

Stages of a journey in synodal spirituality

Dearest Sisters,

In this Circular, I would like to share with you some concrete stages of the Post-Chapter journey that we are following as Institute.

First of all, I would like to recall the beautiful experience of World Youth Day in Lisbon, of which we still have many images in our eyes and hearts. The memory is that of a lively, cheerful youth crowd but composed and open to listening. In his message for the XXXVII WYD, Pope Francis had addressed an invitation to young people to participate in large numbers in Lisbon, and they responded. Those of us who lived this event were able to experience with how much enthusiasm and conviction they participated. We saw a city peacefully invaded by groups of girls and boys of all cultural, social, and continental backgrounds and of different languages who lived the joy of being together. Crowds of young people who had to wait in huge lines to get food, to get on the subway, to enter and exit meeting places, always smiling and kind, mysteriously patient.

Again, in his message, Pope Francis had addressed to young people the hope of experiencing the beauty of meeting with God, with brothers and sisters, rediscovering together, after long periods of distance and isolation, the joy of the fraternal embrace between peoples and between generations; the embrace of reconciliation, peace, and a new missionary fraternity. We can testify that this really happened. An embrace for each and every one for whom Pope Francis acted as an interpreter and witness for five days. On every occasion, he repeated loudly to those million and a half young people who sought him, followed him, and listened to him, *"God loves you. God loves you all. God calls everyone by name."* The flags that paraded together, supported by serene and cheerful young people, were a prophetic sign, going against the current trend of official policies which move by supporting nationalism and partisan interests, the construction of walls, the closure of prejudice and suspicion.

Young people are truly a significant sign of universality and peace that speaks to the world: a sign of hope for the present and the future!

The closing Eucharistic celebration of WYD centered on the Feast of the Transfiguration offered Pope Francis the opportunity to help summarize this intense week of grace starting from the fateful question: *What to take with you, returning to daily life?* It is certainly an existential question also addressed to us adults who accompany young people.

In reference to the text of Matthew 17:2, the Pope highlighted that the face of the transfigured Jesus shone like the sun and thus he invited young people **to shine**, to be luminous by letting themselves be loved by Jesus, listening to Him, and letting themselves be guided by Him.

He ended the final message with the words much repeated in Sacred Scripture, *"Do not be afraid, do not be afraid."* In fact, at the Via Crucis on Friday evening young people offered to the Lord Jesus the fatigue of life, the weight of loneliness, the anxiety for the present and the future, the dramatic experiences of addictions, the anguish, the violence of war with all its consequences, their dreams.

The final one was a pastoral message and, I would say, with a "Salesian" touch. Starting from the observation of the reality in which young people live and measure themselves every day, without ignoring their frailties and hardships, Pope Francis wanted to give them support and strength, so that the Lisbon week would not only a wonderful parenthesis in their lives, but would find continuity in everyday life, *"Do not be afraid!"*, *"Do not be afraid!"*

I thank the Communities and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians who accompanied the numerous youth groups, making the reality of the Salesian Youth Movement concrete. We could be recognized in the crowd by the numerous Salesian signs, visible on the t-shirts, flags, and banners.

On 2 August, by embracing the theme *Come, Live, Proclaim*, the objective of raising young people's awareness of the multicultural nature of Don Bosco's charism was achieved by living together, on a day of celebration in Oratorian style, the Salesian spirituality with which they identify.

An unforgettable day, interesting for the richness of the contributions offered, and above all for the last part of the day in which the young people of the SYM gave life to a creative and beautiful representation of the dream at nine years followed, in the final moment of the Vigil, by an actualization of the dream of the two columns.

However, the highlight of the evening was the entry of the Eucharistic Jesus in the monstrance. The absolute silence full of prayer that was created among the young people was the most eloquent and significant verification of the great education and formation work that is carried out in the local communities.

May Mary, prayed to and invoked every day, especially in the Sanctuary of Fatima, protect and support these daughters and sons of hers, so that they can resume their daily journey with a new light in their heart: from Lisbon to their own lives!

A synodal spirituality

Many young people will again be expected and welcomed in at the meeting that will take place in Rome, in imminent preparation of the Synod, on the last weekend of September, to share and walk together as people of God in the dialogue that reconciles, opens up to others, and helps build peace.

In the ecumenical prayer vigil desired by Pope Francis, and which will be presided over by him on September 30th in St. Peter's Square, brothers and sisters from all the Christian confessions were invited to entrust to God the work of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. The Holy Father's invitation aims to be bearer of the profound needs of the people of God and to listen to the voice of those who are not normally listened to, precisely because sharing prayer and the Word of God is not something abstract, but a call to strengthen coherence in the concreteness of life.

There are two priorities that emerge in the prayer and in the fabric of the Synod in general and which challenge believers, and therefore also us as consecrated educators: the ecological crisis and the cry of the poor.

The *Instrumentum laboris*, which we all have the opportunity to read and study in depth to prepare for this event of the Holy Spirit, underlines that the proclamation of the Gospel today manifests itself by sharing the journey with the men and women of our time, wherever they are, and practicing the catholicity that emerges from walking together with the Churches that live in conditions of particular suffering.

In this sense, a Synodal Church is open, welcoming, and embraces all. There is no boundary that this movement of the Spirit cannot overcome, to involve everyone in its dynamism (IL, 26). A synodal Church is guided, according to the Pauline apostolic horizon "*Caritas Christi urget nos*" (cf. 2 Cor 5:14), to reach the peripheries, to include the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed. It is there that we can find Christ.

As an Institute, we feel in tune with the *Instrumentum laboris* where the call often returns to the dream of an increasingly synodal Church in its institutions and structures, of a space in which the common baptismal dignity and co-responsibility in the mission are not only affirmed, but practiced.

It is interesting to note how the Synodal Church is a humble Church because it is aware of its need for forgiveness. It is a Church marked by a crisis of trust and credibility, by the need for repentance and conversion which opens paths of reconciliation. A Church of encounter and dialogue that promotes the

passage from "I" to "we", because it constitutes a space within which resounds the call to be members of a "body" that values diversity and is united by 'one Spirit.

It is the Holy Spirit, in fact, who acts and inspires us as a people at the service of the one mission, to proclaim to all people the salvation offered by God in Christ Jesus.

We are convinced that synodality remains the privileged path to conversion for everyone. It can renew the Church in its unity, healing its wounds; reconciling her memory; welcoming the differences it brings and redeeming them from fruitless divisions; thus, fully embodying its vocation to be a sacrament in Christ, a sign and instrument of intimate union with God and of the unity of the entire human race.

Seeking to walk together also puts us in contact with the healthy restlessness of incompleteness, with the conviction that there are still many things we are not able to bear the burden of (cf. Jn 16:12). This is not a problem to be solved, but a gift to be cultivated. The incompleteness of a synodal Church and the willingness of its members to welcome their own vulnerabilities become the space for the action of the Spirit, who invites us to recognize the signs of His presence.

For this reason, a synodal Church is also a Church in discernment, in the richness of meanings that this word takes on. Participating in this process helps us, as a religious family, to assume ever more consciously, the communal dimension of the journey and the mission entrusted to us.

By carefully reading the *Instrumentum laboris* we will be able to see how Salesian spirituality is in full harmony with synodal spirituality for many elements. I underline, by way of example, the spirituality of everyday life, which in practice challenges life precisely starting from the acceptance of one's own task or, better, of one's own vocation and mission which, as Don Bosco said, asks us to walk with our feet on the ground and our mind always turned to Heaven.

The Seminar for an authority that generates life

Why a Seminar for Interprovincial Conferences with the theme: "*For generative animation*"? Responding to the mandate of the XXIV General Chapter, we want to dedicate together a useful time of reflection and in-depth study to find the way to understand and live authority as service, as animation, and government in an evangelical and Salesian style. We are convinced that authority is a mission to be carried out. Therefore, it is not power, nor dominion. Consecrated life has been questioning itself for years on the models and on the exercise of an authority that opens up to change, to hope, to regeneration. We feel urged to cultivate a participatory style of animation with a generative attitude centered on evangelical values, to encourage the expression and contribution of all in the search for the common good and in the exercise of one's responsibility (cf. *Acts GC XXIV*, no. 15).

We all have small or great responsibilities towards the people entrusted to us, and it is important to deepen our spirituality so that these responsibilities are life-generating. In the Salesian tradition, whoever is called to animate a community, or any group, cultivates and lives like Don Bosco the "pedagogy of one by one", without losing sight of the whole.

Those who animate develop coordination, organization, and leadership skills. They live the spirituality of synodal service which favors the growth of everyone. Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello ensured that the house breathed the *air of God and the air of family*, conditions for a journey of human maturation and growth in holiness.

Comparing ourselves with the origins of our Institute, we discover that the family spirit characterized the exercise of the service of authority from the beginning. We must recognize, however, that over the years, forms of rigidity have sometimes been generated which have made comparison with the style of Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello more difficult.

We believe that coordination for communion, which the *Formation Plan* deals with, is a style of life and animation, a way of relating, a spirituality based on communion, which involves everyone and values each person in their potential, with a view to the common good.

The Africa – Madagascar Interprovincial Conference (CIAM) was the first to implement this Seminar, from 25 to 29 August in Lusaka (Zambia). An interprovincial Assembly of around eighty sisters, in a

climate of youthfulness, hope, and commitment, created a mini-chapter experience of participation, as someone defined it.

The Seminar of the Interprovincial Conference Middle East and Europe (CIME) held in Frascati (Rome) from 19 to 23 September is about to end in these days. The consistent and collaborative participation of the Sisters of the 22 Provinces and Preprovinces that make up this Conference favored a positive experience and a constructive sharing that will certainly bear fruit. We know that this further effort will be useful and effective for the Institute to the extent that each Province and Preprovince is able to share with the local communities what has been explored, shared, and chosen.

The process of revising and updating the *Formation Plan* and the *Guidelines of the educational mission of the FMA Institute*

I believe it is important to update you on the reflection started in recent months regarding the guidelines of the formation and educational mission of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. The Chapter Assembly entrusted the General Council with the task of updating the documents of the *Formation Plan* of the FMA Institute and the *Guidelines of the educational mission*, rethinking education and formation with particular attention to the processes of identity construction, education of affectivity/sexuality and freedom/responsibility (cf. *Acts GC XXIV*, n.35). For this purpose, an international working group has been set up which operates through various phases to involve the entire Institute, keeping in mind the different levels.

The objective of this work, which is very important, is to carry out the revision and updating of the above-mentioned documents through a *participatory* process characterized by *listening, discernment, and involvement*. It is a synodal process extended to all members of the educating community, which is perceived as the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, young people in formation, lay people, young people, local Churches, and other members of the Salesian Family. It is a *gradual and convergent, unitary journey* that makes clear the unity of the process of our identity as Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. It will therefore be able to encourage effective growth of personal and community identity in the spirit of the Salesian-Mornese charism for a more faithful and joyful vocational response and constant availability for renewal in all phases of life. This has a specific formative impact on the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians who are entrusted with initial and ongoing formation tasks, and the educational mission. Undoubtedly, the group values what has been done in terms of study and experience, the documents, the methodology, the resources available, and the evaluation of the journey made.

We ask you to accompany this precious work with the contribution of your prayer, offering, and effective involvement so that the Holy Spirit may guide us and direct us to choose for the Institute always and only what is His will.

The start of the Synod will coincide with the start of the month of October, dedicated to Our Lady of the Rosary. We entrust the journey of the Church to Mary and renew the surrender of ourselves to the Lord, through her powerful intercession as Mother and Help.

We greet you with affection and gratitude,

Rome, 24 September 2023

Affectionately, Mother