

Salesians of Don Bosco

New Rochelle Province
Installation of 18th Provincial

Merger of the Provinces of
Canada and the Eastern USA

Mass of Transition Very Rev. Thomas A. Dunne, S.D.B.

We come here today with a sense of gratitude to God for his goodness. As we heard proclaimed in today's second reading:

“Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: Rejoice!”

We gather here as a community of believers who have been especially blessed with God's grace as a newly merged province, a vibrant Salesian Family, young disciples of the Lord Jesus, and members of the worldwide Catholic church. While we almost fill this chapel, we know that we represent a much larger movement of believers who have taken up Christ's call to holiness and service to God's little ones after the manner of St. John Bosco.

I must admit to some discomfort with being up here on this day. For a long time, I have enjoyed the experience of sitting in the pews listening to a provincial try to make sense of what was going on the life of the province. I don't mind telling you that I miss the peace and tranquility of those congregational moments! It all happens a lot faster up here!

My position at the podium today is because Fr. Ortiz, our regional superior, sent me an email Thursday, January 8. He asked for my cell phone number because the rector major wanted to speak with me. Actually, I opened that email one day after it was sent. Fr. Ortiz' message went straight into my spam box.

For some reason, the three-month process of consultation that we in the provinces went through had come to a focus by the grace of the Holy Spirit. In spite of my highly efficient spam-program (and my serious reservations), the movement of the Spirit would not be denied.

Beyond my appointment as provincial, we rejoice today at the opportunity that has been granted us by God in the merging of these two province communities. Our celebration today began with the merging of images of our two peoples both north and south of the border. (We are grateful to Sister Mary Culhan and her art class at Don Bosco Prep for designing and executing this beautiful image of our experience today.)

This symbol represents what has happened today in a juridical sense: two ecclesial jurisdictions have become one. The map of our province is no longer easily reproduced on an 8½ x 11" page. We have an increase of consecrated religious in our province. We have grown significantly in the number of communities and ministry centers. The Salesian Family has been augmented in both size and scope. We have become far more diverse in terms of culture, language, and religious sensitivity. We have been enriched by the addition of good friends and colleagues from within our Salesian and North American family. In this spirit, we might exclaim in the same spirit as Bro. Marcel Gauthier at my first meeting with the Canadian confreres: “I just realized that we

have inherited Florida!” My brothers and sisters, we have all inherited a great deal in this merger of the Canadian and Eastern U.S. provinces!

The manner in which we understand this merger will be important in making real the promise of this combination of two provinces. In the decree of merger, Fr. Pascal Chavez, our Rector Major, made clear that this coming together must not be interpreted in light of the current financial situation in the world. It is too easy to consider this merger to be a takeover or a downsizing. The spirit of Fr. Chavez’s decree is just the opposite. He sees this merger as more of a “stimulus package” that will spur us on to growth on behalf of Christ’s mission to young people in our combined area who are most in need, at risk, and abandoned.

We should not be lulled into thinking that the Rector Major’s decree offers us the respite of additional numbers, resources, and collaborators so that we can be comfortable in maintaining the same style of life and ministry – until Don Bosco’s sons gradually fade out of existence! On the contrary, Fr. Chavez’s decree calls for a type of “marriage” of two communities in order to create greater synergy for a common purpose: extending Don Bosco’s mission in our areas of North America.

Instead of making us feel complacent about our current condition, the Rector Major has challenged us to direct our greater numbers, resources, lay colleagues, and young people to be more energetic, bold, vigorous, and (in the end more) effective in bringing Don Bosco’s mission to youth most in need. The challenge laid down here today is to live the image of the Good Shepherd (on our medals) more effectively for the sake of the young who need us most.

If this call sounds vaguely familiar, there are historical precedents for that realization. Today’s call of Fr. Chavez is reminiscent of the call Don Bosco gave to the Salesian Congregation and family in 1875 when he sent forth his first missionaries to serve the young and the poor in Argentina. In sending his first missionaries to the New World, St. John Bosco was extending to his Salesian family the mission of being good shepherds to all lost sheep throughout the world: “Go and proclaim the Gospel to all people, baptizing them in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

As people of the North American continent, we have an innate appreciation for this missionary approach of Don Bosco. We are the beneficiaries of the missionary zeal of others who came to these shores to extend God’s kingdom among the early inhabitants of our lands. Today is the memorial of Blessed Junipero Serra, who came to the shores of our continent in 1749. The missions he founded still remain for us images of the evangelizing spirit that helped to form our people as both honest citizens and devout Catholics.

Perhaps more appropriate to our situation here today is the passionate witness of evangelization offered by the primary evangelizers of our parts of the North American continent: Sts. Jean de Brébeuf, Isaac Jogues, René Goupil, and companions. These missionaries of the early 1600’s evangelized our Native American ancestors on both sides of our current border, planting deep roots for a Christian faith that would bring forth its initial flowering in Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha, the Lily of the Mohawks.

Over the years, our peoples have re-enforced this evangelizing spirit through the extraordinary witness of Blessed Marie de l'Incarnation, St. Elizabeth Seton, St. Margaret d'Youville, St. John Neumann, Venerable Pierre Toussaint, and Blessed André Bessette, among others.

To these evangelizers of our land we have to add the members of our own Congregation who came as evangelizers to those newly arrived to our cities in the Eastern U.S. and Canada: Fr. Coppo, Fr. Scagliola, and Bro. Squassoni to Manhattan in 1898 and Fr. Truffa and Fr. Mellica to Toronto in 1924. These Salesian missionaries brought to our lands the spirit of the Good Shepherd in the unique style of St. John Bosco.

Our first Salesians brought to our lands a youthful evangelization that was inserted into the very life of the people. It was an environment in which they felt welcome as in a home, called to faith as in a church, empowered for a productive life as in a school, and offered life-giving moments of friendship and enjoyment as in a playground. It is this charismatic gift of an oratorian heart that we are being called to bring to the young in our areas with increased vigor and faith.

Today our Canadian brothers and sisters celebrate Canada Day. This is the birthday of Canada and its people as an independent nation. On this day we all celebrate the approval of the Constitution Act of 1867, which gave birth to a nation founded on peace, order and good government.

Tomorrow our brothers and sisters in the United States will remember the approval of the resolution of independence by the Continental Congress on July 2, 1776. On this day we celebrate a nation founded on the principles of freedom, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

As we celebrate these beginnings, we are reminded of the Rector Major's call that the spirit of both these peoples be made one in reaching out to those young people most in need throughout our combined territories. We are challenged to bring to the table all of our resources for the benefit of those little ones who have nowhere else to turn.

Certainly for us in this merged province, our evangelizing outreach will have to include those vulnerable ones who have been abused by our own members. For this, we feel called to a life-long journey of penance, healing, and prevention. We sincerely apologize to those in whom we have caused pain and suffering in this way. Furthermore, we commit ourselves to continuing the preventive policies that have characterized our service to the young in the more recent years. Unfortunately, we cannot undo the past. However, we can make sure that in following Christ the Good Shepherd, we will serve the young with purity of heart and the selfless love of the Beatitudes.

As we move forward in the process of communion, we will be called to a change of mentality for the sake of our common mission to the young most in need. We will be challenged to look wider than the confines of our own ministerial institution, our local community setting, and our schedule of classes, Masses, and small group activities. Instead, we will be called to focus on the broader mission that gives life to those activities. Even more, we will be challenged to be more creative and bold calling together and forming collaborators for our mission, in identifying the

life needs of the young in our areas, in visioning effective approaches and initiatives for helping our young toward lives as responsible citizens and devout Catholics.

In this, we have the example of Catholics from our two countries who serve as icons for living the life of the Good Shepherd in our day: Dorothy Day and Jean Vanier. These honest citizens and devout Catholics give us in North America a living witness of bringing Christ's mission to the most needy out of a motive of faith-filled service. Washing the feet of the lowly after the example of Jesus Christ is the prophetic path they followed as citizens of our countries and fervent members of our Church.

Is it not striking to reflect on the difference these two disciples of Christ have made *on their own* -- without a large congregation and family to aid them? They certainly did not become icons of our times by thinking small, relying only on their own gifts, and carrying on a ministry without creative vision, strategic planning, or ongoing evaluation. They gathered around themselves large numbers of colleagues who would carry on their work even after their deaths.

Far more than an administrative switch of jurisdictions, the aggregation of our two provinces is an opportunity for us to be more true to our identity as Salesians and as a Salesian Family. Our call is to celebrate the 150th anniversary year of the founding of the Salesian Society, by setting out on a new phase of our vocation as baptized Christians, followers of Don Bosco, and citizens of our two great nations.

It is a perfect alignment of circumstances for us to re-invigorate our province community for the sake of Don Bosco's mission. Let us never doubt the fact that Mary, the Help of Christians, is at work in all of this. "It is Mary who has done everything," as Don Bosco was fond of saying. Mary is with us on this day and will be with us all the way up to Don Bosco's bicentennial and beyond so that the gift of Don Bosco's charism will be more effectively implemented for the sake of the many young people in need within the boundaries of our new province and throughout the world.

Over the next six years, we will prepare for the 200th anniversary our founder's death by returning to Don Bosco with the bold intent of making his charism ever more effective for the young and the poor.

"Give me souls. Take away the rest."