

LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR - AGC 415

“Like Don Bosco the educator,

we offer young people the Gospel of joy through a

pedagogy of kindness”

Second year of preparation for the bicentenary of his birth

Strenna 2013

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25 December 2012

[PREMISS](#)

The Solemnity of the Birth of the Lord

My Dear Confreres,

I am writing to you on the solemnity of the Birth of the Lord when with the whole Church we celebrate the great joy that was proclaimed: “*Today in the town of David a saviour has been born to you, he is Christ the Lord. And here is a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.*” (Lk 2, 11-12). While I offer you my best wishes that you may experience a deep realisation of God in Mary’s infant child, I invite you to make your journey, like the shepherds and the magi to Bethlehem to see: “*this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us.*” (Lk 2, 15)

This is the best way to live this special time of grace which is the Year of Faith, since, as Benedict XVI says – at its start it is the “encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.”^[1] “In our days too faith is a gift to rediscover, to cultivate and to bear witness to, because the Lord grants each one of us to live the beauty and joy of being Christians.”^[2]

Dear confreres there is no doubt that in these days what is needed is a more convinced commitment on the part of the Church and of the Congregation to the “new evangelisation” in order to rediscover the joy of

believing and the enthusiasm for communicating the faith.^[3] In fact, faith grows when it is lived as love that has been received and when it is passed on as an experience of grace and of joy.

It is this that I am trying to live, greatly encouraged by having taken part in the recent Synod of Bishops on the new evangelisation for the handing on of the faith, during which the Holy Father launched the Year of Faith coinciding with the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council.

In the chronicle of the Rector Major you will find information about my activities during the last few months between July and November. As you will be able to read, with the exception of the journey to Japan on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of that Province, basically I have been at home continuing with treatment for my health. This thank God has improved with the help of the skill, the sense of responsibility and affection of the doctors, and greatly supported by your prayers and those of the whole Salesian Family, for which I feel the duty to express my profound thanks, assuring you that my life consecrated to God is offered to you and for you without reserve for as long as He decides.

The most significant event in which I have taken part has certainly been the Synod between 8 and 20 October. Perhaps you have been able to follow its progress from the celebration of its opening to its conclusion with two very important intervening events: the 50th anniversary of the beginning of the Second Vatican Council with the launching of the Year of Faith, and the canonization on Sunday 21 October 2012 of seven new Saints (Jacques Berthieu, Pedro Calungsod, Giovanni Battista Piamarta, María Carmelo Sallés y Barangueras, Marianne Cope, Kateri Tekakwitha, Anna Schaeffer).

The theme of the Synod was intended to respond through the emphasising of the urgent need for a new evangelisation to the profound changes in society, to the loss of the freshness of the faith in believers, to inconsistencies in Christian life, to the loss of trust in the Church, and to the increasing impact of secularism.

I have to say that reflection on the new evangelisation is not something new. Even though the expression itself was coined by John Paul II we can find references to it and its foundation in messages of Pius XII, in the address of John XXIII at the opening of the Second Vatican Council, in the main documents of the Council and in the teaching of Paul VI on evangelisation and more recently in the speeches of John Paul I and Benedict XVI.

In the introduction to the *Instrumentum Laboris* the main aim was indicated: “Hopefully, the upcoming synodal assembly will be an event to energize Christian communities and, at the same time, provide concrete answers to the many questions facing the Church today and the resources available in her evangelizing activity[...] The celebration of the Synod is expected to enliven and energize the Church in undertaking a new evangelization, which will lead to a rediscovery of the joy of believing and a rekindling of enthusiasm in communicating the faith. The question is not simply devising something new or undertaking unprecedented initiatives in spreading the Gospel, but living the faith in the spirit of it being a divine proclamation.”^[4]

Even though no definition of ‘new evangelisation’ was given, some features can describe it well as the action of the Church inspired by the Holy Spirit which recognises the urgency of the missionary mandate received from Jesus and so commits herself to put it into practice interpreting today’s signs of the times, in order to find new ways of carrying out God’s plan for mankind and for history.

In the speeches of the Synod Fathers many signs of the new evangelisation came through.

As in all Synods, the best experience was that of the catholicity of the Church in the diversity of continents, circumstances, cultures, sensitivities, challenges, current practices and the opportunities for carrying out the mission of evangelisation. Then the whole event was taking place around the paternal, intelligent, calm, open and reassuring person of the Holy Father, in an atmosphere of prayer, respectful listening, enriching dialogue, lived in a spirit of fraternity, communion and collegiality.

In dealing with the theme, which had two parts – “the new evangelisation” for the “transmission of the faith” there was perhaps less reflection on the second part. Certainly during the Synod great emphasis was given to the importance of a kerygmatic style of Christian initiation, which leads to a sincere conversion and to a deep desire to meet the Lord and to follow Him. All this requires, in addition to *personal conversion* which makes the life witness the first and most convincing and attractive proclamation of the Gospel, a *pastoral conversion*. That means an open heart, an attitude of great sympathy and a joyful acceptance of the world in order to listen to what it is saying and to draw close to it so as to make the Kingdom of God grow. In order to imbibe this spirit I invite you to read the *Final Message to the People of God* which opens with the image of the empty jar waiting to be filled with the pure water that gives life. It is an image which recalls the thirst and yearning for God hidden in the hearts of contemporary men and women, but also the evangelising mission of the Church and its task of reaching out to people as in fact Christ did in the passage in the Gospel where he met the Samaritan woman at the well. In the constantly evolving relationship between the Church and the World, the Synod Fathers asked for a return to a “humble” Church, which does not mean retreating to the sacristy but an awareness that it is the Cross of Christ that the Church brings to the world and through it salvation.

It is clear that in all this project of the new evangelisation for the transmission of faith nowadays Consecrated Life is being called to renew itself, letting itself be evangelised and to be pastorally converted, in order to be a joyful and convinced, a credible and effective bearer of the Good News.

Consecrated Life and within it our Congregation has always been distinguished for its commitment to first evangelisation; in the “*missio ad gentes*” of the Church its role has been and continues to be decisive. It has also shown the same commitment and continues to do so to ordinary evangelisation fostering the acceptance of the Gospel and the building of the Christian community contributing to the renewal of pastoral work dedicating itself to its varied specialised fields of activity such as education, health, social assistance, the media, charitable work on behalf of the poor and the marginalised, cultural, ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue.

Consecrated Life which came into being in order to reflect the way of life of Jesus and to bear witness to the beauty of the Gospel lived in a radical manner, is also being called to devote itself to the new evangelisation, in other words to propose once again the Gospel to those to whom it was already proclaimed and who are now living distanced from and indifferent to the faith.

I am convinced that its fundamental contribution in this area is the joyful witness of a life transformed by the Gospel. Without a witness that is radical, happy, courageous it is not possible to make the Gospel attractive. Only a testimony that is passionate, beautiful and prophetic can be credible, visible and fruitful. Consecrated Life is of service to the Gospel primarily when it sets out to follow the Lord Jesus. Its witness helps to create a need for spirituality, the issue of God, questions about the meaning of life. It demonstrates the prophetic witness value of fraternal life. It shows the compassion of God which is love in dedication to the poor. This is what the young are looking for in us.

This personal presentation of the Synod of mine can serve as an introduction to the **commentary on the [Strenna for 2013](#)** which I am now offering you.

«*Rejoice in the Lord always;*

again, I say, rejoice » (Phil 4,4)

The second year of this three year period of preparation for the bicentenary of the birth of Don Bosco will focus on his pedagogy. In 2012 we concentrated on his life history and we have tried to understand better how the whole of his life was marked by his special love for the young. To this end he devoted all his efforts, precisely because he saw that this was the mission God entrusted to him.

In 2013 our aim will be to study more deeply his approach to education: what Don Bosco wanted to offer to the young and the method he used to open the doors of their hearts, in order to win their confidence and

so to form strong personalities from the human and Christian points of view. In practical terms we want to *draw close to Don Bosco the educator*. It is therefore a question of studying more deeply and of updating the Preventive System. This then is the theme of the Strenna for 2013.

Once again this time our approach will not be only an intellectual one. On the one hand a deeper study of Salesian Pedagogy is certainly necessary in order to update it according to the sensitivities and the demands of our own times. Nowadays the social, economic, cultural, political and religious contexts in which we are trying to live our vocation and carry out the Salesian mission have profoundly changed. On the other hand in order to be faithful to the charism of our Father it is equally necessary to make our own the contents and the method of the education and pastoral care he offered. In the context of society nowadays we are called to be holy educators as he was, giving our lives as he did, working with and for the young.

REDISCOVERING THE PREVENTIVE SYSTEM

Thinking about Don Bosco's experience as an educator, we are called to bring it to life again faithfully in our day. We are all certainly convinced that in some of its particular expressions and interpretations, his Preventive System appears to be decidedly "dated," in so far as it is linked to a world that no longer exists. In fact there have been a succession of many "revolutions" in the pedagogical, psychological, religious, political, cultural, philosophical, technological and demographical fields in the course of the XXth century. The world has now indeed become a "global village." It is full of constant innovations in the media field on a world-wide scale which have an influence on all the cultures on the planet. Peoples' way of thinking appears to be marked by novel cultural criteria of productivity, efficiency, self-interest, scientific rationality. Therefore in this way of looking at social phenomena many old categories for interpreting them would appear nowadays to be outdated.

In order to put the Preventive System into practice in the right way, rather than immediately thinking about programmes and formulas, or repeating "slogans" well-trying and tested and suited to all occasions, today our efforts must be employed in understanding Don Bosco's method from an historical perspective, aware that the particular circumstances of the time had given rise to the original basic idea, to the theological, anthropological, pastoral and pedagogical theories which he thought suitable for the boys of his day. This historical understanding will help us not to consider his experience in isolation, and to express it with its basic principles in new ways. In practical terms it is a question of analysing what was different about his way of dealing with the young, with the ordinary people, with the Church, with society, with religious life. Also what was different about his way of educating the boys in the first festive Oratory, his approach to the junior seminary at Valdocco, to the clerics both Salesians and non-Salesians, and to the missionaries. That is not to ignore the fact that already at the first Oratory in the Pinardi shed there were to be found some important insights which later would be more fully developed in the full significance of their humanistic-Christian implications:

- a. a flexible structure (this is the way Don Bosco thought of the Oratory) as a bridge between the Church, urban society and various age groups of the sons of the people;
- b. respect for and appreciation of the world of the working class;
- c. religion as the foundation of education according to Catholic pedagogical teaching passed on to him in the context of the *Convitto*;
- d. the vital connection between religious formation and human development, between catechism and education. In other words, the convergence of education and education to the faith (the integration of faith and life);
- e. the conviction that teaching is an essential means for the enlightening of the mind;

- f. education, likewise catechesis, which is presented in all the ways possible given the limitations of time and resources: literacy projects for those who have never been able to enjoy any kind of schooling, work placement, social-assistance provision throughout the week, the provision of activities for groups of mutual assistance etc.
- g. the full use and appreciation of the value of free time;
- h. kindness as a feature of education and, more in general, as a feature of Christian living.

On the basis of his own personal practical experience, this method once it was called the "**Preventive System**," became a "system" that was widely publicised and presented as a universal method. Don Bosco proposed it and wanted it to be adopted for the education and the re-education of young people belonging to the most varied groups.

As is well-known and as we find written in the *Charter of the Charismatic Identity of the Salesian Family*, the Preventive System: "represents the synthesis of Don Bosco's pedagogical wisdom and constitutes a prophetic message which he left to his heirs and to the whole Church. It is a spiritual and educational experience which is based on reason, religion and loving kindness.

Reason underlines the values of Christian humanism, such as the search for meaning, work, study, friendship, cheerfulness, piety, freedom not detached from responsibility, the harmony between human sound judgement and Christian wisdom.

Religion means making space for the Grace with saves, cultivating a desire for God, fostering the meeting with Christ the Lord as this gives a full meaning to life, and is a response to the thirst for happiness, progressively taking one's place in the life and mission of the Church.

Loving kindness expresses the fact that in order to create an effective educational relationship it is necessary that the young are not only loved but know that they are loved; it is a special kind of relationship and an affection that awakens in the hearts of the young all their potential and makes it mature even into total self-donation.

Reason, religion and loving kindness are today more than ever indispensable elements in the work of education, and valuable stimuli, in response to the expectations of the new generations, in giving life to a society which is more human."[\[5\]](#)

Once what has been passed on to us from the past has been properly understood, it is necessary to translate into modern terms the great insights and potential of the Preventive System. It is necessary to bring uptodate the basic principles, concepts, the original guidelines, re-interpreting on the theoretical and practical levels both the *great fundamental ideas*, which we all know (the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls; living faith, strong hope, theological-pastoral charity; the good Christian and the upright citizen; joy, study and piety; health, study and holiness; piety, morality, culture, good manners; evangelisation and civilisation...), and also the *great guidelines regarding method* (making yourself loved before feared; reason, religion, loving kindness; father, brother, friend; friendly approach, especially in recreation; winning over the heart; the educator "consecrated" to the well-being of his pupils; full liberty to jump, run and make as much noise as they please ...). And all of this put to good use in the formation of the "new" young people of the XXI century, called to live and to come to terms with a huge and unprecedented range of situations and problems, in decidedly changed times, in which the human sciences themselves are going through a phase of critical reflection.

In particular I should like to suggest three approaches, examining more closely the first one.

[1. Relaunching the "upright citizen" and the "good Christian"](#)

In a world so profoundly changed from that of the 1800s it would be a grave mistake in both sociological and theological terms to undertake charitable works according to narrow, local and purely pragmatic criteria, forgetting the much wider aspects of the common good at national and international level. Here we may well recognise that Don Bosco was certainly not in the position to do more than he actually did. The way moral consciousness has progressed nowadays in fact has led to a recognition of the limits of any support provision which, forgetting the political dimension of under-development, does not succeed in having a positive influence on the causes of poverty, or on those sinful structures from which derive the social conditions always criticised by everyone. To think of charity only in terms of giving alms, responding to emergencies means running the risk of operating in the realms of a “false Good Samaritan role” which, in spite of any good intentions finishes up by becoming the expression of a poor quality of solidarity, since it operates according to development models which favour the welfare of some while sugaring the bitter pill for others.

We may recall that in the period following the Council the words “the poverty of the Church” and the “Church of the poor” were used in various ways, even at times contradictory, yet nevertheless we also need to remember that we did not invent the Gospel, just as it was not us who invented its dramatic impact on politics and the economy. Faith makes its mark in history yet cannot be reduced to it. If love for one’s neighbour is not the whole of the Christian message, can one really deny that it is central and essential to it?

It has been said and written that faced with the modern State which has taken upon itself the welfare and social assistance of its citizens, the Church no longer has the opening or opportunity for charitable and assistance work that it used to have in the past. However, the reality of the situation nowadays shows how false such an hypothesis fostered by secular and political voices really is. Very often the Church is once again the point of reference even within the heart of the *Welfare state*. For many years we have heard it said that charitable and assistance work were old-fashioned and out-of-date means, that were no longer of any use in modern society and in the democratic state. But today, even in secular circles, the social role of Christian voluntary service is recognised, the so-called third, non-profit, sector – those initiatives which originate in the parishes, in the associations, in institutions, in local churches ...

Should not the fact that nowadays hundreds of millions of people are living in conditions far removed from that “civilization of love,” hoped and prayed for by Pope Paul VI and repeated by his successors, find in us “*a direct response*” in our turning to the formula of Don Bosco, that of the “upright citizen and the good Christian”?

With regard to the “*upright citizen*,” we need to reflect very seriously. Above all, at the speculative level, we need to include in our thinking everything related to development issues - human, juvenile, working class, while at the same time paying attention to the various relevant considerations from the philosophical-anthropological, theological, scientific, historical, methodological points of view. This reflection then needs to take a practical shape *on the level of experience and practical reflection on the part of individuals and of communities*. Here I should like to recall that for the Salesians of Don Bosco, a very significant General Chapter, the GC 23, had indicated as important for the areas and objectives of education the “social dimension of charity” and “the education of the young to a commitment and to participation in public life,” “a sector we have somewhat overlooked or disowned” (cf. GC 23, numbers 203-210-212-214).

If on the one hand we can understand Don Bosco’s decision to be concerned only with “the politics of the Our Father,” on the other we also have to ask ourselves how much his initial choice regarding education understood in the strict sense, and the subsequent practice of his educators to exclude “politics”, from their own lives did not condition and limit the important socio-political dimension in the formation of their charges. Over and above the objective difficulties created by the different political regimes with which Don Bosco had to co-exist, were not others perhaps the contribution of educators prone to conformism, to isolationism with an inadequate culture and little knowledge of the historical and social context?

Therefore we have to move forward in the direction of an *updated* re-affirmation of the “socio-political-educational choice” made by Don Bosco. This does not mean promoting a kind of ideological activism tied to any particular party political agenda, but the forming of a social and political conscience that then leads to the making of one’s life a mission for the common good of society with a constant reference to the inalienable human and Christians values and rights. This therefore means operating according to a more consistent *practical implementation* in this area. In other words, the re-appraisal of the *social aspect of education* – which is already an integral part, even though only imperfectly realised, of the fundamental option for the young, including its proposals and projects – ought to be an incentive in the creation of explicit experiences of social commitment in the wider sense. But that also implies a specific theoretical and practical commitment inspired by a broader view of education in itself, as well as realism and practicality. Slogans and manifestos are not enough. What are needed are theoretical ideas and practical operational projects to be translated into programmes that are well-defined and properly structured.

Someone who is really concerned about the educational dimension will try to exert influence through political means, so that it is taken into consideration in all areas: from urbanisation and tourism to sport and to radio-television systems in which very often market criteria prevail.

We need to ask ourselves whether the Salesian Congregation, the Salesian Family, our Provinces, groups and houses are doing all that they could in this regard? Is their solidarity with the young merely an expression of affection, a gesture of self-giving or also a contribution of real competence, a reasoned response, suited and relevant to the needs of the young and of the weaker classes in society?

And the same needs to be said about the re-launching of the “good Christian.” Don Bosco, “consumed” with zeal for souls appreciated the ambiguity and the dangerous nature of the situation, challenged its presuppositions, found new ways of combatting evil with the limited resources (cultural and economic...) at his disposal.

It is a question of discovering and of providing the help to live in a conscious manner man’s vocation, as it truly is. It is precisely in this area that believers can make their most valuable contribution.

In fact they know that human beings and personal relationships are defined by their condition as creatures, which does not indicate an inferior state or dependence, but gratuitous and creative love on the part of God. Man owes his very existence to a gift. He is in a relationship with God in which he plays his part. His life has no meaning outside this relationship. The “other”, whom he perceives and vaguely desires is the Absolute, not an extraneous or abstract absolute, but the source of his life who calls him to Himself.

In Christ, the true nature of the individual person, which reason can begin to perceive, finds its total enlightenment. Jesus Christ, through His word, but above all through the power of His human-divine life, in which He manifests his awareness of being the Son of God, opens an individual to the full understanding of himself and of his destiny.

In Him we become sons and daughters and are called to live as such in the contemporary world. This is the reality and a gift the full meaning of which men and women have to gradually appreciate. The vocation of being a child of God is not an optional extra, something tacked on to being human. On the contrary it is of its very essence, the indispensable condition for its authenticity and fullness, that which satisfies its deepest longings, those flowing from its nature as a creature.

But how is the “good Christian” of Don Bosco to be realised? How do we nowadays safeguard the fully human and Christian aspects through means which are explicitly or mainly religious and pastoral against the dangers presented by old or new forms of fundamentalism and exclusivism? How do we transform traditional education, the context of which was “a mono-religious society”, into an open education, and one that is at the same time critical, in the face of contemporary pluralism? How do we educate to an autonomous life and at the same time to being part of a pluri-religious, pluri-cultural and pluri-ethnic

world? Faced with the fact that the traditional pedagogy of obedience, suited to a certain type of ecclesiology has now been superseded, how do we promote a pedagogy of freedom and of responsibility, aimed at producing individuals who are responsible, capable of making free, mature decisions, open to interpersonal communication, actively involved in social structures with an attitude which is not conformist but constructively critical?

2. Returning to the young better prepared

It was among the young that Don Bosco fashioned his way of life, his pastoral and pedagogical heritage, his system, his spirituality. The single-minded nature of the mission to youth in Don Bosco was always and everywhere a reality, even when for particular reasons he was not in direct contact with the young, and even when his activities were not directly at the service of the young, and when he stalwartly defended his charism as founder for all young people in the world in the face of pressure from ecclesiastics who were not always well-informed. The Salesian Mission is consecration, it is “a preferential love” for the young, and this preferential love as we know from its very beginning is a gift from God, but it is up to us to use our intelligence and our hearts to develop and to perfect it.

The true Salesian does not desert the field of youth. He is a true Salesian who has a vital knowledge of the young; his heart beats in tune with that of the young. The Salesian lives and works for them, committing himself to respond to their needs and to their problems. They give meaning to his life: work, school, his affections, free time. He is also a true Salesian who has a theoretical and practical knowledge which enables him to discover their real needs, to create a youth ministry suited to the needs of the times.

Then, for it to have a real impact, fidelity to our mission requires that we be in contact with the “heart” of today’s culture, with the roots of current mentality and behaviour. We are facing truly great challenges which demand serious analysis, relevant critical comment, in-depth cultural exchanges, an ability to appreciate the situation psychologically. So, limiting ourselves to some questions:

a- Just who are the young people to whom as individuals and in community we “consecrate” our lives? What do they want, what are their desires and what do we (and God) want for them? Do we know today’s young people? Are we convinced about today’s young peoples’ problems so different in quantity and quality from those faced one hundred and fifty years ago by Don Bosco?

b- What is the quality of our professionalism regarding ministry at the level of theoretical reflection on educational programmes and at the level of pastoral practice? The proof of the matter will be found in its creativity, adaptability, flexibility, its lack of pessimism. What is certain is that for us to achieve “inculturation” we cannot put our trust merely in the documents of the General Chapters of our Congregations, in the most important deliberations of the various groups or in the letters of the Rector Major.

c- Nowadays responsibility for education can only be a collective, combined, fully involved matter. What then is our “link” with the “network of relationships” in the area and also outside the area where our youngsters are living? What is our precise contribution in the form of participation and collaboration within this globalised educational network? Have we taken into consideration the possible solutions, discussing them with third parties?

d- If sometimes the Church finds itself at a loss in the face of the young, is the same not perhaps also true of the Salesians or of the Salesian Family of today?

3. An education of the heart

In these last decades the new generations of Salesians have perhaps been experiencing a sense of confusion in the face of the older formulations of the Preventive System: either because they do not know how to apply them nowadays or because unconsciously they imagine them to be some form of “paternalistic relationship” with the young. On the contrary, when we look at Don Bosco, seen from the point of view of the life he led we discover him in an instinctive and intuitive manner going beyond the educative paternalism inculcated by the greater part of the pedagogy of the previous centuries (‘500-’700). During this time the pedagogical attitude reflected in fact European society, which on the political level too was paternalistically structured. On the contrary, Don Bosco’s whole life was marked by interpersonal relationships with the boys and with adults, from which he also derived considerable spiritual benefit himself. There are thousands of episodes and expressions, such as: “Allow me to say, and I hope I offend no one: you are all thieves: I say it and I repeat it: you have taken all I have [...] I still have this poor heart of mine the deepest affections of which you have already stolen [...] this heart is possessed by everyone and in it nothing more remains than a real desire to love you in the Lord»[6] They illustrate the close companionship, the modern approach, the up-to-date quality going much further than the labels: preventive, loving-kindness, charity. Stealing the heart in Don Bosco is a metaphorical and symbolic expression. The boys fully occupy the heart of Don Bosco. There they are at home, there their lives are enriched, there they are happy to be. Today, certainly, styles of interpersonal relationships are different: with a pluralistic society, communication and contacts on a global scale, internet, travel, etc.

We can ask ourselves: nowadays can and do the young and adults find a place in the heart of the Salesian educator? What do they reveal there? A technocrat, a capable but empty communicator, or else a person rich in human qualities, completed and animated by the grace of Jesus Christ, within the Mystical Body, etc.? If they don’t find all this, would not Don Bosco be able to repeat more or less those same words: “When in the heart of the Salesian the wealth and depth of the grace of Christ is not found, the Congregation and the Salesian Family will have run their course”?

PRACTICAL STEPS FOR THE SALESIAN FAMILY

Starting from a knowledge of Don Bosco’s pedagogy and in the light of the reflections presented above, the main focal points and the tasks for the Salesian Family arising from the Strenna for 2013 are the following.

1. The ‘gospel of joy’ was a permanent feature of the whole life story of Don Bosco and the soul of his many works. “In Jesus of Nazareth God reveals Himself as the «God of joy»[7] and the Gospel is “good news” which begins with the “Beatitudes” - men and women sharing in the Blessedness of God Himself. It is a question of a not insignificant but profound gift, since joy rather than being a passing sentiment is an interior force which is able to resist in the face of the difficulties of life. Saint Paul says: «In all our hardship, I am filled with encouragement and overflowing with joy » (2Cor 7,4). In this sense, the joy we experience here below is an Easter gift, a foretaste of that full joy we shall possess in eternal life.

Don Bosco took the desire for happiness the boys had and translated their joy of life into the language of cheerfulness, of the playground, of celebration; but he never stopped pointing out to them that God was the source of true joy. Some of his writings, such as *The Companion of Youth*, the biography of Dominic Savio, the explanation contained in the story of Valentino, are a demonstration of the connection that he established between grace and happiness. And his insistence on the “rewards of heaven” projected the joys of here below into the perspective of their completion and fullness.

At the school of Don Bosco, the person belonging to the Salesian Family cultivates some of the attitudes which encourage joy and communicates them to others.

a) *Confidence in the victory of good*: «Even the most callous boys have a soft spot,” Don Bosco writes. “The first duty of the educator is to locate that sensitive spot, that responsive chord in the boy’s heart, and take advantage of it.»[8]

b) *Appreciation of human values*: The disciple of Don Bosco is able to make his own what is good in the world and does not bewail his own times; he accepts all that is good, especially if it appeals to the young and the ordinary people.

c) *Education to the joys of every day*: a patient effort of education is needed in order to learn or to re-learn, to enjoy, with simplicity, the many human joys that every day the Creator puts in our path.

Since they entrust themselves totally every day to the «God of joy » and bear witness in words and works to the «Gospel of joy», all the disciples of Don Bosco are always joyful. They spread this joy and know how to educate to the happiness of Christian life and to a sense of celebration, remembering Saint Paul's exhortation: «I want you to be happy, always happy in the Lord» (*Phil 4,4*).

2. The pedagogy of kindness. “The loving kindness of Don Bosco is without doubt a characteristic trait of his pedagogical method which is considered still valid today, both in contexts still Christian and in those in which young people belonging to other religions are living.

It cannot, however, be reduced to simply being a pedagogical principle but needs to be recognised as an essential element of our spirituality.

It is, in fact, authentic love because it draws its strength from God; it is love which shows itself in the language of simplicity, cordiality and fidelity; it is love which gives rise to a desire to correspond; it is love which calls forth trust, opening the way to confidence and to profound communication (“education is a matter of the heart”); it is love which spreads out and in this way creates a family atmosphere, where being together is beautiful and enriching.

For the educator, it is a love which demands a strong spiritual effort: the willingness to be there and to stay there, self renunciation and sacrifice, chastity in affections and self-control in attitudes, participation in dialogue and patient waiting in order to identify the most appropriate moment and the best ways, the capacity to forgive and to renew contacts, the meekness of the one who sometimes knows how to lose, but continues to believe with unlimited hope. There is no real love without asceticism and there is no asceticism without an encounter with God in prayer.

1. Loving kindness is the fruit of pastoral charity. Don Bosco used to say: «On what is this reciprocal affection based? [...] On the desire I have to save your souls, which were redeemed by the precious blood of Jesus Christ, and you love me because I try to lead you on the paths of eternal salvation.. Therefore the good of our souls is the foundation of our affection.»[9]

2. In this way loving kindness becomes a *sign* of the love of God, and a means of re-awakening his presence in the hearts of those who are reached by Don Bosco's goodness; it is a way of evangelisation.

3. From this comes the conviction that the apostolic spirituality of the Salesian Family is characterised not by a generic kind of love, but by the ability *to love and make oneself loved.*”[10]

3. Education is a matter of the heart. To understand the famous expression “education is a matter of the heart of which God alone is the master” (*BM XVI, 376*)[11] and therefore to understand the Pedagogy of kindness in the Preventive System, it seems to me important to listen to one of the most renowned experts on the educator Saint: “Don Bosco's pedagogy pervades everything he does; and everything he does reflects his personality; and everything Don Bosco is can be summed up in his heart.”[12] This was his greatness and the secret of his success as an educator: Don Bosco knew how to harmonise authority and kindness, love of God and love for the young.

“Don Bosco’s love for these boys manifested itself in practical and timely ways. He took an interest in the whole of their lives recognising their more urgent needs and with an insight into those most hidden. To say that his heart was totally dedicated to the boys meant that the whole of his being, intellect, heart and will, his physical strength, everything he was and had was directed towards their good, in fostering their all-round development, and with the desire for their eternal salvation. For Don Bosco, therefore, being a man of the heart meant being totally consecrated to the good of his boys and devoting to them all his strength to his last breath!”[\[13\]](#)

4. The formation of the upright citizen and of the good Christian. “The forming of «good Christians and upright citizens » is the aim most often expressed by Don Bosco to indicate *everything of which the young stand in need* in order to live fully human and Christian lives: clothes, food, lodging, work, study, free time; joy, friendship; active faith, the grace of God, the way to holiness; participation, dynamism, a place in society and in the Church. His educational experience suggested to him a plan and a particular *style of approach* which he himself summed up in the *Preventive System*, which «is totally based on reason, religion, and especially loving kindness.»[\[14\]](#)

Having an educational presence in society includes the following: a sensitivity to educational issues, educational policies, the educational quality of life in society and culture.

5. Salesian humanism “for Don Bosco meant giving due weight to all that is positive in the life of individuals, in creation, in the events of history. This led him to accept the genuine values present in the world, especially if pleasing to the young; to place himself in the flow of culture and of human development in his own times, encouraging the good and refusing to lament about the evil; wisely seeking the cooperation of many people, convinced that each one has gifts that need to be discovered, recognised and put to good use; believing in the power of education which provides support for the young person’s development, and encouraging him to become an upright citizen and a good Christian; and always and everywhere entrusting himself to the providence of God, perceived and loved as a Father.”[\[15\]](#)

6. Preventive System and Human Rights. The only purpose the Congregation has for its existence is the holistic salvation of youth. Like Don Bosco in his day we cannot be spectators; we have to be protagonists, fully engaged in their salvation. The letter from Rome of 1884 is demanding that we too in our own day put the “boy at the centre” as the focus of what we do and of all the on-going life commitments we make in each of our communities every day. For this reason, for the holistic salvation of the young, the Gospel and our charism are requiring us to pursue the issue of human rights; it is a new way and a new language that we cannot neglect. We must leave no stone unturned for the salvation of youth. Nowadays we could not look a child straight in the eyes if we were not also engaged in promoting his human rights.

The preventive system and human rights interact and enrich one another. The preventive system offers human rights a unique and innovative educational approach in regard to the movement for the promotion and the protection of human rights, a feature of which until now has been condemnation “after the event” - condemnations of violations already committed. The preventive system offers human rights a preventative education, in other words proposals and action to be carried out “beforehand”.

As believers we can say that the preventive system offers human rights a view of the human race which is inspired by the spirituality of the gospels and which sees as the foundation of human rights the objective fact of the dignity of each individual “without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.”[\[16\]](#)

At the same time human rights provide the preventive system with new frontiers and opportunities for dialogue and for collaboration in networking with others in order to identify and to remove the causes of injustice, evil and violence. In addition, human rights offer the preventive system new frontiers and opportunities to have a social and cultural influence as an effective response to the “drama of modern humanity, of the separation between education and society, the gap between schooling and citizenship.”[\[17\]](#)

In the new globalised context, human rights become one of the means capable of going beyond narrow national boundaries in order to set shared limits and objectives, create alliances and strategies and mobilise human and economic resources.

[7. To be read. The Preventive System in the education of the young, the Letter from Rome, the Lives of Dominic Savio, Michael Magone, Francis Besucco, are all writings of Don Bosco which illustrate well both his experience as an educator and the choice of his pedagogical methods. These books in fact were written so that we might come to know our dear founder and father's pedagogical and educational sensitivity, what was dear to him in putting young people at the centre of things, in helping them take the lead in their own formation, the atmosphere to be created to ensure success in education. From this point of view, the biographies become three methods which are different according to the starting point for each of these three boys from the Valdocco Oratory, and suited to their needs. For Don Bosco it was necessary to start from where each boy was without waiting for some ideal situation to arise, concentrating on the values and attitudes they brought with them and setting goals to be reached.](#)

CONCLUSION

I conclude this commentary on the Strenna for 2013 with a poem sent by a Salesian confrere from India. The text expresses very well what true education really is, especially since it is seen and described in the words of a child who tells his mother what is going through his mind and stays in his heart as he watches what she does. As I read the poem I was reminded of what John Bosco said about Mamma Margaret.

In fact the practical atmosphere that education created at Valdocco, and which nowadays is spread around the world has its roots in Don Bosco's childhood lived in the austere and solid setting of the Becchi, and especially of the people around him. Don Bosco himself said: "*They ask me how I educate the boys. I bring them up as my mother brought us up in the family. I don't know any other way.*"

Mamma Margaret was Don Bosco's first and the best educator. Having been left a widow she knew how to show her sons the demanding love of a father and the gentle and selfless love of a mother. From her Don Bosco learned those values and attitudes that he used with his boys, and that as the years passed became the foundation of his pedagogy left to his Salesians:

- *An active presence.* Salesian assistance is not just supervision; it is a presence that makes the boy feel he is loved; which shares with him the taste for working and growing together while making him the protagonist.
- *Daily work.* Taught by his experience of a peasant's work in the fields of the Becchi and with the Moglias, Don Bosco loved to tell his boys: "*A lazy boy will always be a donkey,*" "*Whoever does not get used to work in his youth, will pretty well always be an idler to his old age.*" At Valdocco laziness was not tolerated and work alternated with prayer, play and learning.
- *The sense of God.* Mamma Margaret was for John also a teacher of religion: she prepared him for confession and for first communion, and above all she taught him to recognise the presence of God in ordinary daily life, in creation, in the joyful and the sad events of life. Observing her generosity towards the poor and needy, the future priest gradually acquired a religious piety capable of becoming at the appropriate time practical, simple and genuine charity.
- *Reason synonymous with dialogue.* Peasant wisdom gave the expression "let's talk about it" different meanings; it was used for having a discussion, explaining one's ideas, arriving at an agreed shared decision which was taken without anyone wanting to impose his own point of view. Subsequently, Don Bosco made the term "reason" one of the supporting columns of his educational method. From this point of view the conversation between Dominic Savio and Don Bosco is indeed an agreement about education which guided the young saint in his commitment: "*So, I am the cloth and you are the tailor; take me with you then and make me into a beautiful garment for the Lord.*"

In the light of this memory, this poem becomes a message for every adult aware of being an educator, since children and youngsters watch and do what you do, not what you say.

WHEN YOU THOUGHT I WASN'T LOOKING

When you thought I wasn't looking,

I saw you hang my first painting on the refrigerator

and I immediately wanted to paint another one.

When you thought I wasn't looking,

I saw you feed a stray cat,

and I learned that it was good to be kind to animals.

When you thought I wasn't looking

I saw you make my favourite cake for me

and I learned that the little things can be the special things in life.

When you thought I wasn't looking,

I saw you make a meal and take it to a friend who was sick

and I learned that we all have to help take care of each other.

When you thought I wasn't looking,

I saw you take care of our house and everyone in it

and I learned we have to take care of what we are given.

When you thought I wasn't looking,

I saw how you handled your responsibilities, even when you didn't feel well

and I learned that I would have to be responsible when I grow up.

When you thought I wasn't looking,

I saw tears come from your eyes

and I learned that sometimes things hurt, but it's all right to cry.

When you thought I wasn't looking,

I saw that you cared

and I wanted to be everything that I could be.

When you thought I wasn't looking,

I learned most of life's lessons that I need to know to be a good and productive person when I grow up.

When you thought I wasn't looking,

I looked at you and wanted to say, "Thanks for all the things I saw when you thought I wasn't looking."

Each of us (parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, teacher, friend) influences the life of a child.

And the important thing is to know how we will touch the life of someone today.

Let us live simply. Love generously. Care deeply. Speak kindly.

Fr Pascual Chávez V., SDB

Rector Major

[1] Benedict XVI Encyclical Letter "Deus caritas est," 25 December 2005, no. 1.

[2] Benedict XVI, Homily for the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, 10 January 2010.

[3] Cf. Benedict XVI, Apostolic Letter "Porta fidei" 11 October 2011, no 7.

[4] *Instrumentum laboris*, nn. 5,9.

[5] Art. 21 – *Charter of the Charismatic Identity of the Salesian Family* – Rome 2012

[6] Letter to the boys at Lanzo, 3 January 1876, in *Epistolario*, ed. Ceria, vol. III, p. 5

[7] SAINT FRANCIS OF SALES, *Lettre à la Présidente Brulart*, Annecy, 18 February 1605, in *Oeuvres*, vol. XIII, p.16.

[8] *BM V*, p. 237

[9] John Bosco, Letter to Fr Joseph Lazzero and to the community of the artisans at Valdocco, Rome 20 January 1874, in *Epistolario*, ed by Francesco Motto, LAS Rome 2003, vol. IV p. 208

[10] Cf Art. 32 – *Charter of the Charismatic Identity of the Salesian Family* – Rome 2012

[11] Cf. Cf. J. M. Prellezo, *Dei castighi da infliggersi nelle case salesiane (1883). Una circolare attribuita a Don Bosco.*, in P. Braido [Ed.], *Don Bosco educatore. Scritti e testimonianze*, LAS, Rome 1992, p. 340.

[12] Cf. P. Braido, *Prevenire non reprimere. Il sistema educativo di Don Bosco*, LAS, Rome 1999, p. 181.

[13] P. Ruffinato, *Educhiamo con il cuore di Don Bosco*, in “Note di Pastorale Giovanile”, n. 6/2007, p. 9.

[14] J. Bosco, *Il sistema preventivo nella educazione della gioventù*, in P. Braido (Ed.), *Don Bosco Educatore, scritti e testimonianze*, LAS, Rome³1997, p. 248ss. (Quoted from art. 17 of the *Charter of the Charismatic Identity of the Salesian Family* – Rome 2012)

[15] Cf Art. 7 – *Charter of the Charismatic Identity of the Salesian Family* – Rome 2012

[16] Thus art. 2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

[17] Cf. Fr. Pascual Chávez Villanueva, *Educazione e cittadinanza. Formal Lecture* for the Honorary Degree, Genoa, 23 April 2007.