

STRENNA 2015

LIKE DON BOSCO, WITH THE YOUNG, FOR THE YOUNG!

Now that we have arrived at this month of June at the end of the school year in one hemisphere, I have been asked, as has happened on previous occasions, to provide a preview or a draft of the Strenna for 2015. Naturally the subject will be expanded and developed in a circular letter at the end of this current year. Very willingly I am offering this preview in the hope that throughout the Salesian Family it may serve, as it is intended to be: simply an anticipated indication of what when the time comes will be given in the traditional way to our sisters, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and to all the Salesian Family.

Here is the outline of this draft:

1. A beautiful spiritual inheritance.
2. The Strenna as an Expression of UNITY for the whole Salesian Family.
3. Like Don Bosco: with his pastoral heart and his option for education caught up *in God's Plan*.
4. The Salesian charism at the service of evangelising communion.
5. With the young, for the young! Especially the poorest ones.
6. During the bicentenary of the birth of Don Bosco.
7. With Mary the most distinguished collaborator of the Holy Spirit.

1. A BEAUTIFUL SPIRITUAL INHERITANCE

I am calling *a beautiful spiritual inheritance* our family tradition of the Strenna, since it is something that was always very close to Don Bosco's heart. The first messages – something similar to motto – as part of our tradition go back to the 50s. In the "Biographical Memoirs" (BM III 433 434) we read that a practice used by Don Bosco was that every so often he would write a little note to someone to whom he wanted to give a piece of advice. Some of these have been preserved and they are very personal invitations to do something good or to avoid something that is not quite right. But besides this, from the first years of the Oratory towards the end of the year, Don Bosco had begun to give a strenna/motto to all his boys in general, and another to each one individually. The first one, the general one, used to consist in recommending certain forms of behaviour and some things for them to remember so that *the new year that was starting would go well*. Don Bosco continued to give these strennas almost every year.

The last strenna was given in a situation that was very special for Don Bosco and his boys. We find this too in the Biographical Memoirs (BM XVIII 425-7). Feeling that his final hour had come Don Bosco had Don Rua and Mons Cagiero called and with the little strength that he still had gave them his final recommendations for themselves and for all the Salesians. He blessed the houses in America and many of the confreres living in them. He blessed all the Italian Cooperators and their families, and finally he asked them to promise him that *they would love each other as brothers and*

sisters... and that they would recommend frequent communion and devotion to Mary Help of Christians.

Taking up these words of Don Bosco, Don Rua in his third circular letter described that moment and those words, and added that: *“this could serve as the Strenna for the new year and sent to all the Salesian houses. He would like it to be for one’s whole life and gave his approval so that it might really be the Strenna for the new year. (ibid)*

2. THE STRENNA AS A WORD OF UNITY FOR THE WHOLE SALESIAN FAMILY

It is a distinguishing feature of our Salesian Family that it is in the first place *a charismatic family (cf. Salesian Family Charter art. 5)* in which the Primacy of God-Communion constitutes the heart of *Salesian mysticism*.

In this communion we recognise *the diversity* and at the same time *the unity* that has its origin in baptismal consecration, in sharing the Spirit of Don Bosco and in participation in the Salesian mission at the service of the young, especially the poorest (cf *Salesian Family Charter art. 4*)

For this reason, in every Strenna we emphasise this aspect of *communion* which takes the first place in our Family. To the extent to which the same Strenna can help the pastoral planning of the different branches and groups it is welcome, but this is not its purpose. *The intention is not to make it a pastoral plan for the year but rather for it to be a message that builds up unity and communion for the whole Salesian Family in a common objective.*

3. LIKE DON BOSCO: WITH HIS PASTORAL HEART AND HIS OPTION FOR EDUCATION CAUGHT UP IN GOD’S PLAN

The heart of Jesus the Good Shepherd is the hallmark of all our apostolic work and an essential point of reference for us. At the same time we find in Don Bosco a practical approach *“in Salesian fashion”* shaped by the extraordinary spirit of Valdocco or the similar one of Mornese or what is most typical of every group in our Salesian Family. But we know that the *first* point of convergence *which applies to all* is the charism of Don Bosco raised up by the Holy Spirit for the good of the Church. This is what we call the Salesian charism which includes and finds a place for everyone. In Don Bosco, the happy expression (which was his plan of life) *“That you are young is enough to make me love you very much”* was the watchword and even before that the fundamental educational option of the Saint.” (Letter of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II for the centenary of the death of Don Bosco. *Juvenum Patris* n. 4) We know very well that for his boys and for his youngsters *“Don Bosco carried out a striking series of activities by his words, writings, institutes, journeys, meetings with civil and religious personalities; for them, above all else, he showed an attentive concern for each one individually, so that in his fatherly love the boys might see a sign of a higher love still.” (ibid, n. 4)*

“Following the same criteria and with the same spirit he tried to find a solution also to the problems of girls and young women. The Lord raised up at his side a co-foundress: St. Mary Domenica Mazzarello with a group of young women who had already dedicated themselves at parish level to the Christian formation of girls. His pedagogical approach gave rise to other collaborators, men and women, some of them consecrated by stable vows, others “cooperators,”

associated with him through the sharing of his pedagogical and apostolic ideals.” (ibid, n. 4) To all of this is added the fact of his being the promoter of a special devotion to Mary Help of Christians and Mother of the Church and the concern and affection he always showed for his past pupils.

At the centre of all that he did and the vision he had, as the real driving force of his activity was “pastoral charity”. For Don Bosco, precisely because *he felt that he was involved in the plan of God*, this pastoral charity meant loving young people whatever might be their condition or circumstances, in order to lead them to the fullness of that human life that was found in the Lord Jesus and which took practical form in the possibility of living as an upright citizen and a child of God.

This is the key to our existence, our living and putting into practice the Salesian charism. If each one of us can come to feel *in our very being*, in the depth of our being that same fire, that passion for education that Don Bosco had, meeting each young person on a deeply personal level, believing in each individual, convinced that in each one there is always a seed of goodness and of the Kingdom in order to help them to give the very best of themselves and to draw them to a close encounter with the Lord Jesus, then we shall certainly embody in our lives the best of the Salesian charism in our own way and according to our possibilities.

4. THE SALESIAN CHARISM “AT THE SERVICE OF EVANGELIZING COMMUNION” [EG, n 130]

I have already said several times both in family situations and on more public occasions that the Salesian charism is not our personal property, neither as Salesians nor as the whole Salesian Family.

Pope Francis expresses very clearly this deep conviction when he says in “*Evangelii Gaudium*” that the Holy Spirit enriches the whole Church in her evangelising mission with various charisms. “These gifts are meant to renew and build up the Church. They are not an inheritance, safely secured and entrusted to a small group for safekeeping; rather they are gifts of the Spirit integrated into the body of the Church... To the extent that a charism is better directed to the heart of the Gospel, its exercise will be more ecclesial. It is in communion, even when this proves painful, that a charism is seen to be authentic and mysteriously fruitful.” (EG, n. 130)

I really believe that *the Salesian charism* is certainly one of those gifts with which the Holy Spirit has enriched the Church so that with a gaze firmly fixed on the heart of the gospel and first of all within that ecclesial communion, and then afterwards within the communion of the Salesian Family it can be a precious gift to the young.

For this reason, *the Gospel, a pastoral heart for the young and communion* are the guarantees of Identity and Fidelity for us as the Family of Don Bosco, the Salesian Family.

5. WITH THE YOUNG, FOR THE YOUNG! ... especially the poorest ones.

5.1 And, brothers and sisters of our Salesian Family, we are saying WITH THE YOUNG, because the starting point for our *giving flesh and blood* (INCARNATING) *the Salesian charism* is our being with the young, being with them and among them, meeting with them in our daily lives, knowing their world and loving it, encouraging them to take a leading role in their own lives, re-awakening in them a sense of God, inspiring them to set their sights high, to live their lives as the Lord Jesus lived his.

5.2 And dear brothers and sisters of our Salesian Family we are saying WITH THE YOUNG, because if what is filling our hearts as we respond to the vocational call of the Lord Jesus is a special pastoral love for boys and girls, for the young, this will show itself in us as it did in Don Bosco as a very real “passion” in discovering what is best for them, devoting all our strength, all our efforts to this.

5.3 FOR THE YOUNG! ... ESPECIALLY THE POOREST.

I have said on various occasions that when Pope Francis talks about *going to the peripheries* addressing himself to the whole Church, we find ourselves challenged in a very real and direct way because he is asking us *to be present in the peripheries, almost deprived of everything, excluded, as though without any opportunities.*

At the same time I want to say that as the Salesian Family these *peripheries* are something typically our own, *because the periphery forms an integral part of our Salesian DNA.* What was Don Bosco's Valdocco if not the periphery of a large city? What was Mornese if not a rural periphery? We need to make sure our examination of conscience as individuals and as the Salesian Family sees us facing up to the strong demand from the Church, which in its turn is part *of the essential nature of the Gospel.* It will be necessary to question ourselves about being with and for the young, especially the least... But it will not be necessary to decide where we ought to be going, *'our pole star'* because it is among the least, the poorest, those who have the most need of us that the most characteristic feature of our DNA as the Salesian charism is to be found.

5.4 WHY THE YOUNG, ESPECIALLY THE POOREST ONES ARE FOR US A GIFT.

It was the Rector Major Fr J.E. Vecchi who wrote that “poor young people have been and still are a gift for us” (AGC 359, p 24). And we certainly cannot think that Fr Vecchi was defending poverty, since if we are with them and among them, *it is they who first of all are good for us, who evangelise us and help us to really live the Gospel in what is the most typical feature of the Salesian charism.*

As on a previous occasion, I make bold to say that **it is the young, boys and girls and especially the poorest and those most in need who will save us**, helping us to emerge from our routine, from our apathy and from our fears as often we are more concerned with maintaining our own securities than opening our hearts, our ears and our minds to what the Spirit may be asking of us.

6. IN THE BICENTENARY OF THE BIRTH OF DON BOSCO

On the occasion of an event such as the *Bicentenary of the birth of Don Bosco*, which demands an acceleration in our journey of fidelity to the same call that he felt, heard and translated into life;

in a year in which the celebration of *the gift that Don Bosco is for the Church and for the Salesian Family* will not leave us closed in on ourselves, self-absorbed and self-satisfied but rather launch us, if possible with greater energy towards the mission;

it is a question of a year of celebration that we are being invited to experience and express as a truly *Family celebration.*

7. WITH MARY THE MOST DISTINGUISHED COLLABORATOR OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

I will conclude giving special attention to the words of Pope – now Saint – John Paul II at the end of the Letter quoted above ‘Juvenum Patris’ in which he invites us always to have before us Mary Most Holy ‘the most lofty collaborator of the Holy Spirit’.

The Pope invites us to look at Mary and to listen to her when she says; "Do what Jesus tells you" (Jn 2,5).

In a beautiful final passage addressed to the SDB in those days but in a context that is most appropriate for all our Salesian Family today, the Pope says: “To her I entrust you, and with you the whole world of youth, that being attracted, animated and guided by her, they may be able to attain through the mediation of your educative work, the stature of new men for a new world: the world of Christ, Master and Lord.” (JP n. 20)

The strength of that desire and of these words which the Pope of that time dedicates to us is such that I think we can add nothing more than an ‘Amen’ entrusting all the members of our Salesian Family to the Grace that comes from the Lord, the intercession of Mary Help of Christians and the heart of the Good Shepherd.

May the Lord bless us all.

Rome 18 June 2014