

I will give you the Teacher

Dearest Sisters,

This month we have concluded, together with the Sisters of the General Council, the last two of the nine Seminars *For a generative animation* during which, with grace and joy, I was able to live important encounters of charismatic vitality and a deep communion with numerous Daughters of Mary Help of Christians from the five Continents. The richness of our charism never ceases to give our heart astonishment, gratitude, and praise, also for the generous and passionate dedication of the Sisters and the Educating Communities in the mission entrusted to them.

Fatima: an event of grace for the Salesian Family

In this circular, I wish to share with you, even if briefly, the beautiful experience lived in Fatima (Portugal) during the IX International Congress of Mary Help of Christians, promoted and organized by ADMA, inspired by the theme, *I will give you the Teacher*.

Starting from the dream of John Bosco when he was 9 years old, the objective of the Congress was to make Mary known more and more as a Mother and Teacher who accompanied, accompanies, and guides the whole Salesian Family towards Jesus and towards the neediest young people.

The dream brings us back to the Oratorian dimension, which is expressed as an educative mission realized in fidelity to the Preventive System and as a path of holiness. Hence, the strong call to accept the mystery of life as vocation and mission, in an often-difficult discernment but fruitful in the good. It is a synthesis that involves us all as Salesian Family and urges us to live with ever renewed awareness the presence of God in daily life. It is a presence that is *mystery and encounter* in which the proclamation of salvation is realized, especially to the young and the poorest young people.

The Congress offered to the many participants a deep reflection on the Salesian charism inspired by the charity of Jesus the Good Shepherd, the maternal guidance of Mary, and a relational style characterized by humility, sweetness, benevolence, and affability. It was an appeal to return to the origin of the educational method that Don Bosco learned from Mamma Margherita and Mary Help of Christians, whom he saw in his dream as the *"Woman dressed in a cloak, shining from all sides, as if every point of it was a very bright star"*.

The International Congress was held in Fatima, a typically Marian place that fostered an atmosphere of prayer and recollection, meditation, serene dialogue, to "measure ourselves" with Mary's intervention in the history of humanity and the Church, specifically in the history of the Salesian vocation, in our history.

I know that many communities managed to follow, according to the various possibilities, the program of the days with much appreciated interventions and testimonies.

Among the 1,400 participants from all over the world, there were 60 FMA. We met, albeit briefly, and enjoyed the beauty of a broad international breath.

It was an excellent opportunity to thank the Marian-missionary animation lived in local realities, and share with lay people and young people the richness of the Salesian charism.

We recalled that the Marian identity of our Institute, together with the ADMA Association, offers to the Salesian Family the specific of a spirituality which recognizes Mary's presence and inspiring role from the very beginning.

Given by Jesus Himself as Teacher to John in the dream, she is our maternal and wise guide, and always will be so, also for all those who share vocation and mission. The Salesian mission, in fact, is inexplicable in its birth and its progressive development, without the inspiring and preventive initiative of Mary and without her constant active and maternal presence.

The power of a glance

Meditating on the contents of the Congress, I find it interesting to dwell once again on the dream that Johnny had at nine years old; a dream-vision to which is linked the history and experience of the Salesian charism in the world and, therefore, in our religious family

The appearance of the "Teacher" on the scene starts a dialogue full of sapiential beauty. The voice that Johnny perceives will echo in him for his whole life. A maestro, in fact, is a teacher who puts a 'sign' that will remain indelible in the personality of those who have known and followed him/her. Those who have met a true maestro receive an inheritance that commits them to develop two great values in their lives: responsibility and gift.

"I will give you the Teacher," Johnny is told, and this Teacher is given to us today with all the richness of her gift of grace. In the Congress, the meaning of '*magis-ter*' was shared, which means "more than more", that is, the maximum of help and guidance.

Mary teaches Don Bosco that he must, before every other step, "learn to look" and she also educates us today to know how to "look" with her own eyes of Mother and Educator.

To look is much more than to see! Mary addressed this invitation to Johnny: "look"!

"At that moment, I saw beside Him [Jesus] a woman of majestic appearance, dressed in a cloak, shining from all sides, as if every point of it were a very bright star. Seeing me more confused in my questions and answers, He indicated to me to approach Her. She took my hand with kindness and said, "look". Looking, I saw that the children had all fled, and in their stead, I saw a multitude of goats, dogs, cats, bears, and many other animals."

The first thing that surprises Johnny are the eyes of the woman. He feels himself looked at with tenderness, affection, and recognition by her. He realizes that he has been understood in his situation of anguish, pain, and distress. Mary immediately perceived Johnny's state of mind, so she welcomes him, first of all with a look full of empathy. The first Marian experience that marks the soul of John Bosco is precisely the gaze of Mary that radiates serenity and holiness, a gaze that watches, guards, and cares, that caresses without holding back.

Mary knows what it means to be looked at by God and she magnifies the Lord, because "He has looked at the humility of His servant".

Fr. Tonino Bello, the bishop whose cause of canonization has been introduced, says that before wrapping her Son in swaddling clothes, Mary wraps Him with her eyes of infinite sweetness. Mary, a woman with a welcoming and hospitable gaze, looks at that Child because He is the Son of God and her Son, who came to bridge every distance between the Father and humanity.

We can also imagine the look of suffering, yet full of love and welcome, of Mary toward John under the cross when, in him, Jesus entrusts us all to her motherhood. We always need this look and, for centuries, generations and generations of believers and non-believers ask Mary to turn her merciful eyes toward them.

Mary puts her eyes where she puts her soul. Her eyes and soul are one. Not only a mirror that reflects, but also a threshold, window, place of connection between the inner world and the outer world, between infinite and finite. The *inside* and the *outside* are gathered in a *beyond*, which she always carries within her. We know that the *beyond* is the place of the Other, of God, He who transcends our own gazes, as He crosses them and makes light that indicate to us unseen horizons. Some must lift their eyes to look, and some must lower them. Mary no longer needs to lift her eyes to look at God, because she already welcomes God in her arms, and she does not need to lower them to look at us, because she walks with us.

The eyes reveal to the outside what we are inside. Through them people, situations, and the world enter into us and we go deeply into what we see and experience. The gaze is the first clear sign of the acceptance of the reality that surrounds us with its history, its lights, its expectations, and its difficulties.

There are negative looks that paralyze and looks that, with their purity and transparency, have the power to bring the light of life even in the most difficult and distant places, where also today, sons and daughters who have lost the way back, are waiting to return to themselves in order to return to the merciful Father, who is always ready, waiting for them. Mary teaches us that eyes can be like little lights in the night of the world, looks that know how to light up paths of hope.

Our gaze on our Sisters, young people, collaborators, and everyone should be similar to hers. This is an urgent mission. It is the joy of evangelization in the folds of daily life. I remember that a child often sought the gaze of a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians because, in her wise innocence she said ecstatically, "You see Jesus in there".

"Go through the city and look around"

Looking implies attention and intentionality to know how to distinguish, learn, understand, make choices, discern 'how'. The mutual look between Jesus and the Father, "lifting up His eyes to heaven", between Mary and Jesus, between Jesus and the Baptist, the Apostles, the believers, builds the true field of strength in the Lord's mission, an invisible and indestructible force field of authentic and salvific relationships.

Look, Mary tells Johnny, a 9-year-old boy, where there is of course still much incomplete, but there is so much future in this imperative.

Look, is also the key-word of the experience that Fr. Joseph Cafasso advises the young priest John Bosco in his personal discernment regarding the choice of his own future. For Don Bosco, it is clear that his life will be spent totally for the young, but where to start and how? "Go to the city and look around" suggests Fr. Cafasso. Don Bosco goes, crosses the streets and squares of Turin, and begins to look around. There are many, very many boys alone, exploited, idle. However, they are all hungry and aimless. People know it is good to avoid them as dangerous individuals. They almost always end up in prison and, once again, it is Fr. Cafasso who guides Don Bosco through this painful experience. *Look*: the impact is strong, devastating. Locked in narrow and dark cells are groups of boys, between twelve and eighteen years old, sad and abandoned. Don Bosco recognizes them; they are the ones he saw in a dream seventeen years ago. He sees them, recognizes them, and recognizes the Lord, who is present there. In those rooms and in those dark and sad lives, he recognizes his Light that does not go out. The same Teacher of his first and unforgettable dream holds him by the hand.

They are wolves but, with Her by his side, Don Bosco already sees them as lambs. *If they could find a friend who would take care of them!* An intuition. A call. A task. From that moment on, Don Bosco is no longer the same. His life and mission are now the life and mission of a father who goes around the city and looks around tirelessly. Don Bosco will repeat it, in different words, to his Salesians and even to his boys: "Go through the city and look around".

True accompaniment can only lead us to go out, to go to the peripheries of human existence with courage and love, as Pope Francis frequently and insistently urges us. We feel strongly called for this, to enter more and more, and together, into the Paschal Mystery of the Lord, to be in the dark areas of contemporaneity, a reflection of His timeless light that the young people need to look with confidence toward a better future. We hear this urgent invitation resounding in our hearts, "Go to the city and look around". Don Bosco went physically to meet the young people of Turin in his time and today we too want to listen to the ever-changing reality, culture, signs of the times, educational challenges that we cannot ignore. It is a charismatic call that pushes us *to go* further, to strengthen the missionary dimension, an essential element of the identity of the Institute (cf. C 75).

Article 6 of the Constitutions recalls the programmatic ideal of Don Bosco that Mother Mazzarello shared and assumed from the first moment, *"da mihi animas cetera tolle"*. It is this deep yearning that led our Founders to make a total gift to the little ones and the poor without limits or measure. The missionary character, deeply rooted in the following of Christ and in history, is expressed in apostolic daring and becomes for us an educative passion, in the search for a constant vital renewal both of our existence and of those entrusted to us. The apostolic tension, shared in Valdocco and Mornese, was ardent, motivated, and expressed up to the extreme sacrifice of life, without any search for protagonism or self-affirmation.

We entrust ourselves to Mary, Help and Educator, so that she may obtain for us a discerning eye in the community's choices for fraternal life and mission; so that she may obtain the strength of creativity, the courage to dare, full and filial trust in Her presence that guides us in our youth mission. Let us always remember our Marian identity, our charismatic DNA, if we want to fulfill the dream that is not only of little John, but is, above all, the dream of God. We know that with the powerful help of Mary, Teacher and Mother, the miracle of the transformation of wolves into gentle lambs can happen today!

I take the opportunity to recall that, in response to the request of CG XXIV, the Salesian Family Sector, in collaboration with the Pontifical Faculty of Education Science "Auxilium", offers the different groups of the Salesian Family around the world an *online* course entitled, *"I will give you the Teacher"*. The course aims to promote knowledge of the person and mission of Mary of Nazareth, Mother and Educator of Christ and humanity, deepening the biblical, theological, and anthropological foundation of Marian spirituality, with particular reference to the Salesian charism.

Above all, I invite the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians to make the most of this precious educative opportunity offered in the various languages.

I greet you with affection, also on behalf of the Sisters of the Council scattered in the various Continents, and assure you of my remembrance and my prayers, with the wish that in our houses, in our Educating Communities, may we increasingly realize that ecosystem of love that shines in the attentive, empathetic, and encouraging looks of all, to inspire young women and men to welcome and follow the Lord Jesus with a life totally given.

Rome, 24 September 2024

Aff.ly Mother