

## **OPENING MESSAGE FOR THE YEAR CELEBRATING THE BICENTENARY OF DON BOSCO'S BIRTH**

Ángel Fernández Artime, sdb

Rector Major

199 years ago, on a day like today, a child came into the world, John Melchior Bosco, in these very hills, the son of humble peasant folk.

Today, as we begin the Bicentenary of this historical event, we thank God profoundly for what he did through his intervention in history, in the real history of these hills that make up the Becchi.

In one of the articles of the Salesian Constitutions, it says that “With a feeling of humble gratitude, we believe that the Society of St Francis de Sales came into being not merely as a human venture but by the initiative of God... Through the motherly intervention of Mary the Holy Spirit raised up St John Bosco to contribute to the salvation of youth. The Spirit formed within him the heart of a father and teacher, capable of total self-giving ..., The Church has acknowledged God's hand in this, especially by approving our Constitutions and proclaiming our Founder a saint.”

The Salesian charism is the gift which God, through Don Bosco, has given the Church and the world. It was formed over time, from Mama Margaret's knees to friendship with good teachers of life and especially through everyday life in the company of young people.

Today we find ourselves as the Salesian Family of Don Bosco, a Salesian Religious Family, along with many civic and Church

authorities, friends of Don Bosco, and young people, amidst these very same hills where he was born, declaring the beginning of celebrations for the Bicentenary of his birth. After three years of preparation and one of celebration, the point of arrival will be next August 16, 2015 when it will be 200 years since he came into the Church and the world for the good of young people.

The Bicentenary of St John Bosco's birth is a jubilee year, a 'year of Grace' which we would like to experience within the Salesian Family as deep gratitude to the Lord, humbly but with great joy, since it is the Lord who has blessed this beautiful spiritual and apostolic movement founded by Don Bosco under the guidance of the Help of Christians.

It is a jubilee year for the more than thirty groups who make up this great family, and for many others who, inspired by Don Bosco, his charism, his mission and spirituality, are hoping to gain recognition as members of this family.

It is a jubilee year for the entire Salesian Movement which in one way or another makes reference to Don Bosco in their initiatives, activities, proposals, and who share his spirituality and efforts for the good of the young, especially those who are most in need.

For all of us throughout the Salesian world this Bicentenary aims at being not just a time of simple celebration but a valuable opportunity offered us to look back with gratitude, to look at the present with confidence, and to dream of the future of the Salesian Family's evangelising and educational mission with the energy and novelty of the Gospel. It is an opportunity for courage and a prophetic outlook, allowing ourselves to be led by the Spirit who will always lead us to the newness of God.

We believe this Bicentenary will be an opportunity for a true pastoral and spiritual renewal in our Family, an occasion for bringing the charism to life and making Don Bosco relevant, as he has always been for the young. We believe that it will be an opportunity for living the Mission entrusted to us with renewed vigour and conviction on behalf of children, teenagers, older youth around the world, especially those most in need, the poorest and most fragile.

The Bicentenary will be a time when, as a Salesian Family, we will continue following Don Bosco's example as we go out to the *physical, human peripheries* of society and the young.

As then with Don Bosco, the Bicentenary year and the road we embark on need to be a time for contributing what in all humility lies at the core of our charism: our determination to interpret the social situations, especially those involving the young, which affect us today; our commitment through clear choices on behalf of young people who are marginalised or at risk of being such; our faith and complete confidence in them, in each young person, in his or her possibilities and capabilities; our certain belief that they are good of heart, whatever their story, and have the opportunity to become masters of and play a key role in their own destiny; our remaining by their side if they will accept us, to help them develop their talents to the full, fully develop their vocation as Christians and human beings.

And finally, this Bicentenary should also evoke the memory of so many men and women who have heroically given their lives for this ideal, in some of the most difficult and extreme conditions in the world. This is a triumph, an inestimable treasure which only God can give proper value to.

With this belief, we feel more encouraged not only to admire Don Bosco, not only to perceive the relevance of his gigantic stature, but to feel strongly and absolutely committed to **imitating** the man who left these hills to go to outlying Valdocco, and the rural periphery of Mornese to involve others with him, anyone and anything that would be in favour of the young and their *happiness in this world and in eternity*.

From this hill at the Becchi we now declare the year of *Celebration of the Bicentenary of Don Bosco's birth* open.

May he bless us from Heaven and may he help us obtain the grace to make our commitment and our dream a reality.

HAPPY BICENTENARY TO ALL.