

The Rector Major
Homily for the 145th Missionary Expedition,
Basilica of Mary Help of Christians, Turin-Valdocco,
29 Sept. 2014

Dear Missionaries: Salesians, Salesian Sisters and lay people; and all of you, dear brothers and sisters:

We are assembled here for another missionary "sending", *the 145th missionary expedition*. This beautiful tradition and this place, at the feet of our Mother, the Help of Christians, connects us directly with the origins of our Salesian Family, with the first SDB and FMA missionaries, and with Don Bosco himself who wanted "outgoing" Congregations and Institutes. We are a Family that has a father who had such a great and zealous heart that he could not stop dreaming even in his sleep, and so handed down to us so many missionary dreams that are also our dreams today.

Valdocco, Mary Help of Christians, and the Missionary Expedition - a precious trio that offers humanity, especially the young and those most in need in our global village, the charism we all possess and for which we all share responsibility. In fact, our beloved Don Bosco spread that charism to the distant and practically unknown Tierra del Fuego, the southernmost tip of a Patagonia still to be explored: a land of courageous people very open to God and imbued with a love of the land and of creation. That was an enterprise calling for a lot of sacrifices and hard work from our brothers and sisters, and it has helped not only the faith to grow and develop, but also the culture and society of the countries in the region. Today we have a Pope who comes from those parts and expresses his desire (which is also a command): *"Les pido, no me dejen la Patagonia!"*, *"I ask you: please do not abandon Patagonia."*

Dear missionaries, today's readings have inspired in me three words that I wish to leave you like the "missionary souvenirs" Don Bosco gave the missionary expedition a hundred and forty-five years ago.

I have drawn inspiration for the first word from the prophet Ezekiel, and it is this:

Be righteous in God's eyes.

My dear friends, none of us is here in his or her own name; we are here in the name of the Institutes to which we belong, in the name of the whole Family, but above all, in the name of God. To be righteous means to be transparent, not to engage in double talk or have a hidden agenda. We are called to be honest, sometimes shrewd in an evangelical sense as Jesus too teaches us, but always men and women in whom there is no guile, as in Nathanael. To be righteous means to be clear about our motives, to be able to tell the truth about ourselves – to our own selves and to others. One does not embark on a mission (any kind of mission, including that of Rector Major) if one aims to pursue one's own interests, to seek power or to dominate others; if one profoundly believes that what one brings is not only something of great value – which it is, truly and certainly! - but

something far superior and better than whatever one may find in other people and in the places one is destined to. To be righteous in God's eyes is to throw oneself completely into the heart of a merciful God who loves the sinner, always gives him a second chance, and is ever willing to receive and embrace him as his beloved son who comes from afar...

Psalm 23 which we recited taught us to pray with all our heart: "*Make me know your ways, Lord, teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth and instruct me...*"

In consonance with the first word, Paul's letter to the Philippians inspired in me a second word:

Be servants without seeking privileges.

The apostle has handed down to history a Christological hymn that the first Christians certainly recited in their liturgy. It is a hymn, yes, but also an act of faith: "*Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not count it a privilege to be like God, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant ...*"

Dear friends, our most precious privilege is that of being called to live like Jesus, who emptied himself by taking the form of a servant! Each of us is, albeit in different ways, a servant of others. Here again, the natural temptation to wield power must be vaccinated by the luminous and amazing example of Jesus, the Son of God, who became one of us. We must put ourselves at the service of those to whom we are sent, also at the service of those who are indifferent, who reject us or even oppose us. We must be wise and take care of ourselves, our communities, our brothers and sisters... but, without seeking to die, that never! We must be willing to give our whole life. We have been called to make a total gift of our life! To go to the missions is to respond to the call to give our lives till our last breath, as Don Bosco did for his boys. Let our privilege always be that of serving those in greatest need, the youth who are most in danger, the people who are most poor.

Finally, we come to the third word that I would like to share with you:

Do the Father's will.

The Gospel offers us this teaching of Jesus, starting out from the attitude of two brothers, but above all, from his own example. To do the Father's will is the sole and proper horizon of our lives as baptized and consecrated persons. There is no other. And we do not do the Father's will by ourselves alone, individually, believing ourselves to be redeemers, version 2.0. Never! None of us has been called to be the Messiah! None of us has been called to bypass community discernment, joint work with other educators and pastors, and deep communion of heart and mind, prayer and affection. Dear friends and my dear missionaries, the Lord calls and sends us out to be missionary disciples who not only live Jesus' great commandment to love one another, but to make Jesus' desire and dream a reality, something that he himself prayed for in his farewell discourse: "*Holy Father, keep them in thy name, those whom thou hast given me, so that they may be one, even as we are one*" (Jn 17,11).

To do the Father's will is to bear witness to the world that we can be brothers and sisters among ourselves and with all men and women of good will, irrespective of beliefs, faith, religion and customs.

I conclude, dear missionaries and all those who are present here: once again the Lord calls us by name, consecrates and sends us to be like his beloved Son Jesus Christ, and to proclaim him. I invite you, I ask you: *be righteous in God's eyes, be servants without seeking privileges, and always do the Father's will.*

Only with the tender and maternal protection of Mary, Don Bosco's teacher, can we become true missionary disciples and help "... every tongue confess that 'Jesus Christ is Lord!' to the glory of God the Father."