

THE MESSAGE OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

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HAVING DEEP ROOTS, BEING FLEXIBLE, AND BEING RICH IN WHAT IS ESSENTIAL

I shall never forget the wise life lesson which the fir trees of the beautiful forest of Vallombrosa gave me

My cordial greetings, dear readers, and all the members of our dear Salesian Family. I wish to offer you in this issue of the *Salesian Bulletin* a reflection that I made from a very concrete experience I had recently - a lesson from nature.

In July, I had the opportunity to spend a serene and peaceful week of spiritual retreat with the other members of the General Council. We were staying near Florence at the Vallombrosian Monastery in – Vallombrosa! It is a very simple and austere place where one can find the beauty of nature 1000 meters (3300 feet) above sea level. It is a place that invites prayer as it is very cool for it is surrounded by thousands and thousands of fir trees – many of which are more than 20 meters high (65 feet). It is one of the most important forested areas of Italy for it provides much oxygen back to the atmosphere.

It was here that I learned the following lesson in biology, and which left its mark on me. I noticed that those pine trees were very tall and stood very straight, but their foliage was very sparse, with few branches and few needles. It is almost as if to say that they have only what is essential to be able to live and to grow through the proper functioning of their leaves and cells.

I asked an expert about these particulars, and he told me that those pine trees have three most special characteristics. They have **very deep roots, a very flexible trunk, and a very small canopy (branches and leaves)**.

The reason for all of this made me marvel all the more.

The roots of these fir trees must be very deep to enable the trees to find moisture and water, most especially in the summer when the soil is arid due to searing temperatures, even in the mountains.

The tall trunks, many even 25 meters (85 feet) tall as he told me, mandate that they be very flexible so that they can sway when at the mercy of bad, windy weather. If they were stiff or rigid and without this flexibility - made even more critical due to their great height - they would easily break.

Finally, one could say that having a very skimpy canopy is an evolutionary trait acquired to protect the tree during heavy snowfalls. If they were full, with many branches and leaves, they would break under the weight of the snow and put the entire tree in danger.

I remained awestruck. Explained in this way, the reason for their structure was obvious. My thoughts turned immediately to us. I said to myself: what an incredible metaphor; what a life lesson

from nature for us humans!

If we can learn how to live according to these three characteristics (i.e., with deep roots and a great interiority which permit us to find the "freshwater" of serenity, of calm, and of peace, even in difficult days or moments that are just plain disagreeable to us), we will not collapse.

If we are able to be flexible in what matters and versatile when it concerns what is at stake is important; when we can replace intransigence with dialogue, listening, patience, and closeness born of love – we will not easily break.

If we truly seek only what is essential, that is to say, what is authentic, what is absolutely necessary, and what fills us the most, many other things will become totally relative and we will feel fuller and richer and filled in every sense of the word.

It seems to me that this lesson taken from nature, comes at a very opportune moment during this year in which we are **inviting families to be families that are schools of life and of love**. This lesson is also valid for personal relationships, for the bonds within the home, for school and education, and for the accompaniment of children.

Indeed, it is most fitting for our love relationships and friendships, as well as being apropos for our work relationships. In short – it is right whenever who we are, how we are, and how we develop and mature are in play.

I believe that I will not easily forget this lesson whenever I contemplate a forest, especially one of tall and straight fir trees.

At the same time that I greet you all with cordiality, I invite you to marvel a bit, if you wish, at this beautiful lesson from nature itself. What a beautiful footprint the Creator has left on it.

May you be happy!

