

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

Bicentenary of the birth of Don Bosco

STRENNA 2015

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My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I want to begin this letter which is intended to be an extended commentary on the subject of the Strenna, by greeting most affectionately all my Salesian Brothers, and the Salesian Sisters to whom by tradition each year in the person of Mother General the Strenna is first presented. It then becomes a single programme for the whole of our Salesian Family throughout the world.

I accompany this presentation of the Strenna with my very sincere best wishes for Christmas and the New Year - both of them celebrations of the Gift and Grace of the Lord. I would very much have liked this to be an opportunity for a personal exchange of greetings. This not being physically possible, I hope that at least this expression of my feelings may reach each one of you as I offer you this simple commentary on the central theme of the Strenna for this year 2015.

1. A BEAUTIFUL SPIRITUAL INHERITANCE

I am calling our family tradition of the Strenna *a beautiful spiritual inheritance*, since it is something that was always very close to Don Bosco's heart. As part of our tradition, the first messages – similar to mottos - go back to the 1850s. In the

“Biographical Memoirs”¹ we read that it was a practice of Don Bosco every so often to 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 about to start would go well*. Don Bosco continued to give these *strennas* almost every year.

The last Strenna –Don Bosco’s last *Strenna* for his boys - was given in a situation that was very special. We find this too in the *Biographical Memoirs*.² Feeling that his final hour had come, Don Bosco had Don Rua and Mons Cagliero 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 be sent to all the Salesian houses. He would like it to be for the whole of one’s life and gave his approval that it might be the Strenna for the new year.*”³

2. THE STRENNA, AN EXPRESSION OF UNITY FOR THE WHOLE OF OUR SALESIAN FAMILY

It is a distinguishing feature of our Salesian Family that in the first place it is a *charismatic family*⁴ in which the Primacy of God-Communion is the heart of *Salesian mysticism*. This is so because it takes us back to the origin of that “charism” of the Spirit that has been passed on to us by Don Bosco, by us “to be lived, safeguarded,

¹ Cf BM III 433-434

² Cf BM III 266

³ *Ibidem*

⁴ Cf *Salesian Family Charter* art 5

deepened and constantly developed... in harmony with the Body of Christ continually in the process of growth.”⁵

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.⁶

For this reason, in every Strenna we emphasise this aspect of *communion* which holds the first place in our Family. To the extent that 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.* Then it is up to each “branch” of the family to see how to give it practical expression in their life and to put it into practice.

For this reason dear brothers and sisters of our Salesian Family, for this year 2015 which the Lord is giving us I propose as the Strenna:

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

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

To say **LIKE DON BOSCO** nowadays, means first of all coming to know, and rediscovering in all its fulness, the spirit of Don Bosco which today as always needs to have all its charismatic power and relevance.

From everything that could be said regarding this charismatic gift, for the present I should like to underline just two of its aspects:

- *Pastoral Love* (or the heart of the “Good Shepherd”) as the driving force behind who Don Bosco was and what he did.
- His ability to *interpret “Today” in order to prepare for “Tomorrow”*.

3.1 Don Bosco with the heart of the “Good Shepherd”

⁵ Mutuae Relationes, 11

⁶ Cf *Salesian Family Charter* art 4

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 spirit 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 has 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.”⁷ We know very well that for his boys and for his youngsters “Don Bosco undertook a striking series of activities by his words, writings, institutes, journeys, meetings with civil and religious authorities; 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.”⁸

It was this special love for the young, for each young person, that led him to do everything that was possible, to break every mould, to confound every stereotype in order to reach out to them. As Fr Francis Dalmazzo at Don Bosco’s “canonical process of holiness” declared under oath in 1892: «One day I saw Don Bosco leave Don Rua and me who were accompanying him to give a helping hand to a young builder’s labourer who was in tears because he was unable to pull an overloaded cart; and this was on one of the main roads of the city.»⁹

This special love for the young led Don Bosco to put his whole being into finding ways to help them in their growth and development, their human welfare and their eternal salvation. This set the scene for the whole life of our father, being everything for them even to his last breath. One of our Sisters, a Don Bosco scholar, expresses this very well when she writes: “Don Bosco’s love for these youngsters was shown in practical and timely gestures. He took an interest in all of their lives, recognising their most urgent needs and instinctively those most hidden. To state that his heart was given over entirely to the boys means to say that his whole being, intelligence, heart, will, physical energy, his whole being was directed towards their good, to promoting their all-round development, to desiring their eternal salvation. For

⁷ John Paul II *Iuvenum patris* n. 4

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Ordinary Process, published version pp 870-972, quoted in BOSCO Teresio, *Don Bosco visto da vicino*, Elle di Ci 1997, p. 108.

Don Bosco, therefore, being a man of heart meant being totally consecrated to the good of his boys and giving them his all even to his last breath.”¹⁰

This same zeal led him to try to find a solution with similar criteria to the problems of young girls, with the support and cooperation of the Co-Foundress Mary Domenica Mazzarello and the group of young women united with her and in a parochial setting dedicated to the Christian formation of girls.

His pastoral heart led him in the same way to rely on other collaborators, men and women, those ‘consecrated’ with formal vows, ‘cooperators’ associated in sharing his pedagogical and apostolic ideals.”¹¹ To this should be added his activity as a great promoter of a special devotion to Mary the Help of Christians and Mother of the Church, and his care and continuing affection for his past-pupils.

And as his personal driving force at the centre of all this activity and his vision there was “the fact that he achieved his personal holiness through his commitment to education lived with zeal and an apostolic heart”¹² *pastoral love*. For Don Bosco, precisely because *he felt himself to be a part of God’s plan*, this pastoral love meant that God held the first place in his life. He was the one who gave meaning to his life, to his activity, to his priestly ministry, to such an extent that he abandoned himself to Him to the point of recklessness. Because *he felt that he was a part of 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 at 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.

3.2 The history of God and of Mankind

¹⁰ P. RUFFINATO, *Educhiamo con il cuore di Don Bosco*, in “Note di Pastorale Giovanile”, n. 6/2007, p. 9

¹¹ *Ibid.* 10

¹² *Ibid.* 5

I believe, and many of us believe, that Don Bosco had a special ability to know how to read the signs of the times. He knew how to make his own many of the values offered by his own times in the fields of spirituality, social life, education... and he was able to give to all of this the very personal stamp that distinguished him and set him apart from the other great men of his times.

All of this enabled him to understand the present as though he already lived in the future! Don Bosco viewed the present with the eyes of ‘God’s historian’; the eyes of someone who knows how to look at history and to recognise in it the signs of the Presence of God. History as present, not in the past! Looked at with that clarity which, at best it is possible to have only by interpreting events in God, and in this way respond to the needs of his boys.

Because of this way of his of living and acting, we too are called today to ask Don Bosco to teach us to read the signs of the times in order to help the young.

The Special General Chapter expressed this same conviction when it said that “Don Bosco had to a very high degree a sense of awareness of the needs of the times... His first collaborators were formed in this spirit ... Modern society with its rapid and profound changes demands *a new type of person*, capable of overcoming the uneasiness caused by changes, and continuing to look for solutions rather than take refuge in ready-made answers ... capable of distinguishing what is permanent from what is changeable without going to extremes”¹³, and in this desire to bring the charism up to date, the path before us is rightly that of seeking for ourselves his pastoral heart combined with that same capacity for flexibility, adaptation seeing with the eyes of faith ‘the here and now’.

4. WITH THE YOUNG, FOR THE YOUNG especially the poorest

4.1 WITH THE YOUNG being with them and among them

We say **WITH THE YOUNG**, brothers and sisters of our Salesian Family, because the starting point for our *making flesh and blood (INCARNATING) the Salesian charism* is by our **BEING WITH THE YOUNG**, being with them and among them, being in contact with them in their daily lives, knowing their world, loving their world, encouraging them to be the protagonists in their own lives, reawakening their sense of God, helping them to live with high aims.

¹³ SGC, n. 665

The world of the young is a world of possibility. In order to be leaven in this world we have to *know and appreciate in a positive and critical manner what the young appreciate and love*. The challenge to our mission among the young is linked to our prophetic ability to read the signs of the times, as we said earlier about Don Bosco; in other words, what is God saying to us and asking of us through these young people with whom we are in contact.

This challenge begins with our having the ability to listen and having the courage and the daring to enter into a dialogue that is “horizontal,” without entrenched positions, without considering ourselves ‘a priori’ in possession of the truth. When we take up the position of the «apprentist» we learn a great deal about them and about the image of the Church we are incarnating for them. Young people with what they say, through their presence or their ‘indifference’, with their replies and their absence, are demanding something from us. And also the Spirit within them and through them is speaking to us. We never emerge from an encounter with them **unscathed** but rather mutually enriched and stimulated.

4.2 WITH THE YOUNG showing them our special pastoral love

And we say **WITH THE YOUNG** because what fills our hearts from the vocational call of Jesus that each one of us has received is the special pastoral love for boys and girls, youngsters, young men and women; a special love that will show itself in us as it did in Don Bosco, as a real ‘passion’, seeking what is best for them, putting into this all our energies, every effort and every last breath we have.

Our communities, whatever Family group they may belong to (*whether they are communities of religious, communities of prayer and commitment, communities of witness..*) should seek to acquire “visibility” among the young in their own locality. This visibility requires discernment, choices and self sacrifice. Above all it means generosity in service, joyful, friendly relationships, in a community project of prayers, gatherings and service. More than that it needs an “open house policy”, with a variety of initiatives for bringing people together and with proposals that respond to the problems that young people in the local area have. Who knows whether the young people appreciate the value there is in being able to avail of a “Salesian house”, being able to count on a group of friends. Being really significant will demand that our communities experience a healthy tension, which leads on to enquiry, discernment and the making of decisions that have to be constantly assessed, prayed about and confirmed in fraternal life and pastoral practice.

4.3 FOR THE YOUNG especially the poorest

On different occasions I have said that when Pope Francis talks about going to the *peripheries*, addressing the whole Church, he is challenging us in a very real and direct way because he is asking us to *be present on the peripheries with the young who are there, cut off from almost everything, excluded and without 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 poorest, the needy, the excluded.... 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 charismatic identity is to be found, and it is against this charismatic identity that we need to measure ourselves in order to find our place, our way of responding today to the mission, in the "here and now."

4.4 FOR THE YOUNG because they have the right to meet *role models of believers and adults*

It is constantly becoming ever more evident that our service to young people, to a large extent consists in being *role models of believers and adults to look up to*. Young people are looking for and want to meet up with good Christians who are also "normal", people they can not only admire but also imitate. In this as in other areas of their lives "under construction", they need to be able to see themselves reflected in others, they want to find their own identity and learn to live their own faith but by "contagion" (through a life witness) rather than by indoctrination.

It is for this reason that our pastoral activity cannot follow a uniform, one-directional model, given that the circumstances of adolescents and young people are so varied. Especially for us men and women educators, this has very serious implications such as being ready to "lose one's life" giving it up for the Kingdom, accepting poverty, austerity, a sober lifestyle as a freely chosen pastoral approach at personal and community level, always putting in the first place people, encountering them and being of service to them.

4.5 FOR THE YOUNG for whom a *personal encounter* will be the opportunity for them to feel accompanied

Working for and with the young always has been and is not only a privilege of being in contact with people who are alive, filled with potential, with dreams and freshness ... but,

above all, it is an opportunity that is given to us to walk with them *in returning to Jesus in order to make our own his life and his message*, without filtering out its radical nature, without trying to avoid its uncomfortable challenge to our scale of values and our way of living. We are convinced that the Gospel, today as always, has all the potential of being listened to, heard and accepted anew as Good News in the world of the young.

In this being listened to and accepted, the Gospel presents us with the challenge of committing ourselves decisively to *the personal encounter*, personal spiritual accompaniment in which every Salesian educator, man or woman, can propose pathways, suggest choices. Following the example of Don Bosco, we have a great need for men and women educators open to something new, ready to innovate, experiment, to take the risk of being personally genuine witnesses in the lives of the young. We are being asked to approach them individually, spontaneously, showing genuine interest in “the things they like” without presuming to invade their personal space. A form of accompaniment that is based preferably on a positive and affectionate respect for the other person, and one that should take the form of a role of “facilitating”, “appreciating” and “guiding”. When we talk about undertaking “processes of education to the faith” these consist not so much in bringing into young peoples’ lives something from the outside, as in helping them to throw light on their deepest inner selves where God dwells, and to develop the potential and the capabilities that they have within themselves. It is a matter of accompanying them in their lives, helping them to discover their deepest inner identity and their plan of life.

4.6 FOR THE YOUNG because the young, especially the poorest, are a gift for us

It was the Rector Major Fr Juan E. Vecchi who wrote that “*poor young people have been and still are a gift for us.*”¹⁴ And we certainly cannot think that Fr Vecchi was defending poverty. But it is certain that 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.* 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. 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.

For their sake and in their presence we cannot escape the urgent demands that from the youth situation itself are knocking on our door. We collaborate through our manifold works and services in promoting welcoming the young, listening to their *silent cries*: young people alone, victims of violence, with family squabbles, with emotional wounds, confused, with suffering and sorrow. The Good News urges us to

¹⁴ AGC 359, p. 24

listen to and to accept without pre-conditions their needs, desires, fears and dreams. Likewise it urges us to help them regain their ability to keep on searching, their indignation in the face of opportunities that being closed to them are empty promises: to encourage them to dream, to promote action, to collaborate, to seek a better society. To accept “God’s embrace” as a gift, learning to weep with Him and to smile with Him.

5. IN THE BICENTENARY OF DON BOSCO

5.1 A first Centenary

We are celebrating the Bicentenary of the Birth of Don Bosco. Naturally, there was a **first Centenary**, of which I want to offer a brief historical survey.¹⁵

We can begin by saying that *in 1915 there was not one Centenary but two*, both very “Salesian”: the birth of Don Bosco and the decision to make 24 May the date for the celebration in honour of Mary the Help of Christians. This was done by a decree of Pope Pius VII, in order to give thanks to the Mother of God for his liberation from captivity, establishing the Feast of Mary the Help of Christians on 24 May the date of his return to Rome.

The idea of celebrating the first centenary of the birth of Don Bosco in a solemn manner emerged well before the actual date. Fr Paolo Albera wanted to give the celebration a twofold character: that it might serve to extend devotion to Mary Help of Christians and also knowledge of Don Bosco and his work with the intention also of speeding up the Cause of Beatification.

By 1914 the planning of the celebrations for the first centenary of the birth of Don Bosco was already well advanced. The press had made known to the public at large the main events that were to take place on this occasion and the authorities who would be taking part. A selection of plans for the construction of the monument and of the new church had been made. The Holy See had approved a change in the date of the General Chapter and the resignation of the members of the Superior Chapter from their respective responsibilities by a year. Cardinal Gasparri, as the Cardinal Protector of the Salesian Congregation, had written a letter in the name of the Pope.

However, subsequent events proved very adverse. In 1914 and 1915 a series of tragic events took place: a very strong earthquake which struck a part of Sicily causing

¹⁵ NOTE: The information which I have greatly summarised was kindly given to me by Fr Jesús Graciliano García, who had prepared for the Spanish Salesian Bulletin eleven short articles, one for each month, based on the history of the first Centenary..

serious material damage although fortunately without any loss of life among the SDB and FMA; a fire that completely destroyed the Chilean house in Valdivia; the death of Pius X, who was very close to the Salesians. Another earthquake at the beginning of 1915 devastated the Abruzzi region, causing the death of three Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and two Salesians were lost in the ruins.

The most tragic, sorrowful and prolonged event was the outbreak of the First World War which divided the world into two warring factions, leaving millions of dead in its wake. Italy at first neutral entered the war on 2 May 1915 just on the vigil of the proposed celebrations for the centenary of the feast of Mary Help of Christians.

The war had a serious impact on Salesian works in many countries. About 2000 young Salesians were called to arms on one side or the other from the nations at war. The war prevented or made very difficult contact and communication with the Salesian houses of the FMA and the SDB. To a large extent it also reduced the help from the Cooperators. Don Albera continued to call for prayer, urging above all the commemoration of the 24th of each month dedicated to Mary Help of Christians. Clearly in these circumstances the glittering programmes planned for the centenary would be either cancelled, reduced or postponed until a more appropriate time. It was decided to postpone external festivities, limit the programmes and give them a more religious and private character, always with the hope that peace would soon arrive and the obstacles removed. But peace was slower to arrive than had been hoped and many of the planned celebrations would never took place.

Nevertheless and in spite of the fact that the day before the feast on the 23 May, as already mentioned Italy declared war on Austria, and joined the allies, on 24 in a crowded Basilica a Solemn Pontifical Mass was celebrated at which the Cardinal of Turin presided.

There were also celebrations in Valsalice and Castelnuovo. For the conclusion of the centenary, the Rector Major invited all the friends of Don Bosco to a two-part pilgrimage: the first on 15 August to visit the tomb of Don Bosco and the second on 16 to visit the places where it had all begun at the Becchi, where Don Bosco was born and at Castelnuovo, where he was baptised. At Valsalice the crowd was so great that an altar had to be set up in the portico in front of the tomb. Thousands of people assembled, occupying the whole courtyard and the spaces nearby. Hymns, prayers and gifts were offered prior to Benediction at which Don Albera presided from the terrace in front of the tomb of Don Bosco. Everyone present was given a attractive memento with Don Bosco's picture and some of his sayings.

On the second day, the 16 August, gathered around Don Bosco's house at the Becchi were numerous groups of young and old, ecclesiastics and lay people who had come from Turin and the neighbouring countryside. Waiting for them were Don Albera and all the Superior Chapter. Don Albera celebrated Mass and then there was the laying of the foundation stone of the new church that was to be built there in honour of Mary Help of Christians to mark the double Centenary. At Castelnuovo a commemorative plaque was unveiled followed by a festive lunch, and then the official ceremony to mark the occasion. Don Albera was declared an "honorary citizen."

In America it was possible to celebrate both Centenaries, that of the feast of Mary Help of Christians and that of the birth of Don Bosco. In all the American countries where Salesian work was established huge events were celebrated in honour of Don Bosco and of Mary Help of Christians. In various places the name of Don Bosco was given to roads and centres, and churches were erected to commemorate the occasion. Argentina and Brazil were the countries which particularly distinguished themselves in these circumstances.

5.2 Celebrating the Bicentenary

That then is the history of the celebration of the first Centenary. Now there are many activities, most of them quite simple, that are taking place in the whole world for the Bicentenary. As I did on 16 August at the Becchi at the beginning of the Bicentenary I want to emphasise its real meaning.

Today – as I said on that occasion – while we celebrate the Bicentenary of this historic fact, we give special thanks to God for what He has done through His intervention in history, in this piece of history here on the Becchi hill. Several times in what I have written I have said in one way or another that the Salesian charism is a gift that God through Don Bosco has given to the Church and to the World. It developed over time from the knees of Mamma Margaret through the friendship of good life-teachers, and above all in daily life spent with the boys.

The Bicentenary of the birth of Saint John Bosco, of Don Bosco, is a jubilee year, a "year of Grace" that we want to live in the Salesian Family with a profound sense of gratitude to the Lord, with humility but with joy, because the Lord Himself is the One Who has blessed this splendid apostolic movement, founded by Don Bosco under the guidance of Mary Help of Christians. It is a jubilee year for the thirty groups which now make up this great Family and for many others who taking their inspiration from Don

Bosco, from his charism, from his mission and spirituality, are hoping to be recognised as members of that Family.

It is a jubilee year for the whole Salesian Movement which in one way or another relates to Don Bosco and his initiatives, activities, proposals, and moves ahead sharing a spirituality and in its efforts on behalf of the young especially those most in need.

This Bicentenary ought to be for everyone throughout the whole Salesian world, a precious occasion that is offered us in order to look at the past with gratitude, the present with trust and to dream the future of the evangelising mission of our Salesian Family with vigour and the novelty of the gospel, with courage and a prophetic outlook, allowing ourselves to be guided by the Spirit who will always draw us closer to the newness of God. The Bicentenary is already becoming an opportunity for a real spiritual and pastoral renewal of our Family, an occasion to make the charism more alive and to make Don Bosco as he always has been ever more relevant for the young, on our progress towards the *physical and human peripheries* of society and of the young. The year of the Bicentenary and the subsequent path that we will need to follow ought to be for us a time to bring about what, in all humility, forms part of our most vital charisma reality.

This Bicentenary ought also to be, and it is already becoming so, the occasion to recall to mind the many women and men who in this exciting enterprise have given their lives in an heroic manner for this ideal in the most difficult and extreme situations in the world, for which they are a triumph and a priceless treasure the value of which only God knows.

With this conviction, we feel more inspired not only to admire Don Bosco, not only to recognise his relevance but to feel very deeply the **essential commitment to imitate the man** who from the hills of the Becchi arrived in the Valdocco periphery, and the rural periphery of Mornese, in order to become fully involved himself and with others in doing everything possible to seek the welfare of the young and *their happiness in this life and in the next*.

6. MAMMA MARGARET, MOTHER AND TEACHER OF DON BOSCO

I would not want to finish this commentary on the Strenna in this Bicentenary Year of the birth of Don Bosco, which has as its core his educative and pastoral praxis ! without referring to her who was his mother and teacher. And this because to ignore or be silent about his mother, Mamma Margaret, is to ignore the fact that so many of the natural gifts that we recognise in Don Bosco have their origin, certainly in God , but through the human

mediation of his family and in a special way of his mother. This is the reason for this simple reflection¹⁶.

In May 1887 Don Bosco went to Rome - and it was for the last time - for the consacration of the Church of the Sacred Heart the perpetual monument to his love for the Pope. He was almost at the end of a long laborious life, to the shortening of which the construction of that church had contributed. On Sunday 8 May a reception was held in his honour with the participation of Church and Civil Authorities/ personalities ecclesiastiche e civili, Italian and foreign. At the end of the reception many of the guests spoke in a variety of languages. Someone asked out of curiosity what was the language that Don Bosco liked best. Smiling he replied: «The language I like best is that taught me by my mother, because I can express my ideas with little effort, and again I don't forget it as easily as other languages!»¹⁷.

Don Bosco always acknowledged the great values that he had acquired in his family: the peasant's wisdom, a healthy astuteness, a spirit of work, a true appreciation of what was important, readiness to work hard when something needed to be done, optimism under all trials, resilience in times of misfortune, the ability to start again after set-backs, cheerfulness always and everywhere, a spirit of solidarity, a lively faith, genuine and deep affection, a readiness to welcome and to be hospitable; all virtues that he had found at home and that had formed him. He was so marked by these experiences that when he thought about setting up an educational establishment for his boys he did not want any other name for it than "house" and he described the spirit that it ought to have as a "family spirit". In order to give it this proper tone he asked Mamma Margaret, already elderly and tired to leave the tranquillity of her home in the hillside to come down to the city and to look after the boys he had taken from the streets, those boys who would cause her no little heartache and grief. But she went to help Don Bosco and to become the Mamma to those who no longer had family or affection.

It was precisely the presence of Mamma Margaret at Valdocco during the last ten years of her life that had its influence in no small way on that "family spirit" that we all consider as being at the heart of the Salesian charism. In fact, that decade was no ordinary one but the first during which the foundations were laid for that atmosphere that was to pass into history as the atmosphere of Valdocco. It was spurred on by a very practical need that Don Bosco had invited his Mother. In fact, in God's plans this presence was to rise far above the limits of a practical necessity to become a providential collaboration in a charism just coming to birth. Mamma Margaret was very conscious of this being her "new vocation." She accepted it with humility and a clear mind. This explains the courage she showed in the most difficult circumstances. One need only think of the cholera epidemic: of the actions and the words that were almost prophetic, such as using the altar cloths to make bandages for the sick.

¹⁶ NOTE: I asked Fr Pier Luigi Cameroni, SDB Postulator for the Causes of Saints, for his help in this short reflection. This he gave and I thank him sincerely.

¹⁷ BM XVIII, p. 274-275

Especially significant is the example of the famous “Good Night” something peculiarly a part of Salesian tradition. It was something to which Don Bosco attached great importance and was begun in fact by Mamma Margaret with a little sermonette given to the first young boarder.¹⁸ Don Bosco was to continue this practice not in church in the form of a sermon, but in the playground or inside the house or under the archways in a fatherly and friendly fashion. The inner qualities of this mother were such that her son, even when he had become something of an educational expert, could always learn something from her. Summing up in some way what has been said, one can quote the judgement of Don Lemoyne: «In a sense she embodied the Oratory.»¹⁹

As it matured, this relationship between the mother and son developed into Mamma Margaret sharing the educational mission of her son: «My dear son, you must know how sorry I am to leave this house, your brother, and everyone else I hold so dear, but if you think this would please the Lord then I am ready to follow you,» She leaves her little house at the Becchi and follows him to be among the poor and abandoned boys of Turin. Here for ten years (the last of her life) Margaret devoted herself without reserve to Don Bosco’s mission and to the beginnings of his work, exercising a twofold motherly role: spiritual motherhood for her son the priest and educational motherhood for the boys of the first Oratory making her contribution to the education of such holy sons as Dominic Savio and Michael Rua. Illiterate, but full of that wisdom that comes from on high she is the help of many poor street boys, nobodies children. Finally, the grace of God and the exercise of the virtues made Margaret Occhiena an heroic mother, a wise teacher and a sound adviser to the Salesian charism as it came to birth. Mamma Margaret is a simple woman and yet she shines out among the extraordinary number of holy mothers who live in the presence of God and in God, with a union with Him made up of almost continuous silent prayer. The “most simple thing” that Mamma Margaret continues to repeat through the example of her life is this: that holiness is within reach, it is for everyone and it is achieved in faithful obedience to the particular vocation that the Lord has entrusted to each one of us.

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

I finish keeping very much in mind the words of Pope now Saint John Paul II at the conclusion of the letter already mentioned in which he invites us to have always before us Mary Most Holy as ‘the most lofty collaborator of the Holy Spirit.’ The Pope invited us to look to Mary and to listen to her when she says: «Do what He tells you” recalling the marriage feast of Cana (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

¹⁸ Don Bosco writes about this episode in the *Memoirs of the Oratory*, p. 296

¹⁹ BM III, p. 266.

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.”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, 8 December 2014

Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of Mary

Fr Ángel Fernández Artime, SDB
Rector Major

²⁰ JOHN PAUL II, *Iuvenum patris*, n. 20