

“If you want to become holy, hurry up, there is no time to lose.”  
(L 47,10)

Dearest Sisters,

I come to you from Mornese where, with the Sisters of the Council, we are living in the Spiritual Exercises in the places of our origins. Pausing here is always a return home to discover again our identity and our charismatic roots. Precisely here, in the company of Mother Mazzarello, I re-read and contemplate with a joyful heart and infinite gratitude, the riches of the charism that blossomed in the entire world and I ask myself what is the secret of so much fruitfulness.

Continuing our itinerary towards 5 August, solemn date of the 150<sup>th</sup> celebration of the foundation of our Institute, I seem to hear the serene and decisive voice of Mother Mazzarello, “Courage! Become a real saint, but one of those saints who is really humble, cheerful with everyone, full of charity...” (L 26, 10).

### **An ordinary holiness**

In the Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et exsultate*, Pope Francis proposes holiness to Christians as a gift of God to live in everyday life, to dispel the prejudices that usually place it in exceptional events or for people out of the ordinary. He presents it to us as an accessible, beautiful, even if demanding way, without however being seen as very far away or marked by impossible asceticism, by great suffering. Rather, it is doable by ordinary people who every day responsibly accept the challenge of fidelity to the commitment of their own life. This idea of holiness excludes everything that is inhuman, that limits life, that hurts it, impoverishes it, makes it empty. Instead, it values and exalts everything that humanizes the person, that makes them authentic and good. It is the holiness gift of God, which is incarnated in history and expressed in the simple life of humanity.

In Salesian Spirituality, holiness is felt as a common vocation, a call for everyone, shared in a special way with the young.

In the Acts of GC XXIV, at no. 15, we read that Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello were vigilant so that in the house one could breathe the *air of God and of family*, conditions for a journey of human maturation and of holiness. In Article 5 of the Constitutions, we affirm that we want to live for the glory of God by our service for the evangelization of young people, walking with them on the path to holiness.

At the request of Dominic Savio who wanted to become a saint, Don Bosco responds with the simple formula, “joy, study, piety”. That which disturbs and takes away peace is not pleasing to the Lord. Be attentive at school, commitment to study and to prayer. Do good to others, always help your companions. This is holiness!

Fr. John Cagliero stated that Don Bosco externally revealed an ordinary appearance in important actions and in the simplest ones. His life seemed like that of any priest. He acted with the same naturalness in all situations and showed a good-natured attitude that revealed something of the old

temperament of the peasant, tied to his origins. Externally, he did not have the aspect of a 'saint'. Even the apparent 'disorder' that reigned in his houses, above all at the beginning of the works, did not testify in favor of his holiness. However, it is true that the works were born in disorder, but ended in order, because as he himself said, God's works are ordinarily accomplished little by little.

Fr. Michael Rua affirms that what was evident in Don Bosco was his continuous union with God. Therefore, it was much more useful for him to observe him, even in the smallest actions, rather than reading and meditating treatises on ascetics.

The observation that various young people after having met Don Bosco, set out on the path of holiness, which was not without heroism, tells us how effective, contagious, and fascinating his holiness was. Don Bosco's resourcefulness, creative imagination, courage can be emphasized but such evident qualities can never be isolated from the interior richness, supported by a rigorous asceticism, by a profound sense of faith, and continuous donation to God and to young people. When in 1884, he sent a circular letter to the FMA urging them to faithfully live the commitments of their consecration to the Lord and to the young, he called them, with witty and refined realism, to the commitment of following Christ without half measures:

“And then, my dear Daughters, do you expect to go to Heaven in a carriage? You have become religious not to enjoy yourselves, but to suffer and gain merits for the next life. You have not consecrated yourselves to God in order to command others, but to obey; not to attach yourselves to creatures, but to practice charity towards your neighbor for the love of God; not to lead a life of comfort, but to be poor with Jesus Christ, suffer with Jesus Christ on earth to become worthy of His glory in Heaven”.

The testimony of St. Mary Domenica Mazzarello also reminds us that holiness has the face of everyday life, therefore it is possible to live it and to make it shine in our life, in our communities. She knows well that one is not born a saint. She experiences it in her nature as a decisive and determined woman, accustomed to walking totally oriented towards God, but also very human in experiencing her frailties and her limitations. Mother Mazzarello knows from personal experience that we become saints by corresponding to the grace of God who works in us, by praying, listening to reality, to the people whom the Lord places beside us.

Holiness is a call to take seriously because time passes quickly. “Courage, my good sisters. I want you to be cheerful and to become holy and rich in merits soon, because death is like a thief” (L 23, 7). “Seek to become holy quickly and to kill self-love and your own will” (L 47,11). “Yes, this is what I really wanted to tell you, my good Sisters. Take courage, take care of your health, and become holy, both yourselves and all those good girls to whom I ask you to give many, many greetings for me” (L 52, 4). Holiness passes through the direct way of fidelity to the Rule: “Listen everyone! What I recommend most of all is that you all be exact in the observance of the Holy Rule. You already know that this is enough to make us holy” (L 27, 9).

As can be seen, often is the call to holiness; for Mother Mazzarello it becomes a natural connection to eternity. The time that passes quickly seems to shorten the distance between the temporal dimension of ordinary everyday life and the 'forever' of eternity, where we will no longer suffer from human frailty, but will live free and happy in Christ.

On her journey of holiness, Mother Mazzarello cultivated great trust and strong faith in God. She allows herself to be transformed by the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist and recognizes His face in that of the poor, of the students, of the sisters, involving everyone in the same journey of holiness more by her example than with works and words. In the community animated by her, the climate of welcome and candid humanity of relationships is harmonized with the simple and profound faith in the presence of God. All this creates a particular environment. Don Bosco himself, in one of his letters written from Mornese, highlights this spiritual atmosphere, “Here you can enjoy very cool air, although there is a lot of warmth of the love of God”.

A fruit of the 'spirit of Mornese' lived by the first missionaries in America is Laura Vicuña, who, distant in time and space from Dominic Savio, makes her First Communion with the same fervor and the same promises he chose.

Laura lived the commandment of love to the point of giving her life, accomplishing an extraordinary spiritual journey in a very short time. Admirably docile to God's grace and to the wise educational work of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and of the Salesians in the small school of Junín de los Andes, lost in the Argentine pampas, she fulfilled the appeal of Don Bosco to the young, "Courage therefore, my dears, give yourself up quickly to virtue and I assure you that you will always have a happy and content heart, and you will know how sweet it is to serve the Lord" (*Giovane Provveduto*, 13).

### **Holiness as a priority commitment**

By consulting the Appendix to the Constitutions, I found some important and vital lines that I would like to share with you, because they seem to me in harmony with our reflection. On the occasion of the centenary of the foundation of our Institute, St. Paul VI, addressing the FMA present at the special audience on 15 July 1972, posed two pressing questions: "Will your Congregation know how to respond to the call of the Church during these troubled times?" ... What are the means by which the original vitality of the vigorous seed planted by your holy Founders may continue to flower in all its fulness?" (*Appendix 476*).

And he responded that there was no other means than, holiness, assured by the primacy of the interior life, and proposed to contemplate and live, "the adoring and operative love of Mary Help of Christians."

According to St. Paul VI, holiness explains the extraordinary fecundity of the past and insures its vitality for the future.

In the audience that St. John Paul II afforded to the FMA participants at GC XXI, on 8 November 2002, he affirmed, "Holiness constitutes your essential and priority task, dear Salesians. It is the best contribution you can give to the new evangelization, and also the guarantee of a service that is truly evangelical in favor of the neediest...Such an urgent mission requires ongoing personal and community conversion. Only hearts that are totally open to the action of grace are able to interpret the signs of the times and to recognize the appeals of humanity in need of justice and peace."

Re-reading the discourse of Pope Francis in the encounter with the participants at GC XXIV in the Generalate on 22 October 2021, I would like to underline the recommendations he left us as Institute. Commenting on the objective of the General Chapter, *Re-awaken the original freshness of the vocational fruitfulness of the Institute*, he highlighted the importance of believing that the actual situation can help us to transform today into a Kairos, a favorable time to go to the charismatic roots, to aim at the essential, re-discovering the beauty of consecrated life, its charge of holiness which becomes a witness, and living the present without being fearful of the future.

Following the footsteps of Don Bosco and of Mother Mary Mazzarello means understanding and living at any cost, the reality of 'grace', a gift of God that was the first and most important concern of our Founders. Thus, they possessed the supernatural sense of hope and of joy that leads to a healthy and constructive optimism in spite of the difficulties of life and they sought to help even the young people to strive for holiness.

### **A holiness that shines beyond time**

Let us live this 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of the Institute as a time of gratitude; a time to recognize that we are really living as Church, a fruitful season because in faith we recognize the Providence of God that accompanies us and the active and foreseeing presence of Mary Help of Christians. In our hearts, we have a certainty that gives strength and joy for the journey, "Hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Rm 5: 5).

Each of us is called each day to cultivate and renew this certainty, personally and as community, so that it may become a daily experience that radiates and contagions.

We cannot forget that our hope is also based on the experience of many sisters who lived intensely, worked with missionary passion, enriched with their fidelity the charismatic patrimony of the Institute, and are now immersed in the joy of the Easter of Jesus, who continue to support us with their intercession and their help.

Faith in the mystery of the mystical Body of the Church urges us to renew our trust and communion with all the FMA who have preceded us into Heaven.

To them, who live the fullness of joy and of holiness, especially those whose Causes for Beatification have already begun, to those who are already Blessed, we can implore with greater assurance and constancy. We can commit ourselves to make them better known, to invite others to turn to them in their intercessions, to make them work even in Heaven!

Article 60 of our Constitutions reminds us of a great truth:

“The communion that has united us in life continues and is strengthened when we reach the moment of passing from this life into the Father’s house. Let the remembrance and gratitude we owe to those Sisters with whom we have shared the demands and the joys of our vocation, the toil and the hopes of daily living, encourage us to offer for them the prescribed suffrages and those suggested by charity and to live more generously the giving of ourselves to God.”

Our Sisters continue to fully live their holiness, mysteriously collaborating, but with efficacy, in our mission and in the life of our Educating Communities. Miracles happen and are performed where there is limpid faith, humble and incessant invocation, also offered as a community prayer, for those who suffer and know they can trust in God alone.

Miracles happen and we can ask for them with the audacity and abandonment of those who demand nothing for themselves or for their own interest, but give others their constant prayer, so that God's will may be done.

For this reason, even the suffrages prescribed by the Constitutions are a sign of our real commitment of affection, gratitude, and communion with the sisters who have reached the House of the Father, an expression of our belonging to a much wider community than the contingent one.

Deepening the reflection on these aspects can also help us to fully appreciate our vocation as consecrated women, who with their own testimony of life are “a sign of the eternal values already present in this world” (C 8).

To Mary, Mother and inspirer of the Institute, I entrust the priority commitment to walk on the path of holiness with the laity, the young people, the families, the Salesian Family, and with every person the Lord entrusts to us.

I greet you affectionately also in the name of the Sisters of the Council, and I invoke on you the blessing of Mary Help of Christians and of Mother Mazzarello.

Rome, 24 June 2022

Affectionately, Mother