

Mystics with open eyes

Dearest Sisters,

For days we have been busy with the General Council in the Plenum meetings and we are discussing the many challenges that you are committed to living in the Provinces. We also gratefully share the richness of the visits and meetings we have had with you. They were certainly events of grace that help us to strengthen the communion and joy of being Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, generative of life in our time. I thank you for the care, attention, involvement, and preparation for the visits and the open and trusting welcome, the lively sense of belonging with which you received the Councilors, both the Visitors and of the Sectors and me too.

In the month of June, the liturgy invites us to celebrate Corpus Domini and the Sacred Heart. In proposing to us the infinite love of God for humanity and the joy of the centrality of Jesus in our lives, reminds us of the convinced exhortation of Mother Mazzarello, expressed over and over again, to remain united in His Heart; "I leave you in the Heart of Jesus" (L 50.4); "Let us always speak to each other in the Heart of Jesus" (L 39.2); "Every day we can find ourselves close in the Heart of Jesus" (L 42.1).

In this liturgical climate, and in continuity with the previous Circular, I would like to share with you a reflection on the style of our prayer.

In the Apostolic Letter on the liturgical formation of the people of God: *Desiderio Desideravi* of 29 June 2022, Pope Francis invites us to enter the reality of prayer, above all liturgical, a place of encounter with Christ where we too are given the possibility of a true encounter with Him (cf. *Apostolic Letter*, n. 10).

Here - says the Holy Father - lies all the powerful beauty of prayer.

This Letter intends to educate us in prayer, a central aspect of our identity as Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. Therefore, consciously making space with praise, adoration, gratitude for the Holy Spirit who prays within us is to acquire a dynamic and fruitful power that operates in the unfolding of time, keeps us in communion with Him and, through Him and in him, He strengthens fraternity and gives evangelical efficacy to the mission. And it is only in the encounter with Him that the Church can overcome the temptation of spiritual worldliness, to open herself to the Holy Spirit who inhabits and enlivens her.

The breath of life

Benedict XVI, in the homily at the opening of the Year of Faith, spoke of spiritual "desertification" to indicate a widespread void, an evident malaise of our age: a life, a world without God.

Sometimes, we too risk getting lost in a thousand interests and activities, overwhelmed by a flood of information, of images that can weaken the freedom and depth of the inner life to the point of anesthetizing with surrogates, the innate desire for the Infinite that inhabits our heart. We too could experience the difficulty of enjoying the beauty of the Christian life and of the religious vocation, of "remaining" in God's love, and of perceiving the throbs of His Fatherly heart.

In the desert of our age, we are called to discover, defend, care for, and make the seeds of life and grace grow that the Lord, always provident and great in mercy, does not leave wanting even today. We are called to reawaken the energy that makes hope fruitful. "In the contemporary world there are innumerable signs, often expressed implicitly or negatively, of the thirst for God, for the ultimate meaning of life".

And "in the desert there is a need above all for people of faith who, with their own lives, point the way to the Promised Land and thus keep hope alive. Lived faith opens the heart to the Grace of God which frees from pessimism. Today more than ever, evangelizing means bearing witness to a new life, transformed by God, and thus pointing the way" (Benedict XVI, *Homily*, 11 October 2012).

God's promise is all of our trust, "I will give water to the desert, rivers to the steppe, to quench the thirst of my people, my chosen one" (*Is* 43:20).

By grace and by vocation, we are called to collaborate with the saving action of God who transforms the desert into a place of gushing water. We are called to arouse true joy in our young people, helping them to discover the mystery of God in their life (cf. *C* 69) with the vital force of prayer and total self-giving for their good.

The "mysticism of the moment", of which some contemporary authors speak, arises precisely from the need to unify all that is human in the profound encounter with God, the Lord of life. It is living the present moment and living it in love, grasping, both individually and as a community, all the richness and prophecy it carries within itself.

It is therefore important to find moments in the day to open your heart to God and, above all, knead your daily life with prayer because prayer is the breath of the soul. The great spiritual masters teach us that without prayer one cannot live, grow or mature in following Jesus. Prayer is a dialogue of love, an encounter, a search for the infinite, contemplation of the mystery that inhabits us, before which Augustine exclaims, "You called, shouted, broke through my deafness; you flared, blazed, banished my blindness. You lavished your fragrance; I gasped, and now I pant for you. I tasted you, and I hunger and thirst. You touched me, and I burned for your peace." (St. Augustine, *Confessions* X, 27.38).

In the documents of the Church Magisterium, and in Christian and religious experience, the theme of prayer implies the relationship between perseverance and fidelity. The main perseverance that the consecrated person is invited to maintain is the imploring of the grace of fidelity (see Guidelines of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *The gift of fidelity. The joy of perseverance*, 2 February 2020, n.39).

Our life must continually be brought back to a unitary center of gravity, thanks to fidelity to prayer, which in our Constitutions is indicated as "simple, essential, capable of transforming our everyday life" (*C* 38).

A simple and essential prayer

It seems to me important to clarify the concept of simplicity so as not to associate this term, as sometimes happens, with that of naivety or excessive ingenuousness. Simplicity refers to what is essential and characterizes the spiritual life. The more complex society becomes, the more the need is felt for a return to essentiality, to simplicity.

In everyday life, we experience that it is easier to complicate than to simplify. Simplification presupposes an ascetic journey which, in evangelical, Johannine terms, we could define as 'pruning'.

To reach simplicity, one needs to prune many useless and secondary things. Simplicity is one of the virtues that characterize spiritual maturity.

Simple and essential prayer, in the meaning indicated above, makes our listening and dialogue with the Lord direct, intense, and capable of involving our whole being in faith and love. A prayerful attitude is vital for us, dedicated to the apostolic mission and committed to building community-communion. It does not alienate us from reality, because it allows us to absorb a christic energy which, in Jesus, makes our daily being and actions ever more evangelically coherent. It is here that union with God and the grace of unity have their driving center.

Our Constitutions state, "Our prayer is expressed in a single movement of love towards God and neighbor. It both requires and creates in the community that Gospel atmosphere of faith and

constant self-giving, that permeated the house of Mornese. It leads to live in the presence of God, trusting in His Fatherly love" (C 38).

The style of our prayer reflects Don Bosco's spirituality, oriented from the outset towards a horizon indicated to all as possible, that of a life lived constantly in the presence of God, in full conformation to His will.

According to Don Bosco, the spirit of prayer is faith in the presence of God. It is "remaining in the love" of Jesus, certain that He will not abandon us. With the expression "spirit of prayer" Don Bosco means an attitude of the heart turned to God, an attitude which is certainly not reduced to prayer formulas or devotional practices.

It is interesting to note how in the first version of the Constitutions of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, speaking of the spirit of prayer, Don Bosco had left what was written in the Rules of the Sisters of St. Anne, "Let them keep themselves perpetually in the presence of God". In the text printed in 1878, this adverb disappeared. Perhaps he had noticed that the sisters were unable to understand it well and, above all, to live it. In February 1877, he went to visit the community of Alassio and, after greeting the sick sisters, he asked what they suggested he should speak about. From the *Cronistoria*, we know that they replied, "We who with our continuous traffic, do not yet know how to be perpetually in the presence of God, as the Holy Rule says, almost in one voice answered: 'On being perpetually in the presence of God'." And the good Father responded, 'It would be truly beautiful if the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians were perpetually in the presence of God. But, my good daughters, we can do it like this. Renew the intention of doing everything for the greater glory of God every time one changes occupation. As you can see, it is not all that difficult to make a habit of continuous union with God" (*Cronistoria* II, 247).

Thus, he helped the sisters to understand that constant communion with God passes through rectitude of motivations, purity of love, acting for Him alone.

Mother Mazzarello wrote to the missionaries exhausted by work, often hard and tiring, "As far as you can, always preserve a spirit of union with God, remain always in His presence" (L 23.3). The "as far as you can" expresses the delicate attention of Mother Mazzarello who, with a touch of realism, helped the sisters to strive for habitual union with God, well aware of human limitations. She encouraged them to pray intensely because prayer is a source of courage, "Pray much. From prayer you will always get all the help you need to do your duties well" (L 47.9). In the meantime, she recalled the prospect of eternity, "Always remember that prayer is the key that opens the treasures of Heaven" (L 51.11). She was convinced that perseverance in prayer sustains fidelity, "Pray always. Let prayer be the weapon that you always keep at hand. It will defend you from all your enemies and will help you in all your needs" (L 66.5).

Prayer was the breath of the life of Mother Mazzarello and of the first community. Certainly, she did not speak about mystical theology. But the simplicity of her heart showed that she had experienced the Lord, therefore, nothing human about her was foreign to her. Her spirituality did not have a moralizing tone. She was aware that the desire for good and weaknesses, the desire to correspond to God's love and the fragility of the human condition dwell together in the person.

Perseverance in prayer is possible for Mother Mazzarello, as a prayer of the heart, which adapts to the rhythm of work, gives it meaning, and illuminates it as eternal. She lived the mystique of everyday life in the encounter with God, loved above all things, and with the people who were entrusted to her. Her simple and solid faith and that of our first sisters of Mornese, made the praise of God 'perennial', even in the fatigue of each day.

In them there was an ardor for life in Christ that never failed. "There must be a sacred fire in us too, which burns continuously and which nothing can put out" (Pope Francis, General Audience, 9 June 2021). It also allows us to be in His presence continuously as in Mornese, as in these 150 years of life and holiness of the Institute. It is the fire of the Spirit of Love that we ask Mary to keep in each one and in the educating communities.

In the Characteristic Traits of the Daughter of Mary Help of Christians, outlined by Don Bosco in the first Constitutions, we read that "the active and contemplative life must go hand in hand in them [the FMA], portraying Martha and Mary, the life of the Apostles and that of the Angels" (C 1885 XIII: Essential virtues proposed for the study of the Novices and for the practice of the Professed).

The "grace of unity" is the central aspect of the Salesian spirit, of the spirit of Mornese.

Contemplative and active life are not to be considered in antithetical positions, but in harmony, because only from this vital synthesis does the "patient and zealous charity" spring which is spoken of as the first characteristic virtue of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

This is also the anthropological and theological synthesis of Saint Francis de Sales: God created us in His image, in love and for love. It follows as a priority attitude to simply welcome this love and express it fully. The experience of love is the unifying principle of spiritual experience and it is also the style of our educational mission.

Prayer is nothing more than tuning into God's very heart, caring about what He cares about. It is necessary to have the antennas directed towards God and towards history at the same time. A profound understanding with God and a wise understanding of the world can give efficacy to our educational action and make us mystics with eyes open on the multiple poverties of young people and of our contemporaries.

Some essential conditions

Dear sisters, if we truly want to experience the "grace of unity" let us commit ourselves to creating some indispensable conditions. The Constitutions are clear and indicative, "In the silence of our whole being like Mary 'the listening Virgin', we will allow ourselves to be permeated by the power of the Holy Spirit who leads us gradually to put on Christ, strengthens sisterly communion, and renews apostolic zeal" (C 39). Silence is indispensable for vital prayer and for the unification of faith and life. Prepare your heart to listen; it helps to read, in the depths of ourselves, the inner movements that can hinder or favor the acceptance and incarnation of the Word. It favors a sincere comparison with the Word of God in view of an authentic conversion. It allows us to make a serene analysis of the thoughts that inhabit us and that are not always oriented towards God and inspired by His Spirit.

Another indispensable condition is faith. Jesus tells us, "Therefore I tell you, all that you ask for in prayer, believe that you will receive it and it shall be yours" (Mk 11:24).

Faith is not an experience acquired once and for all, but a dynamic process that is renewed every day and grows with our humble response to God's grace and call. There is no faith that does not arise from true listening. Listening generates obedience, according to the Latin term *ab-audire*, which means to listen, like Jesus who makes himself a total gift to the Father, "He humbled himself by becoming obedient unto death and death on a cross" (Phil 2:8).

Humility is also a prerequisite for prayer. It contains in itself the root of the same word which indicates the precariousness of those who recognize themselves as poor and needy and have no other certainty and refuge than in God Himself. Humble and tenacious faith has allowed our Saints to see true miracles.

The sacramental dimension of Salesian spirituality, founded on the Eucharist and the sacrament of Reconciliation, is fundamental in the spiritual life and in the educational mission.

"The source and culmination of our prayer is the Eucharist, the Paschal sacrifice, from which the whole life of the Church springs" (C 40). An authentic Eucharistic life transforms and renews the community, unites us, and assimilates us to Jesus to the point of becoming, like Him, bread broken for our brothers and sisters, especially for the young. He revives and sustains the family spirit; He gives us a heart capable of loving kindness, patience, and fortitude.

"The sacrament of Reconciliation is a trusting encounter with the faithfulness and mercy of the Father. It renews our participation in the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection, and reconciles us with our sisters and brothers in the Church. It helps us to peacefully accept our poverty and to

accomplish our journey towards freedom from sin" (C 41). There is no contemplative dimension without the personal and community awareness of conversion. It is a question of starting different paths of reconciliation which, while they give us peace, do not mortify others; on the contrary, they make them feel involved in the same process. If we believe in God's infinite benevolence and mercy, in His compassion for every human being, then we can experience the grace that renews and transforms our lives.

Dearest sisters, in prayer the grace of God changes us and changes our way of seeing situations and people. It helps us to look at reality with God's own eyes. Prayer and asceticism are energies necessary for self-control which makes us joyful, masters of ourselves, capable of giving hope and true friendship to those who live next to us in community (cf. C 15).

Thus, contemplatives in action, we will all be able to be "missionary communities", that is, open to the proclamation of God's love and His sign among young people, with the help of Mary "the Virgin Mother who gave our Savior to the world" (C 17).

In moments of uncertainty and difficulty, let us try to think back to the words of St. Augustine, "You made us for Yourself Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You" (St. Augustine, *Confessions* I, 1).

Today, remembering Don Bosco's name day which was celebrated on 24 June, we unite with the Salesian Family to express our best wishes to the Rector Major Fr. Ángel Fernández Artime and to live the annual Feast of Gratitude in communion. Like Don Bosco, he too guides us towards an ever more authentic willingness to discover the mystical dimension of our life, the secret of apostolic efficacy in every part of the world. We entrust Fr. Ángel to Mary Help of Christians, so that his mission may be ever more fruitful in good and that new vocations may germinate for the Church and the Salesian Family.

In this month, in which we celebrate the solemnity of the holy Apostles Peter and Paul, let us intensify our prayers for Pope Francis and invoke health and strength for him, so that he may continue to guide the Church with wisdom and love.

I greet you with affection and assure you of my prayers and those of the Sisters of the General Council, especially for the communities and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians who live in critical situations and particular difficulties. A special and grateful memory for the many young people who share with us the mission of proclaiming Jesus Way, Truth, and Life and take care of the weakest and most forgotten. Everyone has the right to be happy and to look to the future with hope.

Roma, 24 giugno 2023

Affectionately, Mother