

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
29 July 2013

My dear confreres,

I am writing to you immediately following the closure of World Youth Day, in Rio de Janeiro.

I have had the grace and privilege of being part of this, along with other members of the General Council, Fr Adrian Bregolin, Fr Fabio Attard, Fr Natale Vitali, Fr Esteban Ortiz and Fr Maria Arokiam Kanaga.

I was very happy to see so many confreres, provincials, vice provincials, youth ministry delegates, young confreres in formation accompanying the various delegations from five continents.

Event hough geographical distance and the financial crisis was a limiting factor for many, the arrival of so many other SDBs and young people who wanted to come meant there were more than 7,000 youthful members of the SYM from Salesian works as well as from those of the FMA, Daughters of the Divine Saviour and the Sisters of the Charity of Jesus.

I believe I am speaking for everyone who took part when I describe the great joy and enthusiasm of these days for us around the charismatic figure of Pope Francis. His gestures, attitudes and addresses enlightened minds, warmed hearts and reinforced everyone's desire to be true "disciples and missionaries of Christ" sent into the world, without fear, to serve and transform it.

I especially appreciated how the three components – gestures, attitudes and thought – came together seamlessly to help us understand better the figure of Pope Francis. It all explains his moral strength, his freedom to act and speak, his prophetic stance. Only thus can he lend true value to all he does and says in exercising his Petrine ministry. Only thus can we appreciate the vision of the Church that he has and feels he is called to promote. Only thus can we better appreciate his way of governing: he starts from where things are at, and is very sensitive to this, to set processes of change in social dynamics, through a culture of dialogue and respect for diversity, well aware of the irreplaceable role of the Church in collaborating in reconciliation for a fractured world.

We are speaking of a Church freed from a worldly spirit, the temptation to harden and solidify itself within its institutional framework, to a bourgeois lifestyle, to a closing in on itself, to clericalism. A Church that may be truly the body of the Word made flesh and, like Him, incarnate in this world, resplendent in the poor and suffering. Its service is to offer Christ and Gospel values for the necessary transformation of society. A Church that can no longer reduce itself to being a small chapel, but rather a home for humanity. In Pope Francis' heart there is a desire for a Church connoted by openness and where everyone is accepted, in all their diversity of culture, race, tradition, religious confession. Such openness and acceptance are possible through a culture of dialogue and encounter which

makes unity with respect for diversity possible. A Church that goes out on the street to evangelise and serve, reaching out to the geographical, cultural and existential periphery. A poor Church that favours the poor, becomes their voice and gives them back a voice to overcome the selfish indifference of those with more, as well as the desperate violence of those who feel most exploited and defrauded. A Church that gives just attention and relevance to women, without whom the Church itself runs the risk of becoming sterile.

Of the almost 20 addresses he gave, in my view the most important because they were the most programmatic, were the one he gave to the Brazilian Episcopal Conference and another to leaders in society, as well as the messages to youth who were the central characters in the WYD.

To the Brazilian Bishops: Pope Francis began his address by offering the Aparecida document as a key to understanding the Church's mission. The Church does not have the power of a transatlantic ocean liner because it is a simple fisherman's boat. God manifests himself in it through poor means and pastoral success does not depend so much on human efficiency as on God's creativity. The Church then is called to transform itself bit by bit, recalling that the mystery enters people through the heart and cannot be reduced to rational explanation. The Holy Father then gave the Bishops the icon of Emmaus as a key to understanding the present and future offering an innovative ecclesiological, not a Christological interpretation. He sought to have it understood that abandonment of the Church is due to the fact that it is reduced to being a relic of the past, unable to respond to the problems and challenges of humankind today. The Church cannot escape the night it is experiencing because of the flight of believers to whom it promised something higher, stronger, more resolute and speedy. Unfortunately the Church seems to have forgotten that there is nothing higher than Jerusalem, or stronger than the weakness of the Cross, or more convincing than kindness, love, beauty, or more speedy than the rhythm of pilgrims – the Church should keep step with them to rediscover the tempo of “being with” those with whom it walks, nurturing patience and an ability to listen, comprehension of so many diverse situations. Finally, the Pope identified the grand priorities the Brazilian episcopate should give its attention to.

Turning to *political and cultural leaders* he sought to make them aware of the historic moment we are experiencing, of their responsibility for resolving conflicts, of the urgent need to redeem politics. More than once he emphasises the importance of the culture of encounter they need to foster to overcome the sorrowful exclusion of the elderly through cultural euthanasia that makes it impossible for them to enrich society with their wisdom, values. A culture of encounter that should eliminate the social waste of the young, when they are so often denied the possibility of work and a future.

In his messages *to the young*, the invitation was always one of investing their energies, their very lives for positive causes for which it is worth spending their lives. In particular, Jesus Christ is the great cause worthy of one's entire life. He exhorted them to be fearless in making courageous choices. Making use of metaphors he told them they can be God's field where the good seed germinates, grows and bears fruit; he invited them to go down to the field with God's team

and train to become athletes of Christ; he exhorted them to work in the field of transformation to renew the Church and be transforming agents in society and the world. Finally he invited them, like Christ and with Christ, to depart, again without fear, to go out and serve the world and enrich it with the gift of Christ and the Gospel, beginning all this by serving their friends and companions, and all the other young people they can contact.

So, in Rio de Janeiro, Pope Francis sent the Church out onto the street, took it to the peripheries, had it speak as a Mother, gave it back energy, and by doing so through his gestures and attitudes, taught us the kind of Church he wants and the kind of rapport it must have with the world.

Obviously I experienced this splendid ecclesial event with my brothers and sisters, with the young, as a Salesian, as Rector Major, trying to better understand how this new ecclesial movement has to be accepted, translated and lived out in our Salesian Congregation.

And, without there being too much pretence, I have to say that the road we have taken in preparation for the Bicentenary of birth of our beloved Father and Founder, Don Bosco, and especially for GC27, with its pressing theme of “Witnesses to the radical approach of the Gospel”, are in perfect harmony with this appeal to Christ, his Gospel, to simplicity, poverty and humility.

Through this letter I invite all of you, Salesians and the young, to take up the Holy Father's addresses again, to take up and bring to life his spiritual and pastoral guidelines as a priority not only for Youth Ministry but also as part of our journey towards the bicentenary.

While we continue to pray for Pope Francis, as he himself requests insistently and everywhere, let us entrust the Church and our beloved Congregation to Mary Immaculate, the Help of Christians, that they may be up to what the Lord and the young expect of them.

Affectionately, in Don Bosco

Fr Pascual Chávez V., sdb
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