



AWE-INSPIRING GIFT AND RESPONSIBILITY TO SERVE POOR YOUTH

*Salesians of South Asia Committing themselves
to Eradicate Poverty from the Families of 500,000 Young People in 2020-2026*

Dear Confreres, Members of the Salesian Family and Collaborators,

God be praised for the great gifts and responsibilities he has placed on us Salesians and the Salesian Family in the South Asia Region.

Blessing and Responsibility

162 years after the birth of our Congregation and 205 of the birth of Don Bosco, God has made the SDBs of the Region, 21.1% of the entire Salesian Congregation with 2927 Salesians and novices as per the statistics of 2019. This is one fifth of the Congregation. The average age of our confreres is among the younger group in the Congregation. We can also be proud that many of our confreres are well trained in various fields and form today a very healthy human resource in the Congregation. The strength of the Salesian Family in the region is a great blessing. Consecrated members of the Salesian Family, including SDBs are 6759. Lay members in the Salesian family in the South Asia Region number 12,297.

While God has gifted us with such blessings in SDB confreres and Salesian Family members, he has also given us a great responsibility to carry forward the Charism He gifted to Don Bosco and shared with us. God has placed us in a region that has the largest population of young people in the world. The youth population in India alone is 34.46% of the total population and it is expected to be around 32.26% in 2030. Youth in Bangladesh form 36.08% of its population now and is expected to be 32.98% in 2030. In sheer numbers the total youth population of India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal would be around 520 million! Many of this young population as we know are poor. It is the field God has sent us to.

We thank God for such singular and awe-inspiring gift and responsibility.

As we thank God, we are “moved by hope,” for, as the *Strenna* given by the Rector Major for 2021 suggests, God renews all things through his Spirit present among us (cf. Rev 21:5). This hope assures us that the Spirit of God who raised up Don Bosco in the Church to be a father, friend and teacher of the young, is the same Spirit who has called us to share this charism and God will enable us to be other Don Boscos in our times and cultures (Cf. 1 & 15).

The Six-Year Roadmap: Absolute Priority for the Young – the poorest, the most abandoned...

The great responsibility of ministering to the largest population of young people in the world in our days brings with it many challenges. We are called “to rekindle the gift of God that is within” us (cf. 2 Tim 1:6). The reflections in our Provincial Chapters that led to the General Chapter and the reflections of the 28th General Chapter itself have given us indications to rekindle the charismatic gift we have received. The 10th Successor of Don Bosco, our Rector Major, Rev. Fr. Angel Fernandez Artime has given us, along with the post chapter reflections, his programmatic guidelines in 8 points. The whole Congregation is expected to follow this road map. Each Province is to hold it up as a mirror to compare itself with the “criteria for defining the aims, objectives, processes and concrete actions for the next six years in all the places where the charism of the sons of Don Bosco has taken root.” Each Province may differ in the tempo with which it adapts the guidelines to the place and culture, but it is meant to guide each and every Salesian, our institutions and presences in the next six years.

We are all familiar with the Acts of the General Council (cf. 433) in which the Rector Major has traced out the 8-point programme. In reading the message, I believe that we can safely interpret the fifth point, read in the light of the first four to be a pivot on which everything revolves. This interpretation is supported by the text. Let us reflect on this.

1. SALESIAN OF DON BOSCO FOREVER. Six years for growth in Salesian identity
2. In a Congregation in which we are invited by the “DA MIHI ANIMAS, COETERA TOLLE”
3. To live the “SALESIAN SACRAMENT OF PRESENCE”
4. Formation for being SALESIAN PASTORS TODAY
5. ABSOLUTE PRIORITY for the young, the poorest and most abandoned and defenceless
6. TOGETHER WITH LAY PEOPLE IN THE MISSION AND INFORMATION. The charismatic strength that the laity and the Salesian Family offer us
7. NOW IS THE TIME FOR GREATER GENEROSITY IN THE CONGREGATION. A universal and missionary Congregation
8. Accompanying the young towards a SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

In explaining the first point “Salesian of Don Bosco Forever. Six years for growth in Salesian identity” and drawing a proposal, the Rector Major says, “This six-year period will need to be distinguished by a profound effort in the Congregation to grow in charismatic depth, in Salesian identity in all phases of life, through a serious commitment in every province and every Salesian community to arrive at saying, as Don Bosco did: “I have promised God that I would give of myself to my last breath for my poor boys.”¹ This quotation from Don Bosco cited here along with the explanation provided in the section identifies what constitutes being a Salesian. It consists in being a religious, consecrated to God, in imitation of Jesus Christ the Good Shepherd, following the charismatic dedication of Don Bosco to poor youth.

¹MB XVIII, 258, also cited in the Constitutions, art.1.

What we want to offer to poor youth for whom we dedicate our entire consecrated life is reflected in the second point: “In a Congregation in which we are invited by the ‘DA MIHI ANIMAS, COETERA TOLLE’.” The Rector Major notes: “It is urgent that we give absolute priority to the commitment to evangelise the young with conscious, intentional and explicit proposals. We are invited to introduce them to Jesus and the Good News of the Gospel for their lives.” Our youth ministry is a youth ministry that serves the young not only for a good life here on earth. If we do not propose Jesus Christ as a model to the young, we will not be true Salesians. The Rector Major warns us “Without this, dear confreres, other titanic efforts of the Congregation will tend towards the goodness of human development and social welfare – that are always very necessary and belong to our charismatic identity – but they will not lead us to the primary reason for which the Holy Spirit raised up the Salesian charism in Don Bosco: ‘Faithful to the commitments Don Bosco has passed on to us, we are evangelizers of the young’ (C. 6). The first purpose of our youth ministry is the conversion of the individual to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.” The successor of Don Bosco, together with the Chapter members therefore challenge us in strong terms: “I am proposing to our Congregation that for the next six years we be demanding of ourselves in responding to the “URGENCY OF OFFERING INITIAL PROCLAMATION WITH MORE CONVICTION, because ‘Nothing is more solid, profound, secure, meaningful and wisdom-filled than that initial proclamation’ (*Christus Vivit*, no. 214).”²We are not simply educators but evangelisers who educate and educate through evangelization, for Christ is the perfect human being in imitation of whom each poor youth can attain life in fullness.

The third point indicates a unique Salesian legacy, through which we minister to the young. This legacy is what the Rector Major calls, “SALESIAN SACRAMENT OF PRESENCE”. It is something for which Don Bosco gave greatest priority as evidenced in his letter from Rome in 1884. It is the soul of Salesian Family Spirit. “Our being disciples of the Lord, our profound and authentic way of being apostles of the young first of all passes through our being among the people and, in a special way, among the kids, among the young.”

The fourth point, namely “Formation for being SALESIAN PASTORS TODAY” stresses the need to intensely connect formation, (both initial and ongoing), to our mission addressed to the poorest young people.

We then come to the fifth guideline which, as we indicated is pivotal: “ABSOLUTE PRIORITY for the young, the poorest and most abandoned and defenceless”. The Rector Major makes it clear that he sees this as the very identity of the Salesian. He states: “I dream that today, saying ‘Salesians of Don Bosco’ means consecrated ‘crazies’, that is, Salesians who love with a true Salesian heart, who are perhaps even ‘a little crazy’, oriented towards the poorest.” There is no doubt that the Provincial Chapters in our region and the 28th General Chapter too saw this as the most essential aspect of Salesian identity. The Rector Major points out this preferential option for the poor as “authentic ‘Chapter deliberation’,” even though it is already found in our Constitutions. “The Lord made clear to Don Bosco that he was to direct his mission first and foremost to the young, especially to those who are poorer. We are called to the same mission and are aware of its supreme importance...” (C.26) This teaching of our Constitutions and the deliberations of the 28th General Chapter are “*asking us for a radical, preferential, personal, institutional and structural option for the most needy, poor and excluded young people...*” It is so foundational that, with Don Bosco, his 10th successor says that to forget this preferential commitment to the poor “would be the death-knell of our Congregation”.

² GC 28, no.4.

Guidelines six, seven and eight “6) TOGETHER WITH LAY PEOPLE IN THE MISSION AND INFORMATION. The charismatic strength that the laity and the Salesian Family offer us; 7) NOW IS THE TIME FOR GREATER GENEROSITY IN THE CONGREGATION. A universal and missionary Congregation; and 8) Accompanying the young towards a SUSTAINABLE FUTURE” form the ways and methods in which we carry out this commitment to serve the young.

The Rector Major insists that no difference of culture, language or will should warrant exception in this commitment to poor youth. Preferential option for the poorest is an indispensable one in the whole Congregation irrespective of contexts, cultures, and continents.

Implications of Our Commitment to the Poorest Youth

In our South Asia region, where the majority of the world’s poor young people live, we cannot but enthusiastically heed this call to re-commit ourselves to serve the poorest young people.

Let us keep reminding ourselves (SDBs) that we are Consecrated men. We are consecrated to God and live as brothers in communities sharing the mission entrusted to us by the Father to serve the poorest of the poor in imitation of Christ, in the Don Bosco way. We are accompanied by young people and a host of Salesian Family members (consecrated and lay) who are our collaborators in the apostolic mission entrusted to us. Let us heed the passionate call of our Rector Major and find ways at personal, community, Province and South Asia Regional level to commit ourselves to a *radical, preferential, personal and institutional option for boys and girls, young men and women who are most in need and those excluded from society, giving special attention to those who are exploited and are victims of abuse and violence.*

Such a commitment does not necessarily mean starting new presences and works. What we need first is to re-commit ourselves to a love and commitment for poor youth. Then we will need the courage to challenge ourselves to creatively serve the poor in our existing institutions, works and services. We have to be self-reliant and not expect resources to be continuously brought from outside. This demands very judicious combination of services and optimum use of our institutions. Apostolic courage would not exclude, but include the possibility of starting new services, works and presences when needed. Such apostolic courage could also call for re-dimensioning of some of our existing realities. We must not forget that each of our works was started by the pioneering communities of Salesians with the aim of serving poor youth and no type of work is deprived of the opportunity to serve this Salesian mission. We will do well to remember that individual works and ministries are not separated from the mission of the Province, Region, Congregation, and the Church. Let us remind ourselves that dividing, and channelling resources is not the only way to increase our capacities; increasing our resourcefulness is even more satisfying. In re-committing ourselves to the poor, let us seek the synergy of our multiform interventions rather than critiquing one or the other. Let us achieve this by encouraging each other to use our talents and capacities at personal level and the great potential of every one of our institutions and presences.

Our commitment to the poorest youth demands that we collectively set objectives and evaluate the achievement of such objectives. As they say, what is considered unworthy of evaluation is usually not a priority. If poor youth are our priority, we will all be committed to evaluating our reach to the poor; we must find ways to set goals and work to achieve them. Let us evaluate ourselves by the quality and number of poor young lives that we help to transform. In Pope Francis’ language let us evaluate our effectiveness by the number of young people we help to dream and by the quality of the accompaniment we give in the realization of their dreams. When we do that, we will have responded to the gift and responsibility God has placed on us in the South Asia Region of our dear Congregation.

We will be happy Salesians and that happiness will be contagious to attract more young people to consecrate themselves to God with the mission to serve poor young people. Such happiness in the Salesian Family will bring more young people to dedicate their lives to consecrated or lay vocation in the Salesian Family.

South Asia Proposal

Keeping this in mind the SPCSA Council in its meeting held on 4-5 & 10 September has adopted the following commitment for our region: **Salesians in South Asia commit ourselves to work with young people as protagonists, and other collaborators, to remove poverty from the families of 500,000 young people in 2020-2026** by engaging in education, empowerment, skill training and employment generation for extremely poor young people, especially those below poverty line, so as to expand the experience of God's love and His Kingdom here on earth. This will be our way to commit to the Rector Major's call for the next six years to give "ABSOLUTE PRIORITY for the young, the poorest and most abandoned and defenceless". As the Rector Major has pointed out this commitment is most urgent in collaboration with the Salesian Family. An action plan to achieve this target with objectively verifiable indicators is being placed for wider consultation and can be published after the next SPCSA meeting in February 2021.

The draft proposal envisages, mass, decentralised implementation by the 2927 Salesians and their vast family of collaborators in over 417 communities. Along with the young people who are the protagonists, individual Salesians, communities, initiatives, Provinces and SPCSA Networks will be implementors. Various leaders at the SPCSA level, with special guidance from the Economers' Forum will be committed to spreading the common vision of this commitment to the poorest youth and encouraging the verification and documentation of the mission.

Jesus who through his compassion and dependence on prayer to the Father, multiplied the two fish and five loaves of a young person is our model in this effort (cf. Jn 6:1-14) to accompany the young people in fulfilling their dream to transform their lives and those of their families.

This Salesian South Asia commitment (2020-2026) to end hunger and poverty in 500,000 (half million) families by engaging in education, empowerment, skill training and employment generation for extremely poor young people, especially those below poverty line (as defined by the country = \$1.25 per day - UNO) is to be achieved through various Salesian, charismatic, traditional, and creative interventions that will focus on the following **seven areas/levels** (These are based on the *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs) set by the UNO and are *typically Salesian works* in which Salesians in the South Asia Region are engaged).

Level 1: Full formal employment for the very poor, and migrant youth (at least 250,000) [SDG 1 & 8]

Level 2: Providing minimum proficiency standard in reading, writing and arithmetic especially to rural youth (classes 0-7) [SDG 4]

Level 3: Rescuing and rehabilitation of young at risk, (prevent and rescue youth from trafficking, rehabilitate street kids, rescue, and prevent child labour, rehabilitate and prevent addictions) [SDG 16]

Level 4: Education to justice and peace through human rights education and faith education, with a strong presence in the digital world [SDG 16 & 7]

Level 5: Selection and Training of volunteers/Collaborators/Salesian personnel who are committed to dedicate their life and service to the cause of poor young people. On the job training (training in Salesian Charism – dedication to forming honest citizens and good Christians following the preventive system as a method) of Salesian teachers in academic and technical institutions [SDG 4]

Level 6: Promotion of Self-help Groups, Agrarian development in the rural settings for sustainable economic growth; and spread the use of sustainable and modern energy [SDG 8 & 7]

Level 7: Documentation, publication, reporting and Research [SDG 18]

Verification and Evaluation Mechanism will include the following:

- ✓ Certificate of family income of the young person (at the time of starting intervention)
- ✓ Proof of income from job (employment, entrepreneurship achieved). Salary slip etc.
- ✓ Certificate of educational qualification or Skill level verification
- ✓ Other parameters based on sub goals (literacy & arithmetic proficiency, physical development, teachers/personnel training, human rights promotion, preventing trafficking/child labour ...)
- ✓ Photo, biodata, contact details of beneficiary and family
- ✓ Recognition of funding agencies, sponsors, CSR, Past pupils etc
- ✓ Recognition of Community or institution, leaders
- ✓ Recognition of Network that coordinates the efforts
- ✓ Recognition of Province and its leaders

Optional additions

- ✓ Documented recognition by beneficiary of the life-changing help from the Salesians
- ✓ Testimonials (video, audio, publications, news clips/snippets)

Data will be centralised under the leadership of the SPCSA Secretary and goal achievement will be updated in real time on the Don Bosco South Asia website with the collaboration of all Provinces and Networks. *Privacy of all individuals will be respected* in handling data. The coming months will be dedicated to fine-tuning the concept and the required tools. We would like to include as many as possible in the planning process.

Even as we face changing political and social situations in our region, we can be sure that, as Don Bosco assured us: “Everyone will look on us and welcome us sympathetically, as long as our concern and our requests are for the children of the poor, those most at risk in society.”³

With trust in our Blessed Mother who is our help, let us be “moved by hope” in the Spirit of God who transforms all.



Fr. Biju Michael, SDB
General Councillor for South Asia Region

