

The spiritual exercises and the monthly retreat for a relaunch on the path of holiness

Dearest Sisters,

I would like to thank you for your cordial and affectionate participation, together with your Educating Communities, in the World Feast of Gratitude which we recently celebrated in Bogota. It was organized and animated with great love and a sense of belonging by the four Colombian Provinces. We know that the theme chosen is highly topical: *With Mary we generate a culture of peace*. From the beginning of the preparatory process, it aroused great involvement in the commitment to build peace in everyday life, starting from simple concrete gestures.

In such a delicate time for the world when peace is threatened in many ways, the Feast of Gratitude was a song of peace and a concrete example of how to build it, strengthened by the Word of God, "Blessed are the peacemakers, they shall be called children of God" (*Mt 5: 9*).

This event, from the solemnity of the Eucharistic Liturgy in the Cathedral of the city up to the theatrical performance, was a work of art prepared in synodality and joy by the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and by the laity as an expression of gratitude for the presence of the Salesian charism in the various Regions of Colombia. It was an explosion of beauty, rhythms, colors, landscapes, folklore reflecting an educative style that generates peace.

Once again, I thank the Provincials: Sr. Edith Franco Ruiz (Colombia Province – Bogotá "Our Lady of the Rosary of Chiquinquirá" – CBC); Sr. Cecilia Camacho (Colombia Province – Bogotá "Our Lady of the Snow" – CBN); Sr. Bertha Celmira Serna (Colombia Province - Medellín "Mary Help of Christians" - CMA); and Sr. Sara Cecilia Sierra (Colombia Province - Medellín "St. Mary Mazzarello" - CMM) for the communion and sharing with which they were able to involve their Provinces.

Together we continue to proceed on the post-chapter journey and in this circular, I would like to continue with you the reflection on one of the priority choices of GC XXIV, that of placing ourselves in a state of ongoing formation for a renewed vocational impetus (cf. *Acts of GC XXIV*, 35).

The liturgical feast of Pentecost, which we will celebrate in the next few days, also reminds us that we are always invited to renew ourselves in our daily lives with the power of the Holy Spirit and to experience *docibilitas* as an openness to letting ourselves be formed and transformed by life.

For this reason, I deem it opportune to pause on article 46 of our Constitutions that defines the "particularly effective times of spiritual renewal," which are the monthly spiritual retreat and the annual spiritual exercises that "Don Bosco considered to be of great importance in giving new impetus to our journey towards holiness."

The spiritual exercises as an itinerary of conversion

The term "spiritual exercises" comes from Catholic asceticism and has a general meaning that indicates the set of devotional practices (vocal and mental prayer, examination of conscience, spiritual reading, etc.), and a particular meaning that denotes the custom to retire from ordinary

occupations to focus on one's spiritual life and renew oneself in fervor. It was St. Ignatius of Loyola who gave rise to this Christian practice, followed by St. Vincent de Paul, St. Paul of the Cross, St. John Eudes, and St. Joseph Cafasso.

St Ignatius considers the exercises as a spiritual journey to achieve an intimate union with Christ in contemplation. He proposes listening to and meditating on the Word of God in various ways that help to discover the action of the Holy Spirit in the depths of the heart and to identify what opposes Him. The exercises, in an atmosphere of deep personal recollection, can last a few days or a month, or they can be experienced in ordinary life.

Why spiritual? Because the main protagonist and guide is, and always remains, the Holy Spirit. It is Jesus himself who reminds us that the Spirit will guide us into all truth (cf. *Jn* 16:13). In the First Letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians we find some illuminating passages, “We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the things freely given us by God. And we speak about them not with words taught by human wisdom, but with words taught by the Spirit, describing spiritual realities in spiritual terms. Now the natural person does not accept what pertains to the Spirit of God ...The spiritual person, however, can judge everything but is not subject to judgment by anyone” (*1 Cor* 2: 12-16).

The objective of the spiritual exercises is to be with the Lord, to abide in Him, recovering one's identity as a calling and as a missionary; to grow in the sublime knowledge of Jesus which occurs in the encounter with Him and through the work of the Holy Spirit. It is a knowledge that is expressed and verified in the relationship with others and which makes us open to accepting the Father's will. A knowledge that totalizes life, like that to which the apostle Paul speaks: “to know him and the power of his resurrection and [the] sharing of his sufferings by being conformed to his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead” (*Phil* 3: 10-11), up to saying, “yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me” (*Gal* 2:20).

Before dying, Mother Mazzarello turning to the Crucifix expressed the same desire, “Oh my dear heavenly spouse...and then they say that they want only You! ... Oh, if they knew You as I know You now!” (*Cronistoria* III, 378).

The Spiritual Exercises are a privileged time to live a more intense experience of grace, to listen to and meditate on the Word, to understand God's plan, interiorly savoring the communion with God that impels us to an ever-freer adherence to Him in the gift of ourselves to others. In this experience, we can find the meaning and criteria of our actions, learn to read the signs of God in time, in history, in the exercise of daily discernment. In the Spiritual Exercises, we let the Lord work freely in us and tell us what He desires for us. Like the disciples of Emmaus, we have the opportunity to tell Jesus the experiences of our personal, community, apostolic life, so that He may explain to us their meaning and design in the plan of salvation. Then our eyes will open more and more to the hope and joy that we will be able to offer to the community and to the young with a renewed enthusiasm of love.

Article 33 of the Regulations reminds us that the annual Spiritual Exercises must last eight days and “Leaving aside all our usual occupations, let it be made in an atmosphere of silence and prayer. This will enable us to review our life through meditation on the Word of God and our Constitutions.”

The Institute gives us this opportunity of a privileged time to relaunch us on the journey of holiness, to ask ourselves if Jesus is truly our first and only love, as we committed ourselves when we professed our vows (cf. Pope Francis, *Apostolic Letter to all consecrated persons*, 21 November 2014).

In the *Biographical Memoirs*, Don Bosco recalls the gift of grace that is offered to us, “During the time of the Spiritual Exercises, the Lord usually grants us extraordinary graces, thus no one should postpone these very important affairs for another time; but rather carry them out willingly, using this grace that will bring contentment and tranquility for life” (*BM* XIII, 419). In the same volume, he recommends in a Goodnight, “I hope we will all do the holy exercises well, and thus the graces

of God will be showered abundantly on us, and we will all go ahead on the way of holiness” (ibid, 126).

In Letter 27, Mother Mazzarello evokes the grace of the Spiritual Exercises as the time in which, “we lit the fire in our hearts, but if we don’t rake the ashes from time to time and put on some wood, it will go out. During these feasts of the Immaculate and of Christmas, we must stir up our fervor so that we will remain fervent until death.”

The monthly retreat: a renewal on the path of holiness

In Article 34 of the Regulations we read, “Let each community set aside for the spiritual retreat or ‘Exercise for a Happy Death’ a half day each month and a full day each quarter.

Let these valuable occasions for reviewing one’s life be planned in a manner similar to that of the annual retreat, creating the same conditions of silence and recollection. Let our personal evaluation in the examination of conscience of at least half an hour, the ‘Prayers for a Happy Death’, and the renewal of our profession in common be valued as efficacious means of re-kindling our determination to grow in holiness.”

Don Bosco educated the boys to the experience of the monthly retreat, or as he called it, “exercise for a happy death.” He used to say, “I think that the salvation of the soul of a young person can be said to be assured, if he makes his Confession every month as if it were the last of his life. The young people were alerted a few days before to prepare themselves, and they readied themselves profitably and with a seriousness superior to their age, such was the desire that Don Bosco had been able to inspire in them” (BM IV, 683-684).

The model and fulcrum of everything is Jesus who constantly resorts to the power of prayer; for this reason He retires to secluded places to pray. Even in moments of greatest dedication to the poor and the sick, Jesus never neglects intimate dialogue with the Father. The more He is immersed in the needs of the people, the more He feels the need to 'rest' in the Trinitarian communion, to remain in the Love for which we all have a great thirst.

Jesus himself teaches us that those who pray, while not estranging themselves from reality, choose the most favorable conditions, such as deserted places.

“In silence, the voices that we hide deep inside can emerge; the most repressed desires, the truths that we insist on suffocating, and so on. And, above all, God speaks in silence. Each person needs a space for themselves, where they can cultivate their inner life, where actions find meaning again. Without inner life, we become shallow, agitated, anxious. For this we must go to prayer. Without an inner life, we flee from reality, and we also flee from ourselves; we are men and women who are always on the run” (Pope Francis, Audience, 4 November 2020).

Prayer is the place where we perceive that all comes from God and returns to Him. Thus, it helps us to rediscover the right dimension of ourselves in relationship with the Father, with our neighbor, and with the whole of creation.

Mysticism of every day life

In the *Instructions and Exhortations of St. John Bosco to the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians* (8 December 1884) that we find in the Appendix to the text of the Constitutions, he recommends, “In the fulfillment of every responsibility, in all your work, in your troubles and disappointments, never forget that, having consecrated yourself to God, you must work for Him alone, and from Him alone await your reward.”

Don Bosco proposed intense work to his sons and daughters especially at the apostolic level. However, he never intended detachment from the Lord in motivation (only for Him) and in presence (in Him). The grace of unity proposed by the Founder became a way of living a full community life in harmony and this is the reason for the fruitfulness in the mission (cf. Ko Maria, *La forza delle radici*, 141).

Article 48 of the Constitutions delineates clearly the essence and the style of our prayer, “Mother Mazzarello teaches us that, true piety consists in fulfilling all our duties at the right time, in the right place, and only for love of God. Therefore, let us seek to work in that spirit of apostolic charity that prompts us to offer the total gift of self, making every action an authentic encounter with the Lord.” Like Don Bosco, also Mother Mazzarello and the first community of Mornese tended to work only for the Lord, living in His presence. The meaningful and deep synthesis of this ‘grace of unity’ is to want to make “every stitch an act of love of God.”

Daily life is thus lived immersed in love towards God and towards others. In her letters, Mother Mazzarello expresses the beauty, the fullness, and the joy of a life unified in God, in harmony with the teachings of Don Bosco. I will quote some, but you can do personal research on this.

“Unite yourself closely to Jesus, work only to please Him, try to become more holy each day. In this way you will always be cheerful” (L 22, 8)

“Begin anew each day to be truly humble, to pray with all your heart, and to work with right intention. Speak little, very little to creatures. Instead, speak much with the Lord. He will make you truly wise” (L 22, 10). “As far as you can, always preserve the spirit of union with God; remain always in His presence” (L 23, 3).

Our Constitutions do not speak of contemplation in action and even less of mysticism in daily life. However, without the ability to cultivate interior unity and to remain in the presence of God in all that we do, we risk living the response to our vocation in a fragmentary and superficial way.

The annual Spiritual Exercises, the monthly retreat, as well as the daily meditation, are stages of a journey of progressive interior unification that is accomplished each day.

We are heirs of a solid and demanding, fascinating and challenging spirituality which has shaped female and male saints and which is given to us to enrich it today with our personal and community contribution. According to a contemporary author, a *mystic* is one who never stops walking. Certain of what they are missing, they understand that every place they pass is always temporary, that there must be something else. They dwell nowhere, but are indwelled. Mystics binds themselves like Ulysses, to the main tree of a hope that does not belong to the future, but to the invisible and, at the same time, is involved and attentive to the suffering of the world.

Mother Mazzarello, the Blesseds, the Venerables, the Servants of God of our Institute are examples of this *mysticism of everyday life* without which we really cannot be what we are called to be.

Let us entrust to Mary, the listening Virgin, the Help of Christians, our desire for the good, for inner renewal, and for total availability to the voice of the Holy Spirit, so that He may lead us gradually to the full configuration to Christ that we all desire, transforming our daily life into holy ground and generative dedication to the mission.

May the solemnity of Mary Help of Christians and of Pentecost, mark a deep experience of communion in incessant prayer for us, for the young, for the families, and for the world, in the trustful request for the gift of peace and of the graces that we all need.

I greet you with affection and I assure you of my prayer.

Rome, 24 May 2023

Affectionately, Mother

New Provincials 2023

Rome

Preprovince “Mary Mother of the Church” RMC

Sr. Jessica Salvaña

America

Province "Mother of the Church" MMO

Sr. María del Socorro Hernández

Province “St. Joseph” SEC

Sr. Colleen Clair

Province “Mary Immaculate” SUO

Sr. Thuy Huong Mary Nguyen

Asia

Province “St. Thomas Apostle” INM

Sr. Margaret Devadoss

Province “Our Lady of the Snow” INT

Sr. Majella Fernando

Province “St. Mary Mazzarello” THA

Sr. Thongyoo Angela Kitsakul

Europe

Province “St. Mary D. Mazzarello” ITV

Sr. Antonella Franchini

Province “Our Lady of Fatima” POR

Sr. Maria Deolinda Teixeira

Province “Mary Help of Christians” SLC

Sr. Mateja Kranjc