

In all circumstances give thanks

(1 Ts 5:18)

Dearest Sisters,

I think of you with affection in this Easter time full of joy and hope and I reach you with my constant prayer. I would like each one to feel my thanks for what you are and for all the good you do in the Institute for the young people entrusted to us.

The itinerary that the Liturgy proposed to us recalls the Person of the Risen Jesus who appears many times to the disciples, reassuring them of His real presence and greeting them with words of consolation, "Peace be to you!" "Do not be afraid", "Fear not."

It is an invitation that He repeats to us today.

We are like the disciples, fearful and doubtful at this hour of history tormented by war, violence, injustice, and persecution. Sometimes we too, like them, feel uncertain and frightened by everything that is happening, but let us go forward with courage in the name of the Risen Jesus, because we can trust in Him and we can entrust ourselves to Him.

Celebrating the World Feast of Gratitude 2024, involves us precisely in this historical time and, if it may seem inappropriate to celebrate when the world and so many of our communities suffer, we know that the Holy Spirit is at work among us and calls us to live as those resurrected. At times when we have the impression that evil overcomes good, the encounter with the Risen One transforms our life into an Easter proclamation and restores to us the joy of the journey. "In all circumstances give thanks, for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus" (Ts 5:18).

In this circular, I would like to deepen the sense of gratitude, so that the feast we are celebrating may not be just a moment, a parenthesis, but helps us rediscover and live this characteristic virtue of Christian and Salesian life.

The words of Saint Paul which I have quoted invite us to be grateful, as adoration to God, the source of all good, a way of expressing faith in His presence and recognizing His greatness in our lives. "We know that all things work for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose" (Rom 8:28).

It is an invitation to be always grateful, not only occasionally, because the goal of our praise is to "...bless the Lord at all times; His praise shall be always in my mouth" (*Psalms* 34:1).

"The prayer of thanksgiving always begins here: from recognizing oneself preceded by grace. We were thought of before we learned to think; we were loved before we learned to love; we were desired before a desire appeared in our heart. If we look at life in this way, then 'thank you' becomes the leitmotif of our days" (Pope Francis, *General Audience*, 30 December 2020).

Gratitude is also a fundamental virtue for community life. It helps us to create healthy and authentic relationships, makes us better, helps us recognize the value of the other, and stimulates us to give the best of ourselves. Gratitude is a precious gift that we can give and receive in the educating community and in the mission. It has the power to encourage and motivate, opens the doors of the heart, and helps to create an atmosphere of trust, empathetic sharing, joy in small gestures, small everyday details.

Expressing gratitude can create stronger, more meaningful and lasting bonds. It opens to humility and collaboration. When gratitude dwells in our hearts, it is easier to forgive and understand the

frame of mind of people, first of all of our sisters, children, and young people, all with whom we share the educational mission.

Gratitude, which touches a key aspect of our identity as Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, returns us to the present, to the gift that we are, to the gifts that we receive every day, and colors our life with beauty.

Our Regulations remind us of the value and function of the feast of gratitude, lived at local, provincial, and world levels (Cf. *Reg* 40). The uninterrupted experience from Mother Mazzarello until today, confirms how it is a very fruitful opportunity to strengthen fraternal communion, the vitality of the mission, the sense of belonging of all of us and of the educating community to the Salesian charism. The feast is all this if one lives the joy of gratitude.

Benedict XVI affirmed that joy is an integral part of the feast, but added, "The feast can be organized, joy cannot. It can only be offered as a gift; the Holy Spirit gives us joy. And He is joy. Joy is the gift in which all other gifts are summed up. It is the expression of happiness, of being in harmony with oneself, that can only come from being in harmony with God and with His creation" (Benedict XVI to the Roman Curia, 22 December 2008).

The World Feast of Gratitude is a moment of celebration of this joy, gift of the Holy Spirit, which strengthens being "Salesian" educating communities. It introduces us into the continuous vital flow of Eucharistic grace which is the highest gratitude to the Father through the Son, in the Spirit of Love.

Gratitude to God responds with a song of gratitude, perhaps danced, by a young mother in the house of Aim Karim: the *Magnificat* of Mary of Nazareth! With her who as Mother, accompanies us in our present and shows us the way to the future, let us renew our trust and sing with her our *Magnificat*.

With Mary, guided by the 'dream', let us generate peace by taking care of our common Home

I desire to thank the Vicar General, Sister María del Rosario García Ribas, for the letter sent to all the provincial communities, in which she offers indications and clear guidelines for the preparation of the World Feast of Gratitude. A fraternal thank you to the Provincial of Mozambique, Sister Carolina Ilda Hermínio, and the Sisters of "Saint John Bosco" Province, who made themselves available for the preparation and realization of the World Feast of Gratitude 2024.

The theme proposed by the Mozambican Province, in response to the Chapter Resolution in the context of integral ecology, urges us to live our lives as a hymn of praise, to thank God for His every gift, and to join in the psalmist's invocation: "Oh Lord, our God, You have given him rule over the works of your hands" (Psalm 8).

Before us shines the majesty of our Lord God in all the creatures of the universe, in our educating communities, in the young, in the children who populate our homes and who are entrusted to us in the various educational, social, and catechetical works. It shines in the Sisters of all ages who each day generously live their own self-giving and offering of love gratuitously.

In the logo of the Feast, we find a significant symbolism: Mary, who appears in Johnny's dream at nine years of age. She is the Mother and the Teacher, the model of caring who embraces and safeguards our common Home. In the Gospels after the Annunciation, Mary is identified as the Mother of Jesus. And She is truly a Mother who cares, educates, loves, and by her 'yes' to the Incarnation of Jesus, is the source, the beginning of the redeemed people and of all humanity on their way to God.

In the history of the Church, no dogma has made believers rejoice more than the proclamation of the *Theotokos* at the Council of Ephesus. On the evening of 11 October 431, at that announcement, the crowd exploded in acclamation and in irrepressible celebration. When the Fathers left the council hall, they were carried in triumph and in the evening, they were accompanied to their homes with songs and lit torches.

We Daughters of Mary Help of Christians have received the joyful call to live in profound familiarity, which is filiality, precisely with this Mother. The Mother Help of Christians, who is the Mother of God, "Our Lady of difficult times," "formidable as an army in battle array" against evil; the woman of Eden and of the Apocalypse. In 1814, Pius VII invoked her and presented her to the Church with the title Help of Christians, after experiencing her powerful and glorious intervention in defense of the Christian people.

Mary is a watchful mother and ready to intervene together with us, her daughters, committed to bringing Jesus to young people in various parts of the world. Today we live in a reality that asks us to be instruments of fraternity and peace, in which there is a need to globalize solidarity, especially where the roar of arms stifles the cry of peoples, their desire for peace, and their desire for the future (cf. *Pope Francis, Encounter with the Volunteers of the Italian Red Cross on the occasion of the 160th anniversary of foundation*, 6 April 2024).

Mary is the mother who accompanies us in the unfolding of our days in community, as Don Bosco saw her in Nizza Monferrato. A Mother who works with us for the victory of Jesus over the world and who, therefore, does not know rest, but "at night mends the mistakes we make by day", to put it in the words of our Sisters rich in years and trust in the active presence of the Help of Christians.

She is a Mother who is close to us, who never loses sight of us. She is a tender Mother who holds us by the hand on our daily journey (cf. *Pope Francis, Video message for the 300th anniversary of Our Lady of Czestochowa*, 26 August 2017).

Living monument of gratitude

This is what Don Bosco wanted us to be: A living monument of gratitude to Mary.

It is 5 August 1872. Our Founder, arriving towards evening in Mornese, as soon as he left the carriage, addresses a short greeting to the ladies present at the spiritual exercises and to the future Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. He cannot restrain himself and proclaims to the satisfaction of those who realize the deep desire of their heart, "It could be seen how very much he enjoyed saying that they would be called Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and their Institute would be the living monument of his gratitude to the holy Virgin under the title of Help of Christians" (*Cronistoria* I, 298).

To be a living Monument of gratitude today! We are not only an echo of Mary's remote interventions, invoked under the title of Help of Christians in the life of the Church and of our Institute. We are her witnesses in this contemporaneity. We are the living thank you for her constant intervention in our lives, in our educating communities, in a continuous crescendo of amazement.

These are interventions of which we are aware and there are many others that happen to us silently, and perhaps they are the most numerous.

To prolong and renew today Don Bosco's gratitude to Mary, invoked under the title of Help of Christians, is to continue to propose it to everyone, young people, adults, families so that the conviction may grow in their hearts that we must never separate ourselves from Mary because she brings us to Jesus. It is believing that her protective mantle widens out of all proportion and welcomes us and safeguards everyone; that without her, our pastoral action lacks warmth and effectiveness, and care for the Gospel seed that must find good soil in order to grow.

Calling ourselves Daughters of Mary Help of Christians implies, therefore, vitally assuming the beautiful reality that the name indicates. For us, it is truly a 'glory' and also a great responsibility that we joyfully carry in the world. "Have as glory your beautiful title of Daughters of Mary Help of Christians" (*Cronistoria* I, 306).

Towards the end of his earthly life, Don Bosco had declared that "She did everything." We have the grace to experience that Mary truly continues to do everything in the life of each one of us, in that

of the educating communities, and makes our mission fruitful in evangelical life. She continues to be in this our Institute that is all Hers.

A Daughter of Mary Help of Christians who works in prison ministry among mostly minor boys, tries in her constant accompaniment to anchor them to the Help of Christians. One of them wrote to her, "The Hail Mary, the prayer learned on the knees of a mother, is the lintel of our work. It is the ardent praise and supplication to the divine motherhood." Surely this boy had personal experience of Mary's maternal protection. And She, the Mother, will see to doing the rest.

I wish that all of you may experience Mary's motherly love, the comfort and consolation of her presence, as Don Bosco assured us, "Our Lady walks in this house and covers it with her mantle" (*Cronistoria* V, 52).

We especially pray for ADMA (Association of Devotees of Mary Help of Christians) that this month celebrates 155 years since its foundation through Don Bosco's work in 1869. To all her members we wish continuance in their mission of entrustment to Mary, of love for Jesus in the Eucharist, of maintaining solidarity in attention to the weak, in the commitment of spreading the faith and bringing hope, with the certainty that She never abandons us.

I greet you with affection also on behalf of the Sisters of the Council in and outside the Generalate, and I assure you from now of my prayers and remembrance in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians, in Turin, on 24 May.

Rome, 24 April 2024

Yours affectionately, Mother