

## *The joy of being and expressing gratitude*

Dearest Sisters,

I am very happy to reach you during this special time when we are living a slowing down of activity and we are surrounded by an unusual silence. The coronavirus pandemic is touching the whole world and many are struck by its spread, like the waves of the ocean, from one extremity of the world to the other. Our family is large and is living in universal solidarity because we are all progressively involved. We live among many young people, laity, an immense population that expects from us a light of hope, support in faith, encouragement to believe in the future, an offering of prayer, and of sharing the meaning of life.

In preparation for General Chapter XXIV, accompanied by Mary, we wish to generate life in the heart of contemporaneity, doing whatever Jesus tells us.

At the beginning of our journey, we did not think we would find ourselves in this world situation where the struggle between life and death has become at times dramatic due to the difficulty in conquering an unknown and powerful virus. At the same time, we are experiencing great solidarity and the giving of their life of many doctors, health personnel, volunteers who do all possible to help people in difficulty in various ways. Prayer becomes an important sign and Pope Francis gives us the example, accompanying the Church and the world in ways that are compatible with the situation. We feel him always close and when I met him on March 14, he gave me his blessing for the entire Institute.

In this reality, we are preparing for the Feast of Gratitude that will have a special meaning this year due to the actual circumstances. Its importance does not lie in how we do it but rather in a heart full of gratitude.

With joy I wish to thank you for your choral involvement in the preparation for this event. It has a special meaning this year because it gathers the experience lived together during these twelve years characterized by the family spirit, the increase in communion and in missionary ardor. I can affirm that the Lord has been present and still is, in our being 'a journeying community', open to the ever new challenges of the Church, social, and especially youth realities. They are challenges that question each community with their hopes and daily labors. My heart vibrates with much gratitude to God and to all of you, to the educating communities, to the young people for the love of the charism that our Founders handed on to us. We will never be able to thank them enough for being the recipients of this precious 'pearl' and at the same time, responsible to safeguard it, develop it, and spread it in all its beauty and creativity.

This year, we will celebrate the **World Feast of Gratitude** at Rome in St. John Bosco Roman Province on April 26. Also involved will be the sisters of Mary Mother of the Church Preprovince, and the sisters of the Generalate. I thank in a special way, the Provincial Sr. Angela Maria Maccioni and her collaborators for its organization and for the choice of theme, *Your life is a tree that bears fruit. Thank you, Mother!* It is an expression directed to me, but that I interpret as addressed to all of you. If there is a mother, there are also her daughters who abundantly spread seeds of life and that, *together*, enjoy the fruits of a 'flourishing tree', as is so well represented by the logo of the Feast.

I express my thank you also to Sr. Chiara Cazzuola, Vicar General, who through her letter sent to all the Provinces timely and useful information to live this family feast with joy, hope, and gratitude.

It will be beautiful to meet each other in the way that we can, perhaps only virtually, at Rome, center of Catholicity and see of the 'House of the Mother', that has the 'doors of its heart' always wide open to receive you and listen to you, to share dreams and preoccupations, and keep our gaze turned to future horizons.

**Our vocation: to be gratitude**

Gratitude touches the identity of our Institute, is part of our *DNA* and it is very good to have the opportunity to rediscover it on the journey of preparation for the 150<sup>th</sup> of the foundation of our religious Family that, in the first stage, has as its theme, *Give thanks*: "We truly thank the Lord who grants us many graces" (L 37, 10) (cf. Circular 989).

To cultivate and express gratitude, very rare values in our culture today, I think is the secret of our happiness, the light that illumines the trust of our communities, sometimes weighed down by personal and pastoral fatigue, by doubts and difficulties of various kinds, but certain of being always enveloped in God's Love.

To know how to say a *sincere thank you* manifests the relational quality of our *being* that recognizes the greatness of the love that gives us life each day. The grace of God penetrates and transforms our life and that of every creature, giving a new meaning to relationships, these too, the marvelous gift of the Lord.

Our heart is inhabited by the joy of knowing that we are the "Living Monument of gratitude to Mary Help of Christians" wanted by Don Bosco as "perennial gratitude for the singular favors obtained from this good Mother" (*MB X 600*). Our Founder built it with 'living stones' that have a precise name, the name of each one of us. He wanted it to be dynamic, creative, in continual expansion, pervaded by an interior tension of growth, able to be incisive in society and in the Church, doing 'great good' to the young people.

It could be that over the years, this Monument is covered with dust or needs some restoration. If it needs to be dusted or renewed in its beauty, Mary is ready to give us a hand in giving it a new splendor. Like no other creature, She carries in herself the beauty that shines on the face of Her Son Jesus. Singing the *Magnificat*, she intoned a marvelous hymn of gratitude to God that continues from generation to generation, to today, in the Church, in each of us, and in our communities.

Mary helps us understand that nothing is due to us and that everything is a gift of the Father. She teaches us how to make our heart dance, to sing the hymn of the Lord's poor, the *anawim*, those who know how to rejoice in the wonders of God.

Like her, we too are called to humbly live the joy of the *Magnificat*, prolonging her presence in history. In fact, we are called to be 'helpers' like her among the young people, with a special gaze on those who are subject to various forms of poverty and who wait for hope and confidence in life (Cf. C 4, 65).

The *Circular In Preparation for General Chapter XXIV*, recalls among other things, the importance of being communities that generate life today, feeling the responsibility of making our communities 'houses of the love of God', where the young feel welcomed and where each day, lived in charity and joy, Mary's *Magnificat* continues (cf. C 62). Who better than Mary can indicate to us the road to generate life in the heart of contemporaneity? Who more than Mary can teach us to be courageous, enterprising, daring in always going 'beyond' towards the peripheries with missionary ardor, with the joy of marveling at all the hand of God accomplishes today? He fills the tree of life with new shoots, flowers, and fruits; He knows how to pour 'good wine' into stone jars; He brings light into the everyday life of human history, sometimes troubled and hopeless.

In preparation for the Feast of Gratitude we can commit ourselves to discover in our life and in that of the people around us, some aspects of the *Magnificat* that can give new splendor to our being the *Living Monument of Gratitude*. It can become a reciprocal gift that we share in this very meaningful circumstance.

Let us allow ourselves to be guided by the inner voice of the Holy Spirit that well knows which light to give us so that we too can be women of the *Magnificat*, 'living stones' of the Monument that Don Bosco wanted to raise to Mary Help of Christians.

**Simply: thank you!**

At this time, I receive numerous expressions of gratitude, evident signs of our sense of 'family'. Now however, I am the one who feels the need to say to all of you *simply, thank you!* I reserve this space as an 'open letter' addressed to each one of you, where I would like to write my gratitude in golden letters.

How many experiences and how many encounters with you, directly or in other ways, all lived with the joy of sharing the same vocation, God's gratuitous gift! Encounters animated by the same passion for the *da mihi animas cetera tolle*, attentive to Institute events and to the appeals of the universal Church, so rich in recent times. Encounters open to grasp the challenges of the youth world, faced in full synergy as Salesian Family with the lay people, with the families, and with young people, our 'first educators', according to Don Bosco's thought.

**I thank from my heart all you sisters who have lived and are living a service of animation and of government** in the General Council, in the Province and local communities, in the educating communities, placing your trust in the Lord and in Mary Help of Christians. You are accompanying the development and the inculturation of the charism in every context in which we are called to witness to the joy of our vocation, giving our life for the salvation of the young people. The journey of formation and of growth in the co-responsibility of the laity is a horizon open to the future. My thank you wishes to reach everyone, the lay women and men who share the responsibility for the mission, even without the presence of a community of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. I think especially of the numerous Past Pupils who are a great strength in the diffusion of the charism in the entire world.

**A special thank you to you elderly and sick Sisters**, because you give your whole self in prayer, in offering fatigue and physical and moral suffering with an unwavering spirit of faith. In meeting many of you I have discovered hearts that are in love, lives full of evangelizing passion, able to transform daily life, that is sometimes difficult, into a fruitful mission. God's love envelops you with tenderness, mercy, and is a constant presence that gives you the strength to transform aridity and solitude into trust, fraternity, and apostolic fruitfulness. He counts a lot on your collaboration so that the young people may encounter Jesus, the source of authentic happiness. You are, in all respects, precious 'living stones' in the *Monument of Gratitude* that Don Bosco raised to Mary Help of Christians. Yes, dear Sisters, you are fruitful wombs that generate life. I want you to feel my sincere gratitude and that of the whole Institute, which becomes prayer and deep communion.

**I also address a thank you to all of you, dear young sisters and sisters with many years of religious life.** I confide to you that when I began my service to our Religious Family, I felt in my heart a beautiful and challenging sensation. I perceived a mandate that remained deeply engraved in my soul and that has accompanied me during these years, "*I entrust them to you*". At this time, as I have said on other occasions, you have all entered to be part of my life and of my mission, beyond age, origin, language, culture, formation, tasks entrusted to you.

Thank you for having been and are still now, my faithful 'companions on the journey'. How many trips and how many encounters! I always felt sustained by your prayers, by your passionate sense of belonging, rich with hope and fidelity to our Mornese origins. I can say that I have experienced a 'reciprocal entrustment' for which I will never stop thanking the Lord and all of you.

In the personal and community encounters, you have confided to me many times the commitment to be 'out going' in order to follow the Lord Jesus without conditions and to learn from Him to sow seeds of life in the sometimes arid soil of the mission entrusted to you. Small seeds that will become a huge tree, as the logo of the Feast of Gratitude evokes, when they are irrigated by personal and community prayer and sowed with full hands by those who have at heart the salvation of the new generations. You do not hide fatigue, doubts, and perplexities, but you are open to the future with hope. You share them with openness and freedom of spirit, with parrhesia, so desired by Pope Francis.

I thank you for the reflections shared in the Provincial Chapters that brought the voice of the communities, highlighting the needs of the reality you are inserted in and the challenges that you face. Effectively, as Church and as Institute, we are living a time that makes us somewhat uncomfortable, that disturbs 'we have always done it this way', 'we cannot do it', 'we do not have sufficient and adequate resources', 'the new and unforeseeable frightens us'.

These are understandable fears, but we are not alone. There is the love of the Father that sustains us, His Word that gives light in the heart of contemporaneity. This gives us strength to proclaim and witness *together* as Salesian Family, educating communities, young people, Institutions, and people sensitive to the prophetic resource of education. And there is Mary who helps us 'always to go ahead' with resourcefulness and apostolic daring, to reach the peripheries where the young are waiting for us. As Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, we cannot live today without a gaze of hope. Ours is not a charism of the past, but it is in full development, and to be convinced of this is the condition to seek *with* the young and *for* them, innovative paths to build a world according to God's plan.

I invite you once again to continue to study and share the theme of the Chapter and the circular *In Preparation for General Chapter XXIV* to reawaken the original freshness of the vocational fruitfulness of the Institute and to be educating communities that generate new life in the awareness that GC XXIV already begins today in us. It is the gift, I am certain, that we choose to share to be **Mornese in out-reach**, Mornese that fills the 'empty jars' with the 'good wine' of gratitude.

### **Educate to gratitude**

Valdocco and Mornese are places where the spirituality of gratitude was at home. Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello, with the pedagogy of little gestures, of possible steps, formed young people able to recognize and thank God for the gifts received, and at the same time, give them back by placing them at the service of others. Our Founders were convinced that each young person had noteworthy potentials that needed to be drawn out, among them was gratitude. We know that Don Bosco gave great importance to the dimension of gratitude lived in the 'family spirit' and considered it a significant aspect of the Preventive System. Mother Mazzarello, as well, knew how to translate it into a Mornese style with wisdom and refined feminine intuition.

The experience we daily assist at makes us perhaps deem gratitude a relic of the past, an obsolete virtue, out of style. However, we note at the same time, a reawakening of gratitude and solidarity in the many kinds of volunteer activities in which the young people are the protagonists. I am thinking of VIDES, of the volunteer Organizations, of the Human Rights Office, where the young live the experience of gift and of gratitude with a *missionary heart*, as responsible citizens, and many even as Christians, happy to be able to be the sign of God's love for other young people through gestures of solidarity and of deeply human sharing! Small actions, little gestures that create a network of relationships interwoven with gratuity and gratitude, two closely related anthropological realities that refer to each other.

Is it possible to educate to gratitude today?

We find a response in the memorable words of Pope Francis, “may I?”, “thank you”, and “pardon me”.. He reminds us, “Sometimes we have to wonder if we are turning into a civilization of bad manners and bad words, as if this were a sign of self-liberation. It’s not uncommon to hear these bad words publicly. Kindness and the ability to say “thank you” are often considered a sign of weakness and raise the suspicion of others. This tendency is encountered even within the nucleus of the family. We must become firmly determined to educate others to be grateful and appreciative: the dignity of the person and social justice must both pass through the portal of the family. If family life neglects this style of living, social life will also reject it. Gratitude, however, stands at the very core of the faith of the believer. A Christian who does not know how to thank has lost the very ‘language’ of God.” (General Audience 13 May 2015).

When Pope Francis refers to the family, we receive it as an appeal to our educating communities as well. *Together* we can be the prophetic proposal that knows how to *re-establish* the value of gratitude as a seed of new life for society, for the family, for the very life of the young.

The Monument of Gratitude is a ‘building site’ that is continually in construction and it is complete if there are young people with their dreams, hopes, openness to the future. They are also the ones who can show us the way to *educate ourselves* and to *educate* to gratitude. They have the ability to make us glimpse new, unprecedented ways, provided they feel that we believe in them, that we accept them in their way of expressing themselves; that we recognize them as ‘living stones’ available to build something new, despite their fragility and vulnerability; ready to go where others do not go to meet the poorest young people who are marginalized and sad because they are discriminated against; happy to bring them a ‘breath of Spring’, sowing seeds of hope and love, the same love of God that touched their existence in depth. I deeply thank all the young men and women, starting from the youngest, whom the Lord entrusts to us daily and who are the reason for our vocation. They teach us the freshness of life, they renew us in the ability to let ourselves be loved and to love. With them, we build the Home, the Living Monument!

Only those who have experienced the Father’s tenderness can make the *tree of life* blossom in those who are waiting to be able to fulfill their desires and dreams to build a better world and this is true for us as well.

Perhaps, we are not always ready to believe that it is possible to follow this arduous but beautiful path with a typically Salesian face. The words of Pope Francis encourage us, “Dear young people, ... The Church needs your momentum, your intuitions, your faith. We need them! And when you arrive where we have not yet reached, have the patience to wait for us.” (*Christus vivit*, n. 299). I am convinced that the young people can surprise us and give us the strength to always look ‘beyond’, putting into crisis our apparent certainties.

It is a question of disposing ourselves to listening and giving ourselves mutual trust: Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, young people, lay people to build that educational covenant so much desired by Pope Francis. No longer on May 14, but between 11 and 18 October 2020, the *Global Educational Pact* will be launched (cf. Circular 992). I renew my invitation to prepare yourself responsibly for this event which marks an important stage for us educators, called to fill the ‘empty jars’ of so many young people with ‘new wine’, and perhaps ours too! We all need to taste this ‘good wine’ to build the *village of education* together as a condition for fully educating.

I conclude with the wish for a holy and peaceful Easter to you and your families for whom I offer a special prayer. I express my Easter greetings to the Rector Major Fr. Ángel Fernández Artime, to the new SDB General Council, and to all the Confreres, to the members of the Salesian Family, and to all those involved in the educational mission.

I wish the young people to feel in the depths of their hearts the presence of the risen Jesus: He is the life!

May the Risen One be our joy and our sure hope, especially in this time of hard trial. We live the transition from death to life with Mary, the ever-present Mother.

The Lord bless you!

Rome, March 24, 2020

With affection, Mother