

INSTITUTE OF THE DAUGHTERS OF MARY HELP OF CHRISTIANS

Founded by St. John Bosco
and by St. Mary Domenica Mazzarello

N. 987

Vocation: a yes that is renewed over time

Dearest Sisters,

At this time, we are living a choral communion in the Institute and I wish to express my deep gratitude to all of you, to the educating communities, to the young people, to every person for having received and lived with a sense of belonging the preparation for the *World Feast of Gratitude*.

Also this year, the experience involved many people and made us feel in solidarity with our brothers and sisters in situations of need. Prayer was intense in all the communities with the children and young people. I perceived a resonance of great humanity that became concretized in generous gestures of solidarity as well. The offerings received will be used for some urgent needs of the Institute and to support the new community at the border between Mexico and the United States that, in collaboration with other Institutions, will be a place of reception and formation for young migrants. I thank you from my heart, dear Sisters, because together we are writing a radiant page, accepting the mandate that is still being made to us today: "I entrust them to you".

The choice of the theme for this Circular: *Vocation – a yes that is renewed over time* is essentially based on some interesting motives. Above all, the topic of vocation is in line with the Bishops Synod: *The Young, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment* that finds its sequel in the recent Post-Synod Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Francis *Christus Vivit*. It is an open letter addressed to the young people and to all the people of God on which, as Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, we are called to reflect and share with the educating communities and especially with the young entrusted to us.

Another motive is the journey we are taking towards GC XXIV that has as its objective to *Reawaken the original freshness of vocational fruitfulness of the Institute* and is situated in the triennial of preparation for the *150th anniversary of the foundation of our Institute* (1872-2022). We will live this time of grace together to revive the vocational richness of the charism and to thus be always more meaningful and contagious in the various contexts of today's world, as I clarified in the convocation Circular in preparation for GC XXIV.

I share what I have at heart with simplicity and joy and I propose this journey in the light of Mary, the Woman of the fruitful yes. From our origins, She was a Presence that gave the educational mission a vocational perspective open to broad horizons, listening to the Holy Spirit, and attentive to the responsible growth of every young person.

I invite you to receive with an 'Easter gaze' the certainty of this Presence in our life and in our communities. I am convinced that where Mary is, there is joy and fidelity to vocation, and with her there is a sure guide to help the young people to discover God's plan in their life.

The courageous yes of Maria

Vocation in its broadest connotation is discovery, it is journey, it is entering into the mystery of a proposal of love that God reserves to every person and does it in the logic of daily reciprocal dialogue. The meeting between the proposal of God and human freedom is beyond all forms of determinism. It is not the realization of an already written script, as Pope Francis affirms, but it is listening to the Lord who reveals the place each person is called to occupy in the plan of salvation. In this light, "vocation appears as a real gift of grace and a gift of covenant – the most beautiful and precious secret of our freedom." (*Final Document of the Synod of Bishops DF, n. 78*).

We discover this gift in some of the personages that the Word of God makes known to us. Think of the call of Samuel that always surprises us, because perhaps we find in it the reflection of some aspect of our vocation story. The call is not imposed on Samuel as a plan to follow, but as a mystery of love that asks for listening, personal involvement, progressive understanding (Cf. 1 Samuel 3: 1-21). It is an itinerary to be accomplished in faith because everything is not suddenly clear. In fact, "faith 'sees' to the extent that it journeys, to the extent that it chooses to enter into the horizons opened up by God's word" (Pope Francis *Lumen Fidei*, n. 9, cited in DF, n. 77).

Thus it is for every person, thus it was for Mary, the girl of Nazareth, as Pope Francis calls her in *Christus Vivit*. Looking at her, we understand how the "creative Word calls each one of us personally, revealing that *life itself is a vocation from God*" (*Verbum Domini*, n. 77, cited in DF, n. 79).

Her 'behold' initiated the most important event of history in a remote part of Galilee, today we would say in a *periphery area*. There the Word became flesh and this young woman by making her entire self available, becomes a 'living house', a temple in which the Son of

God becomes man. In Mary the miracle of the reunion between heaven and earth takes place and the mystery of the Incarnation attests to us how much the Father loves us and how much He has at heart the salvation of the world.

“Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word” (*Luke 1: 38*). The strength of this ‘yes’ and ‘let it be done to me’ is impressive, as said by a young woman who let herself be involved in a plan that changed the direction of her life and the history of humanity. Her adhesion is not passive or resigned, but one that is dialogued. In fact, she does not renounce asking questions, but her soul is available because it is illumined by the light of the Holy Spirit.

With this total adherence to God's call, Mary becomes the custodian of a promise and this is the only guarantee she carries in her heart. Difficulties and suffering will not be spared, but “the yes and the desire to serve were stronger than doubts and difficulties” (Pope Francis, *Vigil with young people at the XXXIV WYD in Panama*, 26 January 2019). Only love overcomes fear and dissolves every doubt!

From this moment Mary becomes the first disciple of Jesus and the model of every disciple of the Lord. Her yes accompanies and supports her in the pilgrimage of faith, which knows fatigue and doubt, but is always open to any further request from God.

Let us contemplate Mary ready to leave “in haste” (Lk 1:39) to go to her cousin Elizabeth who needs her and who is the only person with whom she can share the new life she carries in her womb: Jesus!

Mary is also a caring presence at the wedding in Cana, where she contributes to the miracle of the transformation of water into wine, so that joy and celebration are nourished in the community.

We also contemplate her as she ascends to Calvary, living her ‘hour’ with courage, and her sorrowful and sweet face is the only light of comfort that shines near the pierced heart of her Son. And it is precisely from that ‘hour’ the great consolation flows. “Woman, behold your son! ... Behold your mother!” (Jn 19: 26-27).

Mary is also the Woman of the Resurrection. She who shared her Son’s entire redemptive experience, it would be unthinkable that she would not be present at the highest moment of salvation – the Resurrection.

And “she also joined the disciples in awaiting the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (cf. *Acts 1:14*). In her presence, a young Church was born, as the apostles went forth to give birth to a new world (cf. *Acts 2:4-11*)” (*Christus Vivit*, n. 47).

The more we look at Mary, the more is born in us the need to be silent to penetrate the greatness and the profundity of her 'behold' that, from generation to generation, reaches to us, to the threshold of our life. Let us open our heart's door and ask ourselves, how her humble, courageous, dynamic yes, can make our daily yes to God more aware and deeper so that we may be increasingly available to Him and at the service of the people He entrusts to us, especially the neediest?

In Mary's yes, our yes

Enjoying the presence of Mary in our lives and savoring the universal dimension of her yes is like a springboard to revisit with a loving heart the call that Jesus personally addressed to each one of us, those few or many years ago. Entrusting ourselves to her, it is beautiful to rediscover the *grace of vocation* as a gift from God and as a call to a mysterious educational fruitfulness.

Dear Sisters, there would be various reflections to share in this regard, but the space of a Circular does not permit this. I let myself be guided by the Holy Spirit so that He would indicate to me what to propose for your reflection and prayer. From the experience lived in these years at the Institute level, in the ecclesial reality, and in the numerous encounters I have had with young people and adults in various areas of the world, I have more greatly perceived that vocational fruitfulness has certainly its origin in God's call who always takes the initiative, but that He 'insistently' calls for our collaboration, our *'behold'! both personal and as a community, said with joy and love.*

To the explicit question asked of Pope Francis if "community life can continue to be a sign and a pole of attraction for the young", his response was in the affirmative on the condition that community life be authentic. He recalls the experience of a religious community where there is witness, where the vocation as consecrated persons is lived with intensity and joy, and therefore able to contagion in the young the joy of living in community (cf. Pope Francis, *The power of vocation*, pp. 89-90)

Community and joy: two fundamental values of our vocation.

In the Constitutions, there are important articles on community and on joy that I invite you to take up as elements of comparison and dialogue (cf. articles 50, 62,73). It is said that the future of consecrated life is played out in the community. Therein is the true prophecy where we endeavor to pass from living together to communion of life: communion is mission.

Perhaps today, more than in the past, there is need of a community life where no one is content with being happy alone but find their true happiness in bringing joy and hope, creating that family atmosphere which we all need and that, at times, we are aware of the need of empowering it or of recuperating it. We well know how the quality of our relationships is the great support for everyone's fidelity.

We are convoked by God to witness with life, the beauty and the joy of living together in the name of the Lord. This implies the concrete expression of gestures of exquisite humanity, of trust, of respect, of esteem, and of understanding, in an attitude of open, family-like dialogue, of gratitude, and of mutual acceptance (cf. C 50).

In this climate, it is possible to share the experience of the daily encounter with the Lord Jesus and to let ourselves be transformed by Him, in communities that express the richness of our consecrated femininity with the love that generates life, that radiates joy. Is this not what we desire for our communities; to be accompanied by Mary so that those who meet us can feel that our hearts burn with love given with tenderness and gratuity; that our experience of God may become the power of evangelization, of vocational contagion?

Dear Sisters, we are fruitful in the mission only if we succeed in communicating the charm of having been seduced by Love and decided to follow Him *on a paschal journey* that involves suffering, a cross, but that is the source of life.

The family spirit, which characterized Valdocco and Mornese, found its source precisely in the Easter dimension lived to the full. There was no lack of fragility, weakness, abandonment, but love won out over everything. Sometimes there is the risk of idealizing the community, of dreaming that it be perfect, and thus becoming victims of disappointment. This state of mind becomes a cause of prejudice, of criticism, of little serenity. With realism we remember that we are all fragile, weak, sinful, and that God does great things precisely in our poverty.

I have met many communities that, open to grace, live in a continuous process of conversion marked by forgiveness, trust, the rediscovery of feeling like family, the atmosphere of joy that involves young people and promotes the birth of Salesian vocations (cf. C 50).

The communities that become the womb of new vocations are those where Jesus is at the center, where the Gospel of charity is breathed, where there are sisters who love each other, open to hope and aimed at creating communion, values that give the right

dimension to eventual problems and difficulties, and where profound joy does not give way to sadness.

Joy is the first and most credible vocational message that emerges from the communities. It has within it a strong vocational and missionary dynamism that makes our homes *attractive*, life-giving. Many of us recognize that by approaching Daughters of Mary Help of Christians with a smiling face, happy with their vocation, capable of facing the labors of everyday life in an atmosphere of authentic family, strong in faith, and rooted in prayer, they have felt drawn by a reality inexpressible in words, but sensibly true: the seed of the call that sprouted to become a life choice. It is beautiful to remember this effective 'vocational animation', to remember these great and simple figures who in their lives have given continuity, with surprising love, to Mary's yes.

I invite you, dear sisters, to help each other, so that the communities may shine with a Marian face, where the "feast of yes" vibrates, where joy is present in its Easter dimension and where, not for proselytism, but through attraction, many young people adhere to the "come and follow me" of Jesus. We are certain that God still calls, but needs us, educating communities committed to promoting a vocational culture with broad horizons and the breath of communion. Vocational culture is a 'road to encounter', where young people are accompanied to discover what place in life God has reserved for them. I understand that this path is not always easy. Mary accompanies us with her vigilant and motherly presence and with her, we in turn can be communities that are not only 'called', but 'callers' as well.

With Her: Mother of the young

"We young people do not need you to only wait for us, but to come looking for us. Come and find us. You wait for us, but you don't look for us! We need you, we need to be sought by you". This is the expression of a young woman who, in a recent inter-congregational meeting in which I participated, spoke for many other young people. Many, not always explicitly, ask themselves what meaning life has, what orientation it must take, what place to occupy, for what and for whom to live. There are also young people who are indifferent, resigned, devoid of a precise identity, rich with information but poor in formation, who feel they are useless, without a future, resigned towards life, without reference points.

The experience of contact with so many of them makes us realize that, beyond appearances, there are more and more of those who have a 'longing for God', a thirst for

profound and vital encounters; young people who want to build a new society based on peace, justice, respect for the environment; young people open to volunteering, to solidarity, ready to defend the rights of the human person; young people who do not want to stand on the balcony, nor just be indignant, but who intend to be creative, able to bet on the future.

“Come to look for us because we need you”. As educators, we cannot be late. Faced with this variegated youth panorama, a vocational pedagogy is urgently needed that says how we were all wanted by a wise plan, responsible for continuing today to transmit this gift of love, especially where spiritual deserts multiply and underestimate the meaning of existence.

We find an answer to these questions in Pope Francis: “Christ is alive! He is our hope, and in a wonderful way he brings youth to our world, and everything he touches becomes young, new, full of life” (*Christus Vivit*, n. 1).

In WYD in Panama the young people were invited to look at Mary, her story in which there was a promise and a risk, as indeed in the story of each call. And it is on the *courage to risk for God's promise* that the Holy Father dwells in the message for the 56th World Day of Prayer for Vocations.

When the Lord calls He makes us bearers of a promise, but also asks for the courage to risk with Him and for Him. This means facing a new challenge, facing it with an audacity that pushes without hesitation to discover what God desires for the happiness of all: for those who are called to the Christian life with the Baptism that makes children of God and belonging to the great family of the Church; for those who form a family, as well as for other vocations lived in different realities; for those who feel the fascination of consecrated life or the priesthood. They are vocations, the Pope continues, which need courageous Christians and authentic witnesses of the Kingdom of God and of communities open in solidarity.

Resistance may arise in the vocational journey. Fear can paralyze the joy of a ‘here I am’, hope can yield to fatigue. For this reason, the message emphasizes the need for a renewed commitment of the whole Church: priests, religious, animators, and educators, who offer young people meaningful experiences, opportunities for meeting, spaces for listening, for spiritual accompaniment, and for discernment.

We are living a time of grace, of new awareness of the vocational dimension of the educational mission entrusted to us. From this point of view, I invite you to take up again and study the paths that are offered to us by the Formation Plan *Rooted in the Covenant*. In the part that concerns the vocational dimension of the educational mission, it is wisely specified that “to the extent that we live in Christ, with and for young people, we carry out our Salesian vocation and, in the mystery of the fruitfulness of the Spirit, we become *guides and educators in turn of other vocations*”.

There are many realities in the world that can count on the *strength of the whole* as Salesian Family and as an educating communities. Many experiences are beautiful, lively, dynamic, but I think we can make them converge better around an explicit educational-vocational path to feel that we are all more co-responsible in accompanying the young people to the encounter with Jesus who calls them to follow Him.

We must renew the courage to propose strong experiences of Christian life and of solidarity with the poor in the spirit of the Gospel; above all, to be the first to witness to the joy of one's vocation. Communities with this face are already an invitation to "come and see".

Let us all feel involved in the wonderful mission of accompanying the young in the ways possible for each one, to have nostalgia for God, to hear the voice there, where they are cared for and to make it become a life choice

In this month of May, we entrust to Mary, Mother and help of the young, their dreams, their enthusiasm, their expectations, and fears. She gives us the ability to dream with them with the same apostolic ardor lived by Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello.

On the solemnity of Mary Help of Christians I will feel you all present in the Basilica in Turin. Together with you, I will present our gratitude to the Lord for the gift of vocation and for the love with which Jesus continues, in all contexts, to call young people to follow Him and make them joyful heralds of the Gospel.

May God bless you!

Rome, 24 April 2019

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La Madre