

Entrust, have trust, and smile!

**Letter on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the foundation
of the Association of Mary Help of Christians (ADMA) – 18 April 1869**

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Rome, 18 April 2019

Holy Thursday

«My Dear Sons in Jesus Christ,

The Lord knows how much I would like to see you, to be among you, to speak with you about our concerns and to find consolation in the shared trust we have in one another. But unfortunately my dear Sons, my reduced energy, the remaining effects of previous illnesses, the important business affairs in France I have to attend to prevent me, at least for the present, from following the signs of my affection for you.

Not being able therefore to be with you all in person, I am sending you this letter, and I am sure you will be pleased that I am remembering you all. Just as you are all my hope, so too are you my pride and my support. Therefore since I want to see you all grow more in zeal and in merit before God each day, I shall not fail to suggest to you every so often some of the means I believe to be the best so that your ministry may be ever more fruitful.»¹

I wanted to begin this letter not with my own words but with those of our beloved Father, and with the same affection and large heart with which he wrote to his Sons in 1885. With the same feelings of closeness, I want to reach out to each one of you dear brothers and sisters of the whole Salesian Family as I write this *Letter on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the founding of the Association of Mary Help of Christians (ADMA)* and a year after the 150th anniversary of the consecration of the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians in Valdocco, in this way remembering our Father in a special way.

Pope Francis also reminds us of this: «The memory of St John Bosco is alive in the Church. He is remembered as the founder of the Salesian Congregation, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, the Association of the Salesian Cooperators, and the Association of Mary Help of Christians and as the father of the present-day Salesian Family»². The intuition of our Father has in fact led to the coinciding of the event 150 years ago of the foundation of the *Association of the Devotees of Mary Help of Christians* with that of the Basilica dedicated to her. It seems to me that this anniversary is sufficient justification for this letter of mine which is in line with others written by my predecessors, and can help us to revive in our hearts the same love for the Mother of God that guided Don Bosco throughout his whole life, as we remember that without Mary Help of Christians we would be something different but certainly not Salesians and the Salesian Family!

One of the most beautiful experiences I have had this year of animating the Salesian Congregation and visiting so many countries in the world has been that of getting to know the wonderful situation of the Salesian Family that the Holy Spirit continues to raise up and sustain and within that the consolidation of the groups of the devotees of Mary Help of Christians. I have found it very moving to see this group in the most remote parts of the world. It is very moving to make contact with the many young people who have founded *ADMA Youth* and who want to make the valuable contribution of their vision and their efforts to this beautiful expression of devotion to our Mother so loved by Don Bosco himself. It moves me also to be able to visit, as I shall again in

¹ G. BOSCO, *Circolare ai Salesiani sulla diffusione dei buoni libri*, in ISS, *Fonti. Don Bosco e la sua opera*, LAS, Roma 2014, p. 481.

² FRANCIS, *Like Don Bosco with the young and for the young. Letter of the Holy Father Francis to the Rector Major of the Salesians on the bicentenary of the birth of Saint John Bosco*, AGC n. 421 p 104.

this month of April, such unimaginable places as the land of the Bororo people, the same place where two brothers, Fr Rudolf Lukenbein and the Indian Simão Cristao Bororo, were martyred – and to meet a fine group of ADMA: men, women, and young people, who at the end of the Mass sang in that holy place, to Mary Help of Christians in the language of their own people. The glory proclaimed by the Mother has reached even this place: «Here is my house and hence my glory will come forth.»³

It was GC21 that invited us to renew the Marian dimension of our vocation, examining our convictions and making a careful evaluation of our devotion to the Help of Christians as Salesians of Don Bosco. Certainly this can also be a useful proposal for the whole Salesian Family throughout the world so as to respond in our own days to the appeal Fr Egidio Viganò made in his time when he invited us to «make a place for Our Lady in our home.»⁴

With the desire to make Mary Help of Christians ever more at home with us, in the following pages I offer you a simple reflection on our attachment to the Eucharist and to Mary Help of Christians, on the path followed in these 150 years, on the popular nature of the Salesian charism that has been handed on to us as a treasure to be guarded, and on the path to be followed from Mary's house to our own homes⁵.

It gives me great joy to know that following in these footsteps, we are also being faithful to the journey undertaken by Don Bosco and that, as we surely know, devotion to the Mother of God has been especially characteristic and had deeply marked the whole of Don Bosco's spirituality.

1. ANCHORED IN THE EUCHARIST AND IN MARY HELP OF CHRISTIANS

«In the Church in Turin dedicated to Mary Help of Christians, there has been canonically erected with the authorization of the Archbishop of Turin an Association of Mary's clients; the members of the Association aim at promoting the glories of the divine Mother of the Saviour in order to merit her protection in life and particularly at the moment of death. They have two special objectives: to spread devotion to the Blessed Virgin and veneration of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament.»⁶

These are the opening words of the Regulations written by Don Bosco for the erection of the *Association of the Devotees of Mary Help of Christians*, founded by him and approved by the Archbishop of Turin, Alessandro Riccardi, on 18 April 1869, the 150th anniversary of the foundation of which is being celebrated.

It is significant that this anniversary coincides this year with Holy Thursday, underlining how veneration of the Eucharist together with devotion to the Immaculate Help of Christians are fundamental to the spirituality and to the life of the Association. The reference is to the two columns of the Salesian educational system and spirituality. The Christ who dominates the life of Don Bosco is above all the Jesus living and present in the Eucharist, the Bread of life, the Son of Mary, Mother of God and of the Church. Don Bosco lived by this presence and in this presence. The Eucharist, sacrifice and Sacrament, the Eucharist by which to be fed, the Eucharist the real and adorable presence is in the life of Don Bosco strength and consolation, living source of peace and at the same time the powerhouse of activity. On the journey towards growth for himself and for his boys, there is no path to holiness without the Eucharist. The Eucharist is the key stone for the radical conversion of heart to the love of God. The centrality of Christ in the Salesian Spirit is lived with an extraordinary sensitivity for contemplation and love of the Eucharist.

1.1. In the footsteps of Saint Francis of Sales

When Don Bosco decided to found a Marian association, he thought of the members as “devotees” of Mary Help of Christians. This little word antiquated and somewhat out of fashion nowadays, is the key to entering into the burning heart of the relationship that links Don Bosco with the Help of Christians. Saint Francis of Sales teaches that “true devotion” is concerned first and foremost with the love of God. In fact, it is precisely the authentic love that we receive from God (grace) that enables us to correspond to His gifts (charity). For this reason, the “devotees” are those who “fly” along the path of holiness, in so far as “true devotion” brings to perfection in them every action and every work from the smallest to the greatest, making the “devotees” more

³ Cf. *BM* II, 191.

⁴ E. VIGANÒ, *Mary renews the Salesian Family of Don Bosco* (letter published in *ACS* n. 289).

⁵ I take this opportunity to thank the Salesians, the FMA and the ADMA of Valdocco for the valuable contribution they offered me as a result of the reflection they carried out at the dawn of this 150th anniversary.

⁶ *Letture Cattoliche*, Anno XVII (Maggio), Fasc. V, pp. 48-50.

friendly and pleasant, more courageous and ready for self-donation, each one according to their own vocation and mission in the Church.⁷

In fact, Saint Francis of Sales, writing *Philothea* with the subtitle *Introduction to the devout life*, proposes a path of Christian life marked by great joy and spiritual depth in which devotion is certainly in no way devotionalism: it is “holiness lived as charity.” Saint Francis of Sales clearly expresses his opinion on this matter: «Devotion is nothing else but that spiritual alertness and vivacity which enables us to cooperate with charity promptly and wholeheartedly.»⁸ Reading carefully one understands that the protagonist of devotion is Jesus, who with his love – his charity – “accomplishes in us his works” and does so in such a way that “we work through it.” Being devotees therefore means knowing how to acquire a habitual readiness for charity. This is only possible if at least in the depth of the heart we remain always immersed in Jesus so that we are able to follow promptly the inspirations that he gives us.

In his description of the devout, Saint Francis of Sales tells us that «they are either men with angelic souls or angels with human bodies; though not young they seem so being full of vigor and spiritual agility; they have wings to soar up to God by prayer, yet feet to walk among men edifying them by their holiness. They have beautiful and cheerful faces because they receive all things with happiness and contentment. Their legs and arms and heads are uncovered because all they think and feel and do is unencumbered by any other thought than that of pleasing God, The rest of their body is covered with a beautiful light robe to show that they do make use of earthly things but only of what is really necessary using with moderation what befits their state.»⁹

Here we seem to be hearing once again the words of Fr Eugene Ceria, when he describes how Don Bosco used to live in union with God: «This seems to have been his special gift, in fact, never to let himself be distracted from the loving thought of the Lord no matter how many, serious and uninterrupted might have been his occupations.»¹⁰ Fr Ceria concludes by affirming that every action in the life of Don Bosco no matter what he was doing was prayer.

Devotion is a path that aims high, to the foundations of holiness and of the Salesian charism, and represents that “be cheerful” that we can try to live already here on earth and then enjoy forever in heaven. Naturally such a beautiful plan while, on the one hand, it fascinates us, can make us afraid to the point of discouraging us from starting it. In response to this possible temptation, Saint Francis of Sales makes no bones about reminding us (cf. *Theotimus*) that loving one’s neighbor and God, the aim of devotion, is not merely a suggestion, it is a commandment! It is that precisely to prevent us from considering it too high a target and so becoming discouraged and giving up the idea of undertaking the life of devotion.

Don Bosco, aware of our struggles and weakness, went a step further, an even better one: we are not devotees in a general sort of way but *Devotees of Mary Help of Christians*. In his experience, the gift of the love that unites us to the Father and to the Son (grace) and which leads to action (charity), passes explicitly, almost tangibly through the maternal mediation of Mary. Throughout his whole life in fact the presence of the Virgin represents constant guidance in carrying out the mission received from the Father: the wise teacher who teaches the art of educating the young with love, as commanded by Jesus in the dream at nine years of age; the safe harbor in adversity in which can easily be obtained protection, consolation and the strength of the Holy Spirit.

1.2. On the way to Heaven

The special mediation of Mary in the life of grace of her children, writes Saint Louis Maria Grignon de Montfort in his *Treatise on True Devotion*, is possible because Mary, among all creatures is the one most “conformed” to Jesus Christ; in other words, the one most similar to Him, the one closest to Him.. Essentially, Montfort once again points out, “true devotion” is nothing other than the «perfect renewal of the vows and the promises of Holy Baptism,»¹¹ which implies the renunciation of evil and of sin and total adhesion to Christ. Along the path of keeping the baptismal promises, the more we love Mary and let her love us, the more she leads us into letting ourselves be conformed to Jesus, by the work of the Holy Spirit: we know very well that

⁷ Cf. FRANCIS OF SALES, *Philothea* I,1,4; 3,13.

⁸ IBID., *Philothea* I,1,9.

⁹ IBID., *Philothea* I,2,8.

¹⁰ E. CERIA, *Don Bosco con Dio*, SEI, Torino 1929, p. 209.

¹¹ Cf. L.M. GRIGNON DE MONTFORT, *Treatise on true devotion*, III, 1, 120.

the Mother does not call her sons and daughters to remain with her, but takes them “by the hand” to a meeting with her Son Jesus, the Son of God the Father.

For this reason we can say, in harmony with the Strenna for this year, that Mary is the Mother and Teacher who supports us, so that we may “fly” along the path of holiness. In this call, simple and accessible to everyone, to live in a radical manner the gift of Baptism, to live with Mary our Christian vocation is rooted therefore the lay and popular purpose of ADMA: from the members nothing more is asked than what is asked of every baptized person. The difference lies in that “extra step” that comes from “true devotion”; in other words, from that exchange of effective and affective love with Mary, that is a stimulus to grow continually in love of God and of one’s neighbor.

From this point of view it becomes clear that the spiritual relationship with Mary, even though it is direct, intimate and permanent, does not become «something in isolation, but directed towards Christian life in its fullness [...]. The relationship with the Mother of the Lord, who is our mother too, which consists in the giving of oneself and in readiness for her mission, leads to a mature and persevering response to Christ and through him to the Father in the Spirit.»¹². Only love – as Don Bosco had understood so well – gives us wings on life’s journey. Reciprocal love that is exchanged between Mary and her “devotees” is precisely the gift that the members of ADMA are called to bring to all the places in which they find themselves living and working, it being a genuine call and an invitation to live the Christian vocation with vigor and energy.

This will only be possible if our heart is full of love for God and also for Mary.. In this sense, Don Bosco is a real model. Fr Peter Brocardo recognizes this when he declares: «Don Bosco, a saint full of God, is at the same time a saint full of Mary. In fact, the whole of his life, with God and dependence on God at its centre, revolves round the Virgin. Before the dream at nine years of age, Mary is already a vital presence in his life, on account of his holy earthly mother: “My dear John... when you came into this world I consecrated you to the Blessed Virgin.” “Jesus will say to him, I am the Son of her whom your mother taught you to greet three times a day,”»¹³

Looking again at Don Bosco’s Marian experience, we become aware of how Mary can be the model and teacher in every fundamental aspect of Christian life. Now we want to look at these briefly.

1.2.1. *Mary invites to the heavenly banquet*

In the experience of Don Bosco, love for Mary and love for the Eucharist always go together; they are the two columns that support the life and the mission of the Church. In Don Bosco’s ideas about Mary that we can in a special way discover from his dreams, Mary presents herself as the Lady or the Queen who is waiting for the young people at the end of their challenging life’s journey and invites them to take part in the heavenly banquet. As a good mistress of the house, Mary welcomes the guests, after having carefully prepared everything. The heavenly banquet, just like the Eucharistic banquet which continually anticipates and prepares for it, is the place of perfect communion. Communion with God and among ourselves is the ultimate aim of the Christian religion. Jesus offers himself on the cross so that we might be readmitted to communion with the Father; he offers himself in the bread so that we might be one with him. “Devotees” of Mary Help of Christians in the same way are invited to be protagonists in the celebration of the Eucharist, offering their own lives, joys and sorrows, so that communion might grow: in the family, in the work place, in the Church community.

1.2.2. *Mary teacher of wisdom*

Mary presents herself to Don Bosco as the teacher of wisdom from the dream at nine years of age. The evangelist Luke paints a picture of Mary as a wise woman, who keeps and meditates everything in her heart. Biblical wisdom in fact is seen precisely as the ability to listen carefully to the Word of God that can be heard in everyday life. Mary is a prophet because she has a heart that listens, that knows how to learn from reality and knows how to recognise in it the signs of God’s interventions and His salvation. In Don Bosco’s Marian dreams, Mary often presents herself as a woman of the people: practical, active, who has become wise from her experience of life. Mary teaches Don Bosco to start from experience and on the basis of experience to avoid abstractions, to stimulate the intelligence of his disciples. The influence of Mamma Margaret on Don Bosco’s way of seeing Mary is clear from this. Like Mamma Margaret, the “devotees” of Mary Help of Christians ought to be prophets in their lives, in their docility in allowing themselves to be challenged by events, to draw on their

¹² S. DE FIORES, *Maria nella vita dello Spirito*, Cirié (Torino) 2003, pp.149-151.

¹³ P. BROCARDI, *Don Bosco. Profondamente uomo profondamente santo*, LAS, Roma, 2001, p. 127.

valuable experience and to let themselves be led step by step by the Spirit. They are prophets first of all because they are witnesses, then, - as educators – they are able to accompany others on life's journey.

1.2.3. *Mary powerful help against evil*

Mary often presents herself to Don Bosco as Queen. The majestic painting of Mary Help of Christians in the Basilica in Turin depicts her in this way too: in majesty, surrounded by the court of heaven, a crown on her head and a scepter in her hand. A “powerful” Queen as we still say today in the short prayer composed by our Founder. Regality or Queenship, however, is not a privilege of Mary but a baptismal gift in which we are all called to participate. Mary receives her power directly from Jesus the infant she carries in her arms. It is a power that shows itself in a special way in the fight against evil, against sin. Mary is the Virgin whose child will finally crush the head of the ancient serpent, In his preaching Don Bosco frequently insists on this idea and on the fact that Mary will swiftly intervene whenever she is invoked with filial affection and we follow her advice regarding Jesus: «Do whatever he tells you » (*Jn 2,5*); since Mary constantly intervenes in the lives of her children. Certain of this, the ‘devotees’ of Mary Help of Christians are called to share in her queenly power in the daily struggle against evil, keeping fully alive the light of hope even in the darkest moments in the life of a family, of a community, of a people.

2. A JOURNEY OF 150 YEARS

Among the characteristics of Don Bosco and of his holiness is that of being a founder, that is to say the initiator in the Church of a particular school of holiness and of apostolic action that distinguishes him among holy founders. «He initiated a true school of a new and attractive apostolic spirituality; *he promoted a special devotion to Mary, Help of Christians and Mother of the Church (...)* and was an eminent example of a preferential love for the young, and especially for the most needy among them.»¹⁴

Wishing to respond to the grace and to the signs that came to him from on high, and wanting to give consistency and continuity to his work on behalf of youth, Don Bosco heard the call of God to start new apostolic ventures. Exactly ten years after the foundation of the Salesian Congregation and in the year following the consecration of the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians, he founded the *Association of the Devotees of Mary Help of Christians* (18 April 1869).

The occasion «*makes us see in a brilliant way that Mary has continued from heaven and with the greatest success, the mission of Mother of the Church and Help of Christians that she began on earth.*»¹⁵ Assumed into heaven, Mary Most Holy has not given up her role, rather she continues to carry it out most effectively. Mary is a living presence among us and continues in the history of the Church and of humanity her maternal mission as mediatrix of grace for her children.

It is natural to think that Don Bosco followed this Marian path both personal and ecclesial because his personal and pastoral life had been marked by a simple yet profound Marian sentiment. One can say with certainty that his love and his devotion to Mary were a constant unbroken thread running throughout his life, a constant reference point, a faith experience that he lived as it modulated, evolved and matured starting from his various personal experiences and from ecclesiastical events. Don Bosco possessed a clear awareness of the personal presence of Mary Help of Christians, something that he felt and experienced in a very practical way that one might dare to call “objective”.

Speaking about the foundation of the Salesian Congregation, in various different circumstances Don Bosco demonstrated the conviction, as his successor, Blessed Michael Rua recounts, that the Virgin Help of Christians is its “founder” and also its “supporter,” and he declared with certainty that «our Congregation is destined for great things and to spread throughout the world if the Salesians are always faithful to the Rule given them by Mary Most Holy.»¹⁶

Looking back over these 150 years, from the very beginning the great and inseparable link between Don Bosco and devotion to Mary Help of Christians is evident, even to the point that this will be for Salesians an expression of charismatic fidelity; for the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians it is the guarantee of their being in their lives “a living monument to the Help of Christians”; and to all the devotees of ADMA Don Bosco will

¹⁴ JOHN PAUL II, *Iuvenum Patris*, in AGC n. 325 p. 11: the italics are mine and are intended to underline the specific Marian aspect of the spirituality of Don Bosco.

¹⁵ G. BOSCO, *Meraviglie della Madre di Dio invocata sotto il titolo di Maria Ausiliatrice*, Torino 1868, p. 45.

¹⁶ M. RUA, *Lettere circolari*, Torino 1965, 178, pp. 293-294 ss.

give the assurance that they are living an ecclesial devotion, specifically of Salesian Spirituality, in which the Mother is always a solid support.

Don Rua writes in another of his letters: «I have no doubt at all that with an increase among Salesians of devotion to Mary Help of Christians so too will grow esteem and affection for Don Bosco no less than the commitment to preserve his spirit and to imitate his virtues.»¹⁷

2.1. Awareness of being an instrument of God with the mediation of Mary

I consider that is not possible to speak about Don Bosco and his work without drawing attention to the faith journey that he himself undertook. I want to make my own the words of Fr Vecchi which in my opinion describe very well the characteristics of the path followed by Don Bosco which I shall illustrate later on. Fr Vecchi writes: «Without wishing to be too dogmatic, it could be said that Don Bosco began the construction as the Rector of a work [this is in reference to the construction of the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians] and completed it as a charismatic head of a great movement, still in its early stages but already possessing distinctive aims and features: he began as a priest from Turin and completed it as an apostle of the Church. He moved on from the city to the world.»¹⁸

By 1862, Don Bosco felt the need to have a bigger church. The church of St Francis of Sales was too small for the Salesians and the boys in Valdocco. The Congregation had begun four year earlier as a “small nucleus”. Everything led one to think that it was the beginning of something that in time would grow larger. This was also the year when Don Bosco met Mary Mazzarello (and therefore the start of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians was still some time in the distant future) and marks the beginning of the expansion of the Salesian charism in the feminine world. His pastor’s heart led Don Bosco to think about two other foundations: the Archconfraternity of Mary Help of Christians and the Cooperators. At the same time the almost rural district that Valdocco had been was becoming almost an urban quarter and Don Bosco saw the need for giving these people a place of worship.

In any case, the building of a church is more than just a technical matter and the collecting of funds to complete its construction. It is certainly an expression of the way ahead that Don Bosco was reflecting on from both the spiritual and the pastoral points of view, while knowing that it is difficult to explain - even for the most expert of commentators on Don Bosco – what this church might represent in the inner life of our Founder.

Fr Peter Brocardo writes: «All of this would not have made him the great apostle of Mary Help of Christians had it not been for the experience full of the supernatural of the construction of the church of Mary Help of Christians in Valdocco, and if this church had not become the *heart* and the “*center of the Congregation*”, the “*Mother Church*” of the Salesian Family.»¹⁹

With the construction of the Basilica, and with everything that happened at that time, with the opposition and the “prodigious” unhelped for solutions to problems, Don Bosco experienced not only astonishment but almost fear. What above all surprised Don Bosco and later the world was the fact that it was the Virgin Mary herself who actually built her own house going contrary to all human expectations.

«This is the miracle that the Dr. Margotti could not bring himself to deny: “They say that Don Bosco works miracles but I don’t believe it, But there is one here that I can’t deny and it is this sumptuous church that cost about a million [...] and it was put up in three years with just the spontaneous offerings of the faithful.”»²⁰

It is moving to read the accounts of these events. Like the good Piedmontese he was, Don Bosco had obtained the assurance of financial support from some influential people, who as often happens did not keep their promises. In this situation, too, Don Bosco was left on his own. But, as reported above, “just the spontaneous offerings of the faithful” made possible the unimaginable: «It would seem that what *then* became the determining factor (in the choice of the title “*Auxilium Christianorum*”) was the fact of his having experienced day after day that Mary had practically herself built this “house of hers” in the soil of the Oratory and had taken possession of it in order to spread out from there her patronage.»²¹

¹⁷ M. RUA, *o.c.*, p. 353.

¹⁸ J. E. VECCHI, *Spiritualità Salesiana*, Elle Di Ci, Leumann (TO) 2001, p. 229.

¹⁹ P. BROCARDO, *Ibid*, p.131.

²⁰ P. BROCARDO, *Ibid*, p.132.

²¹ E. VIGANÒ, *o.c.*, p. 16.

This reflection we have been making can be very well summed up in the words of Fr Viganò: «After the establishment of this sanctuary from then on the Help of Christians is the Marian title that will for ever characterize the spirit and the apostolate of Don Bosco: he will come to see his whole apostolic vocation as the work of Mary Help of Christians, and his many great achievements especially the Society of Saint Francis of Sales, the Institute of the FMA and the large Salesian Family, will be seen by him as a foundation willed and cared for by the Help of Christians.»²²

2.2. A memory for which to be thankful

In masterly fashion the Salesian historian Pietro Braido describes the foundation of the ADMA by Don Bosco in this way: «A born organizer, Don Bosco did not leave devotion to Mary Help of Christians to simple spontaneous devotion. He gave it stability through an Association that took its name from her. First-hand witnesses saw in this institution one of the initiatives closest to Don Bosco's heart and one with the widest impact after that of the two religious Congregations and of the Association of the Cooperators. He himself described its origins in the leaflet *Association of the Devotees of Mary Help of Christians canonically erected in the Church dedicated to her in Turin with historical information about this title — by the priest John Bosco*. Following the presentation to the Reader, some short chapters give an account of the history of the title *Help of Christians*, from the Bible to the battle of Lepanto (1571), to the liberation of Vienna in 1683 and, finally to the institution of the feast by Pius VII in 1814. Short pages were dedicated to the *Devotion to Mary Help of Christians in Munich and in Turin* and to spiritual favours granted by Pius IX to the Turinese sanctuary. Documents followed relating to the canonical approval of the *Association*. The first was in April 1869: the *Supplica* of Don Bosco to the archbishop of Turin, “for the canonical approval of the Association”. In it he begged him to “take in benign consideration” the “pious project” and to examine its Statutes and – professing the accustomed unlimited readiness – “to add, to delete, to change” whatever might be judged opportune, “with all the conditions” “that might be judged most appropriate to promote the glories of the August Queen of Heaven and the good of souls.” The approval of Mons. Riccardi on 18 April was benevolent and generous, in harmony with the brief of 16 March with which Pius IX had granted extensive indulgences valid for ten years to the Association about to be erected. The last part of the leaflet contained the text of the statute, a long series of prayers and devout practices with the indication of the relevant indulgences, a short catechesis *On indulgences* in general, the decree of 22 May 1868, with which Pius IX granted a plenary indulgence to all those who might “religiously” visit «the church dedicated in Turin to Mary the Immaculate Virgin under the title of Mary Help of Christians, on the titular feast of the same church or on one of the preceding days ».

As was his custom in the presentation of important documents, Don Bosco attributed the origin of the *Association* to “repeated requests”, coming «from all parts and from people of all ages and conditions» during and after the building and the consecration of the church. The idea was for associates «who united in the same spirit of prayer and piety might honor the great Mother of the Savior invoked with the beautiful title of Help of Christians».

In these circumstances, too Don Bosco quickly drew up statutes that were no masterpiece in doctrinal or juridical terms but which were outstanding for immediacy and practicality. He retained the close link that he usually made between devotion to Mary Most Holy and to Jesus present in the Holy Eucharist. The subject matter was divided into three sections without separate initial headings: *the purpose and the means, the spiritual advantages, admission*. [...] For wider diffusion of the Association Don Bosco managed to have it erected as an Archconfraternity, with the faculty of aggregating to it similar associations already existing or to be erected.»²³

2.3. A renewal to be undertaken

The Archconfraternity of Mary Help of Christians as it was called by Don Bosco (today ADMA), from the very beginning acquired a worldwide dimension, alternating between periods of great vitality and wide diffusion and stages of crisis and oblivion. In 1988, the year of the centenary of the death of Don Bosco, an historic relaunching occurred on the part of the Rector Major Fr Egidio Viganò. A significant recognition came from the 24th General Chapter of the Salesians (1996), which declared: «Don Bosco also started up the *Association*

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco prete dei giovani nel secolo delle libertà*, LAS, Roma 2003, vol. I, pp. 526-528.

of clients of Mary Help of Christians involving them in the spirituality and mission of the Congregation by commitments readily realizable by the majority of simple people.»²⁴

It could also be said that the Congregation and the Salesian Family have gone through a maturing process in their devotion to Mary Help of Christians. In fact, our Salesian Spirituality cannot be separated from devotion to Mary Help of Christians. It would be the same as trying – absurdly – to separate Don Bosco from Mary Help of Christians. Our devotion to the Help of Christians is intimately connected both to the Salesian “mission” and to the “spirit” proper to the Salesian charism that we have received from Don Bosco as a *gift* of the Holy Spirit.

The fidelity of the ADMA throughout this historic process was crowned on 7 October 2003, when the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic Life approved the new Regulations of the Association.

Since 2007, ADMA has distinctly renewed itself and has grown in numbers and quality thanks to the involvement of families and to various initiatives, such as the International Congresses of Mary Help of Christians in Częstochowa (2011) and in Turin (2015).

Of great assistance in the process of renewal, growth in the sense of belonging and of shared formation among the more than 800 local groups present in the world is the annual formation program, the monthly commemoration of Mary Help of Christians, days of recollection and retreats, the monthly publication of *ADMA online* in 7 languages, the development of the web site,²⁵ the publication of the *Quaderni di Maria Ausiliatrice*.

2.4. According to a dynamic of communion

The process of the renewal of ADMA in these years has taken place in profound harmony with that of the universal Church, which has dedicated two Synods of Bishops to the family and one to young people.

At the end of the Synods on the Family the Pope remarked: «The experience has made those taking part in the Synod aware of the importance of a synodal form of the Church for the proclamation and the transmission of the faith. The participation of the young has contributed to a “re-awakening” of Synodality which is a constitutive dimension of the Church [...]. As Saint John Chrysostom says, “Church and Synod are synonymous” – inasmuch as the Church is nothing other than the “journeying together” of God’s flock along the paths of history towards the encounter with Christ the Lord.»²⁶

This synodal dimension was very strongly reaffirmed in the *Final Document* of the Synod of Bishops on young people as the right way of being and of acting today for the Church: «Synodality characterizes both the life and the mission of the Church, which is the People of God formed of young and old, men and women of every culture and horizon, and the Body of Christ, in which we are members one of another, beginning with those who are pushed to the margins and trampled upon...It is in relationships – with Christ, with others, in the community – that faith is handed on. For the sake of mission, too, the Church is called to adopt a relational manner that places emphasis on listening, welcoming, dialogue and common discernment in a process that transforms the lives of those taking part. ...In this way the Church presents herself as the “tent of meeting” in which the Ark of the Covenant is preserved (cf. *Ex* 25): a dynamic Church, in movement, which accompanies while journeying, strengthened by many charisms and ministries. Thus does God make Himself present in this world.»²⁷

An expression of this shared journey is the experience ever more vital in the ADMA, of the communion of faith and of charismatic belonging among the different states of life: consecrated, priests, laity. There is a circulation of gifts and of prayer, a fruitful exchange that helps each one to find and to consolidate their own identity. This helps to overcome the way of relating to others that sometimes is understood in terms of function if not at times even utilitarian, by recovering an approach that is more ecclesial and based on communion in the same Salesian Spirit.

Emphasis on the beauty and on the complementarity of the various states of life is an approach to be welcomed and appreciated even from a vocational point of view: priests, consecrated men and women and lay people who share a faith journey and a Salesian apostolic commitment. Between consecrated people and laity,

²⁴ *GC24*, 80.

²⁵ www.admadonbosco.org.

²⁶ FRANCIS, *Address for the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops*, 17 October 2015.

²⁷ *Final Document of the Synod of Bishops offered to the Holy Father Francis* (27 October 2018), nos. 121-122.

a communion of life is established that helps to enrich the proper identity of each one, facilitating their reciprocal recognition, appreciation and support at not only the practical level of work but also the fraternal and spiritual, according to the specific nature of each.

This proposal enables lay people to be approached and involved in the right way. ADMA encourages lay people to take on responsibility and to share in the mission not only *ad intra*, but also *ad extra*, that is to say not only in our works but also in other areas in the life of the Church and of society.

The dimension of the understanding and the development of ADMA lies in the formation and fulfilment of lay people prepared for the spirituality and the mission proper to the Association, in harmony with the ecclesiology of communion and with the rediscovery of a new prophetic, regal, and priestly awareness on the part of the laity. In addition, the appeal to the lay character of the Association overcomes the tendency to identify the Church solely with the hierarchy and priests, and to encourage the shared responsibility and mission of the People of God. At the same time, recalling the lay dimension of the Association discourages any tendency to think of the People of God solely in sociological or political terms and promotes the vital concept and the specific nature of the People as the Body of Christ. «Looking at the People of God is to remind ourselves that we all enter the Church as laity. The first Sacrament, that which marks our identity forever and of which we ought always to be proud, is Baptism. Through this Sacrament and with the anointing of the Holy Spirit, (the faithful) “are consecrated into a spiritual house and a holy priesthood” (LG, 10) [...]. It is good for us to remember that the Church is not an élite of priests, of consecrated persons, of bishops, but that all form the faithful Holy People of God, Forgetting this leads to a variety of dangers and deformations in our own experience, both personal and communitarian of the ministry that the Church has entrusted to us.»²⁸

Certainly, collaboration among the three states of life of the Church requires a change in pastoral thinking which impacts on all vocations but which, as regards the laity, demands that they be recognized and appreciated not merely as “collaborators”, but as “those co-responsible” in the life and action of the Church, so as to foster their maturing process and commitment. For this reason in the ADMA it is precisely the lay people who are those with primary responsibility for the competent and efficient animation of the Association.

2.5. On the path of holiness

ADMA is «a path that leads to holiness and to the salesian apostolate,»²⁹ proposed and lived out in the context of that universal call to holiness so dear to both St Francis of Sales who recommended the devout life to everyone and to our Father of the Salesian Family Don Bosco when he put before the youngsters of the oratory and to the ordinary people the path of holiness as open to everyone, easy to follow and one leading to eternal happiness. Saint Francis of Sales and Don Bosco presented holiness not as something reserved to the privileged few, but always as a call for everyone wherever they might be living, whatever might be their state in life, their profession or trade. Vatican Council II confirmed and proclaimed this reality. Pope Francis strongly re-affirmed this in the Apostolic Exhortation on the call to holiness in the world of today *Gaudete et Exsultate*. The Salesian Strenna for this year 2019 is also a clear and decisive call to holiness for all, «holiness for you too.»

Certainly, it is a pathway that sometimes demands going against the flow, but it is one that, precisely, in the end is a blessing, that is happiness. It is very important, following the example, and being inspired by the humanism and the optimism of St Francis of Sales to let it be seen that living as a Christian is, also from a human point of view, something that brings happiness already in this world, in spite of the difficulties we all have to put up with.

Above all, it is a path of holiness to be lived in the family, giving good example especially by persevering in love: between the spouses, between parents and children, between brothers and sisters, between the young and the old. We need to want and to seek what is best for others. In practice, this “best” means accepting the other person as they are; taking time to talk, building up relationships based on affection and respect, knowing how to understand and to forgive, and not complaining. A family that does not give in when faced with difficulties and in which parents and children live their faith in God and in His Providence, like the Holy Family in Nazareth, is a great support and a fruitful source of good for the Church and for Society.

²⁸ FRANCIS, *Letter to the President of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America* (26.04.2016).

²⁹ *Regulations ADMA*, art. 2.

No less ought to be the witness from within our Salesian Family spread throughout the world that we give to everyone as consecrated women and men seeking to put into practice with the variety of expressions of the charism in the different groups Don Bosco's great vision: to make simple and available to everyone the path of holiness in the Christian life of all youngsters.

To the new generations too, therefore, it is a question of proposing the ideal of holiness – following Jesus – in ordinary life made up of studies, friendships, work, service, making them aware that the world and with it the Church is already in their hands. It is for this reason that young people ought to be given a good human and Christian formation and at the same time helped to feel themselves welcomed with hope and trust. The main thing is to help them to know and to love Christ in the ordinary circumstances of life and to live according to their entrustment to Mary Help of Christians.

When in Valdocco I happen to go into the church of St Francis of Sales I find it very moving, because for me it is one of the most significant places we have: it is the little church that has witnessed so many moments of holiness, of prayer, of boys growing up. It was here that Dominic Savio became so much in tune with the Holy Eucharist that he lost all sense of time and space. It was here that he and his companions offered themselves to Mary Immaculate ready to follow a shared path of holiness. It was here that Mamma Margaret prayed. Here Michael Rua, John Cagliero and the other Salesians of the first generations celebrated their first Mass. Here the life of faith of so many boys became a path of growth in holiness day after day. I love to close my eyes and imagine these boys of Don Bosco in this chapel, the same building though painted differently. It really touches my heart.

The Strenna for this year to which I have already referred tells us that we can propose to our young people the notions of gift, grace, challenge, duty, the opportunity to be saints. In our Salesian Family we have 46 saints, Blesseds, Venerables, and Servants of God under 29 years of age.

What is most fascinating in this call to holiness is that it is not a question of doing special, out of the ordinary things, but seriously to allow the Holy Spirit to work in our heart, in the depth of our being, in all that we are and experience while continuing to get on with studies, work, relationships, service, summer camps, singing – whatever.

Today's world needs young people with convictions, not "strange" young people; young people who have made the choice for God, who are humble courageous witnesses to the joy of the Gospel, Even today there are many young people in the world with our charism who with their own lives want to write a beautiful page, being inspired by the first young people in the oratory at Valdocco, where a real school of life and holiness began and developed.

As I have already said, thinking about the renovations being completed for the "Don Bosco" House (Palazzo Pinardi), there at Don Bosco's side day after day there emerged a *school of everyday holiness*. In fact in the context of the Strenna for this year hundreds and hundreds of boys and girls and young people have told me at various meetings throughout the world that in their faith group, in their Salesian house, on their own or with some friends they have thought seriously about undertaking a real journey of genuine holy Christian life that leads them to a holiness lived out in daily life, an "open door holiness" recalling a phrase of Pope Francis. I want to say that this is nothing strange. It is simply that young people of today, like those of yesterday, need to feel that there are great ideals they can aim for in their lives.

Today's ADMA is also living with this spiritual tension. Likewise the groups of ADMA include among their members some women who are held up by the Church as examples of life who can be invoked for their intercession for support in the faith journey.

Among these are Blessed Alexandrina Maria da Costa: on 12 September 1944 Fr Umberto Maria Pasquale, her spiritual director enrolled her in the Association. Then there is Blessed Teresa Cejudo Redondo, wife and mother a martyr in 1936: she had been involved in the foundation of the ADMA in Pozoblanco (Spain) and was elected the Secretary. In addition, the Servant of God Rosetta Franzi Gheddo, enrolled in 1928 in the ADMA group of Nizza Monferrato, and Carmen Nebot Soldán of La Palma del Condado (Spain), who died in 2007. These Blesseds and Servants of God were noted for their special love for the Eucharist and for the Holy Virgin (the two great pillars of Salesian Spirituality) as well as for their heroic witness to the faith in suffering, in martyrdom and in Family life. They are also united in their sharing in the Salesian charism and they show in a singular way the spirit of Don Bosco lived in lay life, in the family and in society. They are models and a stimulus for all the members of ADMA and of the Salesian Family for their holiness.

3. POPULAR CHARACTER OF THE SALESIAN CHARISM

In the popular imagination, the Salesian charism and work are normally associated with the world of youth. Together with this fundamental aspect, it is very important to remember the popular dimension of the charism, which Don Bosco also expressed through the founding of the ADMA, promoted by him for the defense and development of the faith of the ordinary Christian people. Faith in Jesus Christ and entrustment to Mary according to the apostolic spirit of Don Bosco therefore are the constitutive elements of the identity and of the mission of the Association.

The working class is the natural and normal setting in which to express this option for the young, the social and human context in which to seek and to meet them. In fact, between the young and the ordinary people, there is a natural affinity. The commitment of the Family of Don Bosco to accompany the new generations in the effort to promote their human development and growth in the faith is intended to highlight the gospel values to be found among the young and the ordinary people. It is among all the people of God, in the variety of states of life and of age that an appreciation of relationships between the generations and the role of the family is to be found, in this way responding in a simple and accessible way to a society that is often breaking down and in conflict.

The popular dimension of the Salesian mission is in a special way our distinguishing feature and is the typical expression of the founding charism: «Illuminated from on high, Don Bosco also turned his attention to adults, by preference those who were humble and poor, the working classes, the urban underclasses, immigrants, the marginalized, in a word, to all those who were most in need of material and spiritual assistance. Faithful to the guidance of Don Bosco the Groups of the Salesian Family share this preferred option. The Association of Mary Help of Christians has inserted in its new Regulations the Salesian apostolate directed in particular to the working classes.»³⁰

In dedication to this large and varied community of people “in everyday living conditions” we have a very real experience of God: «*The world of the working classes* is the natural and ordinary context in which we encounter the young especially those in most need of help. The commitment of the Family of Don Bosco is addressed to the ordinary people supporting them in their efforts for human development and growth in their faith, indicating and promoting the human and gospel values it stands for, such as the meaning of life, hope for a better future and the exercise of solidarity. Don Bosco traced out also with the Association of the Salesians-Cooperator and the Association of Mary Help of Christians, a path of education to the faith for the people, making good use of the contents of popular religious devotions.»³¹

3.1. Popular religious devotions (or “popular piety” or “popular spirituality”)

Don Bosco, because of the formation he received in his family and the local religious situation, and because of the way his pastoral work with the young was organized took good advantage of the popular religious devotions considering them the expression of a sound view of life, and a good way of blending life and faith, providing fruitful forms of piety and Christian spirituality. Pontifical teaching in the Church and theological reflection in recent decades has been both profound and rich. It has been illuminating and has confirmed us in the same conviction that Don Bosco had and that nowadays we are promoting and fostering also through ADMA around the world.

In this regard Saint Paul VI wrote in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*: «Popular religiosity, (...) if it is well oriented, above all by a pedagogy of evangelization, is rich in values. It manifests a thirst for God which only the simple and poor can know. It makes people capable of generosity and sacrifice even to the point of heroism, when it is a question of manifesting belief. It involves an acute awareness of profound attributes of God: fatherhood, providence, loving and constant presence. It engenders interior attitudes rarely observed to the same degree elsewhere: patience, the sense of the cross in daily life, detachment, openness to others, devotion. (...) When it is well oriented, this popular religiosity can be more and more for multitudes of our people a true encounter with God in Jesus Christ.»³²

³⁰ *Salesian Family Charter*, n. 16.

³¹ *Ibid*, n. 31.

³² Paul VI Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* n. 48

Pope Francis observes how in the same document his predecessor Paul VI suggests using the term popular piety rather than popular religiosity and how later the Latin American Bishops in the Aparecida document go a step further and speak of popular spirituality. “All three concepts are valid but in concert.”³³

The Pope, while being well aware that we always need to be attentive to the purification of the various expressions of this religiosity, considers it a *genuine form of evangelization*, to be promoted and appreciated without its importance being minimized: «It would be erroneous to believe that those who go on pilgrimage live not a personal but an “en masse” spirituality. In reality, pilgrims bring with them their own history, their own faith, the light and dark features of their own life. Everyone bears in his or her heart a special hope and a particular prayer. Those who enter a shrine immediately feel at home, welcomed, understood, and supported.»³⁴

It is in this ecclesial context that we place devotion to Mary Help of Christians in our Salesian Family, promoted by our father Don Bosco.

3.2. Devotion to Mary Help of Christians

Devotion to Mary Help of Christians was understood and promoted by Don Bosco precisely from the point of view of the help and the defense of the faith of the People of God, tempted by ideologies that removed the Christian sense of the meaning of life, and by the many movements that attacked the faith and the unity of the Church founded on the solid rock of Peter’s profession of faith. In Don Bosco devotion to the Help of Christians is not the emphasizing of a title that is particular and original, previously unknown; rather it is a reference to the universal mother’s role of Mary who intervenes in the work of the foundation of her Family, carrying out in this way, one might say, the work of two. It is the profound and immovable conviction of Don Bosco: «She has done everything». We can have trust in Mary. Therefore we can entrust ourselves to her. All of this in that spirit of the Church that values different public and private expressions in liturgy, doctrine, spirituality, popular piety that the Church recognizes and authorizes. Don Bosco was convinced that with time it would be possible to implement the apostolic passion of *Da mihi animas cetera tolle* only if it was firmly attached to those great columns of spirituality and of Christian and Salesian pedagogy: the Blessed Sacrament and Mary Most Holy. From a renewed devotion to Jesus in the Eucharist and to Mary Help of Christians new fraternal relationships can be built up which are capable of developing and encouraging good processes of discernment and of giving rise to educational and pastoral action in harmony with the Gospel.

Making Mary Help of Christians known, loved and served is the task we want to take up encouraged by the prophetic words of Don Bosco, the apostle of the Help of Christians: «*This devotion, in other words, this love, this trust, this rapture and recourse to Mary Help of Christians is growing more and more among the faithful people, and leads one to say that the time will come when every good Christian together with devotion to the Blessed Sacrament and to the Sacred Heart of Jesus will be proud to profess a most tender devotion to Mary Help of Christians.*»³⁵

In fact «*in the Salesian Family the Association emphasizes and spreads popular Marian devotion as a means of evangelization and advancement of working class people and of needy youngsters.*»³⁶

Indeed it is important to underline that the fact of ADMA belonging to the Salesian Family is not something generic, but is rooted in the particular Marian devotion that St John Bosco lived and spread. The Marian characteristic of the Association is an expression of one of the constitutive elements of the Salesian charism and spirit emphasizing the commitment to guarding, implementing and defending the faith among the people of God “today when the faith is being put to the test and many of the People of God are exposed to tribulation because of their fidelity to the Lord Jesus³⁷, when the human race (...) is experiencing a serious crisis of spiritual values, the Church feels the need of Mary’s motherly intervention: to strengthen her adherence to the one Lord

³³ FRANCIS, *Address to those engaged in pilgrimage work and for the Rectors of Shrines*, Rome 21 January 2016.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

³⁵ *La nuvoletta del Carmelo, ossia la divozione a Maria Ausiliatrice premiata di nuove grazie*, per cura del sacerdote GIOVANNI BOSCO, S. Pier d’Arena, Tipografia e libreria di S. Vincenzo De’ Paoli, Torino – Nizza Marittima, Libreria Salesiana Patronato di S. Pietro 1877.

³⁶ *Regulations ADMA*, art. 3.

³⁷ While writing these pages for the second time in a short time I received news of the death of one of our missionaries. In the space of three months in Burkina Faso (West African French-speaking Province), the lives of two of our missionary confreres Fr César Antonio Fernández and Fr Fernando Hernández have been cruelly cut short. The words of the Holy Father have come true: «Today, every day thousands of Christians lose their lives throughout the world because of their faith».

and Savior, to give a new vitality and the courage of the Christian origins to the evangelization of the world, to enlighten and guide the faith of communities and individuals, and especially to educate in the Christian meaning of life the young people to whom Don Bosco gave his entire self as father and teacher.»³⁸

3.3. VIII International Congress of Mary Help of Christians

From this point of view I am pleased to recall the celebration of the VIII International Congress of Mary Help of Christians that will be taking place in Buenos Aires, Argentina, between 7 and 10 November 2019 with the title: *With Maria, the Woman who believes*.

This event, putting at its centre listening to the Word, shows how faith in Jesus is handed on from person to person, from generation to generation, telling of the marvels worked by God. All of this in the presence of Mary, she who welcomed Jesus and bore him in her virgin's womb, and so is mother, teacher and guide in the faith, in a particular way in the accompaniment of the younger generations, in their journey to holiness.

The VIII International Congress of Mary Help of Christian is a Salesian Family event promoted by the Association of Mary Help of Christian (ADMA) following the proposals of the Rector Major and in dialogue with the Secretariat of the Salesian Family and with the Salesian Family in Argentina.

The choice of this country is intended to be a reminder of the first missionary frontier for Don Bosco and, at the same time, the special importance that devotion to Mary Help of Christians has for Pope Francis. The Basilica of Mary Help of Christian in the Almagro district in Buenos Aires is the place where Jorge Mario Bergoglio was baptized and where he frequently expressed his love for Mary Help of Christian, until he had to leave his homeland when he was elected to the chair of Peter.

4. FROM THE HOUSE OF MARY TO OUR HOMES

The Salesian charism in the animation of the family returns to its origins, and the family in its encounter with the spirit of Don Bosco grows in gospel vitality and joy. We are giving particular attention to the current situation of the family the primary focus of education and the first place for evangelization. The whole Church has become aware of the serious difficulties in which the family finds itself and recognizes the need to offer extraordinary forms of assistance in its formation, its development and in the responsible exercise of its educational task. In this way, it is seen that Family Ministry and Youth Ministry need to be open to one another and need to journey together.

In the Salesian Family «special attention needs to be given to the family, the place where the process of human development begins, which is intended to prepare young people for love and the acceptance of life, and the first school of solidarity among people and peoples. All are engaged in ensuring that it is afforded dignity and is soundly based so that it may become in an ever-more evident way a small “domestic church.”³⁹

This attention to the family is aimed at human development, evangelization and the education of the new generations: «The forming of “good Christians and upright citizens” is the aim most often expressed by Don Bosco to indicate *everything of which the young stand in need* in order to live fully human and Christian lives: clothes, food, lodging, work, study, free-time; joy, friendship; active faith, the grace of God, the way to holiness; participation, dynamism, a place in society and in the Church.»⁴⁰

The Association of Mary Help of Christians has also been renewed in this regard and more and more sees a place for the presence of families and young couples, who under the guidance of Mary are sharing a life journey comprising formation, sharing and prayer. Mary is the Mother and Teacher of the education needed to become spouses and parents. This renewal is the result of a specific mandate on the part of the Rector Major Fr Pascual Chávez, after the V International Congress of Mary Help of Christians in Mexico (2007), a mandate that I also confirmed on the occasion of the Congress in Turin in 2015.

ADMA is a support for fidelity to the vocation of spouses, a great help in the education of the children. The plan of ADMA is to look at families from the point of view of the whole family. It links together the progress of the parents and that of their children. In fact, it is in watching their parents pray and share their faith that the children learn to live in the family in the presence of Jesus and Mary. In watching their children the parents

³⁸ JOHN PAUL II, *Angelus* (31 January 1988) in AGC n. 325, p.41

³⁹ *Salesian Family Charter*, n. 16.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, n. 17.

become more convinced that their witness to the faith is the best gift they can offer, the most valuable inheritance they can leave them.

From this comes the commitment to see to it that families in their daily lives become special places for human and Christian development as they put into practice the virtues that give shape to life itself. It is necessary to journey with families, to accompany them in the complex situations with which they find themselves having to cope, finding new ways and common strategies to support spouses in their vocation of marriage.

Families are the primary source of education and fertile soil for Christian development. In order to propose a Christian pathway to young people it is fundamental nowadays to collaborate with their families and to accompany them. Places in which this can occur include all areas of affective life and family experience: the education to love of teenagers and young people, the preparation for family life of those engaged to be married, the accompaniment of sons and daughters who feel a special call to consecrated life or to priestly ministry, the celebration of Matrimony, the accompaniment of young married people and of parents, special attention given to families in difficulty and irregular situations, the spirituality of marriage and of the family from the point of view of Salesian Spirituality.

4.1. A family-friendly journey

This is the experience found in ADMA, following in the steps of Don Bosco. It is a plan for living to the full the call to be spouses and parents, brothers and sisters, finding in everyday life times for prayer, dialogue, forgiveness and love. In this way it is in harmony with the family style of loving kindness of the Salesian charism, the style of the oratory, under the gaze of Jesus, Joseph and Mary, trying to live every moment even those most tedious in mutual love and without losing hope. The very best witness is to see just how the Eucharist and Mary Help of Christians really become the pillars of life, reference points in the difficulties of every day. Don Bosco's dream of the two pillars becomes the heart of the families' journey. A love between the spouses that is renewed each day, spiritual growth as individuals and as families, a formation for parents in the difficult task of education, friendships between the children that enable them to share the faith and to witness to it with others. Each family takes part according to its own possibilities. They are also invited to share in the life of the local Church, taking an active part in parish activities and in the oratories. All of this seems to me to be a great way to express and to develop faithfully, and with a contemporary theological and ecclesial vision what Don Bosco did in his times.

4.2. Family of families

Nowadays no family can go it alone. The hedonistic and disturbing culture, not to mention the solitude that is often a feature of peoples' life-styles, makes it necessary to create places where Christian values can be reflected on and cultivated with others. This means working towards becoming a Family of families, sharing the joys and carrying together the burdens and the hardships, while bearing in mind certain points.

– Putting Matrimony at the centre and Jesus at the centre of Matrimony

Trying to live the vocation of spouses and parents aware that it is necessary to bring Jesus into everyday life, placing in his hands their anxieties and labors, joys and hopes under the guidance of Mary and the protection of St Joseph. God wants to reveal Himself through "the daily life of the spouses," in strengthening their relationship, in the education of their children, in their commitment to their work and to the apostolate.

– Ensuring the primacy of grace

Every family receives gifts and graces. In daily fidelity to prayer the awareness grows of being sons and daughters loved by God, and conjugal and family love grows. In prayer God renews each day the grace received in the Sacrament of Matrimony, filling life with meaning.

– Experiencing how prayer leads to love

The gifts received in the life of prayer and formation are given back in everyday life. This in various ways: from being open to the needs of families close by or in difficulties, to a pastoral commitment especially on behalf of the young or the poorest or in formation and sharing the faith with other families. Particular attention is given to the younger families so that the experience gained by those who have been longer on the journey may be put at their disposal.

– Accompanied Spiritually

The spiritual accompaniment of individuals and of couples is fundamental, with the presence of priests, consecrated persons and spouses themselves who have undertaken the beautiful journey of family, married, Christian and Salesian life and so become valuable guides in the journey of faith, sharing the experience of God that is at the heart of their vocation and mission.

4.3. ADMA Youth

A special grace of Mary Help of Christians has been the launching of the youth groups who want to make their own the spirituality and apostolic commitment of the ADMA. Together with families “the grafting” of the young can be seen as a providential gift of Mary Help of Christians who is taking care of the new generations, This is an important point on which there needs to be continuing reflection and discussion, as well as appreciation of the providential situations that can be encountered. Certainly, the way ahead is that of linking up with Youth Ministry and providing young people with meaningful experiences and journeys.

“ADMA Youth is” a Christian life project aimed at youngsters and young people, according to the charism of Don Bosco: living with Mary Help of Christians a faith experience of the love of the Father, of the saving work of the Son, of the power of the Holy Spirit, putting themselves at the service of the Gospel and of the Church. It consists in welcoming with joy and availability this gift of grace and making it fruitful through practical and consistent life choices.

Thinking about young people and about devotion to Mary we cannot forget what Don Bosco asked of his boys and how he led them to love the Virgin. Among the many that could be mentioned we can find examples of this in the biographies of Dominic Savio⁴¹ and of Michael Magone⁴² written by Don Bosco.

About Dominic Savio Don Bosco writes: «There was no limit to his devotion to the Mother of God. Every day he made some little act of mortification in her honor (...). He had a very special devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Every time he went to church, he would pay a visit to her altar, and kneeling there before her, beg her to keep his heart free from all impurity (...). Not only did he practice devotion to Mary but he was never happier than when he could succeed in bringing someone else to honor her.»

Regarding Michael Magone Don Bosco wrote: «It needs to be said that devotion to the Blessed Virgin is a support for every faithful Christian, but especially for young people (...) Our Magone was aware of this important truth, which was revealed to him in a providential way.» He wanted to consecrate himself entirely to Mary but his director told him he was too young to make such important vows.» To this Michael Magone replied: «I want to give myself totally to Mary: and if I consecrate myself to her, she will help me to keep that promise.»

This Salesian educative tradition of love for the Virgin should make us think very seriously about ways of cultivating this aspect of our youth ministry programs. It is for this reason that, as an expression of the youth dimension of ADMA, young people take a full part in the spirit and the life of the Association in ways and on the occasions proper to them. Of particular importance is the fact that in some parts of the world and especially in the Principal ADMA Center in Turin many of the youngsters and young people are children of couples who belong to ADMA: this is a help for faith journeys in terms of the generations, attentive to the family situation and marked by the family spirit. In a socio-cultural context also marked by anthropological and ethical relativism, we recognize that close ties with families are a truly valuable extra gift for the apostolic effectiveness of ADMA, for the affective formation of the young and for the potential renewal of education according to the Gospel. In fact, within every Christian community the irreplaceable educational role-played by parents and other family members needs to be recognized. First of all it is the parents who on a daily basis show God’s care for every human being in the love that links them together to each other and to their children.

The Synod on the young in 2018 and the post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation in the form of a Letter to the Young *Christus Vivit* are a strong invitation in this regard: to accompany the young in recognizing and accepting the call to love and to life in its fullness, and also a challenge to the young people themselves to identify the most effective ways nowadays to proclaim the Good News.

⁴¹ G. BOSCO, *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico, allievo dell’Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales*, in ISS, *Fonti Salesiane. Don Bosco e la sua opera*, LAS, Roma 2014, pp. 1053-1055.

⁴² G. BOSCO, *Cenno biografico sul giovanetto Magone Michele allievo dell’Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales*, in ISS, *Fonti Salesiane. Don Bosco e la sua opera*, LAS, Roma 2014, pp. 1106-1108.

Accompanying the young requires putting aside one's own preconceived schemes, meeting them where they are, adapting to their times and rhythms; it also means taking them seriously in their struggles and interpreting the reality in which they find themselves. They need to be accompanied and helped so that the proclamation, received in words and in actions, becomes part of and makes effective their daily effort to construct their own life story and identity, in the search for meaning in their lives, which is always a part of their journey even when not expressed explicitly or consciously.

Young people by nature have great energy. They need plenty of room in which to express themselves. They need wide horizons, great challenges to respond to, and a future to plan for. They also need people who show confidence in them, give them opportunities, invite and encourage them to translate their energies into service, witness and apostolate. Creating space also means accepting young people as they are; accepting their ways and their mistakes, especially when the young devote all their efforts to opportunities for service, without being too preoccupied with or focusing on results, or expecting from them high levels of "professional standards" This means looking at individuals as the whole person so that they may grow to maturity in their process of human and spiritual development.

CONCLUSION

While we give thanks for these 150 years in the life of the Association of Mary Help of Christians let us commit ourselves in fidelity to the charism of the holy founder of our Salesian Family, to allow ourselves be guided by the Holy Spirit in a renewed evangelizing and educative zeal. This means bringing faith in Jesus Christ and love for Mary to all young people, boys and girls and teenagers, especially those who are poorest and most in need (let us never forget this). It means sowing the seeds of this in their earliest years when boys and girls are still living the golden age of interest in religious values. It means sharing this faith in Jesus and love for our Mother with many friends, family members, companions, neighbors, acquaintances. The essential aspect of this evangelizing zeal consists in the renewal of the Association and giving special attention to the family and to the new generations, fostering and developing personal friendships, openness towards all and a spirit of service, making our own the profoundly gospel attitudes of Mary: her availability to God, her fidelity at the time of trial and of the cross, her spirit of joy and thanksgiving for the marvels worked by the Lord.

In the spirit of the *Magnificat* let us sing our thanks for all the good experienced by ADMA in these 150 years, including thanks for the fidelity of so many humble people who have kept alive the flame of the Association in times of difficulty, of crisis and of challenge so that the gift received by Don Bosco may continue to be handed on to future generations.

Close to the great picture of Mary Help of Christians in the Basilica in Turin, the statue of Don Bosco has him with a model of the church in his hand showing how Salesian work is marked by the presence of Mary Help of Christians. Fidelity to Don Bosco cannot be separated from devotion to the Help of Christians which was so close to his apostolic heart and to the hearts of all his successors. It is a charismatic heritage to be rediscovered and promoted.

«*This active motherly presence of Mary is the foundation of the Association and the inspiration for the commitment of the members to the service of the Kingdom of God.*»⁴³ The Association and the fact of belonging to it are based on the experience of the motherly presence and the help of Mary in one's own life. This motherly presence seen, touched and experienced, animates and supports every effort, good resolution and action. Mary is with us, she loves and protects us. From this comes the gospel sense of service that emanates from the joy of feeling oneself saved and of committing oneself with zeal to the proclamation and the building of the Kingdom of God, following the example and with the help of Mary who glorifies the Lord and at the same time declares herself to be His humble handmaid.

Let us also experience the motherly love of Mary so as to become her hands reaching out to every individual so that everyone may draw close to the God of love. The constant entrustment to Mary is a vital characteristic of our spirituality. «Entrustment has an upward action: it is a giving of oneself in order to respond generously to a mission to be accomplished; but there is also a downward motion: accepting with trust and gratitude the help of Her who guided Don Bosco and continues to guide the spiritual Family which has its origin in him.»⁴⁴

⁴³ *Regulations ADMA*, art. 1.

⁴⁴ *Salesian Family Charter*, n. 37.

The strongly felt presence of Mary in our educative and evangelizing mission is a confirmation and a safeguard that we are not doing “our own thing” and are not depending solely on our own efforts: we are responding to a gift and to a call, with all the effort and the patience that our responses, limited as they always are, require. Authentic entrustment to Mary, the first to be evangelized and the first evangelizer is for us a charismatic fact which enables us to be aware of being servants and mediators of the grace of God. Mary the star of evangelization is helping us, as she did at Cana in Galilee, to know how to respond to the real questions of the young and of the people that God loves, and she is inviting us to pay attention to her Son: «Do whatever he tells you.»⁴⁵

The Association of Mary Help of Christians is a light that shines out for all the Salesian world and invites us to be with Mary disciples and missionaries of the Gospel of joy. So many eyes are looking at this organization which is able to involve as an Association, families, parents and children, young people and old, boys girls, and teenagers. My opinion of the situation is based on observing that sometimes-new opportunities arise among us not because there is a established program but because life itself calls; it is life that can highlight what is most important and for what there is most need. The most precious specific aspect of ADMA is the fact of the faith lived in a family where Our Lady is present and providing accompaniment. This is of great value for the Church, of exceptional value.

In conclusion, allow me to share a profound conviction of mine. Travelling around the world I notice that we are putting so much effort into so many different activities in order to make them succeed as well as possible, many of them devoted to generous social work: this is all very valuable and always very Salesian. Nevertheless, sometimes what is missing is an opportunity for real relationships: occasions to speak of God, of Jesus, to celebrate the faith, to express the faith that is our support. We talk about so many things, but sometimes, unfortunately not about what is most deeply rooted. In this situation, the Association of Mary Help of Christians has many fine elements, among which the faith and prayer stand out and these need to remain a priority. Seeing families, seeing children, seeing young and old people together is a splendid thing.

I thank all those who have made this journey possible and I invite all our Salesian Family and all the places where we are present to take advantage of this Mother’s love with the same educative and evangelizing passion of Don Bosco. I can assure you that the protection of the Lord, the maternal presence of Mary Help of Christians and the intercession of Don Bosco will not be lacking. In particular, I ask all our Salesian Family to promote with pastoral creativity awareness of this Association in those places in which it is not yet present; even though 150 years have passed since its foundation. Mary Help of Christians will still do the rest.

Saint John Paul II has given us a fine chart, saying to us as the Salesian Family: «By your work, dear educators, you are sharing in a wondrous manner in the motherly role of the Church. (*Gravissimum educationis*, 3). Keep always before you Mary Most Holy, the loftiest collaborator of the Holy Spirit, who was docile to his inspirations and so became Mother of Christ and Mother of the Church. She continues through the centuries “to be a maternal presence as is shown by Christ’s words spoken from the Cross: ‘Woman behold your son’: ‘Behold your mother’” Never take your gaze off Mary,” (*Redemptoris Mater*, 24)»⁴⁶

Thank you for all the witness you are giving. Let us continue to forge ahead with great energy: *entrust, have trust, and smile!* May God bless you!

Fr Ángel Fernández Artime S.D.B.
Rector Major

⁴⁵ *Jn.* 2:5.

⁴⁶ JOHN PAUL II, *Iuvenum Patris*, o.c., pp. 33-34.