

## **With Mary, daughters and mothers**

Dearest Sisters,

With joy and affection, I unite myself to all of you in giving thanks to God for the numerous gifts that He continually pours out in our life, in the Institute, in the Church, in history.

It is beautiful to celebrate the *Feast of Gratitude* and recall that it flowed from the simplicity of the Salesian and Mornese experience. For us, it is a very meaningful time at the charismatic level, which gives continuity and expression to that spirit of family and of gratitude so characteristic at Valdocco and at Mornese.

This year, the Feast is inserted in the especially festive and involving climate of the celebration of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of the Institute and it unites us in the desire to go ahead with a great and generous heart (cf. *L* 47:12) as Mother Mazzarello asks of us.

It would almost seem a contradiction to celebrate in such a difficult world context marked by many political and social challenges, war, and violence. But it is precisely in this situation that we are called to give greater visibility to the joy and beauty of our vocation in order to be ever more effectively, a "response of salvation to the deep expectations of young people" (C 1). Thus, we participate in solidarity, in the pain and hopes of humanity that seeks peace and better conditions of life.

I thank the Vicar General, Sr. María del Rosario García Ribas, for having communicated to the Institute, the proposal of the Piedmont Province "Mary Help of Christians" (IPI), giving precious and useful indications to accomplish the journey with deep gratitude to the Lord who continually makes Himself present in ever new ways in our Religious Family.

A special thank you to the Piedmont Province for the preparation of the Feast that puts at the center the presence of Mary, inspirer of the Institute, Mother and Teacher, Helper who always accompanies us. We are invited to accomplish a spiritual and historical itinerary on our 'holy ground'. Turin, Mornese, Nizza are the places that bring us back to an experience that has seen from the origins and along the years, the direct and active intervention of Mary.

### **Mary, Mother and true Superior of the Institute**

Don Bosco himself recounts that about ten years before the foundation of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, he had dreamed that he was in Piazza Vittorio in Turin, among a large number of noisy girls who asked him for help. Naturally, he had shielded himself from them. But then he saw a noble Woman with a radiant face who said to him, "Take care of them, they are my daughters!".

The description of that dream is interesting. A noble woman appears whose face is radiant with light. Mary always reveals herself to be majestic and solemn, with beautiful features and a splendid

appearance. She is a tender and strong Mother, a vigorous and energetic presence, as she is described in the dream at nine years and as we admire her in the painting of the artist Tommaso Lorenzone in the Basilica of Turin. It is Mary who indicates to Don Bosco the journey to found the Institute, inspires him with concrete ways, and guides him through the paths of Mornese to the meeting with Main and the Daughters of the Immaculate, as she had guided him at the beginning of the foundation of the Oratory through the difficulties, adventures, sufferings faced for love of the young.

Almost simultaneously with Don Bosco's dream, Mary Domenica in Mornese, Borgo Alto, has a vision. She seemed to see a large block of buildings in front of her with all the outward appearance of a boarding school with numerous girls ... And she heard a voice, "I entrust them to you!" The *Cronistoria* affirms that "Mary quickly moved away from there and tried not to think about it. However, those young girls were always there, almost as though calling to her, especially whenever she had to cross over that hill." (*Cronistoria* I, 96).

"I entrust them to you!" It was a voice that she never forgot! In the hundred and fiftieth year of the foundation of the Institute, it is significant to listen to the call that still today resounds in each one of us to take care of every girl and boy entrusted to us.

The presence of Mary in the formative itinerary of Don Bosco and of Mother Mazzarello becomes a very strong point of spiritual encounter.

Each Founder expresses in the name attributed to the Congregation begun, the synthesis of the charismatic vision, the plan, the inspiration. The name already evokes the aspects of the identity with which an Institute is characterized in the Church.

On 5 August 1872, Don Bosco gives the name to his female religious Family that must belong totally to Mary. He encourages and supports the newly Professed. He opens to them a missionary vision in which difficulties and the cross will not be lacking, but he assures them that the Institute will have a great future if they practice the virtues of simplicity, poverty, and mortification. In concluding, he declares, "Have as your glory your title of *Daughters of Mary Help of Christians* and often think that your Institute must be the living monument of Don Bosco's gratitude to the Great Mother of God, invoked under the title of Help of Christians" (*Cronistoria* I, 306).

Two particular aspects are contained in the name *Daughters of Mary Help of Christians*: the filial relationship with Mary and the mission of consecrated women in the Church and in the world. In the relationship with Mary, the Daughter of Mary Help of Christians, living as Her daughter, learns her motherhood, learns to generate, to be, like Her, a 'helper', especially among young people (cf. C 4). Like Mary in Cana, she is helper and mediator, but she is also a missionary because she places them in direct contact with Jesus who fills life with joy.

In the life of Mother Mazzarello and of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, the spiritual itinerary has its driving force in Jesus, the living center of faith. Mary always guides to Jesus and the mission of the FMA is precisely that of guiding young women and men to meet Him. In fact, she favors the realization of an authentic formative work because she helps to open the heart to the Gospel and supports the generosity of commitment on the journey of holiness and in the mission.

Don Bosco sees in Mary the founder and inspirer of his work. At the beginning of the FMA Institute, in the face of the fear and perplexity of Mary Domenica Mazzarello who would like to refuse to be the Superior of the first community, Don Bosco replies that she will simply be the 'vicar' and that Mary will be the true Superior because she is the Mother (cf. C 114). The vicar is called to make Her presence, action, and motherhood visible. This awareness is not only for Mother Mazzarello a source of peace, serenity, and security, but it is also an appeal to go to Mary's school to find the ways of the heart to reach every Sister and every young person and accompany them with discretion and

concern towards integral maturity. The gesture of placing the house keys at the foot of the statue of Mary Help of Christians every evening is a concrete expression of total trust in Her help.

### **The value of presence**

In Don Bosco's life, Mary is Mother, she is Mom, and as such, she is always present. She illuminates and directs his life and his choices since childhood. She accompanies his vocational path with her tender protection. In Don Bosco, the certainty of maternal mediation in the work of youth education is strong. He is convinced of how constructive and interiorly healing it is for young people to find or rediscover a Mother in Mary. It means having the experience of being welcomed, of a love that nourishes, protects, defends, and lays the foundations of trust in oneself and in others.

For Don Bosco, the presence of Mary is transformed into total surrender to her, so much so that he affirms several times, and especially in the last period of his life, "It is She who has done everything!"

Even in the first community of Mornese, Mary is felt as a living presence, inseparable from that of Jesus. Certain of this presence, Sr. Mary Domenica in her educational work, undertakes to reflect in herself some aspects of Mary's motherhood in harmony with the Preventive System.

The condition for which Mary can be 'at home' in the community is that all her daughters live in fraternal charity, making sure that Jesus can stay willingly among them (cf. L 49,3). She is certain that Mary Help of Christians protects her daughters, so she does not doubt Her maternal presence in every situation. What she recommends to the missionaries is an undisputed certainty for her, "Have great confidence in Our Lady; She will help you in everything" (L 23: 3).

During the XXIV General Chapter, the Assembly questioned itself a lot about the quality of its presence in the contexts in which it lives and works, in this contemporaneity that belongs to us. The prayerful comparison took place with the passage from the Gospel of Jn 2: 1-12, Mary is present at Cana and precisely because of her 'being there' she sees, foresees, and provides. She is a sign of God's prevenient style and is a model for us of maternal solicitude in the realization of the Preventive System among young people (cf. C 7).

Today we experience how competent and passionate dedication to integral education is the priority and most urgent way to go, in a time like ours in which the pandemic, precariousness, uncertainty towards the future cause heavy repercussions on the very motivations of people and generate new forms of discomfort that challenge our mission.

As an educating community, it is urgent to take preventive care in the pedagogical perspective of the Preventive System. It has within itself a humanizing force, based on respect for the dignity of the person and their rhythms of growth, and on the intention to offer them paths of maturation and happiness (cf. C 66). In the Salesian Family, attention to the education of young people stimulates creativity and allows them to find new answers to situations that seem to have no way out. This commits us to be courageous and capable of resilience. Mary teaches us, as in Valdocco and Mornese, that presence is availability for "I will go" (cf. C 32 and Acts GC XXIV, n. 7).

I end by recalling a significant event of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of the Institute. On 23 May 1872, occurred the transfer of the first group of young women who already lived with Mary Domenica Mazzarello in the "House of the Immaculate" to the Borgo Alto School, where Main had the vision and heard the prophetic voice: "I entrust them to you!" The circumstance is described by the Cronistoria as "providential", because it occurred on the eve of the feast of Mary Help of Christians. Mother had prepared the house for her daughters! (cf. *Cronistoria* I, 282-286).

In addition, I would like to inform you that in the months of May, June, and July, some modules will be sent to you that will be used for the preparation for the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of the Institute, and an outline for the celebration of a **new 'Yes' on 5 August**. Each Province and community is free to avail itself of this help or not.

I once again thank each one of you, each community, the laity, the young people, each group of the Salesian Family for the precious contribution that makes the charism flourish throughout the world. I address a special thanks to the elderly or sick sisters for their generous and fruitful support for the vitality of the Institute.

I also wish to reach out, with a special greeting and the assurance of prayer, to communities living in situations of war, violence, poverty, difficulties, and those who are engaging with great generosity in welcoming migrants and refugees. We continue to implore peace for Ukraine and for the various Countries affected by violence.

To all of you, may you feel the comfort and consolation of the presence of Mary, certain that what Don Bosco said becomes a reality in each of our communities. "I want to tell you that Our Lady is really here, among you! Our Lady walks in this house and covers it with Her mantle." (*Cronistoria* V, 52).

I greet you affectionately also in the name of the Council Sisters present and those who are away and I wish you every good in the coming month of Mary.

Rome, 24 April 2022

Affectionately, Mother