



Salutatio december

...and after the Council of Major Superiors, what next?

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Father General

On the afternoon of 27th October last, we finished the meeting of the Council of the Major Superiors of the whole Order. We concluded the meeting with a celebration together of the Eucharist, as the best expression of thanksgiving to God. Many of those celebrating together were able to express their sentiments of thanks to the Lord during the ample time allowed for that purpose after the communion.

It was eight days of intense work, with an extremely tight schedule: from the time we met at 7 in the morning in the chapel, for Lauds and the celebration together of the Eucharist, until 7.30 pm, together in the chapel once more for Vesper prayers and meditation. After supper several district meetings still were taking place to deal with points of common interest, taking advantage of the occasion of our meeting together in Rome.

We only dedicated the afternoon of Sunday 23rd to a stroll round Rome and the surrounding areas. Also, the whole morning of Wednesday 26th was taken up by the audience with Pope Benedict XVI in St Peter's Square. Our Attorney General, Father Guiseppe Romanó, arranged a good place for us, on the left hand side of the access platform to the basilica, so that we could personally greet the Pope, who approached us at the end of the audience. In our handshake, I put all your hands in there too, by saying that it was the Order who wanted to greet him. He thanked us for the greeting with a gesture of satisfaction and admiration, saying that he sees all Escolapios as vigorous courageous people. *Siete forti! Vi benedico di cuore!*

During the whole time of the Council, it seemed that I could feel a good warm brotherly ambiance; it was noticeable that the proposed topics had been prepared; the motivation to participate and take part was obvious. The final evaluation was highly positive. So you can have all the information, apart from what you could glean on the General Curia website during the celebration of the Council itself, we have an issue of the *Ephemerides calasanctianae* programmed about the contents and results of the consultation. We are merely offering you some thoughts, now the Council has finished and our memory is still fresh.

First and foremost I wish to underline the importance of the input from all the participants; it enabled us to learn from others and to teach one another. On writing that, the passage from Col 3, 16 comes to mind: *"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God"*. With the simplicity and humility that our frailties and limitations indicate we should adopt, I think, however, that I can recognize that the essence of what

St Paul wrote in this quotation was experienced during the Council: we taught each other; there was wisdom in the meditations; there were hints of how to correct plans, conduct, evaluations and established judgments; we sang and praised at the moment of prayer and celebration; we tried to fit in the word of Christ when we looked at ourselves, figured out what we wanted, and sketched out the future of the Order.

In second place, we all agreed on the fact that topics and themes of great importance for the Order were being dealt with. You know that the two central topics of the Council were restructuring the Order and training (pastoral care of the vocations to Escolapio religious life, initial training and on-going training). As both are ample and cover many subjects, the General Congregation summed them up in ten consultation points about restructuring the Order and twelve about training. In the end, a third consultation block was added with twelve so-called “minor” themes. The epithet relates to the short time they were dealt with, already foreseen in the programme, and not to the importance they could hold for the Order, the same as for the central themes. We were conscious of the fact that, on reflecting on these topics, we should enter decisively into the search and individualization of the operative proposals useful for encouraging the present life and mission of the Order and to offer reasons for hope in the future. The result of the consultation was highly positive, there being a wide agreement on the proposals.

Thirdly, the question that spontaneously arises is, without doubt, what is going to happen? This is the challenge bequeathed by the Council. The farewell we gave at the end contained the idea of mission, of sending forth: firstly, communicate what was experienced to others, each one in his own place; secondly, let's start thinking already, General Congregation, Major Superiors and monks, about how to leave room for the proposals, to channel them into a practice which can lead us to the desired goal: the revitalization of the Order. This is the objective we sought and was emphasized at the General Chapter in 2003: “restructure to revitalize”. Therefore, the answer to the question lies in taking things on board, mentalizing them; by proposing operational plans based on the proposals, which should be done in an orderly fashion, each instance in the Order assuming its own message and responsibility, which reaches each and every religious Escolapio. The answer is finally in supporting the plans sketched out with discernment and utmost participation.

On several occasions during the Council I referred to the force that gives us the virtue obedience affords us, in the noblest sense of its religious meaning, leaving us disquisitions about meanings we already know: we all obey the General Chapter, a qualified unique expression of what the Order wishes to give itself for its own good and to improve the service of its mission within society and the Church. Obedience, dynamically supporting what the “Holy Spirit” suggests to the Escolapio community, thus obeying the wishes of the Father, is a great strength that only the religious life offers us, and which occasionally we don't know how to take advantage of . We turn to props outside the religious life when, without entirely discounting them, it would be better to lay our hands on our best tools. I know of an Escolapio who guides his life in the light of this motto: *In obedientia, gaudium!* I rejoice in obeying. It sounds hard, without a doubt. But how does the Gospel sound? The motto cited brings to mind another similar motto, this one of the Blessed John XXIII: *Obedientia et pax!* Obedience and peace. We all know what an evangelical person that memorable Pope was, and what good he brought to the World and the Church.

During the month of December we will have celebrated Advent once more, the door to the the celebrations of the Birth of our Lord in Bethlehem. In the liturgy

there resounds with force the prophetic invitation to level roads, straighten paths, return to the Lord not with sacrifices but with a personal devotion from oneself and the people, the community. One word sums up all of that: to convert at the voice of the Lord. I venture to say that, at least, an echo of that voice is the celebrated Council for we Escolapios. Without a doubt, on many points we are going to need to change mentalities. External situations: an individualist model of culture, environmental pressures, readings from our own and others' histories, a tendency towards superficiality and frivolity; and the internal: the natural law of age, which in certain cases leaves few opportunities for change; the force of experience itself which keeps our own beliefs set, because it isn't a question of making value judgments about them, about good and bad, but about perceiving the opportunity of the proper time or *kairós*, the time of God or "a sign of the times"; the uncomfortable feeling, finally, of restating things we have become accustomed to, or in which we have delightedly got comfortable in, our little worlds, our "nests", where we take refuge and which we enjoy. Neither is it a case of adopting a certain preconceived attitude of suffering as if that were appropriate for the religious life. As a footnote here, I was a witness many years ago to an argument between Escolapios: the opinion, defended by a young Escolapio in the face of another older one, and which I agree with, that one comes to the religious life to enjoy and not to suffer, was answered by the other man with a wisdom forged from experience: "you do not convince me and, additionally, worse for you, because if you come to religious life to enjoy, you will be disappointed; if you came to suffer, you would enjoy yourself a lot more on the few occasions that also happens".

I will close already with the *salutatio* of the post-Council, bringing in this quotation from the Bible, just in case it passes through the mind of someone that the possibility or impossibility of carrying out in the Order something similar to what was provided for in the Council has not been taken into account: "Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach; no, the word is very near you; it is in your heart and in your mouth". (Dt 30, 11.14).

I say farewell with a wish for all, along with a brotherly prayer, for a happy beneficial celebration of the Mystery of Christmas and the beginning of the New Year 2006.

With affection and respect for Christ, born in Bethlehem to Mary, wife of Joseph, and for Calasanz.