

Together in the Church for an 'Extraordinary' Missionary Month

Dearest Sisters,

Traditionally the month of October is dedicated to the mission *ad gentes*. This year it is celebrated in the whole Church with a special connotation, remembering the hundredth anniversary of the Apostolic Letter *Maximum Illud* of Benedict XV (November 30, 1919).

The decision of Pope Francis to call this Missionary Month 'Extraordinary' with the theme: *Baptized and sent: the Church of Christ on mission in the world* aroused in me, and I believe it will be the same for you, renewed joy and strong apostolic ardor. It is an opportunity for greater awareness that the Church's reason for existence is the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus to all peoples indistinctly, and for us a call to consolidate the missionary impulse in our realities, an essential dimension of our charism from the beginning (cf. C 1 & 6).

How can we not feel deeply touched by this fundamental and challenging appeal that involves the Church and within it, the Salesian Family? We are aware of the need for new enthusiasm that opens the heart and mind to real missionary conversion. The Institute was born missionary and the Salesian charism was aroused by the Holy Spirit to spread itself and, therefore, destined to expand to the extremities of the world, overcoming barriers of culture, language, nationality, and religious confessions.

Thus living this month of October with intensity is therefore, a favorable time for everyone to re-discover the *mission* of the Church, re-motivate our being *missionary communities* that together with the young people, are the 'outgoing Church' as Pope Francis asks us to be. I too dream of an FMA Institute with a missionary spirit, where new vocations flourish because they vibrate with love, joy for the proclamation of Jesus, with passion for the *da mihi animas cetera tolle*. So that this may truly be so, I invite you to live this special time with Mary. She is the missionary of joy and of hope and is happy to accompany us, to walk with us.

The Church called to a *mission* with a universal face

Pope Francis asked the universal Church to live the Missionary Month in an 'Extraordinary' way, to commemorate the centenary of the Apostolic Letter *Maximum Illud* which the Pontiff regards as a prophetic and far-sighted document in its proposal. This is why he emphasizes, "Its farsighted and prophetic vision of the apostolate has made me realize once again the importance of renewing the Church's missionary commitment and giving fresh evangelical impulse to her work of preaching and bringing to the world the salvation of Jesus Christ, who died and rose again" (*Message for World Missionary Day 2019*).

It will be a truly "extraordinary" time because it is an opportunity to rediscover the missionary sense of our adherence to Jesus in the faith that we have freely received as a gift in Baptism. The awareness of possessing this gift places us in full communion with the Trinity which is never, the Pope emphasizes, an individual but an ecclesial experience and makes us feel in profound communion with brothers and sisters from all over the world, without exception.

Here is the meaning of the mission: the divine life that has been given to us is not a 'product to sell', it would be proselytism, but a richness to be given in our turn, to communicate with the witness of life, to be proclaimed with joy to all because God wants everyone to be saved, to come to the

knowledge of the truth, and to experience His mercy (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 48, quoted by Pope Francis in the Message).

An ‘outgoing’ missionary Church is able to arrive where only the love for Christ makes it daring and courageous in the proclamation. A Church formed by missionary disciples who take the initiative, get involved, are enterprising in seeking the best way so that the Word can be incarnated in concrete situations and produce fruits of new life, up to readiness for martyrdom as the supreme witness to Jesus Christ. A missionary Church is the Church that knows how to take the ‘first step’, knows how to take the initiative without fear, and is capable of ‘celebrating’ every small victory, every step forward in evangelization (cf. EG, n. 24).

In order for this evangelizing work to reach the most distant borders, it requires - as Pope Francis underlines on several occasions - a constant and ongoing missionary conversion. To evangelize, in fact, it is necessary to let ourselves be evangelized. It is certainly a ‘demanding’ but a practicable and possible ‘way’, witnessed by brothers and sisters in the faith driven by the fire of love which by its nature is movement, openness to the other, that does not refrain from sacrifices and hard work and seeks to weave hope-generating relationships.

The authentic life conferred on us in Baptism inserts us completely into the Church. It is in this sacrament that we experience as daughters and sons all fatherhood and true motherhood: “We cannot have God as a Father if we do not have the Church as a mother”.

The Church is a mother with a heart wide open that intends to arrive to everyone, without exception, and if she privileges some, she doubtlessly chooses the poor, the forgotten, those who have nothing to give back (*Lk 14: 14*, cf. EG n. 48).

The celebration of the Special Assembly of the Bishops Synod for the Panamazon Region, which will be held in Rome in October, is a providential event, affirms Pope Francis, that “allows me to emphasize how the mission entrusted to us by Jesus with the gift of His Spirit is also timely and necessary for those lands and their peoples. A renewed Pentecost opens wide the doors of the Church, in order that no culture remain closed in on itself and no people cut off from the universal communion of the faith” (*Message for World Missionary Day 2019*).

With this reflection open to broad horizons, the Pope reminds the whole Church of its profound identity, its missionary vocation: “Go into the whole world and proclaim the Gospel to every creature” (*Mk 16:15*).

Fervent communities with the missionary spirit

On 5 August this year in Mornese, with great emotion I opened the three-year preparation for the celebration of the 150th anniversary of the foundation of our Institute. The echo that followed was marvelous: Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, young people, and lay people were involved in a vibrant movement of missionary ardor that belongs to us by charism. Yes, we are all missionaries and called to ignite the young to become missionaries too, wherever we are, whatever age, service, and competence we have. There are those who make a gift of their suffering with a ‘missionary heart’ and those who, with apostolic initiative, enjoy good health and are actively present in the mission.

On August 5th in the land of Mornese, I felt Mother Mazzarello almost sensibly present who, with our first sisters, looks passionately at the globe, eager to go to distant lands to proclaim the Gospel, to make Jesus known as the sole purpose of that ‘going out’ from Mornese, with understandable nostalgia.

Now as in a mirror, I see our present reality and I thank the Lord, together with all of you, for the fidelity and courage of numerous sisters who maintain and nourish the missionary ardor of the origins (cf. C 1). They live their missionary vocation in an ‘extraordinary’ way with simplicity,

passion, creativity, and the ability to inculturate themselves in an unknown reality already loved, happy to collaborate for the spread of God's Kingdom.

They are Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, past and present, and they are many!, who, almost unknown to them, accomplished and still accomplish a marvelous truth, "*I am a mission* on this earth; that is the reason why I am here in this world. . We have to regard ourselves as sealed, even branded, by this mission of bringing light, blessing, enlivening, raising up, healing, and freeing" (EG, n. 273).

The Church shines with numerous witnesses who make it holy and increasingly missionary. This is the case for our religious family. Among so many heroic missionaries I think of Sister Maria Troncatti, of whom we recently celebrated the 50th anniversary of her *dies natalis*, and who was chosen to be among the witnesses of the forthcoming Panamazon Synod on the theme: *Amazon, new paths for the Church and for an integral ecology*.

In the message sent for this circumstance to the Province of Ecuador, interpreting the whole Institute, I thanked and praised the Lord for having given the Church, the Institute, and the Shuar people the gift of this great missionary figure. She, a frontier woman, *the itinerant missionary*, who reached the unexplored Amazonian peripheries and, with patience and evangelical boldness, embraced the demands of inculturation with the sensitivity and intuition of the saints. Her days were a continuous 'missionary outgoing' to be close to the joys and sufferings of indigenous peoples, their traditions, and their culture, open to the values of the Gospel.

Dear Sisters, I think that it is all a question of love and those who love know how to understand, to adapt, how to walk quickly to become neighbor. This principle touches all of us closely wherever we are living our 'missionary spirit'.

We know well that it is not the place that makes us missionaries, but the *mandate* given to us first as a gesture of trust from God, the Church, and the Institute. It is the missionary mandate that marked GC XXIII and that Pope Francis made resound in the hearts of the Chapter members present at the Audience, "*Missionaries of joy and of hope*", that is, educators, missionary disciples who renew "the passion and commitment for the evangelizing educative mission, in whatever situation, in whatever work, even original, in which the Salesian charism is expressed" (*Acts GC XXIII, no. 50*).

Therefore, the mission is an action that not only goes 'beyond' the confines, but is present everywhere the Church is and wants to arrive where the Church is not yet present! It is there that the new generations await the word of life, of peace, of true love. The mission land is there where Jesus is ignored, forgotten, unknown; where discrimination dominates and human rights are violated; where the spirit of the beatitudes is not lived and solidarity and inclusion are not promoted.

With my knowledge of the Institute, I can affirm that we are missionaries in the whole world! There are numerous sisters whom I have met in these years and they are effectively 'missionaries', even though they are not far from their native land and who with simplicity 'speak' of God with their life, giving gestures of humanity, mercy, forgiveness which we know we all need. Sisters who share their faith journey in the joy of feeling they are inhabited by the Risen Christ, who bring happiness and enthusiasm even amid daily fatigue and suffering. It is a happiness made up of daily actions, lived on 'tip toe', but that have the power of keeping alive the dreams of every person, and above all, of the young. Sisters who look at the complex reality of today with the same gaze as God. Sisters who live inter-religious dialog in daily life. Are they not, perhaps, the missionaries who generate life today?

We are aware, however, that the mission is never accomplished, it still has a journey to make and thus we ask ourselves: What proposals do we make to young people to have missionary experiences among the poorest, awakening in them the passion to communicate God's love?

I invite you in this Extraordinary Missionary Month to reserve times for personal and community reflection on our being a living part of a Church that is totally missionary, on the missionary dimension of our Institute, an essential element of its identity and expression of its universality (cf. C

75). We wish to live this time with a *prophetic missionary spirit*, with the fire that is already present in our heart, but that perhaps for various reasons, may be extinguished or weakened. How can we free ourselves from that which stops us from being daring and creative in opening new paths today?

Ours is a 'world community' (cf. C 115) present in many Countries of the world and on the five Continents. We aware however with suffering that there are still places where the presence of the Church is weak so that children, young people, and families are not reached by the proclamation of the Gospel and by an adequate integral education due to the lack of people willing to be missionaries *ad gentes*. Faced with these realities, I continually beg the Lord to send many vocations to the Institute and to the Church!

I relaunch with great trust and humility the appeal to the sisters who feel the missionary call in their hearts to carry out a wise discernment in the light of the Holy Spirit and thus be able to say their yes with generosity and in total gratuity.

Objections, understandable difficulties can arise within the Provinces. Pope Francis reminds us that "life is strengthened by giving it and weakened in isolation and in leisure [...] it grows and matures to the extent that we give it for the life of others" (*EG*, n. 10).

For my part, I thank each of you for your adherence to Jesus, the missionary of the Father, and for the fidelity with which you daily live the vocation of Daughters of Mary Help of Christians there where you are. I wish to express a special thanks to each sister who supports the Institute and its mission with prayer and with the active and supportive commitment that is sometimes hidden but effective. It is very beautiful to think that for those who go and for those who remain the mission is one: to proclaim the salvation brought by Jesus to all peoples. However, not alone, but in full synergy with the young and lay people ready to welcome the mandate: "I entrust them to you".

A missionary mandate: "I entrust them to you."

The guiding thread that accompanies the reflection in this circular is the mandate: "I entrust them to you" which I consider essentially missionary. In fact, from Borgo Alto of Mornese it surprisingly and I would dare say almost like a 'charismatic miracle', expanded with the strength of the Holy Spirit and landed in the most remote corners of the earth, involving young people and adults on a *journey together* lived in the style of Valdocco and Mornese, transforming arid realities into life-generating, fruitful, and attractive communities.

The circular in preparation for GC XXIV can be a point of reference to further understand the actuality of this mandate. We will feel urged to courageously accept the new demands of this 'missionary mandate', strengthening collaboration and communion especially with the groups of the Salesian Family and the educating communities.

Putting the mission at the heart of our educating communities is the criterion for discovering the apostolic efficacy of the communities, the vocational fruitfulness of our environments, and the joy that we are capable of arousing around us. It is the secret of our journey of conversion and holiness and, at the same time, its most radiant expression.

I have met many people willing to share efforts and hopes with us so that the young may know and meet Jesus and be, in turn, missionaries of other young people.

I understand that this 'shared mission' is not always easy. Sometimes real difficulties can arise, but experience confirms that the good to sow is much stronger than any hardships and frustrations. These can be overcome if the awareness prevails that we have received the same vocation to fulfill: we are baptized and therefore sent to proclaim and witness with our life the fruitfulness of the Word of God, so that everyone may have the certainty of being children loved by the Father and thus worthy of respect in their personal dignity and in the vocation entrusted to them for building a more human world open to the Gospel.

Pope Francis reminds us that “those who love move, are urged outside of themselves, attracted and attract, give themselves to others, and weave relationships that generate life. No one is useless or insignificant because of God's love. Each of us is a mission in the world because we are the fruit of God's love” (*Message for World Missionary Sunday 2019*). For us the ‘theological place’ of the mission is the young people to whom the Lord sends us, so that in many of them hope may be rekindled and new horizons may open up prospects for a better future where young people themselves feel fully involved.

On many occasions the Holy Father has addressed them with messages of great missionary depth and with a clear vocational appeal. In my heart, in the hearts of the sisters and of the educating communities, does faith in young people and in their missionary enthusiasm vigorously vibrate, as it emerges in the thought and concrete actions of Pope Francis? His is not a utopia, but a great dream waiting to be fulfilled and which can blossom for every young person in the search and adherence to their vocation in the Church and in society.

Life is mission and joyfully living one's responsibility for the world is a great challenge. The mission entrusted to the young is to proclaim Jesus Christ so that they bring Him to other young people. It is a mutual trust: *every young person is entrusted with other young people!* Is this not perhaps the educational-evangelizing dynamic lived in Valdocco and Mornese and which must also characterize our realities today? I leave it to you to reflect on this question in the certainty that in everyone there is a commitment to keep alive the strength and beauty of the *da mihi animas cetera tolle*, the soul of the mission. Everything happens by ‘contagion’ and love cannot place limits. It is an irradiation that generates encounter, testimony, proclamation. At the same time, it generates sharing in love with all those who are far from the faith, or are indifferent, contrary, skeptical. Missionary disciples are called to go to the extreme existential peripheries and not only the geographical ones. The most needy periphery of Christ is indifference toward faith and the sacredness of life. Faced with this challenge, a question is launched to the young people: “What would Christ do in my place?”

It is an explicitly missionary-vocational question that we can dare to courageously and consistently offer to many young people, especially the most sensitive, with the mandate: “I entrust them to you”. Even today it is possible to believe that there are young people willing to be ‘missionaries of other young people’ by vocation, and us with them, because the mandate is not ‘private’, but for the community following the style of Jesus present in every age.

I conclude by wishing that we may live the “Extraordinary” Missionary Month *together*: young people, educating communities, people willing to give something of themselves for the human, Christian, and cultural growth of many peoples thirsting for Truth.

I wish to thank Sr. Alafé Deretti, Councilor for the Missions, and her collaborators, for offering us, in addition to the monthly letters, a Guide sent to the communities to help them deepen the Apostolic Letter *Maximum illud* in its key elements.

I invite you to participate warmly and actively in the initiatives organized by the local Churches.

Dear Sisters, I confidently join with all of you on this ‘missionary’ journey with courageous, humble, sometimes tiring steps, confident of the presence of Mary who always accompanies us to be “missionaries of hope and joy” as she was.

I am sure that all of you, according to your possibilities, want to keep the fire of the *da mihi animas cetera tolle* burning, which leads you to risk your life, to be bold, to be unafraid of change, to be open to the new challenges of contemporaneity (cf. *Message for the 150th anniversary of the foundation of the Institute*).

May God and Mary, the first missionary, bless you.

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La Madre