

The faith: a treasure to share

Dearest Sisters,

I thought a long time about the theme to share with you in this Circular, keeping in mind the hard experience that the whole world is living and suffering because of Covid-19. This reality deeply touches the communities as well, the relationships with ourselves, with the young, with creation, with the entire world in its every aspect. This time of lockdown presents questions. “What future awaits us?” It is a hard question that provokes states of soul with uncertainties that are difficult to manage in us and around us. And it is precisely in this dark hour that the words of Isaiah shine again, “*See, I am doing something new! Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? In the wilderness I make a way*” (Is 43: 19). It is the word that enlightens life, opens the doors to hope, and strengthens faith. This is the time of faith and I am certain that what is happening, if on the one hand it is a world drama, on the other hand it is the beginning of a new ‘exodus’, a passage that involves all of us because nothing will be the same as before and probably, we will not return to ‘normality’ in a short time. We are also aware of it, even it costs us to realize the profound change that is already underway.

The Holy Spirit hovers over this ‘desert’ and we need His light to look with eyes of faith at history, our life, and the unprecedented situation that submerges us. We feel poor but trustful because we are certain that precisely now a new shoot is springing up, new opportunities that we will progressively discover.

The presence of Mary precedes us and accompanies us on roads that are perhaps fatiguing, always in ascent, but sure. It is a journey that strengthens communion among us and with the young, and consolidates us in the conviction that in this dark time, we are called to proclaim with joy and faith in Jesus who assures us, “*Do not let your hearts be troubled. You have faith in God; have faith also in me*” (Jn 14: 1). His Word is alive and actual! He is present in the today of history and He will make us generators of new life if we remain in Him and He in us.

From this perspective of faith, of love, of hope I desire to share with you some reflections matured in prayer. I presented to the Lord the situations that you yourselves told me, and that you are living in courageous solidarity with those in need during this pandemic. It does not save us from doubts, perplexities, even regret due to the privation of the Eucharist and of other times of encounter, of sharing, and of prayer. But I sense you are alert to go ‘beyond’ with the strength of the charism. The light of the Holy Spirit helps us to look to the future of our life and of the educational mission with creativity together, FMA, adult and young lay people, convinced that the shoot that is being born awaits being watered by the joy of the proclamation of Jesus.

The joy of witnessing to the faith in the time of trial

In our journey towards GC XXIV we are committed “*to be in the heart of contemporaneity with the attitude of Mary*” (cf. *Circular* 985) who in faith received and lived the time of salvation with availability and wisdom: light that illumined the meaning of every event, even those most obscure and incomprehensible.

At Cana, we recognize the first ‘sign’ that aroused faith in Jesus of the disciples sustained by the faith of Mary. *Cana is the today* we are living. It is the privileged place where we hear the voice of the Mother who tells us ‘to do’ whatever Jesus asks of us. To live and share the faith as the treasure that gives strength to face with hope all that is happening in the world.

I understand that it is not an easy journey to witness to and to propose, but it is this that the people expect from the Church and from us today. We are invited to welcome everything that daily life brings by entering with Jesus into His Paschal Mystery, to live the transition from death to life. This is the great light that illuminates the night, which opens the horizon of the future

Faith is not an idea but a life. Above all, faith is an ever new relationship with the Lord. In the current context there emerge fundamental questions about the meaning of existence, about the uncertain future that opens before us and the new generations, about what awaits us after this earthly pilgrimage. We cannot silence these questions and many other life questions that call to us as Christians and as educators. They are questions that touch the depths of our life of faith. They cannot remain dormant. They must awaken to the calls of history that teach us how to live this very dramatic time but that also bring new opportunities.

The precious daily homilies of Pope Francis during this time arrive like an overflowing river, like a wave that enters into our daily life, entrusting to every person of good will a clear mandate, be witnesses of a transparent faith, of open doors, of a 'missionary' faith.

How has the daily Word of God touched me deeply, penetrated my whole being, guided my actions? What actually changes in my personal and community life? Does it make me capable of sharing it with the people I meet in a comprehensible way because the Word has become 'part of me'?

The missionary dimension of faith does not necessarily ask us to go to faraway Countries. As Christians and consecrated persons, we are all missionaries. However, I ask the sisters who feel the vocation *ad gentes* to be generous, not to wait for tomorrow to do what they can do today, and to present their request to me with generosity. Either faith is missionary or it is not faith, continues Pope Francis. It is to be offered as a precious treasure. It must not remain locked up in a fence of private property but must become the sign of God's love and tenderness which embraces suffering humanity. It must 'go out' to prepare the ground so that the Holy Spirit may act in people even through our witness.

The joy that no one can take from us and that burns like a living fire in the heart, guides us to decide irrevocably and with humility to be *missionaries of faith*, witnesses of the Risen Jesus everywhere and always, without timidity, with courage. He accompanies us and is faithful to the promise made, "*Behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age*" (Mt 28: 20). Let us feel that we are all 'invited' to proclaim the Gospel to every creature (cf. Mk 16: 15) even to the point of martyrdom if necessary.

In this 'today', which due to the health emergency has upset the rhythm of our routine and of the human community, there is an opportunity for each of us to renew the journey of faith and the joy to witness to it concretely. Testimony is credible and incisive when it is first shared in community, a place where the gift of faith finds a privileged space to rejoice in the richness of the Word and where apostolic passion is strong in giving and in creativity.

The faith: a gift of the Spirit to share with joy

The life of faith is an essential part of our identity. It is the journey the Institute made at the beginning up to today and we are a living part of this pilgrimage.

Mary walked in faith (cf. LG 58) and is beside us, step after step. She helps us "to live the generative power of the charism in this historical hour, sustained by the joyful and unwavering certainty that the Holy Spirit effuses and infuses in our today, a new vitality and creativity, full of the hope of the new wine that flows from faith" (*Circular* 985).

Mary well knows that progressing in faith means following Jesus in all the stages of life up to the cross, always keeping hope lit towards the dawn of resurrection. And it is in this hour, before the empty tomb, that the joy of the faith spreads in her heart. Looking at Her, we ask ourselves, does the

joy of the faith that finds its reason for being in the daily encounter with Jesus dwell in our heart? How do we keep the light of faith alive in hard times of darkness, of difficulty?

In the actual situation of restrictions due to the pandemic there is the possibility of having more time to dedicate to prayer that is the 'breath of faith'. A prayer that is confident and serene, decisive and constant.

Many of you have communicated to me, even in the time of trial, the joy of dedicating more time to the encounter with the Lord personally and as community, even with the young people through online communication. It is a prayer that is not closed up in walls, but that is dynamic, open to the needs of many people tried by suffering and in need of material help and of spiritual support. It is a prayer that makes you aware of the complexity and the risks that many of our educational works in the whole world are subjected to and that gives the strength to struggle and to keep them alive. It is love for the charism that makes us enterprising, able to overcome difficulties and fatigue with the passion of the *da mihi animas cetera tolle*.

I perceived the solidarity of the faith in many testimonies. You shared with me your attitude of awareness of the gravity of this time, but you are not resigned. In many places there emerges a new energy that is concretized in gestures of closeness in solidarity. These find their support in prayer and in the trust that God is present and never abandons His people.

I am certain that the experience of prayer and of encounter with the Word gives rise to a new possibility of communication among us, of less superficial relationships, ones that are more profound and motivated. It will be important not to lose the experience we are living! The mission is fruitful in the measure in which it is rooted in the spiritual life and prayer is irreplaceable.

Sometimes, I perceive in the communities a great desire, perhaps even nostalgia, for a communication of more shared values to make our vocation more beautiful and our charism contagious, as is underlined in the journey that, together with the educating communities, we are making in preparation for GC XXIV. I thank you for believing this journey is possible and for dedicating yourselves to cultivate with creativity, the new sprouts in the communities and in the mission so that the young may meet Jesus. They too help us to meet Jesus! Something new can flourish in this particular time if we confirm ourselves in faith and testify to it with joy and love. Love is always a source of novelty, because it is a gift of the Holy Spirit who, by His nature, is surprising creativity!

All of us are writing a new page in the 'chronicle' of our Institute, a page of hope and of future! During this time, I often think of Mother Mazzarello who, in the distant 1860 when the typhoid epidemic broke out in Mornese, she accepted to help her sick relatives in the awareness that she herself would catch it, as actually happened. From that moment, everything changed in her life. All her plans vanished. She experienced both physical and moral suffering. She found herself fragile, weak, useless, but her deep union with God made her docile to the voice of the Holy Spirit who opened horizons that were unknown to her, but not to Him. Indeed, within that frailty He was sketching out an unprecedented project that would take on a universal and missionary dimension until it reached the ends of the world. We can affirm with emotion that in this moment of fragility and weakness our Institute was maturing! Yes, dear sisters, all of us were born from this trustful poverty! There we discover the richness and the beauty of the origins, the freshness and the clarity of faith of the young Mary Domenica. From that hour, we marvelously draw the strength to live today the joy of faith and witness it to the young people in a time of trial and of new opportunities. With them we believe that together we can gather the fruit if our vision of reality is enlightened and sustained by faith, a reality never fully reached but always journeying in the style of Mornese.

Faith: a goal to be reached by walking

The Apostolic Exhortation *Christus vivit* that Pope Francis addressed to the young and to all the People of God, concludes with a significant desire, "*Dear young people, my joyful hope is to see you*

keep running the race before you, outstripping all those who are slow or fearful. Keep running, attracted by the face of Christ, whom we love so much, whom we adore in the Holy Eucharist, and acknowledge in the flesh of our suffering brothers and sisters. May the Holy Spirit urge you on as you run this race. 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” (n. 299).

The expression, “we need your faith”, surprises us and calls to us as educating communities. The message is addressed to the young people, but it is evident that he wants to reach us adults as well to put us in dialogue with them, open us to the newness they bring, believe in their intuitions and dreams, be aware that, above all in this time of emergency, we grow in the faith if we walk together.

Trust in the young generations and in the Church herself that we gather from the Apostolic Exhortation, open the heart to hope and outlines the horizon of a future that is not easy but is meaningful, *something new is being born and will bear fruits of good for all of humanity*.

We know that it is not an easy journey. However, it is a challenge that we want to face at this time in which the world is in crisis due to the phenomenon of migration, the drama of abuses, social injustices, indifference toward human dignity, violence on creation and on the common home, and now also for the serious situation caused by Covid-19. The reality, we do not hide it, is complex and calls for very concrete and constant steps that you, dear Sisters, know how to identify according to the needs of your realities and in synergy with the local Church and Civil Institutions.

Remembering what Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello did in times of emergency, I wish here to highlight the importance at this time of the pandemic, to strengthen, and if there is need, to rediscover the value of service, and to propose experiences of gratuitous giving for which many young people are ready. *“Life is of no use if not used to serve others.”... The real heroes are those who are giving themselves in order to serve others. Feel called yourselves to put your lives on the line. Do not be afraid to devote your life to God and to others; it pays!”* (Pope Francis, Homily 5 April 2020).

Strong words, said without half measures, that explicitly ask the young and that touch we adults as well, to let ourselves be involved in actions of solidarity towards those who are in need; to have faith and to dream that something new can sprout but not without our contribution. This is not idealism or poetry, but experience that can be realized if there is the encounter with the Risen Jesus who makes both young and adults grow in faith, makes dreams mature, and leads us to make concrete choices. It is faith that opens people to responsibility (cf. *Ch V 138*).

We have recalled that faith is not an idea but a life! It is faith with a social face that asks us to ‘go out’, to be witnessed to, and offered as a treasure to share.

Let us ask the Holy Spirit that in all of us, in the young people, and in those who accept the gift of faith and the challenge of trust in Jesus, there be the joy that has its source in three great convictions found in *Christus vivit* and we are invited to read again in prayer:

- **God loves you.** Never doubt it, whatever happens to you in life. In any circumstance, you are infinitely loved (cf. n. 115).
- **Christ saves you.** He writes His love story with us precisely through our contradictions, fragility, and limitations (cf. n. 120).
- **Christ lives.** The first words I want to address to each young Christian are: Christ is alive and He wants you to be alive! (cf. n. 1).

It is a marvelous and challenging journey that calls for great openness and availability. It does not save us from the fatigue of searching, of sharing, of confronting. Think of Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello who with resourcefulness, courage, and apostolic joy gave everything of themselves, to their last breath so that the young people could encounter true joy: Jesus! He is the path that opens to lasting and unwavering hope in this time of confinement.

As at Cana, also today, Mary is beside us and invites us to a clear understanding of life. She urges us to have courage in making decisions, in new relationships, to undertake with the young the Gospel ways that generate life (cf. *Circular* 985). How can we not think of her Motherly gentleness, she who tells us in this ‘present’ that the empty jars can be filled with ‘new wine’? *“This is the time! This is the day that the Lord has made!”*

I wish to launch a simple and familiar proposal to you: let us commit ourselves to discover in our life, in our communities, and in the reality in which we express the charism, the signs of new shoots, even if only potential, and sprinkle them with the clear water of prayer, of trust, leaving aside any feelings of skepticism, indifference, doubt. Let us open wide the doors of our heart and of our homes to the ‘sun’ of hope, to love that never disappoints, to faith that gives us the joy of the encounter! Let us help each other to be attentive to all the signs, even the smallest, because a new future is maturing in them. May the Holy Spirit whom we await at Pentecost, make us passionate about our time!

Mary, Mother of faith, help us to scrutinize the great horizons that are opening before us to radiate the light of faith, beginning with our poverty. I thank you for accepting this sharing and, even if virtually, live in communion with the whole Institute, with the Salesian Family, and with the young people the solemnity of Mary Help of Christians. *She, the Mother*, is always present! I entrust you to her so that she may bless you.

Rome, 24 May 2020

Affectionately, Mother

New Provincials 2020

Province “Our Lady of Guadalupe” <i>Sr. Margarita CHAVARRÍA</i>	MME	<i>America</i>
Province “St. John Bosco” <i>Sr. María Eugenia RAMOS</i>	VEN	
Province “St. Mary D. Mazzarello” <i>Sr. Petra EGELING</i>	AUG	<i>Europe</i>
Province “Sacred Heart” <i>Sr. Hilde BOSMANS</i>	BEG	
Province “St. Thomas of Canterbury” <i>Sr. Pauline Clark</i>	GBR	
Province “Mary Help of Christians” <i>Sr. Emma BERGANDI</i>	IPI	
Province “Our Lady of Jasna Góra” <i>Sr. Malgorzata PILARSKA</i>	PLJ	
Province “Jesus Adolescent” <i>Sr. Charlotte GREER</i>	MOR	<i>Middle East</i>