

Message of the Rector Major to the young people of the Salesian Youth
Movement

Rome – 31 January 2006

Rome, 31th. January 2006
Feast of St John Bosco

My dear young people,

As I speak to you, the many faces that I have met in different parts of the world come to my mind: young faces, full of joy, of enthusiasm, with a zest for life and an eagerness to be of service. You are the most important and most precious portion of my family, in which I constantly rediscover the joy of giving myself to God and the hope that sustains me in my service.

In this year 2006 the Salesian Family recalls the 150th anniversary of the death of Mamma Margaret, mother of the educative family created by Don Bosco at Valdocco. I am convinced of the decisive role played by Mamma Margaret in the human and Christian formation of Don Bosco, and in the setting up of a “family style” of educative environment at Valdocco. Hence, this year I have invited the Salesian Family and you too, young people of the Salesian Youth Movement, to renew the commitment to

“ENSURE THAT SPECIAL ATTENTION BE GIVEN TO THE FAMILY,
THE CRADLE OF LIFE AND LOVE AND
WHERE ONE FIRST LEARNS HOW TO BECOME HUMAN”.

All of you, dear young people, have a powerful *experience of what a family is like*. Your lives are marked and filled with well-known faces, the remembrance of which, lights up your eyes at all times with gratitude and joy.

The face that presents itself with the greatest intensity and clarity is surely that of your mother. It was in her smile that, for the first time, you read the word “love”, a love fully gratuitous, protecting you with tenderness and delicacy, as one protects the precious germ of life it-

self. It was in her heart that the gratuitousness of God's love mingled in a mysterious manner with that of human love.

Together with the face of your mother, you came to recognize the face of your father: a face that complements maternal love with its demands and bold projects. Later you also discovered the faces of your brothers and sisters, and all of you together experienced being accepted, acknowledged, and loved.

That atmosphere, rich in meaningful and affective exchanges, was for you "the cradle of life and love", an authentic school of communion and sharing.

It was in those faces, resplendent with love, that you read and listened to the good news of the Gospel; they taught you to recognize Jesus, to pronounce his name with respect, to love him, to make the sign of the cross.

What a great gift you have received!

Sadly, many youngsters today suffer from the cruel absence of father or mother. They don't have the experience of a serene and harmonious relationship with their parents, brothers and sisters. They bear in their lives deep wounds and scars difficult to heal; they are defenceless before the assaults of society. It is a tragic experience that they carry within themselves; and it shows up in the various behavioural patterns, which are a provocation and a challenge for us and for you.

Is it not perhaps a family that they are in search of? Deep down, do they not long for brothers and sisters, a mother and a father, which accounts for those forms of expressions not easily understood by adults or by young people themselves? Is not theirs a sort of first appeal to the Church to be a family? Is it not a plea to you – as young people reaching out to other young people – to create fraternal bonds and to build up a family atmosphere?

The Word of God, which we encounter at every moment, enlightens and provides a deep foundation also to this human experience of family life and of the gift of love, which in the family we receive and breathe in.

Dear young people, we have received a *precious gift: the Love of God*. "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called chil-

dren of God; and that is what we are" (1John 3,1). "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3, 16). A love that had us in mind even before we were born, a love that arranged every detail of our life's journey, a love that ever accompanies and welcomes us, even when we are not always faithful. We are completely wrapped around by God's love, which beckons us and spurs us on to bring out the best in us and to spread the same love to all the persons around us. "Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another" (1John 4, 11).

Love is your vocation, dear young people. It is the deepest dimension of your person. It is the energy that makes life come alive. It is that which gives meaning to your existence, opening it to understanding and self-giving. You are, quite legitimately, anxious to live this gift of love. Often, however, due to a number of internal and external factors, you run the risk of using it in a consumerist way, or of stopping at aspects that are only partially important. For this, it is necessary to undertake an educative journey, which will help you to develop all your gifts and the joy of love, which you have received from God.

During the thirty years that he lived in his family at Nazareth, Jesus himself trod this long journey of maturing as a human being. To be born as a human being God needed a mother; to grow up and become a man, to learn to love as a human person, God needed a family. Mary is not only She who gave birth to Jesus; as a true mother, along with Joseph, she transformed the house of Nazareth into a home where the Son of God matured in his "humanity" (cfr. Lk. 2, 51-52).

You too ought to make use of these years of your youth as a precious time to learn to love after the example of the love of God, manifested in Jesus. In this way you will be able to respond to the vocation to which you have been called: marriage or celibacy in the religious and priestly life.

To arrive at a definitive choice of marriage or celibacy for the Kingdom of God, you should already from now on *educate your hearts*. Love is always and only a gift; and one learns to give by giving without expecting response or thanks. Look around: discover urgent needs, even if they are not always striking; listen to the cry, often silent, of the needy, starting from your own *family situation*. Foster dialogue, heart-felt listening, daily expressions of service and help, of generous forgiving; willingly set aside time to be "together". These are small gestures,

which create an atmosphere of cordiality and familiarity, which open hearts and release a current of love and of solidarity.

If you want to make sure how to learn to love, open your hearts and your life to serve your neighbour with gestures, actions, attitudes in specific tasks. In other words, learn to love by placing yourselves *at the service of the poorest*. Service implies commitment and not just sporadic actions, constructive relationships and not only gratifying episodes. It, therefore, calls for a generous mentality, a capacity to go out of oneself to transform unjust and inhuman situations and structures.

If you are generous as young people today, tomorrow you will form families inspired by Christian values, open to the needs of the neighbour; or, you will learn to spend your whole life for others, consecrating yourselves to God. You will know how to insert yourselves into the healthy and wholesome life-flow of your community, in unceasing involvement on behalf of the poorest. Your participation ought to be creative, offering all the inner educative resources you have received from the great salesian family.

The vocation to love, be it in Christian marriage or in a life of celibacy for the Kingdom, is a gift of God, for which we must implore, and to which we ought to dispose ourselves generously. Dear young people, we cannot build a serious and permanent commitment of love without placing at its centre *a strong Christian spirituality*. For this, it is essential to give attention to prayer both personal and together; and along with it, to pay attention to the reception of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, in which we unite ourselves to the supreme act of love of Jesus, his death and resurrection; and to the sacrament of reconciliation, which offers us God's forgiveness and teaches us to forgive one another, which is an essential element of true love.

It will be a great blessing for you to get to know a *spiritual guide*, who will help you to gauge the proper value of feelings. At times, these feelings are so much more at hand as they are superficial. You run the risk of feeling yourselves very close to one another in gestures, while being, in fact, quite far, perhaps even strangers, on the level of deep communication. A good spiritual guide will help you recognise the difference between gestures and relationships, to nourish the profound yearnings for freedom, to accompany with prayer the search for a fuller sense of life, to love reserve and modesty.

As a matter of fact, we know that love is a delicate and fragile thing. It is so fragile that it remains as love only when it is given; and the giving of oneself needs a formation to a personal interior life. This correct education later broadens out and finds concrete expression in commitment, in service, in different vocations.

It is a long process, which demands of us educators to follow you up personally, one by one; to give importance to groups of Christian experience of a high standard; to offer you spiritual guidance, because the reason behind all this is to help you become persons, who, in a reciprocal relationship with Christ, consider their life as a gift for others.

For this, as educators of the young, we want to offer you, while respecting your personal freedom, *concrete steps* of formation, of follow-up and of discernment of the vocation to Christian marriage or to celibacy in religious life or priesthood.

Groups, movements and associations of couples and families will be for you opportunities for reflecting and taking stock of your human resources within the process of maturing. These will help you to live and to deepen your vocation to marriage or celibacy and to assume with a sense of commitment the educative responsibilities.

Valdocco continues to be for all of us an essential point of reference and a school of life. *At the school of Mamma Margaret*, that wise woman, full of the wisdom which comes from above, Johnny learned to love life as a precious and unique gift. The heart of his mother, like the heart of God from whom "*every fatherhood in heaven and on earth assumes its name*", was for him an inexhaustible source of fatherhood. For him to be a priest meant to be the father of a large family.

Don Bosco was a father who had a strong sense of dignity and of justice, who, at the same time, was a priest fully immersed in the concrete situation of the youngsters of his time. The family atmosphere that he created at Valdocco together with Mamma Margaret, was not a hothouse or a cosy nest where the timid and those out in the cold felt at ease. Don Bosco led his sons to full human and Christian maturity in keeping with the spirit of Gospel freedom. The strong personalities that grew up at Valdocco are a proof of the pudding.

We can safely assert that Don Bosco received love from the life and heart of his mother and transmitted the same with passionate zest to

his youngsters. He accepted this vocation as an immense grace, as a permanent invitation to preserve before God the heart of a son.

Here, dear young people, is the supreme message of Don Bosco: there is nothing greater in this world than to respond with one's whole life to the love of God, through one's vocation to marriage or to a life of celibacy. This should not surprise you, because it is the mystery of God himself. If things are so, then there is nothing more catastrophic than the refusal or the degradation of love and of fatherhood, and nothing more ennobling than to learn to be a father or a mother, in the image of God the Father, and to learn to be a son, in the image of God the Son.

Each of you is called to unite in some way in his vocation these two attitudes: the heart of a son, simple before God the Father, and the heart of a father or mother, tender towards the children whom God sends and entrusts to you. In the measure in which you fulfill one and the other, you will progress in holiness and discover true joy.

I conclude with the invitation of Pope Bededict XVI to young people at the last World Youth Day:

“I know that you as young people have great aspirations, that you want to pledge yourselves to build a better world. Let others see this, let the world see it, since this is exactly the witness that the world expects from the disciples of Jesus Christ; in this way, and through your love above all, the world will be able to discover the star that we follow as believers” (Cologne 2005, Homily for the concluding Mass).

Fr Pascual Chávez Villanueva
Rector Major

Invitation to reflection: *personal, or in groups or in colloquy with the spiritual director*

1. *What is your experience of living in a family? How can you enrich it?*
2. *How are you living your vocation to love?*
3. *How are you educating your heart?*

- What concrete steps are you adopting in this respect?*
- 4. Does your spiritual director help you grow in love?*
 - 5. Does the spiritual life strengthen you in love? Mention what helps you most.*
 - 6. In what way do you feel yourselves sons or daughters?
In what way do you feel yourselves fathers or mothers?*