frequenting by Salesians of ecclesiastical and civil universities for the purpose of obtaining recognized professional qualifications and degrees.

Institutions of a university character, destined for lay students, appear (with an occasional rare exception) in the late fifties and early sixties. They subsequently multiplied, and even today there are others in the pipeline.

After the developments that have taken place we can see more clearly the motives which underlie this fact: the extension of middle-school instruction and access to university for more youngsters from the working classes; the request made to us to make suitable provision where no suitable institutions existed to meet the new demands; the legal and financial concessions offered us by states, supporting groups, or the Church; the desire to bring a Christian influence to general culture or professional sectors with repercussions on the social order; the availability of lay forces which, perhaps for the first time in this field, have become participants and protagonists.

To us Salesians it was a stimulus to rethink our pedagogical patrimony at a scientific level, and spread it further abroad through the study of the educational sciences and related matters, and to prepare persons to intervene with Christian formation in the different areas of education.

Today the sum total of our work in the university area includes

- Educative assistance to young university students, preferably of the poorer classes, with reduced possibilities of entering university institutions and desirous of a Christian formation and environment. Hostels for this purpose have increased in number in recent years, and an extensive study has been made of them.
- Religious care of young university students in common or specific groups (animators, volunteers, collaborators, ecclesial movements) in academic or pastoral settings.
- Academic commitment of Salesians in State or private Universities.
- The management of particular university institutions which together constitute already an important sector on account of the number of students, the involvement of lay people, and the effort at financial organization.

During these days of reflection we shall be concerned only with the latter, but against a **background of wide university commitment**, with our **attention ultimately centred on the subject** (young and adult university students to whose service Salesians and laity are committed) rather than on means and structures, and emphasizing the pastoral purpose which lies behind all our

initiatives.

From these elements (subject, pastoral objective, university institution) it is clear that we must focus especially on the cultural and formative quality of our university institutions. In fact, as is said of the school, if a university is not valid as a university it cannot be Catholic either.

This is a task which will call for a certain time and procedure. And so for the moment it is a matter especially of understanding the implications and laying out a possible process for their realization. And that is what we have in mind when we speak of a ***Common Program for the development of the IUS.***

2. Indicators of a situation

In the process tried out in the past, the ***Provinces*** did not always have full responsibility for the university institutions which grew up in their territory: they were often considered "non-typical" or "unique", not least because of their numerical rarity and the result not infrequently of the initiative of "pioneers" who accepted personal responsibility for their management.

In several cases it has not been possible to provide these institutions with reasonably sufficient ***salesian personnel*** because of the urgent need to provide for other works of greater priority to which we are already committed, and also because of the lack of qualification and preparation on the part of the majority of the confreres.

The ***lay personnel*** on whom we have counted have given and still continue to give at the present day a substantial quantitative contribution and one which to a good extent is acceptable also as regards quality. But it varies also from the standpoint of preparation and cultural orientation. It seems to be chosen on the basis of professional ability in a particular sector, on teaching output, on an acceptable level of adherence to the Christian mentality which rarely reaches a systematic and global association with culture.

Few university institutions have tried to formulate a ***Christian cultural project*** (for inspiring teaching, research and further initiatives), other than what is expressed in some traditional elements like the offering of some courses in religious knowledge, the principal ethical references linked with Christian morality with regard to burning problems of the present day, institutional identification with the Church or Christianity, and the presence of persons characterized as Christians.

The ***Congregation itself***, although aware that the institutions coming into being were in line with its mission, both as regards objectives and those to whom the work was addressed, has not yet defined in public form the characteristics of the specific salesian identity of our universities nor established for them any required cultural and pastoral levels.

Essentially there has been a ***prevailing concern*** to create a useful service, to ensure the proper functioning of the organizational structure, to improve the teaching capacity, to meet expenses, and to carry out the 'evangelization' which the nature of the institution and the personnel available made possible. There was less concern about qualifying salesian and lay personnel, for the formulation of a vision of cultural orientation at the level of the prevailing challenges, for the scientific and Christian formation of the students, and for the organization and realization of research.

3. The present context and intentions

This being the state of affairs in our universities we, the Church and the Congregation, are now entering a kind of new phase, symbolically and generically linked with the third millennium.

The key-points most emphasized in the effort at new evangelization are the dialectic dialogue between ***culture and Christian thought***, the evangelization of culture itself, inculturation of the faith in today's context, the clash between faith and the widespread forms of life spread by concepts of human existence and the social order.

All this is achieved through the commitment to elaborate and communicate culture through the

proclamation of what is specifically Christian and the witness of believers. Various components and institutions are called upon to play a conscious part in the work and to accept more responsibility than in the past. But certainly of first importance are the means of social communication, the centres of research and thought-production, education of formation at university level.

The Congregation is reshaping the foundation and carrying out an eventual reorganizing and re-siting of works and resources in line with the criterion of effectiveness. As far as educative initiatives are concerned, and leaving aside for the moment personal and community aspects, this emerges sometimes from the evident manifestation of charity, sometimes from spiritual intensity, sometimes from the educative quality, sometimes from the cultural influence or in the formation of mentality.

This latter perspective is the one that has been chosen, but not in isolation, for the salesian universities, in the context of the new demands for cultural qualification of which the Church feels the need, emphasized in the three Apostolic Exhortations concerning consecrated persons, priests and laity.

In the *Report on the state of the Congregation* presented to the GC24, it was stated: "With the completion of the first organizational effort which such initiatives at university level require, the time has now come to face up decisively and as a community to **cultural and pastoral qualification**, starting from the preparation of the confreres".

The proposal was taken up again in the letter "For you I study": "It must be recognized", I wrote, "that in this field it is not easy to ensure the conditions for significant salesian presence at a scientific, educative and pastoral level. In a few cases at the outset attention was directed especially to organizing a service to create the opportunity of a higher education amid the middle and poorer classes and fill the cultural gaps that existed. Nowadays one can no longer think that without specific preparation and an adequate staff one can express the 'oratorian criterion' at this level by integrating preoccupation for organization and attention to cultural level, administrative management and pastoral effect".

A first step in this process concerns the awareness and specification of the ideal orientation of these centres. "It is indispensable", says the letter, "to define clearly **the identity and orientation of these centres**", going beyond the generic declaration of Christianity. "While recognizing that they have a general set-up that takes its inspiration from the Christian mentality and passes on a humanistic and religious vision, there is always the risk of levelling down to the prevailing mentality rather than entering into dialogue for the sustaining of alternative proposals".

It is evident that such orientation must conform with the 'Catholic' character, expressed in the open and soundly autonomous cultural environment of the university and be in harmony with the salesian style and mission.

A process of reflection and verification seems necessary, therefore, which will lead to a **Project for Salesian Universities**. In the words of the letter already quoted more than once: "It will be necessary to draw up an authoritative line of approach (a *Project for Salesian Universities*, almost a platform for proclaiming their fundamental inspiration), to foster dialogue and exchange of ideas between these institutions and follow up the progress of the Provinces in this new experience".

In such an effort of rethinking and realization, provinces and confreres cannot remain uninvolved. **An animating nucleus is still needed** in these institutions for their own benefit and for ours. It would be of little avail to have them and merely administer them without the possibility of direct and authoritative intervention in delicate aspects. The operation implies, therefore, "the preparation and dedication of salesian personnel, intense collaboration with lay people who have been selected and made aware of the character and purpose of our universities".

There is a risk that must be absolutely avoided: "Just as in Houses of Spirituality we frequently find ourselves managing the structures without having available persons and teams capable of spiritual animation, it can also happen that in our university centres and hostels we may be providing structures and organization but not plans for life and the accompaniment of growth".



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4. Conclusions

I have explained to you why we are gathered here, and the direction in which we want to move. While I thank you sincerely, and through you all those who are committed to the foundation and consolidation of our university institutions, it is my earnest hope that through patient and untiring work they may become, like the oratory, models of salesian presence.

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Rector Major

Rome, 10 July 1998