

STRENNA 2020
Presentation of the theme

“Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” Mt 6:10)
“GOOD CHRISTIANS AND UPRIGHT CITIZENS”



Note: While I was presenting the commentary on the Strenna 2019 in Valdocco, Turin, to the Salesian Family, some were already asking for the draft of the 2020 Strenna so they could have it for the beginning of the educative and pastoral year in some parts of the world.

I am happy to do this, while insisting that this is only an outline, a draft with the essential points that I will develop when I prepare a more meditative, thoughtful and calm reflection, one that is both as profound and comprehensible as possible

I would like the Strenna to continue to assist you by being a central thread in the pastoral guidance of the New Year in every part of the world. Bless you all.

After the meeting of the Salesian Family World Council in Turin in May, I decided to propose a theme for the 2020 Strenna with a pair of terms that would embody the essence of our Salesian education. We received it from Don Bosco himself: to help our boys, girls and young people to be "good Christians and upright citizens". We need to deepen our identity as evangelizers and educators of the faith even more.

There is a growing fragility and sometimes an inability when it comes to being apostles and missionaries of the young. And at the same time there is the risk of not educating our young people to a strong sense of citizenship, social justice and evangelical values that lead to internalizing a life programme which involves service to others, commitment to public life, personal honesty, an "allergy" to all types of corruption, sensitivity to the world of migration, to creation and the "common home" that has been given to us. All this in our commitment to protecting the defenceless, those who have no say and who are discarded.

I ask myself: if we do not succeed in educating to these values, what is it we are doing? And what evangelisation in Jesus' name are we carrying out?

Therefore, this task of education today is a way of putting Jesus' words: "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven".¹ This is and will continue to be the real "politics of the Our Father" which was Don Bosco's.

0. What do we mean by "politics of the Our Father" in Don Bosco?

Since the reference to Don Bosco is so direct and about one of the most sensitive themes of his history "within" the social, political and ecclesial context in which he lived, I think it is important to pay attention to what our sources have to say on this subject. We need to get a clear idea of what involvement in the "polis" of his time meant for Don Bosco: his great "yes" and his very firm "no" which certainly cannot be brought whole and untouched into our context..

¹ Mt 6:10.

This year's Strenna allows us to reconstruct what Don Bosco thought, and how he did things and acted among the young with a view to preparing them for the society in which they found themselves, subject to the whirlwind of change going on in the midst of the Industrial Revolution where poverty reached many extreme levels: immense social and economic disparity, the growth of the phenomenon of begging, the abandonment of "migrant" children... All this in 19th century Italy.

If we start out from the *Biographical Memoirs*, the expression "politics of the Our Father" is a well-known one, used by Don Bosco when he and Pope Pius IX met in 1867:

Don Bosco had only just come into Pius IX's presence when the latter said to him, smiling: "What kind of politics would get you out of all these problems?"

"My politics" Don Bosco replied, "are the same as Your Holiness's politics. They are the politics of the Our Father. In the Our Father we pray every day that the kingdom of the Heavenly Father may come on earth, that it may extend, that is, that it may become more and more felt, more and more alive, more and more powerful and glorious: *Adveniat regnum tuum!* and that is what matters most."²

At any rate this belief, and that we must understand in all its depth and significance (as we will do in developing the text of the Strenna), is also enlightened by other of Don Bosco's thoughts, such as the following:

"No really, with our work we don't do politics; we respect the established authorities, we observe the laws that must be observed, we pay taxes and get by, asking only that they let us do good to poor youth, and save souls. If you like, we also do politics, but in a way that is harmless, indeed advantageous to any government. Politics is defined as the science and art of governing the state properly. Now the work of the Oratory in Italy, in France, in Spain, in America, in all countries where it has already been established, attending especially to the relief of the neediest youth, tends to diminish the number of unruly types and vagabonds; it tends to reduce the number of wrong-doers and petty thieves; it tends to empty prisons; it tends, in a word, to form good citizens, who, far from annoying the public authorities, will be their support, maintaining order, tranquillity and peace in society. This is our politics; this is the only politics we have dealt with so far, this is what we will deal with in the future. And it is precisely this approach which has allowed Don Bosco to do good to you first, and then to many other young people of all ages and countries."³

It is this very "politics" that urged Don Bosco to offer *an effective response to new and persistent emergencies for the good of his boys.*

1. GOOD CHRISTIANS

- **Living in the Faith of the Lord and with the guidance of the Spirit**

There is a passage from the Letter to the Ephesians that expresses the beauty and greatness of the love to which we are called; a horizon that must never fail whatever the context to which we are sent. *Nothing can take away the dignity and divine greatness that lies within and before every human life as its destiny.* The fact that it is Paul who says this, who had before him a very much pagan world still, makes these words even more encouraging:

² MB VIII, 594

³ G. Bosco, Parlata agli ex allievi, in ISS, Fonti Salesiane. 1. Don Bosco e la sua opera. Raccolta antologica, LAS, Roma 2014, 106-107.

“For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. 18 I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”⁴

- **Living by listening to God who speaks to us. Living what we proclaim. With the need to evangelize and offer the first proclamation and catechesis**

“At its beginning this Society was a simple catechism lesson.”⁵ This brings us back to our origins and our roots. From Don Bosco we learned the evangelizing passion to bring every child, every young person to the encounter with Jesus. That is why we can never stop being evangelizers of the young, knowing that “evangelization aims at a process of growth which entails taking each person and God’s plan for his or her life seriously.”⁶

Our being educators and evangelizers of young people requires firstly on our part that we can tell young people with words, gestures, actions based on our own personal experience, that God loves them; that “you are worthy in his eyes; you are not insignificant. You are important to him.”⁷

- **True Christians and educators today with Salesian spirituality**
 - Emphasizing the spirituality of God in daily life
 - through a way of living Salesian spirituality where the climate of friendship between the educator and the young person is of great help for personal growth. In the tradition of St Francis de Sales, growing in faith, even having a guide, will not be possible if there is no true friendship, that is, communication, mutual influence; a friendship that comes to be truly spiritual.
 - “The relationship between the Salesian formator and young people must be marked by ‘the greatest cordiality’, because ‘familiarity brings love’, and love brings confidence. This is what opens hearts, and young people reveal everything without fear ... because they are sure they are loved.”⁸
- **Good Christians in the challenge of non-Christian environments**
 - Fr. Tom Uzhunnalil’s testimony, our confrere who was a prisoner in Yemen for 557 days, attests how his spiritual interiority and faith kept him “healthy in mind and spirit” in an extreme human situation where he gave witness, even in silence, through his life.
 - To be able to live a dialogue and witness that are prophetic.
- **Good Christians in the challenge of post-believing or post-Christian settings**
 - A challenge that is, above all, a precious gift we have to offer the Church and that the Church and the world ask of us. Perhaps no charismatic family in the Church is more involved with such a vast number of people, the majority of whom are young, who are not Christian because they belong to other faiths or who are no longer believers.
 - This puts us on a missionary path unique in its potential for witness and evangelization. The Church asks us not only to take steps but to be forerunners in the Church on this front, where the whole future of young people plays out.

4 Ephesians 3:14-19.

5 MB IX, 61

6 EG 160

7 Ch V 115

8 A. Giraudo 154, quoting “G. Bosco, Due lettere da Roma, 10 maggio 1884”, in P. Braido (de), *Don Bosco educatore*, cit. 378-384.

- **Faith lived together, and where we go out from ourselves**
 - The spiritual dimension of all Salesian pastoral action must be lived and must present itself adequately and without dichotomies. It has much to empty itself of, to engage in, so we can see and live our fatherliness in the world, with others, as a witness to human fraternal relationships, which is the evangelical reason for treating others (of all ages, races, cultures and religions) in the awareness that we are children of the same God. To call and treat others as brothers and sisters is to recognize God as Father, and to recognize God as Father is to see others as our brothers and sisters.
 - In this synthesis we identify the basis of all Christian spirituality that is committed to making the world a place of encounter with God and to making the encounter with Him an opportunity to build a better world.
 - Pope Francis helps us with this when he says: “When an encounter with God is called an “ecstasy”, it is because it takes us out of ourselves, lifts us up and overwhelms us with God’s love and beauty. Yet we can also experience ecstasy when we recognize in others their hidden beauty, their dignity and their grandeur as images of God and children of the Father. The Holy Spirit wants to make us come out of ourselves, to embrace others with love and to seek their good. That is why it is always better to live the faith together and to show our love by living in community and sharing with other young people our affection, our time, our faith and our troubles. The Church offers many different possibilities for living our faith in community, for everything is easier when we do it together.”⁹
 - This is a real invitation to live the ecclesiology of communion with ever greater intensity, where the GIFT that each one is and has in their state of life is discovered and valued to the utmost only when it is given to others, put at the service, in an outgoing way that begins first of all by reaching out to those closest to us.

2. UPRIGHT CITIZENS

- **Young people are waiting for us in the "house of Life".**
 - The expectations of the young are more and more pressing and dramatic if we take a broad look at them. Surely we can say that the youth population in the world has never been so numerous as it is today and proportionately has never been so poor and needy as it is today, given their number and perhaps even their living conditions.
 - There remains, nevertheless, “the most delicate and precious portion” of society, as Don Bosco described it. So, it is a very open field for the Salesian Family, but one you have to help us to see.
 - I believe that there is a risk in various Salesian quarters of remaining comfortably “within the walls”, contenting ourselves with those who enter our doors.
 - This is why there is a great cry from young people, that we go out to face the real problems they have: the meaning of life, their lack of opportunities, formation, job placement...

- **Educating ourselves and our young people in citizenship and to social commitment.**

- As emerges from the documents of the synod (all three) there is a justice and a citizenship of which the youth are becoming prophets, which goes beyond that of the states to which they belong. There is greater justice than the one expressed by national juridical systems and by our governments. There is a citizenship of the world as a common home and home of the future, which undoubtedly belongs more to the new generations than to ours.
 - We should educate ourselves to the courage of this demanding vision of justice (*Laudato Si,' Evangelii Gaudium...*) that aims at sustainable development (the *sustainable development goals* of the United Nations, the various *Global Agreements*, in particular the recent one on migration that some nations shamefully did not sign).
 - We should also make ourselves heard in contrast to the more short-sighted visions focused on narrow-minded viewpoints – see the ecological sensitivity of the young and the closed minds many governments have regarding these issues.
 - Today there is a lack of credible leaders in the world, and this also questions our educational processes.
- **Educating ourselves and our young people in political commitment and service**
 - Here I believe there is so much ground to recover, as Church, as a Salesian Congregation and as the Salesian Family. Although this is an appeal that returns in a more or less strong form in all the documents (from Synods to General Chapters), in fact, the “social doctrine of the Church”, which is like the *“magna carta”* of this commitment, is somewhat the “Cinderella” of educative and pastoral action.
 - There are young people in our houses and also young men and women religious of our Salesian Family who wonder if the ultimate goal of our works should really be about producing graduates with the best qualifications for a very competitive society, without ever questioning the socio-economic model that lies behind all this ...
 - It is also the point where the difference from Don Bosco’s approach will be most felt: precisely in order to be faithful to his spirit today we need to use expressions that are almost the opposite to his. The *Our Father* asks us to teach young people, not only as individuals, but as a group, to become far more active in pursuing the common good, including in the explicitly administrative and political field.
 - We must understand well what we mean by political service and how a Christian cannot back away from this.
 - It will be a “long battle”, especially for us consecrated men and women who have not grown up with this mentality, but it is a cry coming from the world and the young people of today.
 - One shining light today is the reality of volunteer work as a gradual and pedagogical path towards a greater commitment to the transformation of society.
- **Educating ourselves and our young people in uprightness and keeping ourselves free from corruption.**
 - The potential of the Salesian Family in this field is truly enormous, as is the reality of the Salesian Cooperators and Past Pupils in the “world”, their presence in politics and in sectors of influence.
 - It is a strong call to our internal coherence. Especially in our relationship with the laity.

- It will also be an opportunity to take steps in creating a culture of social ethics or making it more visible.

- **Being sensitive and sharing responsibility in a world on the move, a world of migration**
 - Young migrants were the first beneficiaries of Don Bosco's Oratory.
 - The majority involved in this migration of peoples which has not been known to this extent in previous history, is made up of young people. Is this not a direct appeal to the Salesian Family which is the most widespread in all continents? Shouldn't we become SPECIALISTS in this field (by investing in "higher education", as is done for technology or philosophy...)?
 - If we are not the ones to create culture on this open front of human life that will expand more and more in the future, who else? Who in the Church must be more prophetic on this front? The Carthusians maybe?!
 - It seems to me that it is not so crazy to consider our **Salesian Youth Movement** as a ***movement for young people on the move***.

- **Taking care of our common home as young people ask us to do (*Laudato Si'*, 13)**
 - The commitment to our common home (the vision of ecology proposed by *Laudato Si'*) is not an extra commitment: it is a horizon that questions the whole of our culture, faith, lifestyle, mission... education and evangelization. There is not much to invent because in this (both in ecology and the rights of minors) the direction to follow has already been clearly laid down by the Magisterium of the Church over a long period now and is now strongly laid down by Pope Francis. How do we let ourselves be converted...?
 - Integral ecology also speaks to us of an integral educational proposal (in its human and spiritual values).

- **In the defence of human rights and especially the rights of minors**
 - The purpose for which we have been raised up by the Holy Spirit in Don Bosco as a Salesian Family is to give our whole life to minors, to the young, to the boys and girls of the world, giving priority above all to the most defenceless, the most needy, the most fragile, the poorest.
 - Hence we must be experts in the defence of all human rights, especially the rights of minors, and ask for forgiveness to the point of tears when we have not done so. We cannot be accomplices of any abuse, meaning by this any abuse: abuse of power, abuse of conscience, sexual or financial abuse – as it was defined at the Synod on *Youth, Faith and Vocational Discernment*.¹⁰

3. WITH THE HELP OF MARY, OUR MOTHER

The presence of Mary in Don Bosco's educational system has a fundamental importance that we cannot overlook or neglect.

Don Bosco presented her to his children as the Immaculate, the simple, gentle woman who joyfully lives the project that God had for her. He also presented her as the Help of Christians, as a loving Mother, concerned that all her sons and daughters could fully live the dream that God has for each of them.

In the perspective of an education that helps boys, girls and young people, and all of us as educators and evangelizers of the Salesian Family, Mary's presence has not only a devotional but also a "political" dimension: she is the Mother who helps her sons and daughters to fully live out their commitment to God and to the created world. This is the "politics of the Our Father".

May our Mother the Help of Christians intercede for us all

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