

RECTOR MAJOR - SPEECHES, MESSAGES

Go and Witness to the Joy of Faith

Learn to be happy by becoming Disciples of Christ and Missionaries of the Young

Letter of Don Bosco to the Youth of SYM

My dear Young People,

Through this letter I wish to come close to each and every one of you. I would like you to know how much I love you. My heart's dream for you is that you may be fully happy, carry within you the fullness of humanity of Jesus, and also express total adherence and witness to Gospel values. I am writing to you in a time when there is much talk about New Evangelization. Now a days, in many of our countries, God seems to have become an unknown phenomenon, some one you can do without! For this reason, today, Jesus beckons us: "Go forth and make disciples of all nations ... and lo, I am with you always, until the end of time" (Mt 28,19.20). The mission that Jesus commits to us today is a terrain full of challenges, but also one filled with great opportunities. It connects us to the pressing invitation of Benedict XVI to the universal Church to live intensely the Year of Faith, and the Salesian Family's preparation for the Bicentenary of my birth.

Let me assure you that even my times were difficult. Valdocco was a real mission land. Nevertheless the palpable presence of Jesus and Mary in our daily life and educational service filled my heart with joy. It was from this mission land, as you all well know, that numerous young missionaries went forth to evangelize the people of distant lands. These youngsters who grew up at the oratory, wrote sublime pages of history, by generously donating their lives to education, human development and evangelization of many generations. My dear Young People, this story of loyalty and generosity, continues in you and places the same challenge before you. In this book of history, you and you alone can write the missing pages. This is your hour!

The teaching of Jesus re-echoes even today with the same vigour: "Do not work for food that perishes but for the food which endures to eternal life" (Jn 6:27). The question his listeners posed to him then, is the same that resonates within us today: "What must we do to accomplish the works of God?" We know Jesus' reply: "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent" (Jn 6:29). The work of God in you therefore, is that of being disciples who lovingly welcome the Word of God, and meet Jesus Christ in it. Every Christian is called to be an apostle who radiates this joy. Our faith increases when we openly share it with others. My dear young people, Evangelizing is your vocation!

To evangelize means to put the yeast in the dough, to transform the mentality and the attitudes of people and thus transform also the social structures according to God's plan. This is not in introvert private activity. To evangelize is to cause a genuine social revolution, the only deep and effective one. What motivates us to evangelize our being "in love" with God and experiencing his intimate friendship. We must start by focussing our attention on our own hearts, our thoughts and choices. We need to free our hearts from all pollution and corruption. This requires honesty to look

into ourselves and to lay bare before the Lord, the real motives of our behaviour. If our actions are to be credible we require pure motivations.

The desire to share the Good News comes from the heart of a person who is taken up by Jesus, who is deeply integrated and unified with the love of God. This love is unique and central because it takes precedence over all the other affections. Only a pure heart can truly seek God, see him and bear witness to Him. With God above all else, he seeks first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness with his whole heart. Looking back into my life, I can say that as a young man I asked only one thing from the Lord: "*Da mihi animas!* Let me work for you and for the salvation of the young."

Hence I wish that the Gospel captures your mind and becomes the basis of all your endeavours, and the source of your life and your joy. Jesus entrusts his Gospel only to those who are prepared to stake their lives on it. Only authentic disciples can be credible apostles as well. The world of youth, as you well know, is a land of very demanding mission. Get out, then, from your tiny, cramped and suffocating shell. Get into God's vast world. He will open the doors to a greater life and vaster mission and you will find new horizons beyond your dreams. These are not some distant horizons. God is calling you to work out your faith in the ordinary concerns of your daily life. Without the light of his resurrection, these concerns can suffocate your hearts.

You know that many young people do not know the deepest desires of their own hearts and live a dissipated life. They are pulled by a thousand attractions and run hither and thither, enslaved by numerous masters. They live "elsewhere" and everywhere", far from the intimacy of the conscience of their own hearts. The result is their inability to meet God in a personal and intimate way. In the heart of every person, in fact, there is a big, painful wound that begs to be heard, understood and healed. That is why today Jesus needs disciples who can listen to the hearts of people, especially the young, disciples who can understand their joys, fears and their hidden desires and can help them to come close to him and meet him. Only the disciple who has a deep and profound relationship with the Lord Jesus can recognize and help those who truly seek a God-experience.

The disciple is called to facilitate the encounter between Jesus and those who desire to see, know and love Him. This is a delicate, but wonderful mission, and if you do not do it, my dear young people, who else will bring the dreams and needs of your buddies and friends to Jesus? Who will make them see Jesus? It's up to you to tell your friends that Jesus is the light that enlightens their search for meaning, that he is the road that leads to the heart of the Father, and that he is the truth that warms their hearts and helps to live life with passion. You are the flames of a new Pentecost, which should burn and infect your friends. Together, you can fight for freedom where it is missing, for peace where it is threatened, for justice where it is trodden underfoot, for solidarity where it is most required. You can be the critical conscience of the society in which you live. Arise therefore, leave the upper room and go, because the world needs you!

But always remember that only Christ can heal and cleanse the deep wounds and the sufferings of the hearts of the young. To render this meeting fruitful, you must decide to make a special journey towards him, a journey from admiration to knowledge, from knowledge to intimacy, from intimacy to love, and from love to imitation.

The initial meeting will eventually lead to a genuine encounter, when Jesus will "let himself be seen" and his Word will reveal the naked truth of one's heart. This encounter will free the heart from masked and false perceptions of God, and from wrong ideas about oneself, about others and of events. This is what happened to the two disciples of Emmaus (Lk 24, 13-35). They walked

with a sad face and with disappointed hearts. They had lived with Jesus and he had awakened in them their best hopes. Unfortunately, his death on the cross had buried all their expectations and their faith. But along the way this travelling companion shared their sadness and bitterness and, at the same time, revealed to them the hidden meaning of the Scriptures. He adjusted himself to the pace of their slow and painful quest, gradually opening their minds and hearts to understand his mystery, the meaning of history and of the world. Their search was sincere, but their eyes opened to contemplate the Risen Lord only when he repeated the gesture that best identifies him: the "breaking of the bread". This discovery was the result of their search, but it would have been impossible without the explanation of the Scriptures and the offer of the sign from Jesus. Above all their recognition of Jesus was a gift, because Jesus "made himself recognizable." The recognition was the climax of the entire episode, but not its end. The next step showed the fruitfulness of this encounter; it led from communion to mission, from personal experience ("did not our hearts burn within us!") to witness ("they returned to Jerusalem where they found the Eleven together"). The disciples returned to the place where they habitually lived, but with new eyes and a new heart.

Even you, my dear young friends, cannot live your faith alone, in the private sphere of life. Our salvation lies outside of ourselves. We do not find our Salvation in science or economics or politics, but only in Christ Jesus, who died and rose for us. Return, then, with a new vision and a new heart to the place where Jesus today is present and lives, the Church. Meet the community of believers who confess Jesus as their Lord, the family of his disciples who share with him their lives and mission. Dear young people, may be you are disappointed with many human limitations of the Church. You may also feel misunderstood and not taken seriously by her. It's true, the Church sometimes disappoints us, disturbs us, but nevertheless she also fascinates us because she is a part of ourselves. She surrounds us with a mother's love. She is the visible place of our identity, the place of our rendezvous with the God of Jesus Christ and with our own brothers and sisters. Listen, therefore, to the words of a father who has suffered, but has always loved the Church: No, dear young people, do not distance yourselves from the Church! No other reality is so full of hope, compassion, and love. She never ages, her youth is eternal. The Church is the continuation, the house, the living presence of Christ, where God dispenses grace, truth, and life in the Spirit. She breaks the bread of the Word and gives you the precious gifts of the sacraments, especially Reconciliation and Eucharist. Without a true ecclesial experience, the knowledge of Jesus becomes inadequate and poor. These sacraments are the real memory of Jesus, of what he did and still does for us today, and of what the Church means for our lives. In Reconciliation we experience the goodness of God who is the source of our inner freedom and rebuild and maintain the fabric of our lives. It opens our eyes to a new creation and makes us see what we can become according to the project of God. It is the sacrament of our future, not just of our past sinfulness. The Eucharist, which the Christian community celebrates daily, is the table, where the believer strengthens his life by nourishing himself on the double feasts of Christ's broken Body and Word. In the Scriptures and in the Eucharist, the Church recognizes, accepts and assimilates the Lord's Body which she herself is.

These gifts that the Church offers you as grace should be received with a constant attitude of contemplation and prayer. Prayerful contemplation opens you up to receive the riches of the Spirit that the Father desires to pour into your hearts. For you, whom I consider the evangelizers and educators of the young people of the third millennium, it is essential to proclaim, contemplate and pray the Word, in order to grow in faith. Such a faith then listens to the cry of the poor, the abandoned and the outcasts, and makes God's love visible through concrete acts of charity.

It is this freely received love that urges us to evangelize. Only great love can generate great passion for the salvation of others and the joy of sharing the fullness of life rooted in Jesus. Those who have met the Lord cannot be silent. They have to proclaim him! Remaining silent would amount to

killing him a second time. Go therefore, dear young apostles of Christ, and make disciples for Christ, and show the world that only faith brings true and lasting happiness.

In my 200th birth anniversary, I want to be reborn in you to continue my mission to the young, entrusted to me as my precious legacy and my *raison d'être*. With you I want to love them with the same love coming from the heart of the Good Shepherd. This is possible even in today's changed social and cultural conditions. As usual, I do not work in abstract, with theories or ideologies, but rather resort to the concrete pedagogy of goodness, a pedagogy that makes itself flexible to the ongoing changes in the world but at the same time one that calls for true spiritual and pastoral conversion which alone can lead to lasting human growth and to true Christian maturity. I am increasingly convinced that education is a matter of the heart. The heart must be educated, because it is the heart that guides all the aspects of the lives of the young.

In this Year of Faith, I want to be with you in this wonderful mission that involves the entire Church. To each of you I repeat the same words which I said to my beloved youngsters at Valdocco, "My only desire is to see you happy in this life and for ever. *Learn to make yourself loved* so that you may be happy and that all may receive the good news you proclaim. *Learn to make yourself loved* so that the world may believe and be saved. *Make yourself loved* so that you can pull down the walls of division, of misunderstanding, of prejudice and of rejection of the Church. *Learn to make yourself loved* so that your own happiness will make you credible and authoritative missionaries of Christ. With meekness and courage, faith and love, we shall together announce the Gospel to the young. Thus, I dream of you as "youth for youth", enthusiastic for all that this life has to offer, but at the same time deeply rooted companions and witnesses of the Lord Jesus.

These my words are my bi-centenary gift to you, which I entrust to Mary, Mother of Jesus, who "believed in the fulfilment of the words of the Lord" (Lk 1:45), and gave herself to God for the love of her Son and of her children. May Mary, the inspirer and supporter of our family, awaken the filial heart asleep in each of you, and transform you into a new people, the Church. My dear young people, I wish that Mary Immaculate Help of Christians, gives you a desire to live for Christ, a great apostolic zeal to share the riches of his mystery, with creative intelligence and pedagogical skills to educate your friends to faith. In this way you can meet the challenges of new evangelization. May Mary, the Mother of Jesus and our own, intercede for us, that we may always be credible witnesses as believers and educators.

I bless you, and we shall meet at the World Youth Day in Rio de Janeiro, in mid-July. With a warm embrace I greet you all with the affection of a father, brother and friend.

Valdocco, 31 January 2013

Affezionatissimo in G. C.
Luc. gio Bono