

DRAFT OF THE 2017 STRENNA

WE ARE FAMILY! Every home, a school of life and love

1. WE ARE FAMILY! And we are born as a family!

- The 2006 Strenna was already one focused on the family. We have been referring to it ever since.¹ At the same time, the ecclesial events that we have experienced after two synods and the apostolic exhortation *Amoris laetitia* of Pope Francis, demand – gladly for us as Salesian Family – that we focus our educational and pastoral attention on the family.
- All of us have the strong personal experience having been born in a family. We **are born as a family**, with the beauty and limits of every family, but ultimately within a family – a family that is the very concrete human reality where *the art of life and love is learned*.
- The family, we know well, is made of people – of persons who love, speak, share, and sacrifice themselves for the other members of the family, defending at any cost their own lives and the lives of their own. One becomes a person living in a family, growing, usually with one's parents, breathing the warmth of the home.
- It is in the family, in the home, that we are given a name and therefore dignity; that we experience affection; that we cherish intimacy; that we learn to ask permission, ask forgiveness, and give thanks.
- The family is also – and we know it – the first school for children, the group indispensable for giving the young a sense of belonging, and the best refuge for the elderly.
- All this is something of what all of us have lived in one way or another – the human, anthropological dimension of family.
- At the same time, we do not lose the perspective of what the reality of the family means and of what God, who is Communion-Love, means, because the family is a great sign-sacrament of the Triune God who is Communion-Love.
- The family is also the mother's womb in which the Son of God makes a journey of humanization.
- Besides, the addressees of this strenna are also the Salesian Family, which has a strong and ever growing sense that WE ARE FAMILY.

- As a religious group (congregations, institutes, associations of apostolic life, associations of believers, etc.) we have a strong sense of the bond of religious family that unites us.
- Almost all our Salesian Family groups have collected in the various statutes the family spirit and the family atmosphere as a constitutive part of our being, and also our pastoral activity toward the family, with families, for families.
- This foreword explains our duty as Salesian Family. Our duty is not only not to look in another direction than the one in which the Universal Church is strongly involved, today under the leadership of Pope Francis. Rather, our duty is to give the Church's direction a "Salesian reading" – as educators of children and youths – and to offer our humble contribution.

2. An invitation to a calm, open reading with a ready heart

- I make first of all an invitation to a calm and open reading, one with the heart ready for dialog and encounter with what the apostolic exhortation says, so that it may help us as Salesian Family to discover what the document offers. Such a reading is a gesture of love, as a Salesian Family, on behalf of the reality of the family, acknowledged and extolled as a great gift of God for all. And it is also a gesture of love toward those who have successfully lived in fullness this plan of God and who need our help, and maybe our accompaniment, to implement their plan for a life of conjugal and family love, which sometimes is broken or faces great difficulties.
- The document is a service to humanity from the perspective of Catholic belief, and a true spiritual and pastoral treasure. And we get involved in it from the awareness that "we are a Salesian Family."
- The exhortation of the Pope is based on the teachings of previous Popes, St. John Paul II and Benedict XVI, and of the synodal assemblies of 2014 and 2015, whose final reports are frequently quoted. It summarizes the ecclesial reflection of many years, but it also introduces, at the same time, a change of tone, language, and perspective from the canonical level to a pastoral one. The Pope himself says, "We need to be humble and realistic, acknowledging that at times ... we have proposed a far too abstract and almost artificial theological ideal of marriage, far removed from the concrete situations and practical possibilities of real families. This excessive idealization, especially when we have failed to inspire trust in God's grace, has not helped to make marriage more desirable and attractive, but quite the opposite" (AL n. 36).

2.1 A synthesis of the content of the Pope's exhortation: to discover our duty as a Salesian Family with families

- The text contains the already known **characteristics** of the magisterium of Pope Francis; it is a realistic, close, direct, and suggestive text. It is an open text that invites us to enter actively into the theme, not only passively receiving its ideas, but trying ourselves to live the mystery of life and love within our own life and personal vocation. It is not a document that speaks of

the family in an abstract way, but one that touches life, to give a word of encouragement to many people who need it.

- In the apostolic exhortation, the Pope traces the biblical and theological, moral and pastoral “**summa**” concerning the family, underlining the importance and beauty of the family based on matrimony, inviting us to deepen the values of conjugal love, a true gift of God for the life of human beings. It invites us to bring out the positive and humanizing aspects of human love, which is a reflection of God’s love, which is always stronger than the failures of our human plans.
- The document **contains nine chapters** that illumine the reality of matrimony and of the family from different points of view, trying to harmonize the presentation of the beauty of the divine plan with the realistic and merciful attention to the many shortfalls and painful situations that occur in real life. Each chapter admirably intertwines fidelity to the truth with compassion and mercy. The document is illumined from the Word of God, without ignoring the present situation, always from the perspective of faith in Jesus Christ. Love in the family is always the main theme, with the richness of fruitfulness and the education of children, and with pastoral suggestions that may help on the journey in situations of fragility and imperfection.
- Chapter 1, “*In the Light of the Word,*” recalling the unity of doctrine and praxis needed in the Church, underlines at the same time that, on the basis of cultures, traditions, and challenges of various countries, some aspects of the doctrine of marriage may be interpreted “in a different way.” It confirms the beauty of matrimony formed by a man and a woman, and states the importance of dialog, of the spousal union, and of family tenderness. It defines the family not as an abstract ideal, but as a “craftsman’s task.”
- In chapter 2, “*The Experiences and Realities of Families,*” the survey extends to the reality and the challenges of families, with the desire “to keep firmly grounded in reality” (AL n. 6), with a sociological and cultural perspective that seeks also to offer a nuanced, realistic, and hopeful vision. It flees oversimplification, because the range of themes and particular contexts requires a nuanced look. The exhortation does not capture a “stereotype of the ideal family, but rather a challenging mosaic made up of many different realities, with all their joys, hopes, and problems. The situations that concern us are challenges. We should not be trapped into wasting our energy in doleful laments, but rather seek new forms of missionary creativity” (AL n. 57).
- Chapter 3, “*Looking to Jesus: the Vocation of the Family,*” opens the door to the witness of the Gospels, the teaching of the Church, the sacramental reality, the complexity of irregular situations, and the transmission of life and faith to the children. “The experience of love in families is a perennial source of strength for the life of the Church” (AL n. 88).
- Chapter 4, “*Love in Marriage,*” articulates in a beautiful way the well-known hymn to love of 1 Cor 13. It does so with delicate beauty and displays the various aspects of reality, without idealizing (“It is not helpful to dream of an idyllic and perfect love” [AL n. 135]) but aiming at the ideal: intimacy, shared life, love of friendship, dialog, conjugal love always in a demanding dynamism of transforming growth. Recommendable are the words that Pope Francis directly addresses to the young (nn. 131-132).
- Chapter 5, “*Love Made Fruitful,*” speaks of a love that is expansive, fruitful, dynamic, passionate: words such as fruitfulness, generation, understanding of the father and the mother in the process are key words. Rich is the reflection on “discerning the body” (AL nn. 185-

186) and suggestive are the pages on “the extended family”: children, grandparents, brothers, and sisters, from “a big heart” (AL n. 196), also inviting families to be places of integration and points of contact between the public and the private spheres.

- A pastoral chapter was essential in order to enter concrete life in depth. Chapter 6, “*Some Pastoral Perspectives*,” speaks to pastoral workers about marriage preparation and accompaniment in the first years of married life, and does it with bold realism. It invites us to “cast lights on crises, worries, and difficulties” (AL nn. 231ff.) because they provide a nuanced, dynamic, and complex approach in which to locate particular questions.
- “*Toward a Better Education of Children*” is the theme of Chapter 7 (AL nn. 259-290). Children are the hope that is open to the future. Through these pages appear the necessary closeness and presence, the ethical formation, the figures of authority, the contexts, sex education (realistic and valid, without fear or superficiality), and the transmission of the faith.
- At the same time Pope Francis hopes that “everyone should feel challenged by Chapter 8,” which is entitled “*Accompanying, Discerning, and Integrating Weakness*” (AL nn. 291-312). Those who are looking for precise, severe norms will be disappointed. The Pope proposes pastoral gradualism, invites to discernment, assumes the way of the “internal forum” (AL n. 300), highlights mitigating factors in pastoral discernment (AL n. 301) and places in the center the logic of mercy (AL n. 307). “This offers us a framework and a setting which help us avoid a cold bureaucratic morality in dealing with more sensitive issues” (AL n. 312).
- The ninth and last chapter is dedicated to “*The Spirituality of Marriage and the Family*” (AL nn. 313-325). In a stimulating and easy way, the Pope invites us to a spirituality of exclusive and free love, which is a spirituality of care, consolation, and incentive. From faith Christ unifies and illumines family life, even bitter days. Because of this, “Let us walk, families, let us continue to walk, and let us not lose hope.”

And since we believe that the family is Good News for the world (the Gospel of the Family), society, and the Church, we feel committed, and we want to be even more committed, wherever in the world our Salesian religious family is present.

3. EVERY HOME, A SCHOOL OF LIFE AND LOVE: our educational-pastoral contribution

3.1. Being close to *help construct and repair*

In the face of family realities in which complex and difficult situations are often lived:

- fragmented families (“patchwork” families);
- families that are believing and not unstructured but which are the exception in many contexts;
- families in which many wounds exist;
- families in which there is selfishness that creates breakups;
- families with situations in which, in particular, the souls of the children are wounded, or where sometimes they are “hostages of discord” (Pope Francis).

We already ask ourselves whether we can do something in favor of these families, starting from our reality as educators and pastors, since:

- It is in these contexts that we are asked to exercise *empathy* in the face of the suffering caused by such situations.
- There are existential situations in which we must help to construct relationships, heal wounds, help to leave behind fears – seeing, as in the biblical text, “a bruised reed he will not break “ (Matt 12:20; cf. Is 42:3).
- Situations in which we can help to acknowledge that much good and much generosity also exist in these lives.
- In learning to be a family there are always mistakes that demand humility and understanding, forgiveness and mercy. All are entitled to forgiveness, and all are entitled to forgive in order to build the family and to reconstruct themselves. This is the moral element.
- Accepting the condition of one’s limits offers each member of the family the opportunity to enrich oneself with the love that is offered and the opportunity of enriching others with one’s own offering. Gratuitousness is the starting point for building the family. This is the affective element.
- There is a point of constitutive solitude in the human condition that prevents total communication, and at the same time offers a leap of quality for the desire of the Other who is the only One who can fill this desire for fullness. This is the spiritual element.
- Eventually, we are being asked to be present to help build and restore.

3.2. In the *school of life* that is the family

From a Salesian perspective we cannot talk of the vital educational value of the family without asking, first of all, that each of us refer to our own personal experience and, at the same time, that we also refer to the family experience of the founder of our Salesian Family, Don Bosco. He lost his father when he was a little child. His mother Margaret was his first, decisive, and transcendental educator, and we know well that Don Bosco was what he was because he had the mother he had.

This is one of the keys that I propose: helping families to be aware that, first of all, they are a school of life, and that in this mission, some persons, groups, and institutions intend to stay at their side and help, without ever replacing what is irreplaceable – that warm home that each family is, preparing for life as a real school and, by loving, teaching us to live love. This is so:

- when the family is more than a “center of income and consumption” or an “affective point of reference,” and in it the adults, especially the parents, accept their responsibilities;
- when there is an intense intra-familial communication, not limited to discussions of just a useful nature;
- when the children are so trained that concrete ethical responsibilities are expected of them, through which deep convictions can be expressed and communicated, and not only kept and observed in a hidden way out of the fear of bothering someone;
- when education is given for everyday family life, experiencing the radical equality of each one with respect to needs, rights, and duties, as well as mutual respect;

- when there is a space for living with the capability of encouraging real relationships of dialog, of complete reciprocity in which the good of the other is really looked for, out of respect for persons and their activities.
- when the family is an experience of love, and not a place where one feels the weight of the law, and where one learns to love freely. In this sense, from the viewpoint of faith, each marriage and each family are a history of salvation.
- A family that is a school of life because it contains in itself *opposed but harmonized* elements that prepare for life through values such as:
 - freedom and responsibility
 - autonomy and solidarity
 - care for oneself and seeking the good of all
 - healthy competitiveness and capability of forgiving
 - availability for communication and also for listening and respectful silence.
- The family, then, is a school of life, because it offers values and hope as well. It offers closeness and love that orients, corrects, prevents, helps, heals, and eventually saves.

3. 3. The decisive Salesian pastoral mission: ACCOMPANIMENT

As Salesian Family, we propose this beautiful challenge that is more current than ever:

- how to accompany parents, spouses, and those head families?
- how to accompany children, especially those who live in the houses, activities, and services in all the works that exist in our Salesian Family around the world?
- how to accompany with our youth, family, and parish ministry the young people who are developing a plan of life oriented toward matrimony and forming a family?

This requires some decisions from our ministry:

3.3.1. Firmly deciding to make a priority of *educational-pastoral attention to families* .

3.3.2. Taking a decisive, definitive, and firm step to make *accompaniment* a priority service:

- accompaniment of parents and spouses who accept it;
- real accompaniment of the children and youths in Salesian presences around the world, especially when they are dealing with family and personal difficulties;
- vocational accompaniment of youths who show concretely that they are developing a plan of life that includes matrimony;
- accompaniment that offers spirituality and faith as the meaning of life, in the most diverse family realities.

3.3.3. Seeing the urgency, as Salesian Family, of being part of *this broad journey of ecclesial reflection and discernment*, with greater attention to the reality of the family, and to the priority of mercy as an essential value of the Gospel, which must be reflected in our educational and pastoral activity.

3.3.4. Delving, therefore, into *personal and pastoral discernment* that will not lead us to expect univocal answers when facing such diverse situations that are far from the Christian ideal, but rather to offer service that will affect and animate concrete marriage and family histories.

3.3.5. In this way of educating in which the family cannot refuse to be a place of support and accompaniment (AL n. 260), we believe that we can offer something which very much belongs to us, is very “Salesian”: *Helping the families to educate and grow with affection and heart*, with everything this implies in our educational (“preventive”) system.

3.3.6. We must also take ourselves very seriously to help the parents in the sexual education of their children, which for us means an authentic education to love.

3.3.7 We will help to discover *sacramental marriage as a “vocation,”* the fruit of discernment (as in every vocation), and also as a path to holiness.

3.3.8. We shall contribute in any way possible to take care of and foster in families the sense of *the joy of loving*.

3.3.9. Let us help families to be “spaces of life” where parents train their children, in freedom, to know and love God.

3.3.10. Even though this could be marginal to family realities, *this will be an opportunity to educate families, educators, and young people, and be educated ourselves, to the value of creation*, as a responsible answer to creation and to the poverty that is generated when the harmony of creation is not attended to.

3.3.11. Some concrete commitments of the Salesian Family toward families, e.g., the mission of the Salesian Family in the light of Don Bosco’s Preventive System: making of the world a home like a large family playground – of friends, of training for life, of encountering God.

To complete our commitment as Salesian Family in this movement of ecclesial revitalization, we commend ourselves to the Mother who is always our guarantor as we make our pilgrim way.

Rome, June 19, 2016

¹ Pascual Chavez, Letter of the Rector Major: ““And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years and in favour with God and man’ (Lk 2,52),” ACG n. 392, pp. 3-46.