

In fidelity to God and the Constitutions is our joy

Dearest Sisters,

The Lenten journey we are living is an invitation to return to God with all our heart, in the certainty that He is merciful and great in love (cf. Joel 2:12-13). In this time of grace, we are invited to experience the depth of His immense mercy. Jesus showed us the face of the merciful Father so that in the docility of our heart, we might renew ourselves inwardly and, through gestures of concrete charity, transmit it to those whom we meet on our way. Conversion, of which the liturgy speaks to us in this privileged period of penance and purification, is essentially a return to the radical choice of the Lord in full fidelity, to accept as Moses did, His own declaration, "I am the Lord your God" (Ex 20:2).

In the Lenten period of conversion and return to the essential, I would like us to receive as a call to a new vocational fecundity the recent text, *The Constitutions of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians: a journey of holiness in daily life*.

Our Covenant with God

The Constitutions, like the Bible, teach us to read the history of the world, of the Church, of the Institute as a history of salvation. Our personal history and that of our communities is a history of salvation, of the Covenant. It is the fabric on which God acts and works, where He works great things with simple and poor creatures as we all are. Our daily life is full of signs to be discovered, deciphered, accepted as a gift, but sometimes fragmentation, superficiality, haste, prevent us from reaching this unified and dynamic vision of our existence. Today's mentality sometimes leads us to think that the rules and discipline prevent us from enjoying the dream of being Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, holy, life-giving, and therefore happy here and now.

Fidelity to the Constitutions is the personal and free response to God's call, therefore we need to become more familiar with the style of the Covenant and of gratuitousness, as He Himself assures Moses on Sinai: *"You have seen how I treated the Egyptians and how I bore you up on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now, if you obey me completely and keep my covenant, you will be my treasured possession among all peoples, though all the earth is mine!"* (Ex 19: 4-5).

Are we convinced that the missionary and vocational fecundity of the Institute passes through the full assumption of the Constitutions? *Are we aware that they are for us the mediation of a charismatic project, a life plan shaped on the Gospel, rather than a collection of laws to be observed?*

The Constitutions are the "pact of our covenant with God" (C 173), the sure guide to holiness. They are the path of communion, an experience that gives our lives and our communities the breath of universality in love. Fidelity to the Covenant is the foundation of unity and consistency in our being and, at the same time, of communion within the Institute. It guides the inculturation of the charism and opens up interculturality in a missionary dimension. For this reason, Mother

Mazzarello invoked for every Daughter of Mary Help of Christians a *big and generous heart*, capable of living an unconditional donation and building the community day after day in silent and humble fidelity, expressing the best of oneself.

Gift of Don Bosco and of Mother Mazzarello

In the spiritual Testament of Don Bosco, we find this important request, "If you have loved me in the past, continue to love me in the future with the exact observance of our Rule" (*MB XVIII*, 570). Also in Mother Mazzarello, we discover the concern for an observance that is not an external formality and, at the same time, that guarantees a path of full fidelity. To a departing missionary, Sister Giuseppina Pacotto, she recommended, "Be careful to observe our holy Rule well and make sure that everyone is most exact in this observance. Never allow the least infringement or relaxation of the Rule to be introduced for any reason whatever" (*L 64,3*).

To be faithful to the Constitutions, therefore, is to realize the dream of our Founders. There is, in fact, an indissoluble link between Constitutions and charismatic identity. In our life project, through various facets, the identity of the Daughter of Mary Help of Christians emerges in the Church, in society, and in the charismatic mission. Each article outlines a model of a consecrated woman who, standing among the people, expresses the mysticism of a passionate love for Jesus. She cultivates a joyful missionary dedication, welcomed in its wealth and also with its struggles.

The Constitutions offer us a core of meanings and values, around which people, communities, and cultures can meet and converge. This nucleus is the Word of God; it is the charism of the Institute.

From the first articles, the Constitutions present the figure of the Founder, Don Bosco, and that of the Cofounder, Mother Mazzarello, as persons open to the gift of the Spirit, inserted and active in salvation history. Precisely because they were open to the calls of God, they were able to hear the cry of the young people of their time, their sometimes-unexpressed expectations, their dreams. Only if you are totally "open" to God are you really open to humanity. Total gift to the little ones and the poor is the experience of the Founders, who became father and teacher the one, mother and Cofounder the other. They are titles attributed, in the history of spirituality, to those who truly generate life, a life that lasts in time and continues to multiply the good. We can rightly say that of our Founders, history in all its expressions, has been their constant interlocutor and so it must be also for each of us today, for the educating communities who have at heart, the authentic happiness of the young generations.

Our founders dreamed of open and flexible communities, capable of great horizons. "Let us carry out our mission in the unity of charism and the plurality of socio-cultural situations with that adaptability, courage, and creativity that impelled Don Bosco to go out to meet young people" (*C 76*). We are a family with a strong missionary impulse, because the core of the charism is apostolic charity inspired by the charity of Christ, the Good Shepherd (cf. *C 1*) and on the educational passion of Don Bosco, gift of the Spirit, that gave him a heart as great as the sands of the seashore, making him the father and teacher of a multitude of young people. The same experience of apostolic charity is lived in creative fidelity by Mary Domenica Mazzarello (cf. *C 2*). Both dedicated themselves to the least and the poorest (cf. *C 6*) in the spirit of the *da mihi animas cetera tolle*. It is a charity that has an ecclesial, missionary, and intercultural breath.

The *da mihi animas cetera tolle* and the *I entrust them to you*, become a clear and courageous proclamation of the Lord Jesus, in the search for His face in every person, without preconceptions or prejudices, but with a free heart, passionate for the good of all, because all are children of God, loved and saved by Jesus for whom we wish to give our lives unconditionally.

The respect and appreciation for each person are in close connection with poverty and the proclamation of the Kingdom of God. They go hand in hand with conversion of heart, with sobriety of life, and love for the poor.

Don Bosco is interested that his children be true religious, distinguished by poverty and detachment; that they not be moved by pride and arrogance. Hence the insistence on a de facto poverty as a prerequisite for the mission: "Let the world know that you are poor in clothing, food, and housing, and you will be rich in the face of God and become masters of the hearts of people" (*MB XI*, 390).

In the Conference on poverty, Mother Mazzarello expresses, with other nuances, the same concern as Don Bosco, [...] God forbid that all this [the changes in the life of the FMA] should make us lose the good spirit, the spirit of Don Bosco, the spirit of our Jesus. For Heaven's sake, my daughters, even in the midst of the conveniences that the Congregation will offer you, be poor in spirit, using what is given to you and provided for your use, without attachment to the things themselves. Use them with your spirit ready to leave them if obedience so wills; use them with a spirit willing to suffer the consequences of their lack and insufficiency. For Heaven's sake, even in the midst of greater comforts, continue to love, really and practically, the poverty that our Redeemer taught us; the spirit that has been so well demonstrated by our good father, Don Bosco" (*Cron III*, 266).

Passing from written text to lived text

In 2015, we received the last re-edition of the text of the Constitutions, approved by CG XXIII. This text, no less sacred than the first elaborated by the Founder, expresses what has been lived for more than a century, preserved, deepened, and constantly developed in harmony with the journey of the Church and with the new challenges of the time.

Today, as ten years ago, we receive the Practical Commentary on the Constitutions, which can help us to make more concrete, the commitment to move from the written text to the lived text, in the changed historical situations compared to the origins, but always of great actuality.

On his last visit to the house in Nizza Monferrato, in August 1885, Don Bosco spoke to the Sisters about the Cross and the joy of carrying it. He also recommended the practice of the holy Rule: "Put your Rule into practice, and I repeat again, that you will never regret it." "Be cheerful, my dear daughters, healthy and holy, and always get along with each other" (*MB XVII*, 556). "Our Lady is truly here, here among you! Our Lady walks in this house and covers it with her mantle" (*MB XVII*, 557).

We will be more and more the living memory of Mary, the more our life will be a faithful transparency of the spirit of Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello.

Don Bosco, handing over to the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians the printed text of the first Rules of the Institute, wrote, "Hold dear the rules that govern you. Read them, meditate on them, but above all, never forget that it would be worth nothing knowing them even by heart, if you then do not put them into practice. Therefore, each one give herself the liveliest solicitude to observe them promptly; to this is aimed the vigilance and the zeal of the Superior; to this is aimed the diligence and the commitment of the subjects. In doing so, you will find peace of heart in your Congregation; you will walk the way to Heaven, and you will make yourselves holy" (*Letter to the FMA*, 8 December 1878, in *Cron III*, 411-412, Attachment n. 4).

Recalling the certainty of Don Bosco, "It is Mary who guides us" (*MB XVIII*, 439), we affirm our total trust in the Immaculate Virgin Help of Christians, whom he himself has indicated as a shining model of donation to God and to the young.

The Lenten journey leads us towards the celebration of the Lord's Paschal Mystery, which brought to completion the ancient Jubilee and inaugurated for us the new time of grace. We immerse ourselves in the light of the boundless love of the Father with full confidence and joy, in the great hope of being daughters in the Son and belonging to Him forever. May the women of

Easter morning help us; may you, our Mother and Helper, help us to open and understand the energy of life and salvation that emanates from the radiance of this great mystery.

Happy Easter to all of you, Sisters, your loved ones, the children and young people of our homes, associations, educating communities, all collaborators, and especially priests who in various parts of the world give us the gift of the Word of God, of the Bread of life, of the Father's Forgiveness.

In this climate, we feel in full communion with all the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, children, young people, adults, families who are preparing to live the *World Day of Gratitude*, enlightened by the Word of God that has been proposed to us by the Sisters of Vietnam, where we will celebrate this event: *Lighting the Gospel of Hope*.

A heartfelt thank you to Sister María del Rosario García Ribas - Vicar General - for the useful indications she has communicated to us, so that this annual appointment may be a *new family encounter*, because new is our will to shine with Easter light the charism that has been handed over to us and which, as a Salesian Family, we wish to make ever more luminous and contagious.

We continue to pray for Pope Francis, so that the Lord may sustain him in recovering his health and give him the strength necessary to live this moment of physical fragility and trial, certain that the Lord is all his hope. Even in this hour, he becomes for us a school of coherence, of faith, and of great love for the Church and for the world thirsting for peace. I think that in everyone, the words said at the *Angelus* on 16 March 2025, from the "Agostino Gemelli" Hospital have been engraved on us, "Our physical body is weak, but even so, nothing can prevent us from loving, praying, giving ourselves, being for each other, in the faith, signs of luminous hope."

With this strong evangelical and missionary witness, which Pope Francis gives us with deep humanity and with the heart of a Father and Pastor, I renew to all my best wishes for a holy Easter, also in the name of the Sisters of the General Council.

Rome, 24 March 2025

Aff.ly Mother