

## The responsibility of being vocational communities

Dearest Sisters,

We are living in a special moment in the life of the Church. We thank the Lord for the presence of his Spirit in the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, just concluded. We know that the synodal process is not finished, but that it is entrusted to each one of us, so that we can carry it out in a daily journey as a true personal and community conversion. The objective of the Synod was not to produce documents, but “to plant dreams, draw forth prophecies and visions, allow hope to flourish, inspire trust, bind up wounds, weave together relationships, awaken a dawn of hope, learn from one another, and create a bright resourcefulness that will enlighten minds, warm hearts, give strength to our hands.” (Pope Francis, Address at the beginning of the Synod dedicated to young people, 3 October 2018 and quoted in the *Preparatory Document for the Synod*, 32).

The Synod highlighted, among other things, that “Living through the synodal process, we have renewed our awareness that the salvation to be received and proclaimed is inherently relational. We live it and witness to it together. History reveals itself to us tragically marked by war, rivalry for power and thousands of injustices and abuses. We know, however, that the Spirit has placed the desire for authentic relationships and true bonds in the heart of every human being.” (cf. *Final Document*, 154).

It is a reminder to us to consider how the vocation of the Daughter of Mary Help of Christians is not conceivable without the communion lived in a community permeated by the spirit of family, oriented to the evangelizing educative mission lived in the style of synodality. Our communities are called to serve the Lord in joy and to work with optimism and pastoral charity for the kingdom of God (cf. C 49-50). We are a community of women “called” to follow Jesus, “sent” for young people in the spirit of the *da mihi animas cetera tolle*.

The opening of the three-year period in preparation for 150<sup>th</sup> of the first missionary departure of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians is, for the whole Institute, a strong time that brings us back to our origins with gratitude. This event rekindles the desire to feel ourselves in mission in every place of the world, where there is need for those who proclaim, with the witness of life, the beauty of the Gospel of Jesus. We are therefore called to be life-generating communities in the heart of contemporaneity. We will be this if each one awakens within herself the original freshness of the vocational fecundity of the Institute. The more we are generative of life, the more the world will be full of hope and new life.

### **The beauty of the sequela**

In this circular, I would like to delve into a particular aspect of our identity, which is the first of the priority choices of General Chapter XXIV, where we find an explicit invitation to be vocational communities. We feel the need to witness *together* to the beauty of the Salesian vocation and to live a renewed vocational impulse starting from our lives.

The Lord asks us for a renewed responsibility: to make the charism more visible and to commit ourselves to transmit it and revitalize it in fidelity in today’s context.

We ask ourselves: today, what are the expressions that make evident to young people our happiness in belonging to the Lord?

Mother Yvonne Reungoat dedicated in a particular way Circular no. 960 of 24 April 2016, to deepen the vocational aspect of our life and mission. These are reflections of great relevance and for this reason, I quote her words to you: "Vocational communities are communities of people 'called' *who remain in the joy of their call* and therefore are able to open themselves to Jesus and to many people in an encounter that shapes and transforms. Joy is first of all a gift, but it is also a responsibility in the evangelical logic: 'Without cost you have received; without cost you are to give.' (*Mt 10:8*). Vocation is a dynamism that shapes life and relationships in the evangelical and Salesian style with missionary impetus. Therefore, vocational communities are not primarily places where activities of vocational animation are organized, which are also necessary, but spaces in which one lives and witnesses one's vocation and expresses it with joyful fidelity in the fabric of daily relationships and mission."

Every community, in order to be vocational, can and must be a true '*schola amoris*' and visibly express fraternity. Communities where we take care of each other; where we mutually guard our fidelity; where we enjoy the good that each one accomplishes; where we value the resources of everyone; where no one is 'invisible'. Our communities have a prophetic value if they are joyful witnesses of the gratuitousness of God's love. Joy draws from the ever-greater source of love of God, which has been manifested in Jesus Christ. "At the beginning of being a Christian there is not an ethical decision or a great idea, but the encounter with an event, with a Person, which gives life a new horizon and, therefore, the decisive direction" (Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, 1).

The current world, with its multiple offerings of consumption, runs the great risk of sinking into an individualistic sadness that springs from a heart folded in on itself, dissatisfied, incapable of gift and smile.

We are not free from these temptations. Sometimes we experience that when our inner life is closed in on its own interests and the spiritual path is tired, there is no more room in the heart for others; no more Sisters, young people, poor people can 'come in'. The voice of God is not heard anymore. Yet, bearing witness to the Lord Jesus with life, works, and words is the specific mission of consecrated life in the Church and in the world. We know, as the apostle Paul says, in whom we have believed (cf. *2 Tim 1:12*) and to whom we have given the totality of our being.

Passionate love for Jesus Christ is a powerful attraction for young people whom He, in His goodness, calls to follow Him closely and forever. Our contemporaries want to 'see' in consecrated persons the joy that comes from belonging to the Lord.

In this sense, the witness of communities centered on Jesus and on prayer that becomes the 'upper room', a place where one learns to love others with the same gratuitousness with which one loves humanity daily.

It is in serene and fraternal relationships, motivated by evangelical meanings, that we mutually enrich each other. Mary, with her witness, is for us a sublime school of life. She is the Guide who accompanies us, prays, acts, suffers, and rejoices with us. She helped to prepare the apostles for the mission with her assiduous prayer to the Father, her bond with the Son, and her willingness to receive the promptings of the Holy Spirit. She is a Teacher of prayer and communion in the Church, in our communities, and, as the first one evangelized, she nourishes in us a strong missionary impulse.

### **“You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you”**

Vocation is a gift and a gratuitous call, a grace in which the initiative is from God: «You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you» (*Jn 15:16*). We find this quotation in the preamble to the first article of our Constitutions and in the section concerning our identity (cf. art 1-7). In this first part, which contains the key to reading the entire text, it is evident that the Institute derives its origin from the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, with the direct intervention of Mary, and is born as a gift to the Church.

God establishes with Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello a covenant of love that is prolonged in the fidelity of each one of us. This reminds us that our vocation was born, as Don Bosco said, by

attraction and contagion. If our life testifies and makes the charism fascinating, we set the conditions so that young people will question themselves deeply.

It had happened with Jesus. The apostles remain bound to Him by an uncommon admiration; they perceive the goodness that emanated from Him and ask Him: "Where do you live?"

And Jesus answers, "Come and see" (Jn 1:38) and then they stay with Him, sharing His same mission of evangelization.

Every vocation is born as wonder through the fascination of Jesus. He did not seek the best, but called to be apostles those whom the Father gave Him. Some were quarrelsome, proud, power-hungry; others more mild, very different from each other - just read the Gospels - but all *stayed* with Him.

It is not easy for young women and men to discern the path to follow in their lives, such as the call of God. Offering them the opportunity to see the testimony of those who live their vocation with awareness, responsibility, authenticity, and joy can make this search less difficult and more thrilling.

It is important that they understand how the call to religious life involves the whole person and therefore imbues with a sense of *Christ-like* orientation living in its totality. There is a need for direct and explicit work on our part, because it is true that God arouses the call, but it is equally true that He uses humble human instruments like us, to indicate and orient the path of young women and men, "Come and see" to experience Jesus.

In this sense, the environment in which they are welcomed plays an important role. It is there that they can discover models, values, create beautiful friendships, and, above all, find answers to their thirst for God. Our mission is to offer the young women and men a systematic, patient, and discreet accompaniment so that they may gradually discover the Father's design for them.

Every community, in the context in which it lives and works, has the task of prolonging the Salesian charism over time, so that it continues to be fruitful for many young people. It is an alibi to resign oneself to the fact that times have changed and that young women are no longer attracted by consecrated life. It is the Lord who leads human affairs. He knows what is necessary for the salvation of humanity, but we cannot shirk our responsibility to think and prepare the future with the light that the Holy Spirit gives us, if we invoke Him with an upright heart, with apostolic ardor, full of hope.

I invite you to read again Article 73 of the Constitutions, of which I quote only a part:

*“In gratitude to God for having called us  
to the life of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians  
let us be especially responsible  
for vocations to our Institute.  
Let us ask for vocations by incessant prayer  
and by our own joyful and constant fidelity.”*

### **The educative motherhood of Mary Domenica Mazzarello**

We draw on our charismatic heritage and look to Mother Mazzarello, a woman of great ability in accompanying and guiding the young women and Sisters.

It is interesting to note that in the first election as Superior General of our Institute, Don Bosco convinced her to accept the task as guide, telling her that Mary Help of Christians would be the true Superior and she would simply be the Vicar.

We all know how reassuring this statement was for her to agree. It is not secondary, however, to note how, even in her humility, Mary Domenica Mazzarello lets herself be called "Mother", and that she defines herself as such in signing the letters to her distant daughters, thus identifying herself with this mission.

From the beginning, she remains a formative guide for the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and the Salesians. Fr. Lemoyne, a few days after the death of Mother, states that she was "a woman endowed with special gifts in the direction of souls, so much so, as to amaze the Founder himself"

(*Cronistoria* III, 411). He also describes her as a person with special gifts and great docility to the Holy Spirit.

The process of discernment that she knows how to wisely accompany in young women has a clear vocation-missionary connotation. She finds in Mary, Mother and Teacher, a great help, and learns from her the art of taking care of each one.

When in letter 48 she exposes to Don Bosco her concern for the formation of young Sisters, but also of young women in formation, she demonstrates realism and knowledge of the people entrusted to her, "They are still in need of spiritual and professional formation, so we must have patience." (L 48,11).

"There are many novices and postulants, but they are very much in need of formation and supervision, since a lot of them have brought many small passions from the world. These, if not corrected, are an obstacle to perfection and can spread to the others as well." (L 48,8).

Fr. Ferdinando Maccono, writing to the Postulator of the Causes of the Saints, describes the contribution of Mother Mazzarello to the first community of the FMA. "Who reads carefully the life of Mother Mazzarello sees that the Founder is Don Bosco; but who prepared the future religious? Who formed them? Who induced them to hold dear sacrifice, to love even hunger, very poor, even miserable as they were? Who supported them in the most difficult moments when everything seemed to collapse? It was Mazzarello. Don Bosco, for his character, for criteria, conflicts, and rumors with the Curia of Turin, visited Mornese a few times, about fifteen times in all. Who did it was Mazzarello" (*Letter to Fr. Francesco Tomasetti, 23 March 1935, in MACCONO F., Documents and Memoirs around the title of Co-foundress conferred on M. D. Mazzarello, in ACS (Mazzarello 9, folder 5)*).

Let us not forget that for Mother Mazzarello humility, the struggle against individualism and a worldly mentality, fraternal affection, charity without limits, unity-communion, unconditional sacrifice for the Gospel, joy of the upright heart full of Jesus are the characteristics of the Daughter of Mary Help of Christians and of the communities, so that they may be fruitful in good for young women and capable of accompanying others in vocational discernment. Above all, let us let this Word resound in our hearts, "Without me you can do nothing", which Mother Mazzarello makes arrive beyond the sea in her last letters. "Always consider that you are not capable of doing anything and that which you seem to know is the hand of God working in you. Without Him, we can do only evil" (L 66.2).

It is a clear and maternal invitation to prayer "assiduously and in agreement", so that the Lord makes our communities fruitful, according to His will. They will thus be authentic vocational communities.

Soon, we will begin the path of Advent that will lead us to welcome the immeasurable mystery of love of the Incarnation of Jesus. May Mary, Immaculate and Mother, who knows how to help us, guide our steps towards Bethlehem together with all the children, young people, educating communities, and those who share with us the Salesian charism.

Also, on behalf of the Sisters of the General Council, I take this opportunity to wish a holy Christmas of peace and hope to you, your loved ones, the educating communities, families, children, young people, and youth who come to our homes, especially those in the most difficult situations.

We hope to live together Jubilee 2025, which is about to begin, as Pilgrims of hope.

A special greeting to the Vicar of the Rector Major, Fr. Stefano Martoglio, to the Salesian Confreres, and members of the Salesian Family.

We are particularly close to the Sisters and communities who live in difficult situations, due to wars, violence, natural disasters, poverty. On all humanity we invoke with faith the gift of a true and lasting peace.

I greet you with affection.

Rome, 24 November 2024

Aff.ma Madre