**PRESENTATION OF THE THEME FOR THE 2021 STRENNA**

**Moved by hope:**

**“See, I am making all things new” (*Rev* 21:5)**

**Introduction**

As is the case each year, over these weeks I am sending all provinces in the Salesian Congregation and all Salesian Family groups the title that has been chosen for the Strenna for the coming year. Although there are still five months to go till the end of the calendar year, planning for the new educative and pastoral year require that this communication be brought forward prior to the calendar deadline. I am very happy to do this.

At the same time, the pointers I am offering are obviously not the commentary on the Strenna, but merely ideas that are the common thread running through it, ones that I consider to be essential if we are to understand the development of reflection and certain pastoral guidelines that will flow from it.

1. **A WORLDWIDE PHENOMENON THAT CHALLENGES US AND ONE WE CANNOT IGNORE**

When thinking about a message that can unite us as a family in 2021, it is impossible not to take into account the fact that the world, every country, has certainly been blocked if not paralysed (and indeed many are). Travel is out of the question, there has been no possibility of keeping appointments at world and international level. The “global village” has gone back to being, and will certainly remain so for some time, a collection of many “villages” regarding each other with suspicion. Walls have fallen, but for “self-protection” frontiers have been much more reinforced.

Faced with this situation we can repeat the thousands of messages saying that we will overcome it, that we need to trust in ourselves, that we are strong, that in each case national pride has overcome worse situations, etc. Many of these messages, that are also a mindset, a way of interpreting current events, smack of the “Promethean” claims described in the well-known Greek myth in which someone is singularly able to rebuild him or herself, reinvent themselves, draw strength from their own weakness in order to overcome adversity. This is very much a pagan mindset. Many of these messages have nothing to do with the meaning of life, of every life, and much less so with God and the journey we have experienced in this moment of history.

However, this is not our view, nor is it the message we wish to pass on in the many places where we are as a Salesian Family.

So then, our message emphasises and insists that faced with this tough and painful reality with its weighty consequences, we continue to express the certainty of **being moved by hope**: because God in his Spirit continues to make “all things new”.

Pope Francis has invited the world to become infected with “the necessary antibodies of justice, charity and solidarity”[[1]](#footnote-1) for reconstruction once the days of pandemic are over.

We cannot deny how much sorrow the world is experiencing at the moment. We cannot deny how many millions of poor people have been infected and have lost their life. If we are invited to keep a safe distance, can we imagine how people crowded into the *favelas*, the slums, next to rubbish dumps can respect social distancing? The loss of jobs is affecting millions of families...; mourning that cannot take place leaves millions of hearts in sorrow; looming poverty (at times hunger) affects, disorients, paralyses and threatens *to bury every hope*.

1. **DON BOSCO IS NOT FAR FROM THESE SITUATIONS BECAUSE HE EXPERIENCED THEM HIMSELF**

We make reference to our Father Don Bosco because he himself throughout his life had to face the harshness of so many situations, so many tragedies and so much pain. He is a teacher in showing us how the way of faith and hope not only enlighten us but also give us the necessary strength to change unfavourable or adverse conditions, or at least to limit them as far as possible. Our Father stood out for his extraordinary tenacity and for his special and profoundly realistic perspective on things. He knew how to look beyond the problems. The cholera situation was – at local level – similar to what we are going through now in every country. As an educator and pastor he accompanied this situation together with his boys. While there were people who were only worried about themselves and their needs, Don Bosco and his boys, like many others, were busy helping to overcome the tragedy. We can say that this profound perspective of faith and hope was something he showed throughout his life: when he left his mother and home and went to live as a “waiter” at the Cafe “Pianta” so he could study in Chieri, facing loneliness and difficulties; or weeping and suffering because he did not know where he could take and welcome his boys in the afternoons for his Oratory until he met Giuseppe Pinardi... All of this confirms how Don Bosco was moved by the virtue of hope.

1. **A MOVEMENT OF THE SPIRIT THAT IS ABLE TO “MAKE ALL THINGS NEW” (*Rev* 21:5)**

Christian faith continuously shows how God, through his Spirit, accompanies the history of humankind, including in the most adverse and unfavourable circumstances. This God who does not suffer but has compassion, according to the beautiful expression of Saint Bernard di Chiaravalle: “Impassibilis est Deus, sed non incompassibilis” (God does not suffer but he is not lacking in compassion)[[2]](#footnote-2). God never abandons his people in salvation history, he always stays with them, especially when their pain becomes so overwhelming: “I am about to do a new thing: now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? (Is 43,19)”[[3]](#footnote-3).

This time and this situation will no doubt be conducive to

* being aware of the suffering of many people
* paying attention to the many constant and silent epidemics such as the hunger that so many suffer, complicity in wars, lifestyles that enrich some and impoverish millions of people
* asking ourselves whether we can live – for those among us who have more – with a more simple and austere lifestyle.
* Seriously considering that our world, the whole of creation, is suffering and falling sick while, while people continue to deny the evidence
* realising how important it is “to bring the whole human family together in the search for integral and sustainable development”[[4]](#footnote-4).
1. **A SALESIAN INTERPRETATION OF THE PRESENT MOMENT**

Many are the interpretations that have been made of this historical moment, a moment that – they say – occurs every hundred years, with great crises that affect humanity for one reason or another. Not even the bloodiest wars have been as “global” as the situation we are experiencing. In any case, what response can we give? What contribution can we offer as a Salesian Family? What Gospel values, read in a Salesian perspective, do we feel we can offer? How can we, as educators, offer as an alternative an "education to hope"?

* 1. Alternative processes to the dominant culture. Change of values and perspective:
* from *closure* to *openness*
* from *individualism* to *solidarity*
* from *isolation* to genuine *encounter*
* from *division* to *unity* and *communion*
* from *pessimism* to *hope*
* from *emptiness* and *lack of meaning* to *transcendence*.
	1. God speaks to us through so many people who have known how to live with hope:
* in extreme situations God continues to speak to us through the hearts of people who see and respond differently
* the Salesian holiness of our Family is rich in models of those who have know how to *live moved by hope* (Blessed Stephen Sándor and Madeleine Morano…).
	1. We do not save ourselves by ourselves alone. No one is saved alone.

The sense of what I am trying to say is in this quotation from Pope Francis: “If there's one thing we've learned in all this time, it's that nobody saves themselves. Borders fall, walls crumble, and all fundamentalist discourse dissolves before an almost imperceptible presence that manifests the fragility of which we are made... It is the breath of the Spirit that opens up horizons, awakens creativity and renews us in fraternity to make us present (or to make us say: ‘Here I am’) before the enormous and imponderable task that awaits us. It is urgent to discern and feel the pulse of the Spirit in order to give impetus, together with others, to the dynamics that can witness and channel the new life that the Lord wants to generate at this concrete moment in history.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

* 1. As a Salesian Family we have tried to give answers at this time of emergency as a sign of charity and hope, and today we must be the alternatives:
* accompanying young people on life’s journey, opening them up to other horizons, new perspectives.
* learning to live “on the edge” within a “limitless” society. That is, by helping young people and adults to discover the “normality of life” in simplicity, authenticity, sobriety and depth.
* letting ourselves be challenged by the many voices of hope from young people in difficult times: the ecological movement, their solidarity with the needy.
1. **Places where we LEARN and EXERCISE HOPE**
	1. Faith and hope go together. ***Let us propose faith as the authentic path*** because “a world without God is a world without hope” (Cf. *Eph* 2:12)
	2. ***Prayer*** as a school of *hope* and personal encounter with the love of Jesus Christ who saves us.
	3. ***Action***, ***effort in daily life*** given that ultimately, when the human being is moved, he or she acts to transform the situation, and deep down always has hope that sustains. “Every serious and upright deed of the human being is hope in action,”[[6]](#footnote-6)
	4. ***Suffering*** and ***sorrow*** in every human life as *the necessary doorway* that opens up to hope.

In many cultures, people try in every way to hide or silence suffering and death. However, what allows the human being to heal is not to avoid or hide this suffering and pain, but to mature in it and find meaning in life when it is not immediately or easily visible. Indeed, “Humanity’s greatness is essentially determined by its relationship with suffering and with those who suffer.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

* 1. The ***poor*** and the ***excluded,*** who are at the centre of God’s attention, must be our privileged beneficiaries as a Salesian Family.
	2. In the greatest crises, so many things disappear, so many “certainties” we thought we had, meanings in life that in reality were not such. But in fact, ***the great values of the Gospel and its truth*** remain when philosophies and opportunistic or temporary thoughts fail. The values of the Gospel do not vanish, do not become “liquid”, do not disappear. This is why as the Salesian family of Don Bosco we cannot give up showing what we believe in, cannot lose our charismatic identity in responses we have to provide in the face of whatever situation.
1. **MARY of Nazareth, Mother of God, Star of Hope**

Mary, our Mother, knows well what it means to trust and hope against all hope, *trusting* in the name of God..

Her “yes” to God has awakened all hope for humankind.

She experienced helplessness and loneliness at the birth of her Son; she kept in her heart the announcement of a sorrow that would pierce her heart. (Cf. *Lk* 2:35); she experienced the suffering of seeing her Son be a “sign of contradiction”, misunderstood, rejected.

She knew of hostility and rejection directed at her Son until when at the foot of the cross on Golgotha, she understood that Hope would not die. That is why she stayed with the disciples as a mother – “Woman, here is your son” (*Jn* 19:26) – as the Mother of Hope.

“Holy Mary,

Mother of God, our Mother,

teach us to believe,

to hope and to love with you.

Show us the road to the Kingdom.

Star of the sea,

shine on us

and guide us on our journey”[[8]](#footnote-8).

Amen.

Fr Ángel Fernández Artime, S.D.B.

*Rector Major*

Rome, 2 August 2020

*Memorial of Bl Augustus Czartoryski*

1. Francis, *“Un plan para resucitar” a la Humanidad tras el coronarivus* (PDF), in *Vida Nueva Digital*, 17 April 2020, pp. 7-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Bernardo di Chiaravalle (Bernard de fontaine), *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, XXVI, 5; *PL* 183, 906. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Francis, *cit.,* p. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Ibi*., p. 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Ibi*., p. 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Ibi*., p. 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)