

STRENNA 2016

WITH JESUS, let us pursue the adventure of the Spirit together!

1. GREETINGS AND A WORD OF EXPLANATION

In my mind and heart I still retain the unforgettable memories of the celebration of the bicentenary of the birth of Don Bosco which we experienced in the month of August in the Salesian holy land of Valdocco and Colle Don Bosco. It fills me with joy to hear the echoes of the celebrations which took place in so many corners of the world to mark this special event. Thanks to the Holy Spirit the Salesian Family is very much alive!

The bicentenary of the birth of our father Don Bosco has given us the opportunity to remember his life story, to deepen our understanding of his pedagogical inspirations and to relive some of the features of his spirituality. This was the programme proposed by my predecessor Fr Pascual Chavez – a very fruitful programme. Weaving together the threads of the history, the mission and the Salesian spirituality of the beginnings, we have discovered what it means to live our Salesian vocation with passion. Like every vocation ours too implies a love story between God and a real person be it a woman, a man or a young person. Only by giving importance to the origins of our charism on which the Salesian vocation draws will we succeed in *planning together the mission to youth* which as the Salesian Family we have received, and make *appear with clarity the spirituality* from which we drink and draw nourishment.

My Dear Brothers and Sisters of the Salesian Family I come to you in another year to present the Strenna and I do so with words of brotherly love and affection. I express this strong new desire to reach out to you with the same feelings that Don Bosco had. I know that many of you are waiting for this presentation. The Strenna demonstrates the riches of the family that we make up together. It is intended to be a help in linking us together in communion and in sharing mission ventures, moved by the Holy Spirit who in the Church of our times encourages us to follow new paths. This is why we are saying: ***“With Jesus, let us pursue the adventure of the Spirit together.”***

As you can read in the following pages I want to speak about God and about Jesus Christ who is the foundation of our personal lives and of our Salesian Family; however, at the same time I am speaking about the mission that I describe as “an adventure of the Spirit” and about the communion among us, with us as the Church which I describe using the expression “pursuing together”.

This period of service as Rector Major has enabled me to come to know better and to love more the Congregation and the Salesian Family. I have had the privilege of being able to be a witness of the many paths along which the Holy Spirit is leading our Family nowadays. I am convinced that the Holy Spirit is being very generous with all of us and

expects from us on our part the same availability that He encountered in Don Bosco, Mother Mazzarello, Dominic Savio and the very many others who at the school of holiness in our great religious family were ready to follow Jesus, in a radical manner, allowing themselves to be guided by the Spirit of God.

2. WITH JESUS !

Saying “WITH JESUS” at the beginning of the title of the Strenna tells us that He is at the beginning and the centre of all our reflections.

The journey we are proposing in these pages is much more than a pastoral strategy; it is a declaration that only with Jesus, in Jesus and through Jesus will we be able to undertake a journey that really is meaningful and decisive for our lives.

In a way similar to the calls of Jesus in the Gospel, today as then he gazes and looks attentively at every individual, into the depth of his or her heart, and from there makes his invitation to follow him heard. This is what the Christian life is about: the beginning of a vocation, hearing oneself called by name. It is essentially the *following of Jesus*.

It is Jesus who takes the initiative, who joins us on the journey, *who with kindness seeks a meeting*. His gaze of predilection and his personal call require a response full of trust and abandonment in him; because when Jesus calls someone to follow him he does not give them a detailed programme, neither giving reasons not imposing conditions. The call of Jesus involves someone in an adventure, in a situation of risk. It is a question of following the path he takes without a roadmap. Following Jesus means going to the trouble of getting to one's feet and setting off, not staying at the side of the road like a person watching someone going by who arouses enthusiasm or controversy or argument.

What we know about the calls of Jesus in the Gospel has been repeated down the centuries, and it is the same call that he has given to each one of us in the Salesian Family, and the one that he gives to every young person who meets him *and who wants and decides to be one of his own*. It is a decision that implies the daring of the disciple who overcomes every kind of fear and makes light of the difficulties inherent in the process of following, such as rejection, exclusion, incomprehension, or the risks.

Meeting Jesus, or better, being met by him provokes admiration, attraction, fascination. However that is not enough. Perhaps the most important experience that this following involves is personal friendship with the Master; a friendship that is understood and lived as dedication, faithfulness and trust. Where there is no personal friendship there can be no following, even though there may be other things such as enthusiasm and hard work to the point of exhaustion. The call brings us face to face with the splendid possibility of friendship, and demands heartfelt attachment to the person of Jesus and a radical change of life: a following and a walking with Jesus that becomes transformed into communion with

him (Jn 1, 31-51); a following and a walking with Jesus that is also a question of staying with him, given that it is linked to a personal experience that is truly an encounter (Jn 15, 14-16).

My dear Brothers and Sisters, what I have presented briefly, trying to get to the essentials, ought to be both the starting point and also the destination, the highest priority of our commitments as educators and evangelisers of the young. From this point forward the invitation I am giving to you is to pursue personally, sometimes with other educators in the thousands of centres of the Salesian Family around the world, and always with the young people – *always with them and always for them* - a faith journey in which our relationship with Jesus is rekindled. Yes, this is what it is all about! Allowing ourselves to be captivated by him as a person, allowing ourselves to be won over not only by an ideal or a mission but by the living God incarnate in him. Allowing ourselves to be gradually transformed by this God who is passionate about a life that is more worthy and happy for everyone.

We ourselves and especially our young people have a desire for God and a need for God. “Italy, Europe and the world have changed considerably in these two centuries but the soul of the young has not: even today boys and girls are open to life and to the encounter with God and with others, but there are so many of them exposed to discouragement, spiritual anemia and marginalization,” Pope Francis says to us the Salesian Family¹.

And we have to be convinced that this opening of ourselves to a meeting with God, this need for God becomes a decisive event for all of us and especially for our young people, when the Christ of the Gospel, just as he is, is experienced as the one who gives full meaning to life, moving on “from admiration to knowledge, and from knowledge to intimacy, to love, to following, to imitation.”² This desire is an educational and pastoral challenge that we have to face up to if we want to cultivate and develop a Christian spirituality for our times.

When one understands this and begins to live it out, one’s personal perspectives often change, because each one of us becomes more aware of God’s free gift, that he loved and loves us, and fixes his gaze on each one of his sons and daughters. This urges us to seek very seriously this **encounter** which generally takes place gradually, which ordinarily matures slowly with the highs and lows of the limited human response, that takes time and space, that implies a process that is freely undertaken. It is for this reason, sharing his own personal experience and conviction, that Pope Francis, in an interview he gave at the beginning of his pontificate invites people “to embark on the adventure of seeking an encounter and of allowing themselves to be sought and allowing themselves to be encountered by God.”³

¹ FRANCIS, *Like Don Bosco, with the young for the young*. Letter of Pope Francis to the Rector Major of the Salesians. Vatican City, Rome 2015

² AGC 406, Letter of the Rector Major Pascua CHAVEZ: *Bringing the Gospel to the young*. Rome 2010 p 22

³ FRANCIS *Interview given to Antonio Spadaro SJ*, Vatican City 21 September 2013

3. LET US PURSUE TOGETHER

Thinking about life's journey as the place in which everything is at stake and about what is the most important thing in it, we can look at Jesus as presented in the Bible as he walks the roads of Galilee with his followers, meeting many people, preaching, healing...Jesus who walks the streets among the people, in their everyday lives, and sometimes surrounded by those in need, also by the curious, those seeking something different, those fascinated by him, those who are indifferent, those who see him as dangerous and want to get rid of him.

To pursue a path, in human terms is to be familiar with it and to recognize it, to know the places it goes through which we will come across further ahead, where the refreshing shady places are, and the springs. It is to experience walking on stony ground, climbing steep tracks, sometimes quite difficult and at others quite easy and peaceful. As in the case of a pilgrim who is walking in search of faith, or for some other reason associated with faith, so our pursuing the path of life with Jesus is a ***journey that we make in Him*** (Col 2, 6), ***that we make with Him*** because he has fascinated us, and we do it united.

The message of the Strenna as we will be able to see in the challenges and the proposals in the final pages, is meant to emphasise very strongly that we undertake this journey this walking not alone but united among ourselves and with the young.

Why united? Because the community and ecclesial dimension is something essential in the Christian message - which we will be speaking about in these pages. Essentially, it is a question of an experience in which the believer feels supported by a great Love and by a community; a community on the move, which has a plan for the future. All this will mean that we are living a life that is worth living and which is the joy of being a Christian.⁴

4. AN ADVENTURE OF THE SPIRIT

4.1 An adventure very different from any kind of search for novelty

In many cultures the word *adventure* has a primary significance that means something similar to a type of life in which people seek as the ultimate goal the living of new experiences, and in which elements such as insight, uncertainty, danger, good fortune, success or failure are essential.

This concept of adventure, understood in this way speaks to us about enterprising seekers after new emotions in which to discover unknown ways, to experience one's limits,

⁴ Cf BENEDICT XVI. First interview granted to Vatican Radio before the XX World Youth Day in Cologne. Quoted by Pascual CHÁVEZ, in a Conference at the CISM (Italian Conference of Major Superiors), in Luis Fernando GUTIÉRREZ: *Discepoli e apostoli di Gesù Cristo*, CCS 2014, 222.

and at the same time demonstrate one's capacity for taking risks. All of these things would be the absolutely necessary qualities of a good "adventurer."

From another point of view, and by way of an example, we know that the European concept of Romanticism considered that "travelling does not so much consist in exploring new places as in detaching oneself from one's native soil so as to come in contact with a world unknown. In this sense, the journey is formative when one returns changed...or does not return."⁵

The intention in these pages is to identify paths of interior life and spirituality in order to pursue a very special kind of adventure; *the adventure of the Spirit*.

4.2 The adventure of the Spirit is a *JOURNEY INTO THE INNER LIFE*

Those who are more *familiar* with the study of the *inner life* frequently begin their reflection saying that in recent years much has been written on this subject: sometimes this is in reference to interior journeys that human beings try to pursue in order to recover the meaning of life; at other times to the yearning for the happiness that is always sought but often not found.

The danger of careless mistakes in this pursuit is great. In rather critical terms there is talk of prescriptions which are widespread and provide advice on how to acquire a healthy rhythm of life, or how to recover various aspects of psychic and spiritual health; how to achieve interior equilibrium; how to accept oneself in order to be happy, etc. It would seem that there is on offer a "spiritual supermarket" in which to choose and put in our shopping basket what most appeals to us. We find offerings that are esoteric, exotic, "new-age jewellery" or pseudo spiritualities of every kind.⁶

It can be seen that the danger lies in the false paths of interior life offered by the market or the idolatrous nature of certain invitations to an interior life that is a flight from the world. There is not even safety in "the ideology of obsessive monothematic self-fulfilment approach of 'what is happening to me?' 'how do I feel?' ... a universe that spins around one's own 'ego' and cuts one off from being available for service to and interest in others."⁷

I also found interesting a "metaphor" in which it is suggested that on certain occasions "one has the feeling that it has fallen to us to be living at a time when even the way of relating to oneself appears to have more in common with a hotel where one sometimes stays, rather than with the place where getting to know oneself is an enriching

⁵ Francesc Xavier MARIN: *Interiorità ed esperienza psicologica*. In Autori Vari: *La interiorità, un paradigma emergente*, Madrid, PPC 2005, 107

⁶ Cf Cristina KAUFMANN: *Interiorità e Mistica Cristiana*, In Autori Vari, o.c. 53-54

⁷ Dolores ALEIXANDRE: *Interiorità e Bibbia. Il Dio che si riceve nel nascondimento*. In Autori vari, o.c. 39

experience. Frequently we would seem to be closer to killing off the interior life than to fostering its strengthening.”⁸

Even though what has been said so far, looked at positively, tells us about a search in the hope of filling the emptiness in lives, it is certain that sometimes these searches are in response to a whole mass of personal disquiet deaf or silent, that reach the point of becoming unbearable. And it is in this situation that everyone, ourselves and our young people must not fall into the trap of narcissism that self-centredness that closes individuals in on their own interests and imprisons them in their own little world. This situation I am describing leads us to see in ourselves, the Salesian Family in the world and in the young people themselves with whom we share our lives that there is a real danger of losing, or having lost, (or simply of never having experienced) a taste for the interior life and the ability to discover the depths in our own lives.

It is not possible to cultivate an interior life if one “uses up” the time in being spectators of the lives of others, simply stopping and looking at outward appearances. I believe that we have to take this challenge more seriously and *accompany* our young people and those with whom we interact so that we may all live in a state of enquiry, and so that they and we may become seekers after the essential. Because, when any person, a young person does not discover, nor take interest in an inner journey within themselves, this can lead to them becoming incapable of imagining or dreaming their own present situation or their future.

And to continue along these lines what do we mean by the inner life?

In the words of a Carmelite nun who has devoted her life to this research which has led her to God, “the inner life is the vital awareness that everything is to be found within the Absolute, God, love, life. The inner life is not the place I retire to by my own design but it is to come to an awareness that I am within Someone.”⁹ This Sister has understood the inner life is something that forms part of the essence of our existence. It is that force that urges us towards God, and is the awareness of being “within” God and experiencing this awareness and this joy. “It seems to me,” she adds, “that all have the possibility of discovering their own inner life, of interpreting it and becoming aware of it to love and to live it.”¹⁰ In fact, the Catechism of the Catholic Church has something similar when it says: “The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself. Only in God will he find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for.”¹¹

⁸ Francesc Xavier MARIN : *Interiorità e esperienza psicologica.* , In Autori Vari, o.c. p. 107

⁹ Cristina KAUFMANN: *Interiorità e Mistica Cristiana*, In Autori Vari, o.c. 56

¹⁰ Ibidem 57

¹¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church, n° 27

I believe that it is not a pessimistic view to recognize or conclude that in many cultures, especially the more western ones on our planet, religious experience is socially marginalized, or in other words the interior dimension is mutilated reducing it to the merely psychic dimension, without recognizing its potential to being open to the transcendent. It is for this reason that the individual has to try to find traces or signs of God in his interior experience, going deeply into his inner self, into what echoes in his mind and in his heart because “God is within his inner life as thought, conscience, heart, psychological and ontological reality.”¹²

From the Christian perspective the inner life is not the place into which I retire but rather the recognition that I am within Someone or with Someone. I perceive myself as an “ego” received from Someone, as a gift of Someone. When to the awareness of the interior dimension we give significance (that is to say, that this Someone is the person of Jesus or of God the Father) this awareness becomes transformed into a spiritual search. Therefore a spirituality without an inner life is unthinkable.

4.3 The adventure of the Spirit is a JOURNEY OF SPIRITUALITY

How can spirituality be defined? We can say that essentially spirituality *is living according to the action of the Spirit*. In the more complete terms of the theologian Hans Hurs Von Bathasar, “spirituality is the basic, practical or existential attitude proper to man and which is the consequence or expression of a religious view – or in a more general way, an ethical view– of existence.”¹³

This means that spirituality is not to be understood as something that is added to a person, like something accidental or circumstantial, rather that it refers directly to the very essence of our condition as human beings. Hence, nothing in the person, neither attitudes, nor behaviour nor relationships can remain on the margins of spirituality. Spirituality therefore penetrates all the dimensions of a person. It concerns his identity, his values, that which gives meaning, hope, trust and dignity to his existence and is expressed in his relationship with himself, with his neighbour and with what transcends human nature, the mystery of God.

And in our case as Christian believers and followers of Jesus we do not speak only of spirituality in general, but of Christian spirituality because we have in Christ the source, the reason for, the goal and the meaning of our lives and of the spirituality with which we live it. We discover that we have God dwelling within us, we believe that there is a place in our heart for him, and we discover that we have been given the privilege of such a personal relationship. How beautiful this is, knowing that at the same time we are ‘*God’s beggars*’.

¹² J.E. VECCHI, *Spiritualità Salesiana*, Elledici, Torino 2001, 10

¹³ H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *Il Vangelo come criterio e norma di ogni spiritualità nella Chiesa*, “Concilium”9 (1965) 7-8

Christian spirituality is therefore and above all a gift of the Spirit. He is the interior Master of the spiritual journey of each person. He awakens in us the thirst for God (Jn 4,7) and at the same time quenches our thirst. This life in the Spirit is for Saint Paul “life hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3,3) the life of “the inner man is renewed day by day (2 Cor. 4, 16), “new life” (Rm 6,4). It is the Spirit who makes the Christian the dwelling place of God, able to welcome him. It is the Spirit who enables the spiritual life to begin, generating man as a son of God.

The Masters of the spiritual life of all times constantly make reference to this inner space where the dialogue with God takes place. Saint Ignatius of Loyola speaks of “feeling and tasting the things of God within” Saint Teresa of Avila compares the interior life to an interior castle with many rooms, in the principal one of which God himself dwells. Saint John of the Cross alludes to an interior shop in referring to this interior space where intimacy with God is experienced. In the Gospels when Jesus of Nazareth speaks about prayer he refers to a secret hidden place where God dwells: “But when you pray go to your private room and when you have shut your door pray to your Father who is in that secret place, and your Father who sees all that is done in secret will reward you.” (Mt 6,6).

4.4 An adventure that is a LIFE OPEN TO THE HOLY SPIRIT

The consequence of all of this ought to be that of probing, pondering, investigating the fascination that is to be found in living a life open to the Holy Spirit who dwells within it. God comes to meet us and invites us to walk with him and to take part in his life by means of the Spirit. In fact as Fr Vecchi suggests, speaking about our Salesian spirituality, we believe that “everything in the world that points us towards God, everything that implicitly or explicitly reminds us the presence or of the intervention of God, everything that urges us to seek God has as its hidden moving force the Spirit.”¹⁴

Nevertheless, knowing God and seeking him is more than something we ourselves want. It is above all a gift that is offered to us and which is in harmony with our situation of being seekers of the Absolute, despite the fact that very often our steps are small and uncertain.

It is from this perspective that we remain focused on Jesus in order to follow, at his side a real path that is an adventure, a novelty, the fresh air of the Spirit, knowing that it is not something reserved for an elite but open to everyone, every man and woman, every young person open to God; knowing that it touches one’s own life in a decisive manner; knowing that it will always lead us to a more profound and intimate encounter with Jesus, noting that it fully extends one’s own capabilities, that it is primarily expressed in the communication of God- The Mystery ever beyond our reach – that speaks to us and with which we communicate in various ways, that always urges us to come out of ourselves and

¹⁴ J.E. VECCHI, *Spiritualità Salesiana*, o.c. 11

to go and meet others, living the faith in the ordinary activities of everyday life. All of this would be the *expression of Christian spirituality*.

LED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT

5.1 Jesus 'event' of the Spirit

The action of the Holy Spirit reaches its highest point, in accordance with the Father's plan in the person of Christ. His whole existence is an *event of the Spirit*¹⁵ from the moment of his conception when to Mary the young woman of Nazareth it was communicated that "the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow." (Lk 1, 35)

Already before the beginning of his mission in Galilee "Jesus receives the Spirit and God declares that he is the Father who loves him (Mt 3, 17); he is constituted Son before acting as the apostle."¹⁶

While Jesus recollects himself in prayer after his baptism "heaven opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him" (Lk 3,21b-22a) and by means of the Spirit the Father anoints him as Messiah and presents him as his beloved Son. Full of the Holy Spirit "he was led by the Spirit through the wilderness..." (Lk 4, 1-13). In the Spirit having come to the desert he overcomes the temptations and shows himself in a special way the Son of the Father. Still in the Spirit he returns to Galilee, comes to Nazareth and publicly attributes to himself the prophecy of Isaiah "The Spirit of the Lord has been given to me" (Lk 4, 18)¹⁷

To sum up, these simple references to New Testament quotations show us very clearly how the life of Jesus was marked by the presence and by the action of the Spirit of God, and how his life was an apprenticeship, learning to live as the Son of the Father always and in everything seeking his will.

5.2 Mary, the woman of the "yes" guided by the Spirit

Mary of Nazareth is above all the young woman the believer loved by God, with whom God himself conversed through his Angel (according to the gospel narrative) signifying or making it understood that the presence and the action of the Spirit takes place in a *respectful meeting* with a proposal and a response. The very presence of the Spirit will depend in fact on her yes. In Lk 1, 35, - as I quoted previously - the Angel tells her of God's

¹⁵ *Ibidem* 15

¹⁶ J.J. BARTOLOMÉ, *Imparare a essere Figlio di Dio obbedendogli*. In J.J. BARTOLOMÉ-Rafael (de): *Testimoni della radicalità evangelica*. Madrid, CCS 2013, 24

¹⁷ Cf Marco ROSSETTI, *La radicalità di Gesù di Nazaret come consegna della propria vita agli altri*. In J.J. BARTOLOMÉ-Rafael (de), o.c. 40-44 – Cf. J.J. BARTOLOMÉ, *Imparare a essere Figlio di Dio obbedendogli*, o.c. 24-29 – Cf J.E.VECCHI, *Spiritualità Salesiana*, o.c. 13-17

plan, to which Mary replies “I am the handmaid of the Lord, let what you have said be done to me.” Lk 1, 38).

From this yes, she could never have imagined what the paths would be that she would have to take guided by the Spirit, and simply, *she trusted totally in God*. She was present at Cana, at the beginning of the mission of her son, she was at the foot of the cross on Calvary, at the moment her son handed over his life ; she was in prayer with the disciples after the resurrection and was present when the Holy Spirit was poured out at Pentecost. A whole life marked by yes to God and openness to his Spirit. “In her, the Mother, faith shines out as gift, openness, response and fidelity.”¹⁸

5.3 Peter and Paul “touched” by the Spirit of God

Looking at Peter, the impetuous fisherman from Galilee, at the various stages of his following of the Lord, with his promises and his infidelities, with his successes and failures one can learn the important lesson: it is the Spirit who urges on this unquestionable leader, full of nobility and love for the Master to follow the plans of God and not deform them with purely human desires.

One who was a believing and observant Jew, trusting in the active presence of God in his people, and ready to make his own opinions prevail even by force surrenders in the face of the evidence of who his Lord was. The first of the apostles in the emerging Church’s advance, he wept for his sin but had no doubt about his being forgiven. This was his greatness not without resistance until the time of his true conversion. And it is like that, in fact, when we allow the Spirit to act, and this confirms the fact that like Peter we have to be converted anew in order to always follow Jesus and not go ahead of him pointing out to him what we believe to be the way (cf Mt 16, 22-23).¹⁹

Paul of Tarsus was an observer of the Law, and scandalized by the unacceptable message of a man, a certain Jesus who died on the cross, felt it his duty to persecute the Christians and then was *captured by Jesus Christ*. This experience that he himself speaks about as something more than a vision or an enlightenment, he describes as above all a revelation and as a vocation received precisely in the encounter with the Risen One. It is here that Paul is really born anew, it is here that he received the Holy Spirit and was healed of his spiritual and physical blindness. We could say that Paul was decisively against Jesus when Jesus was decisively on his side. This is the experience that changes his life radically, putting all his energies at the service of Jesus Christ and of his Gospel, having encountered the motive of absolute value in the face of which he could not place any limits: Jesus Christ.²⁰

¹⁸ Document of the Assembly of the Bishops of Latin-America at Puebla, 296

¹⁹ Cf BENEDICT XVI, General Audience. Vatican City, 17 May 2006

²⁰ Cf BENEDICT XVI, General Audience. Vatican City, 25 October 2006

5.4 Don Bosco open to the Spirit in order to say his 'yes' to the Lord in the young

The spiritual life of Don Bosco **was a long and patient pilgrimage towards the depth of his rich and intense interior life.** This growth in the inner life, like everything in his apostolic activities, was a journey he undertook step by step aware that the goal God had for him could not be reached all at once. It needed people to accompany him, it needed time, it needed a period of apprenticeship.

From being a boy Don Bosco could not stop dreaming, he imagined a different world for his boys, a better world. However, before all else he wanted to know what God expected of him. The action of the Holy Spirit in him took practical form in the call to become a priest, and in gradually shaping in him the heart of an apostle of the young. He made his interior journey in order to understand, to allow himself to be surprised by God's plans. His hands bore the marks of the difficult situation of XIX century Piedmontese society, his heart was on fire for the salvation of the young, his feet followed the path of commitment to the poorest. However, all this did not happen just by chance. Don Bosco took care of his spiritual life in order to live to the full his highest aspirations, the force that animated him and his innermost ideals.

In addition Don Bosco understood that this "adventure of the Spirit" **was not an experience intended for a few boys** with exceptional gifts or an easy way of avoiding responsibilities. Every boy who entered the Oratory, whatever his state or condition, was invited to live a full Christian life, called to live in a joyful manner the life of the Spirit.

One of his most brilliant insights and achievements was to have introduced in his daily pastoral work the idea of a taste for the spiritual life. Into the lives of those boys he brought streams of light, of colours, of the joyful aspects of Christian life. In the Oratory they did not only learn a trade, a sense of duty, but together with these the spiritual dimension of life was beautifully presented, 'drawn out.'

6. CHALLENGES AND PROPOSALS

In the preceding pages I tried to concentrate my reflection, as far as possible, on what could be fundamental in undertaking a journey with Jesus so that it might be a *genuine journey in the Spirit*, something that leads us to have a passion for life ourselves and for accompanying our young people in a true *Adventure of the Spirit* that can fill their lives and ours to the full with meaning.

In our journeying as the Salesian Family with the young people "of our worlds" there where we meet them, we have seen, with sorrow on not a few occasions, boys and girls in whom there are so many seeds of goodness – as Don Bosco used to tell us – but who were wounded, who feel themselves lost, who have a **hunger for Someone** who might look on

them with the tenderness that only God possesses, who could remove their fears, could set free their best energies and the gifts they have received, who could reveal the precious pearl that their situation hides and which could make their lives rich and worthwhile.

Having come to this point, the great challenge is to find the ways, the means and the practical suggestions that enable us *to invite the young people* to come together in order ***to pursue a path that really is a breath of life, of God's fresh air, of the presence of the Spirit in their lives.***

I suggest to you some pathways that can possibly help us, by way of a variety of ideas as ***road signs for our journey.***

A LOOKING WITHIN

Let us learn to look within : let us practise and educate ourselves to discover and make richer our own inner life, from the earliest years, from infancy and from adolescence. May our young people feel that they can count on someone who, faced with the culture of distractions, will challenge them to develop their inner lives: faced with escapism will seriously consider the meaning of life.

Let us help the young people to acquire the capability and the ability **to enter their own inner world**: educate them to listening and to a taste for silence; cultivate the capacity for contemplation, for wonder and admiration; taste the experience of selflessness...These abilities ought to be proposed and practiced.

Let us help young people to **explore**, in the depths of their own heart the **presence of God**, who is Love, Life and the Ever-new. Working together let us have the experience of discovering and recognizing Him who *is closer to us than our own inner selves, and higher than the highest point in our being.*²¹

Let us learn to grow in our life in God by the humble acceptance of our own limitations, of our personal history and of our sin.

B SEEKING GOD

Together with the young people let us learn **to be seekers of God and to interpret our own life as a blessing from God**, and to be amazed by his Presence and his footprints in us and to recognize him as the One who is seeking us, the One who is present, the One who lives in us.

Let us have the courage and the capacity to ask ourselves in prayer whether what we do or do not do is according to the will of this God-Love who lives within us, and let us propose this same exercise to the young.

²¹ Cf Saint AUGUSTINE, Confessions, Book III, n. 11

Let us promote a pedagogy of the desire for God which leads to the search for the religious meaning of life and to drinking at the “well of living water which is Jesus”.²²

C. MEETING JESUS

Let us be daring in proposing to the young experiences that lead us to **the Personal Encounter with Jesus**, a meeting that is capable of fascinating us and of putting our lives to the test, knowing that “the more one knows Christ, the more one follows him, the more the Spirit enters within us, and our eyes are able to see him.”²³

Let us suggest strategies to young people in order **to develop a true friendship with Jesus**, which without doubt will shape the way they see things, the way they think and their values.

D. BEING ONE OF HIS OWN

Let us be witnesses to the young of our joy in following Jesus and tell them how beautiful it is to be a Christian: “I would like to make them [the young] understand what a beautiful thing it is to be a Christian! And to believe is also beautiful and right!”²⁴

Let us allow ourselves to be led by the Spirit, who moves our hearts and those of the young **to make a decisive choice to be one of his own**. Let us nourish and take care of the link with Him through prayer, the Word of God, Reconciliation and the Eucharist.

E. MAKING FUNDAMENTAL VALUES ONES OWN

From the earliest years let us educate ourselves to esteem and “to taste in all aspects of life, **the family, friendship, solidarity with those who are suffering, giving up one’s own self to serve others, love for knowledge, for art, for the beauties of nature**”.²⁵

Let us proclaim the immense joy of believing in a God who has fully taken on all that is human and to be part of creation, and let us be daring in denouncing all that prevents everyone from being able to recognize, contemplate and benefit from his Presence in our world.

²² Renata BOZZATO, FMA: *Educare i giovani a “vivere nello Spirito”*. In Atti della XX Giornata di Spiritualità della Famiglia Salesiana: Riscopriamo con i giovani la presenza dello Spirito nella Chiesa e nel mondo. Rome 1998, 110

²³ J.E. VECCHI, *“Nella Speranza siamo stati salvati” (Rm 8,24): riscopriamo con i giovani la presenza dello Spirito nella Chiesa e nel mondo per vivere e operare con fiducia nella prospettiva del regno*. In Atti della XX Giornata... o.c. 151

²⁴ BENEDICT XVI. First interview granted to Vatican Radio before the XX World Youth Day in Cologne. Quoted by Pascual CHÁVEZ, in a Conference at the CISM (Italian Conference of Major Superiors), in Luis Fernando GUTIÉRREZ: *Discepoli e apostoli di Gesù Cristo*, CCS Madrid, CCS 2014, 222

²⁵ BENEDICT XVI, *Ibidem*, 3

Let us accompany young people in their **faith experience in the Christian and ecclesial community**, as a splendid opportunity for their discovering and personally developing their own life in Christ.

Let us present to young people the **challenge of accepting life as a gift as the service** that makes us better, that frees us from our egotism and gives meaning to our lives. The Spirit of God will always urge us on to give of ourselves because this is “the logic of God”

F. DEVELOPING A PLAN OF LIFE

Let us work together with young people with faith and a deep personal conviction so that they can develop their own plan of life, undertaking a journey, since living life as a gift in every kind of service and profession they can go from their first significant experiences, even circumstantial to the full commitment of a life that responds to God’s call. Someone who embarks upon the Spirit’s ways has not only received qualities as though they were birthday presents, but “is in possession of something like a generic code according to which they go on growing.”²⁶

EPILOGUE

I have offered as pathways these **Challenges and proposals** in the hope that they may help all our Salesian Family, in the most diverse of geographical and pastoral contexts around the world. It is possible that, if not all, some of these challenges and proposals can be suitable and timely in reference to the pastoral situations being experienced and to the local evangelising, catechetical and pastoral circumstances.

Allow me to conclude with *three simple suggestions* that might throw light on our efforts to walk in this year of Mercy that we have begun, quite rightly in the experience of a God, who in order to be so, needs to meet us, ourselves and the young, with a heart that is seeking him.

The first is this: I fully share the thought and the sentiments of the previous Rector Major in suggesting to the Salesian Family that the desire of the young to “see Jesus” is already the **fundamental reason for us to come to be disciples of Christ** given that he asks himself: who will present the dreams and the needs of the young to Jesus? Who will make it possible for the young to see Jesus? It is in our accompanying them and walking at their side that our existence is rooted, and it changes us into real companions and apostles of the young.²⁷

²⁶ J.E. VECCHI, “Nella speranza siamo stati salvati...” o.c. 159

²⁷ Cf AGC 406 (2010), 16

The second is this: in the process we are proposing “we cannot do anything better than this: **guide the young towards holiness**”.²⁸ Accompanying them on the journey towards becoming mature in the faith, to high goals, and being ourselves the first to believe in this journey, which we ourselves take as the goal for our lives, *our personal witness* is the determining factor. That is what Don Bosco did putting everything at stake in order to achieve his dream (God’s plan for him) on behalf of the young.

Finally let us not forget that processes are slow and need to be gradual as the very patience and pedagogy of God show us. Of this point John Paul II reminded us with these words in “*Juvenum Patris*”: “Be strengthened by the inexhaustible patience of God in his pedagogy towards humanity, the unfailing exercise of fatherhood revealed in the mission of Christ, teacher and shepherd, and in the presence of the Holy Spirit, sent to transform the world. The powerful though hidden efficacy of the Spirit is directed to bringing about the maturity of humanity on the model of Christ. He is the animator of the birth of the new man and of the new world (cf. Rm 8, 4-5). *In this way your educational labours will be seen to be a ministry of collaboration with God and will certainly be fruitful.*”²⁹

May Mary our Mother and Help, the Woman of “yes” who welcomed the Spirit of God in her heart and in her life help us in the beautiful responsibility for the young which as the Salesian Family we have in the Church of today, and may one of the desires which Pope Francis addressed to us almost at the end of his letter in this historic year of the bicentenary of the birth of Don Bosco become a reality.

“ May Don Bosco help you to *not disappoint the deep aspirations of the young*: their need for life, openness, joy, freedom and the future; their desire to collaborate in building up a more just and fraternal world, in fostering the development of all peoples, in safeguarding nature and the living environment. Following his example you will help them to experience that only in the life of grace, that is in friendship with Christ, does one fully obtain the most authentic ideals. You will have the joy of accompanying them in their search for a synthesis of faith, culture and life at moments when they take weighty decisions or attempt to interpret a reality that is complex.”³⁰

May the Lord bless you all.

Yours very affectionately,

Rome 31 December 2015.

Fr Angel Fernandez Artime SDB

Rector Major

²⁸ J.E. VECCHI, “*Nella speranza siamo stati salvati...*” o.c. 174

²⁹ JOHN PAUL II, *Juvenum Patris*, 20 (Note: the final italics are by the writer)

³⁰ FRANCIS, *Like Don Bosco, with the young, for the young*, o.c. 9

