

Where your treasure is, there also will your heart be

Dearest Sisters,

The Lenten journey towards Easter has almost come to an end. The liturgy of this period is full of pressing calls to conversion, to return to God with all our heart, and to let Him be the only Lord of our lives.

In this month of March, the Church also proposes to our attention the figure of Saint Joseph. It is beautiful to highlight how, in Mornese and Nizza, Saint Joseph was a continuous and constant presence in the daily life of the first communities. He was invoked as treasurer and protector of the house, guardian of the spiritual life, and also active collaborator in vocational discernment.

“Mother Mazzarello recommended his devotion. She wanted the prayers to Saint Joseph to have the particular purpose of obtaining from him, that the house would be liberated from any subjects not suitable for religious life, or those among the students who were not of edification to their companions. Many times, we have had occasion to note the effectiveness of these particular prayers addressed to Saint Joseph” (MACCONO F., *Saint M. Domenica Mazzarello* I, 308-309).

I invite you to treasure the many references that we find in the Cronistoria of the Institute on the active presence of Saint Joseph to invoke him with confidence and hope. We can listen and compare our life choices with his, give more depth to our spiritual life, invoke his intercession for peace, for the harmony of families and of the human family.

Don Bosco gave him to us as Patron, as an icon of "caring", a model of listening, obedience, acceptance, creative courage, so that we too could learn from him to cherish Jesus in our hearts, in the silence of our whole being, and to make him known especially to the young people who are entrusted to us and who are "the soul" of our mission.

With this desire, we continue our reflection on the formation that takes place in daily life, valuing the ordinary moments that our Constitutions indicate to us.

Meditation the breath of life

In this circular, I would like to reflect on the meaning and value of meditation, not only as a religious practice, but as a privileged experience of our spirituality.

Following Jesus means, first of all, being with Him, wanting to live in His company, far from every form of intimism, to be able to proclaim the joy of the Gospel.

In the Gospel of Mark, we read an interesting passage that touches us closely, "Then Jesus went up the mountain. He called to Himself those He wanted and they went to Him. He constituted Twelve of them. He called them apostles, to be with Him and to send them to preach with the power to drive out demons" (Mk 3: 13-15).

Before sending them as apostles, Jesus asks those He has called to Himself to become disciples, to learn with Him and from Him that we can dedicate ourselves to the service of others only by having a personal experience of a unique and all-encompassing encounter with Him.

Communion with Jesus is the profound meaning of our lives as consecrated women and of our educational mission. If we separate ourselves from Him, we are like branches cut from the vine (Jn 15:1-6), which cannot bear fruit without sap.

What Pope Benedict XVI said to the seminarians on his Apostolic Journey to Germany can also serve us as Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, "By dedicating yourself to the service of our brothers and sisters, do not fall into the temptation of not finding time to be with Him. It would be grave, indeed mortal. You would cut yourself off from your source, and you would no longer serve others. You would need it to feel alive, perhaps useful, even good" (Benedict XVI, *Address to Seminarians*, 24 September 2011).

Meditation, by its nature, consists essentially - as Saint Teresa of Avila also teaches us - in remaining heart to heart with the Lord, letting oneself be deeply grasped by the Word, so that a true encounter with Jesus may take place. He asks to become more and more part of our lives. "Here I am, at the door and knocking. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door to Me, I will come to them; I will dine with them, and they with me" (Rev 3:20). Where your treasure is, there also is your heart.

The Saints teach us that to meditate is to savor an affectionate confidence with the Lord. It means to know how to go beyond our thoughts and plans, to understand, recognize, and welcome what is pleasing to Him.

Regarding this, Pope Francis emphasizes, "Heaven grant that you may recognize what that word, that message of Jesus is which God wishes to say to the world with your life. Let yourself be transformed; let yourself be renewed by the Spirit, so that this may be possible, and thus your precious mission will not be lost" (*Gaudete et Exultate*, n. 24).

In meditation, everything we live is exposed to the fire of the Holy Spirit that illumines, purifies, and changes the heart. Meditation is therefore, "generative". In it takes place a true illuminating and transforming encounter that bears fruit in us and around us. The result is a spiritual revival, an incarnate spirituality, as incarnate as is the Word. In this experience shines the grace of unity that allows us to harmonize the various aspects of existence. A contemplative vision emerges that is born and grows from familiarity with the One who wanted us. We feel the strength to scrutinize ourselves, situations, people, reality from God's point of view.

Only in this way do we become capable of that healthy discernment that allows us to make concrete choices according to God's will and in fidelity to the charism.

How to arrive at seeing reality from the point of view of God when, like the disciples of Emmaus, sometimes our heart is weighed down by other interests?

Pope Francis points out the 'how' to us, " It is the root of their blindness: their hearts were foolish and slow. And when the heart is foolish and slow, things cannot be seen. Things appear foggy. Herein lies the wisdom of this Beatitude: in order to contemplate it, we need to enter within ourselves and make room for God, because, as St. Augustine says, 'God is more intimate to me than I am to myself.'" (General Audience, 1 April 2020).

In personal and community meditation and prayer, we grow as apostles and disciples of Jesus. We are formed at this school in love and action for the Kingdom of God, in fraternal communion so that young people may truly encounter the Lord.

In the silence of our whole being

Article 39 of our *Constitutions* emphasizes meditation as a strong, indispensable moment of inner dialogue with God:

“Each of us will attend to it
with special diligence.
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.”

And our *Regulations* reaffirm the importance that each community in planning, also agree on the modalities of daily prayer with their respective schedules, so that they are compatible with the needs of the mission. One of the strong points of our spirituality is meditation (cf. 25).

Jesus "knows" Himself in love, that is why Mother Mazzarello also invites us to remain in the silence of our heart. She insistently suggests cultivating prayer made from the heart and in the heart of Jesus. To those who had difficulty in speaking with the Lord, she said, "Perhaps, speak your dialect, for the Lord understands you." What matters in prayer, in meditation, is to create a personal relationship with the Lord, a dialogue of love. For this, Mother Mazzarello recommended to them to speak to God with familiarity, as one speaks to a friend, to a family member, and exhorted them to express what is spontaneously born from their heart.

Even in her letters, we find references to the "biblical heart", to that interiority from which alone an authentic meditative attitude can be born. Mary Domenica often reminded them, "*Pray always from the depth of your heart*" (Letters 29, 47, and 51), "*love the Lord with your whole heart*" (Letter 23); "*work from your heart*" (Letter 22), and above all, "*in the Heart of Jesus*".

In the normality of her life as a teenager and a young woman, Main matured in the interiority and industriousness of an intense but not dispersive apostolate. Through the mediation of Fr. Pestarino and the teachings of Frassinetti, she drew from the source of the most authentic spirituality of her time and learned "the art of meditation"

Along the itinerary of her prayer, the gaze from the window of the Valponasca becomes a prayer of simple gaze, that is, intense and continuous contemplation, enriched by the experience of a life, which has also become Eucharistic.

This contemplative gaze penetrates the whole reality, especially the complex human reality, the people entrusted to her educative and maternal care, and becomes a capacity for discernment. It is the spirit of prayer typical of Salesian spirituality that, according to the Founder, consists in living in the presence of God in the simplicity and also in the fatigue of everyday life (cf. M. E. Posada, *Becoming prayerful. Itinerary of prayer of Mary Domenica Mazzarello*, in 'Quaderni di spiritualità salesiana 1', Nuova serie1, Roma, 2003, 71-79).

Meditation in Don Bosco

Don Bosco took to heart good publications and wrote many works, but we do not find in his numerous productions specific texts on meditation. It is possible, however, to trace in some of his published and unpublished writings and in the indications offered to the Salesians, some constants that allow us to understand his thought.

In the handwritten notes of Don Bosco used in the spiritual exercises of Trofarello (1866), the first of the nascent Congregation, we read, "Meditation. Shorter or longer, make it always." "All those who gave themselves to the service of the Lord constantly made use of mental, vocal, ejaculatory prayer."

For Don Bosco, prayer represents the nourishment that strengthens the life of a religious. He writes in the introduction to the Constitutions, "Therefore, as long as we are zealous in the observance of the practices of piety, our heart will be in good harmony with all and we will see the Salesian cheerful, happy with his vocation." "Let us give the maximum solicitude to never neglect meditation, spiritual

reading, the daily visit to the Blessed Sacrament, confession, the rosary of the Holy Virgin, the little abstinence on Friday. Although each of these practices taken separately does not seem like much, nevertheless, it effectively contributes to the great edifice of our perfection and salvation.”

In 1882, the cleric Ducatto transcribed an instruction that Don Bosco had given during the spiritual exercises of that year. We read, "My dear brothers, meditation is a practice of piety I will not only say is important, not only useful, not only very useful, but I am going to say necessary for us religious." (References taken from: *The practice of meditation in the prayer of the Salesians of Don Bosco. Proceedings of the Seminar on Salesian Meditation*. San Callisto - Rome, 10-12 May 2018 by Giuseppe Buccellato SDB, Rome 2021).

Dearest Sisters, this circular also stems from the concern aroused in me and in the General Council by the reports of the Canonical Visitations of the Visiting Counselors or, at times, by meeting with the Provincials themselves. They highlight, with some concern, the fact that in some communities meditation is no longer done because they do not have time. The apostolic work is pressing, and the appropriate modalities are not found, so that it is easier to eliminate it from their prayer.

I ask myself how we can agree to make our day empty from the start. Perhaps, more than lacking time, we do not find valid motivations and, as if this were normal, we neglect a fundamental aspect of our Salesian consecrated life indicated by our Founders and Constitutions (cf. art. 39). I am convinced that we should reserve the best time of our day for God; and is this not perhaps the time of the Eucharist, of meditation, and of personal and community prayer?

Are we losing our enchantment with Jesus? What do we put in place of the daily encounter with Him? How can we teach young people the art of meditation if we neglect it ourselves? Do we ask ourselves why, as it happens sometimes, that young people, after growing up with us, are looking for other Religious Families or Spiritual Movements to have a profound experience of the Word of God and meditation? Let us try to give ourselves an answer that would be good to share as a community, also as a gift in preparation for the World Feast of Gratitude that we will celebrate in Mozambique on 26 April.

I end by wishing that in all of us the joy of the Resurrection may shine to be "light" that illuminates the present and any place and situation in which we find ourselves. Only the Light of the Risen One can open hope to the entire human family that urgently needs it today.

I joyfully communicate that on Sunday, 28 April, the diocesan phase of the Beatification and Canonization of the Servant of God Sister Antonietta Böhm (1907-2008) will close. Let us thank the Lord who does not let our Institute, the Salesian Family, and the Church lack fruits of holiness. We continue to deepen and invoke the intercession of Laura Vicuña and the FMA on their way to the honors of the altars. They can inspire and encourage us in the daily exercise of knowing how to combine action and contemplation.

Best wishes for a holy Easter to each one of you, to your families, to the educating communities, to the Salesian Family, to the young people who are so dear to us.

A special greeting to the Rector Major of the Salesians, Cardinal Ángel Fernández Artime, whom we accompany with our prayers for his Episcopal Ordination to be held on 20 April.

We continue to invoke the gift of peace throughout the world and support with our prayers and offerings the communities sorely tried by war, violence, injustice, and poverty.

To Mary, Mother of the Risen One, we entrust all people, especially the children, young people, and families living in situations of hardship and waiting for a better and more serene future. May all enjoy the fullness and joy of Easter.

Rome, 24 March 2024

Affectionately, Mother