

In the 150th of the Institute: “let us not forget the grace of the origins”

Dearest Sisters,

It is a joy to be able to reach you in this month which is particularly rich in significant and important celebrations for the Salesian Family and for us. The 40th edition of the Salesian Family Spirituality Days has just ended, centered on the figure of Saint Francis de Sales. In the homily of the Eucharistic celebration, in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians in Turin, the Rector Major Fr. Ángel Fernández Artime, commenting on the Gospel, stressed that every community is Cana of Galilee in which what happened between Mary and her Son is remembered. In Nazareth Mary waits for events; at Cana she intervenes with her Son and waits for Him to do His work.

Like Her, we too learn to let God decide. Saint Francis de Sales is a great example of this trusting faith, because he makes trusting in God and His goodness an attitude of life, as he well expresses in his affirmation, "Any answer will be my good".

Providentially, the Strenna offers us the opportunity to deepen the fundamental aspects of Salesian spirituality at their origins, generating harmony with the journey towards the 150th anniversary of the foundation of the Institute.

"Let us go forward with a big and generous heart" (L 47,12)

I would like to share with you the reflection we are having with the sisters of the General Council in preparation for the official celebration of the 150th anniversary of the foundation of the Institute, also prompted by your questions. To remember the path we are following, I would like to recall Circular no. 989 in which Mother Yvonne and the General Council invited the Institute to live a three-year period in preparation for the celebration of this great event.

The proposal had three stages:

2019-2020 *Giving thanks*: "Let us really thank the Lord who gives us so many graces"
(L 37.10).

2020-2021 *Accepting a mandate*: "I entrust them to you".

2021-2022 *Planning the future with daring*: "Courage! Let us go forward with a big and generous heart" (L 47,12).

The intent was and remains to involve educating communities, especially young women and young people, in rediscovering Mary Domenica Mazzarello in her identity as a young woman and in the prophetic dimensions of her spirituality and mission. This will help us to celebrate together the generative force of Don Bosco's charism, lived in a creative and ingenious way in Mornese and Nizza Monferrato, by La Madre and the first communities, together with the young women and lay collaborators.

On 5 August 2019, however, when the three-year proposal was launched, no one could imagine that in a few months a pandemic, that of Covid-19, would have upset and tested the life of all humanity and globally provoked the need to reorganize and rethink society, work, school, personal life, and relationships in all aspects.

In this situation, which still surprises and persists, we are called to accept the challenges of contemporaneity in order *to boldly plan the future* and, in this context, to experience the 150th anniversary as an opportunity for renewal and vocational and missionary revitalization. Our strength is in the certainty of the presence of Mary Help of Christians in our history and in our daily life, in the commitment to be a sign of anticipating love in the world and in the Church, 'helpers' of life, guardians of joy and hope.

And our strength is in the words of Mother Mazzarello: "Courage! Let us go forward with a big and generous heart" (L 47,12).

In his visit to the Chapter members on 22 October 2021, Pope Francis gave us this invitation, "Do not forget the grace of the origins, the humility and smallness of the beginnings that made God's action transparent in the life and message of how many, filled with astonishment, began this journey." The Pope's invitation is a call to live these few months that prepare us for August 5 as a special time of grace.

Mother Mazzarello with her simplicity and depth would tell us, "Now is the time to rekindle the fire" (L 27,8).

The fire of belonging to the Lord and of the call to Salesian life, the fire of the charismatic passion which makes us *generative communities* in the service of the young and the poor, has made possible the expansion of our Institute throughout the world, so much so as to give reason to Don Bosco who said to the first FMA, "... You are few and without means and not supported by human approval. Let nothing disturb you. Things will change soon and you will have so many boarders that you no longer will know where to put them; and not only boarders, but also many postulants that you will have difficulty to choose them. Yes, I can assure you that the Institute will have a great future if you keep yourselves simple, poor, and mortified" (*Cronistoria* I 305-306).

It is a prophecy that still belongs to us and that needs to be enlivened by faith and trust in Providence, as well as in the word of Don Bosco.

We are supported in this by the grace of the XXIV General Chapter which, in the simplicity of everyday life and in the midst of the difficulties in which the FMA communities in the world live, opens us to the future with hope, reviving the joy and fidelity of our vocation. We have the certainty of being in God's hands, of being in His plan, and of being called to guide young people to discover their vocation, so that they offer their specific contribution to the Church and to society.

"The Institute will have a great future if you keep yourselves simple, poor, and mortified"

On the 50th and 100th anniversary of the foundation of the Institute, our sisters were able to express the feast with great and solemn celebrations, which saw the joyful presence of multitudes of people in the sacred places of Mornese, Nizza Monferrato, Turin. Now the current world conditions are not propitious to these modalities, but they offer us other no less effective ones to involve our people in gratitude for so many gifts of grace received in these 150 years. We, as consecrated women and educators, daughters of dreamers, have the vital task of knowing how to understand the change in the era that is taking place and being protagonists together with the educating communities.

Precisely this today, difficult, complex, and insecure, strongly recalls us to the essentiality and moderation of life and, at the same time, to the courage of an ever more joyful radicalism founded in Jesus: Word and Bread.

The sharing of the experience of the XXIV General Chapter, of which positive echoes come from the various Provinces, moves us to make priority choices to be declined in the various contexts, to re-appropriate the prophecy of presence, assumed by Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello and delivered to us with the Salesian charism. *Presence* that, for the Institute, in this historical moment, is *solid on-going formation, missionary synodality, listening to the cry of the poor and of the earth from the point of view of integral ecology*.

It is important to internalize and take on in daily practice, the contents and indications that the Acts of GC XXIV offer us, as a fundamental step in the path of personal and community conversion that leads us to next August 5, to then go further with our gaze to the future. It will be to make our faces and houses shine with beauty and freshness, to intensify a sincere, cordial, collaborative fraternity; to color our mission with genuineness and pleasantness; becoming more and more attractive signs of a Love that generates and regenerates. It will be to hear and welcome again the voice of Mother Mazzarello, her invitation to the sisters of that time, and to us today, to the evangelical splendor of the essential, to the purity of love.

We all have in our hearts her invitation and encouragement to remove "with a true and resolute will" what can obscure, suffocate the originality of the grace that is in each of us; to shake the ashes so that the flame shines brightly; to remove from the 'garden' of the heart that which suffocates it, so that it may be free in charity; to throw the ballast of worldliness out of the house to make room for the 'world'; to divest what is not needed for our salvation and that of others, and to truly clothe ourselves in the Spirit of Christ.

This essentiality enables us to prophesy the *presence* within each 'today'.

I encourage you to value with more awareness the moments of ordinary formation such as the community encounter, the good night, the monthly retreats, the private conversation to deepen Salesian spirituality and reread the past as the root of the present that illuminates the future, a future that is already started. We can draw from the Institute Site, the FMA Study Center, and the charismatic Sources that each community has at its disposal in abundance.

I invite every Province and community on 5 August 2022, or at another time that the Province deems appropriate based on the calendar of their country, to make *a special celebration to renew the "yes" of fidelity to the Covenant of love with God*, as a sign of communion of the whole Institute, and of witness for young people and educating communities.

It will be a new outpouring of grace and joy that can infect other young people, also awakening in them the sensitivity to the charm of Jesus who calls them to give fullness to their life (cf. *Christus vivit*, nos. 248-277).

I thank you for your collaboration in preparing at the Provincial level the *International Conference* organized by the Pontifical Faculty of Educational Sciences *Auxilium*, and promoted by the General Council, which will be held in Rome (25-30 September 2022) on the theme: *Contribution of the FMA to education (1872-2022). Paths, challenges and perspectives*.

It will be a significant opportunity for all to revitalize the joy and awareness of the relevance of the educational charism of Don Bosco and Mary Domenica Mazzarello as a response to the search for meaning and hope of many young people in the five Continents.

It is nice to note that the Jubilee Year of the 150th anniversary of the foundation of the Institute is already arousing in all of you, in the educating communities, and in the Provinces so much

creativity in initiatives, celebrations, and encounters. I urge you, within the limits of local possibilities, to carry out *community experiences of coexistence with young people*, making the most of this opportunity to be together, listen to them, share, pray, and possibly find the most appropriate way to make Mother Mazzarello known.

It is important and vital for the present and for the future of the Institute to strengthen at all levels and in all environments in which we are present, *the welcoming capacity for young people*, so that they feel that the Institute is 'home' for them, that we are ready to walk together in building a world of universal fraternity, and in following a path of global ecological conversion.

Not being able to organize events at the level of the whole Institute, if not online, I invite you to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the Institute in your realities with joy and solemnity. For this reason, I encourage you, in opportune and possible ways, to foresee a *youth celebration*, at the level of the communities or of the Province, involving young people as much as possible, so that they feel that they can be protagonists in giving a young face to the charism today.

I thank each of you and the educating communities for who you are, for what you give with commitment and responsibility, and I ask you the favor of sending the documentation of the various initiatives that love and missionary creativity will devise, to the Secretary General and to the Institute Website.

The development of GC XXIV, miraculously made possible, demonstrates what we care most about: the particular presence of Mary in our Institute and her powerful help.

It was also evident for all to experience the truth of verse 2.1 of the Gospel of John, "*the Mother of Jesus was there*" and its echo in the Constitutions, "*Mary is actively present in our life and in the history of the Institute*" (cf. C 44).

We feel accompanied, preceded, guided by Her. We are an Institute that belongs entirely to Mary, therefore "courage", Mother Mazzarello would say, daring and prayer. Let us go forward with enthusiasm on the path that the Spirit will suggest to us, with a free and open heart to accept His solicitations, with an attentive eye to recognize, with compassion and tenderness, the needs and urgencies of a world in constant suffered change, alongside young people, the most exposed and delicate part of society, but always the favorite.

Happy feast of Don Bosco to you and to the educating communities. May the Lord fill us with His grace, grant us farsightedness, new courage, and bless us.

I greet you with affection.

Rome, 24 January 2022

Affectionately, Mother