

## **Love for the Pope, guarantee of ecclesial communion**

Dearest Sisters,

In this circular, I would like to renew my thanks to Sister Maria Hoang Thi Thu Ha and the Sisters of "*Mary Help of Christians*" Province of Vietnam for their strong and passionate commitment in the realization of the World Day of Gratitude. We all have in our minds and hearts the images of beauty, elegance, and grace with which the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, young people, children, and adults have interpreted and expressed the feelings of gratitude of the Institute, especially of the many young people who live in our houses all over the world.

I appreciated the capacity for involvement, both in the preparation and implementation of the event, of Past Pupils, benefactors, parents, priests, and many other people. This indicates how the presence of our Sisters is open at an ecclesial and social level, fruitful of Salesianity and the ability to open the hearts of young people to a motivated, joyful, evangelical hope.

I had longed to meet them and, in those days, I could experience their affection and the lively sense of belonging and communion that characterizes them. Through the delicacy, the propriety of gestures, and the vivacity typical of that land, they had the opportunity to make known to our realities present in every part of the world the typical expressions of the Vietnamese culture. We thank the Lord for so much good sown in the hearts of the people and we invoke on this Province all the blessings of Heaven.

### **In memory of Pope Francis**

The atmosphere in which the Feast of Gratitude took place was marked by the unexpected death of Pope Francis, which left us surprised and painfully stunned. No one could remain indifferent, believers and non-believers, people belonging to other religions, humble and illustrious people, children, young people, and adults, we all felt a bit like orphans. Francis was a Pope who incarnated the traits of the Good Shepherd - a Dad for all - and, among the many gifts he left us, there is the grace of the Jubilee that asks us to be "Pilgrims of hope". It is the theme that best responds, at this moment, to the needs of a lost and wounded humanity that often lives without hope.

Hope makes us dream of a new humanity, makes us courageous, helps us to know how to wait for the times of God, to have His patience. Pope Francis lived this way, giving love and hope, giving himself to all, without saving anything for himself, drawing this strength from the Lord Jesus and from his filial trust in Mary, Mother and Helper. It is a love that goes back to the time when, as Archbishop of Buenos Aires, then Cardinal Bergoglio, every May 24 he celebrated the solemn Mass for the feast of the Help of Christians in the Marian Basilica located in the district of Almagro, where he had been baptized and where he had learned to love the Mother of God. We thank the Lord for having given us as Father and Pastor for twelve years and for his pontificate, lived intensely at the service of the Church and of all humanity.

As Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, we cherish his message and his kindness, which was concretized in a unique way during the XXIV General Chapter with his surprise visit. We cannot forget the attention to each person, from the Chapter Sisters to the community, to the lay collaborators of the General House. For everyone he had a smile, a look, a word, a blessing. We are

left with the nostalgia of his paternal presence, simple and original at the same time, and the great desire not to betray his heritage, continuing the path in the direction that he himself has shown us. Thus, we do not feel like orphans, but heirs of a precious life full of timeless values, rich in light and hope.

### **You are Peter**

In the passage from the Gospel of Matthew 16:13-20, we are faced with the confession of Peter who recognizes in Jesus the Christ, the Son of the living God. And Jesus responds to Peter by investing him with a unique and surprising power, "You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church and the powers of hell will not prevail against it."

From a human point of view, Jesus could have chosen as the foundation of His Church other men, perhaps more influential, richer, and more capable than Peter. Yet, he chose Simon, the fisherman, in whom the other disciples immediately recognized the Vicar of Jesus and *the first* among all, with the mission to confirm them in the faith and keep them in communion.

Commenting on this gospel passage, Pope Saint Leo the Great puts in the mouth of Jesus some expressions that explain the primacy of Peter, his participation in the power of Jesus, and its continuity in time. "As my Father has revealed to you my divinity, likewise I now make you know your dignity. You are Peter. I, who am the inviolable stone, the cornerstone that has made two peoples one thing; I, who am the foundation out of which no one can build, say to you, Peter, who are also a stone, because you will be strengthened by my power to such an extent that what belongs to Me by My own power is common to both of us through your participation with Me. Upon this stone I will build my church and the power of hell will not destroy it. It means that on this fortress, I will build the eternal temple and the sublimity of my Church, which will reach heaven and rise on the firmness of the faith of Peter" (Saint Leo the Great, Sermon 4 on the anniversary of his ordination, 2-3).

It is the miracle of meeting Jesus and accepting a unique mission. To this consignment must be added the gift of the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. They have a positive function: to *bind and unbind*. *Bind* to what is important and *unbind* what does not allow us to live in fullness. It is the grace of belonging to a living Church, founded on the rock of Peter. It is Peter who has the keys; he is the first of that small circle of people who have invested their lives in following Jesus of Nazareth. It is he who, in his ardent love for the Master, transforms the pain of betrayal into a profession of firm, courageous, and fearless faith in Jesus and His message of mercy and salvation, of love and fraternity. Peter is the *Stone* that gives solidity to all the other stones of the great building which is the Church: *living stones* that even today choose with determination and perseverance to follow the Master.

### **Love for the Pope in Salesian spirituality**

In the Salesian Family, and in our Institute, love for the Pope is sincere love for Peter as Vicar of Christ, head of the Church, his Bride.

Regarding this in our *Constitutions*, we find clear guidelines for living the commitment of baptized and consecrated women: The Vicar of Christ, the supreme Pastor of the whole Church, is our first Superior with regard to religious life. Each of us will show him the same love that characterized Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello accepting his teaching in filial loyalty, obeying him even in virtue of the vow. Let us educate young people to accept his word and bear witness to it with faith and courage" (C 109).

Love and fidelity to the Pope are indispensable aspects of our charism and, therefore, dimensions deeply rooted in our spirituality. Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello were the first to give us the example of filial love for the Pope, obedience and docility to his Magisterium. They knew that this

is a guarantee of communion in the Church. In fact, the Institute living and working is at the service of the ecclesial community in any part of the world.

We are asked for total adhesion, full of love. This is why we say "filial" to the Magisterium of the Pope, both in our life by virtue of the vow of obedience, and in the educative and evangelizing mission, as well as in witnessing to anyone and everywhere.

Our *Regulations* invite us to express fidelity to this aspect of Salesian tradition with the annual celebration of the "Pope's Feast day", as an occasion of great educative value and as an occasion for a more intense prayer for Him who is Father, Shepherd, and Teacher (cf. *R* 53).

A concrete sign of love for the Pope is for all of us the commitment to value, study, transmit, and put into practice the documents of his Magisterium (cf. *R* 54) and to pray for him every day (cf. *R* 24).

As confirmation of the love and fidelity we owe to the Holy Father, as our Founder taught us, I report the expressions very significant of Pope Francis in his visit to the city of Turin: "About Don Bosco you can say so much! But today I would like to emphasize only three features: the trust in divine Providence; the vocation to be priests of young people especially the poorest; the loyal and active service to the Church, particularly to the person of the Successor of Peter. [...] Don Bosco has always been docile and faithful to the Church and the Pope, following their suggestions and pastoral directions. Today the Church turns to you, spiritual sons and daughters of this great Saint, and in a concrete way invites you to go out, to go again and again to find young people where they live" (Pope Francis to the Salesians and the FMA, Turin, 21 June 2015).

We know the "three loves" of Don Bosco: the Eucharist, Mary Help of Christians, the Pope. For Don Bosco, it was a constant commitment to support the Holy Father Pius IX in his many trials, illuminating him in tragic moments for the Church, defending his authority, rights, and the Magisterium. He wanted his religious family to support the authority of the Pope at a time when, due to many historical events, this was being questioned. "Purpose of the Congregation: to support the authority of the Holy See" (*MB* XVIII 477, 489, 491; *MB* VII 622; *MB* X 762).

"When [the Pope] manifests a desire to us, this is a command for us" (*MB* V 573, 874). "The Pope's word must be our rule in all things" (*MB* VI 494). "God free you from saying a word or doing the slightest action that can even be interpreted as against the infallible teachings of the Supreme See of Peter" (*Reminders to the Missionaries*, in *MB* XI 387).

When Don Bosco went to Rome, although very poor, he brought with him money offerings, collected with zeal even among his young people. He once offered the Pope a thousand-franc ticket for Peter's Pence, and when he received it, Pius IX exclaimed: "Oh, this is wonderful! that you, who always have an empty purse, bring money to me, who always has an empty box" (*MB* IX 808).

We know that the love of Don Bosco and his dedication to the Church were constantly reciprocated by the trust of the Popes. Pius IX even asked him to present a list of possible Bishops who could be suitable for facing the political challenges of one of the most critical moments in Italian history.

In an audience, Leo XIII, welcomed Don Bosco with paternal goodness and promised him that he would not only become a Salesian Cooperator, but a Salesian operator! (*MB* XVII 103). In fact, he generously collaborated with the mission of Don Bosco during the last ten years of our Founder's life, always treating him with great cordiality. He himself appointed Fr. John Cagliero Apostolic Vicar of North Patagonia and, in the first audience granted to Fr. Michele Rua, he expressed his conviction regarding the holiness of Don Bosco and promised to take to heart the consolidation of the Society of St. Francis di Sales.

In the *Cronistoria*, from the beginning, Mother Mazzarello and the first FMA communities shared with Don Bosco, love for the Pope and fidelity to his Magisterium. There are many episodes that bear witness to the affection, sincere adherence to the Pope's Magisterium, and lively sense of belonging to the Church. In December 1875, she wrote a Christmas letter to the Pope on behalf of the community (cf. *L* 4,13).

Mother Mazzarello, following the dialogue, moved and humble, she said in a low voice, without taking her gaze away from the figure of Pius IX, "Oh Lord, bless your Vicar!" When Fr. Cagliero presented the Superior General of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians to him, the Pope congratulated her and the Sisters. He added with tenderness that they were fortunate and blessed by the Lord, because they were daughters of Don Bosco. He added that they too would have a vast field of evangelical work and that, as true caring and loving mothers, they would accomplish great good. To the missionaries, he left the memory of being like "the large basins of the fountains, which receive water and pour it out for the benefit of all; basins of virtue and knowledge." And he put his hands on the head of each one, and paternally added, "God bless you, so that you may do much, much good!" The missionaries were moved and amazed. Mother did not speak and upon leaving, questioned by the Sisters on the impression she received, she expressed her admiration for the great goodness of the Pope (cf. *Cronistoria* II 283-284).

### **Our greetings to Pope Leo XIV**

With a heart full of gratitude, we thank Pope Leo XIV for having accepted the call to be the Vicar of Christ, Bishop of Rome, Pastor and Guide of the people of God. Let us invoke upon him and his Petrine Ministry the gift of the Holy Spirit, so that he may be illumined and sustained. We welcome his first message as personally addressed to each of us and renew our full availability and fidelity to his Magisterium, just as our Founders have taught us, and our heart as Daughters of Mary Help of Christians desire: "Peace be with you all! Dear brothers and sisters, this is the first greeting of the Risen Christ, the Good Shepherd who gave His life for God's flock. I too would like this greeting of peace to enter your hearts, reach your families, all people wherever they are, all peoples, all the earth. Peace be with you!" (First Blessing "*Urbi et Orbi*", 8 May 2025).

On 24 May, I will have the joy of being in the Basilica in Turin and I will entrust to Mary Help of Christians, Mother of the Church, Our Lady of difficult times, Pope Leo XIV, so that God and Mary may be his help and comfort at this time and always! I will also entrust to Mary, peace among peoples, our communities that live in suffering and difficulties, the young people whom we love with special charismatic predilection.

Happy feast of Mary Help of Christians to you, your families, and the educating communities. May the Lord fill us with His grace and grant us the capacity to live intensely the present and to glimpse a future of new hope.

I greet you with affection and gratitude.

Rome, 24 May 2025

Aff.ly Mother

### **New Provincials 2025**

#### **Europe**

Province "Our Lady Queen of Ireland"  
*Sister Sarah O'Rourke*

IRL