

Let's revive the Marian face of the Institute

Dearest Sisters,

The choice of theme for this Circular has two motives: the first regards the *Word Feast of Gratitude* that will be celebrated at Asunción, Paraguay. The proposal of the theme and of the slogan that were offered to us involved many people in the whole world, rendering more solid our reality as *family* united by the values of Salesian spirituality beyond geographical confines of cultures and of unique traditions.

I wish to express here my deep gratitude to each of you, to the educating communities, to the young people, and to every person for having received this proposal with openness of heart. Thanks also for the numerous signs of solidarity that have already come to me. They serve for the construction of a work in San Lorenzo, Paraguay, a space where the young can gather together, and for other urgent needs of the Institute.

The second motive is the celebration of the 150th anniversary of the consecration of the *Basilica of Mary Help of Christians* in Turin, already mentioned in choral circular 976. For us, the 150th is not only an historical event, but an appeal to make that living monument of gratitude to Mary, raised by Don Bosco in the Church, shine with a new light. If in the preceding circular the accent was on the construction of that time, the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians, here I want to emphasize even more the reality of the *living monument* that is the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

It is beautiful to rediscover the grace of being the living memory of Mary, living the style of Mary as communities, committed to express today 'the yet unwritten events of her life', and transmit the certainty of her motherly presence to the young generations (Cf. *Plan of Formation: Rooted in the Covenant*, p. 37). To revive the Marian face of the Institute means testifying that the living monument of Mary Help of Christians is alive and dynamic. It means making ourselves available to write a piece of history every day with the young people, because only with them is the song of the *Magnificat* complete and can shine with the typical beauty of the Salesian charism

Living Monument to express Gratitude to Mary

In order to be the living monument of gratitude to Mary, we must be 'true images of Mary', as Mother Mazzarello exhorted (Cf. *Cronistoria III*, p. 216), that is, reproduce in ourselves the image of Our Lady by living fully our identity of Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. The more we look at her, the more we discover the beauty and depth of our vocation and mission in the Church. Mary herself can be considered a living monument of gratitude: a perennial gratitude that celebrates the glory of God.

A monument also serves 'to remember'. Mary is the woman of memory. The Gospels present her as the one who "kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart" (Lk 2: 19). Often, the reality that she reflected on was incomprehensible; it went beyond her intuitive capacity. It aroused awe before the mystery of a Son she had generated in the flesh, but whose behavior could not be explained only with purely human categories. Right from the first announcement of the Angel, Mary understood that in her poverty, she should only 'entrust herself' and sing the *Magnificat*: a song in which the memory of the great things accomplished by God is expressed in gratitude and thanksgiving. The *Magnificat* summarizes the very identity of Mary: a perennial praise of gratitude to the Father for what He had done in her personal story and in history, from generation to generation.

'Remembering' is a typical Christian attitude. Jesus Himself left us the Eucharist as 'the memorial' of His presence among us. And on Calvary, He entrusted us to His beloved Mother as His memory. Eucharist and Mary are the key aspects of our identity. The first dimension of the living monument is, therefore, that of being, like Mary, women who remember. In a time when we are witnessing a profound loss of memory, we tend to increasingly delegate the function of 'conserving in memory' to technological tools. We do not doubt the importance of these instruments, but they could make us forget the memory of the heart, the narratives of life, fraternal relationships, dialog. We risk forgetting even the recent past, from which it seems we have learned nothing, thus exposing ourselves to repeat the mistakes of history. We pass quickly from one experience to another, from one episode to the next, without keeping and meditating, without finding the connections, as Mary did. But in this way, we also lose the sense of historical events, of bonds, and of solidarity with the generations that have preceded us and with those that will follow us.

Someone may ask: "Why build monuments?". "Let's live the present moment!" But the present without reference to the past and without projection into the future remains episodic and devoid of a global sense. As believers we have a very rich history, able to revitalize the present because it is full of God's presence, source of newness and of hope. The people of Israel understood this and willingly passed on to their children the memory of a life guided by God and open to the future. *"What we have heard and know; things our ancestors have recounted to us. We do not keep them from our children; we recount them to the next generation, the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord and his strength, the wonders that he performed...They were to teach their children; that the next generation might come to know, children yet to be born. In turn they were to recount them to their children that they too might put their confidence in God and not forget God's deeds"* (Psalm 78: 3-7).

The New Testament also proposes that we hand on the living memory of Jesus to the disciples of all times. Thus, we read in the First Letter of John: *"What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we looked upon and touched with our hands concerns the Word of life; we have seen it and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was made visible to us, what we have seen and heard, we proclaim now to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; for our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ"* (1 Jn 1-3).

To be a living monument of gratitude is to draw from memory and hand it on to the future generations. But we cannot hand on something without having experienced it to the point of "seeing, hearing, touching".

Remembering is bringing back to the heart. Only what has been internalized in silence and contemplation can be brought to the heart. A *monument* without this basis of interiority and prayer remains fragile: it is a monument without a foundation. We are called to be women of memory *with* Mary and *like* Mary who laid her foundation in God. The living monument that is the Institute, therefore, must take root deep in the Gospel and in the charism

All of us, my dear Sisters, are invited today to be the *memory of Mary* with our life, our style of relationships, our prayerful attitude, the mission among the young generations. I pray that we can increasingly cultivate a rich interior life, solid in faith and in hope, strong in love, faithful to the heritage of our Founders. Many already live this way. I feel the need to thank them for the witness that I grasped in direct encounters and in other forms of communication.

In community with Mary's style

To be the living memory of Mary requires us to be rooted in history; our personal one, the history of the Institute and of humanity. It requires the wisdom to know how to discover in the folds of this history, the plan of God, the courage and freshness of witness, ascetical transparency. Only in this way can we be 'the sign and expression of God's love' (Cf. C Art. 1). We are the living monument of Mary Help of Christians as *community*. Don Bosco wanted the whole Institute to celebrate the graces bestowed by this good Mother and to be a thank you to her through the centuries. The best expression of this thank you is to relive Mary's style today.

Pope Francis helps us to rediscover it today. He presents Mary as the Mother of tenderness, humble, poor in things and rich in love. The Pope emphasizes that we need the heart of a mother who knows how to safeguard and express the tenderness of God and listen to the heartbeats of every person. It is a need of Christian life and, I add, of Salesian consecrated life. Looking at Mary, we are encouraged to leave aside much useless ballast and rediscover what counts: love (Cf. Homily, January 1, 2018).

Only a great love can make us vibrate, dispose us to listen to the Word, open us to the dream of God for each of us and for the community: a *dream of communion*. In fact, Mary is the Mother of communion. She is the one who creates unity in the human family. She takes care of each of us without leaving anyone behind and without rejecting anyone.

It was she who at the beginning of the Church helped the Apostles to form community. The Acts of the Apostles present the Church of the origins as a united community praying together with Mary, the Mother of Jesus (Cf. Acts 1: 12-14). And together with Her, they receive the Holy Spirit and courageously leave the Cenacle to proclaim the 'Good News' that Jesus is risen! Mary is the Mother of encounter because she is the Woman of the 'yes' who permitted God's encounter with humanity through the incarnation.

Thus, we turn to her to build our communities, harmonizing unity in diversity, as a living monument of diverse and precious stones, but all radiant with the light of God. Mary takes us by the hand and leads us to Jesus. And because where Mary is, there is the Holy Spirit, with Mary our communities become *more spiritual and, thus, more authentically human*. The splendor of being human, dear sisters, will shine in our communities if we live a life of deep interiority, of prayer, of reciprocal charity. The light that emanated from the life of Don Bosco and of Mother Mazzarello onto the young, even amid so much activity, came from their 'remaining' in God.

We are often overcome by frenetic days, by multiple tasks that assail us and stop us from making space for God. Reserving an opportune time for the daily encounter with Him is an urgency and a desire that is noticed in many of our realities. It is the condition of fidelity that keeps alive the beauty and the joy of the first encounter, of the first yes where our journey as consecrated persons began and where our apostolic action finds its fruitfulness.

Pope Francis says that the secret of the spiritual life is to let ourselves be encountered by Jesus and to collaborate in encountering Jesus. Encountering Jesus as brothers and sisters, young people and elderly people, helps us to overcome the sterile rhetoric of 'the beautiful times of the past', and to silence 'nothing goes right here'. The Pope continues by wishing that the encounter with Jesus may be revived today, walking together toward Him: and this will give light to our eyes and vigor to our steps (Cf. Homily, February 2, 2018). These are expressions of encouragement and, at the same time, they make us reflect. Prayer and charity contribute to the spiritual climate.

Mother Mazzarello reminded the sisters, "My good sisters, think that where charity reigns there is Paradise. Jesus is very pleased to stay among daughters who are humble, obedient, and charitable. Always act in such a way that Jesus can willingly stay among you" (L 49, 3). I understand that it is not always easy to live the demands and the challenges that the life of communion present to us. Mary teaches us to not run away from challenges, but to accept them as opportunities. She who shared with the Apostles in the Cenacle hopes and difficulties, worries and joys, will help us today to be aware again of the need of gestures of humanity, which we often notice are absent: of a simple smile that opens to trust; of listening nourished by silence and by love; of a benevolent gaze rich in compassion and the sign of sincere acceptance; of the readiness to keep alive the acceptance of diversity and of multiculturalism present even within our communities.

Sometimes, the excessive idealization of the community can lead us to be inattentive to each person in her uniqueness and to find difficulty in accepting differences. Instead, it is important to accept each other for the diverse gifts we bring and even for our fragilities. Among the stones of the moment there

is a place even for imperfections and angularity. If we know how to value them, they will give harmony to the whole. No stone should be discarded because none is useless.

Living the ideal of community-communion, where the richness and reciprocity of relationships are valued without idealizing them, means welcoming each other with mercy and allowing each one to shine forth from what each one is and can give. This attitude, rooted in life according to the Spirit, forms the 'cement' that keeps the stones together, allowing each one to express her original characteristics. There is no stone more precious than another. All stones are equally important and necessary for the beauty and solidity of the whole.

In addition to proclaiming gratitude to Mary, the monument desired by Don Bosco is also called to express mutual gratitude. Each sister is a gift for the community and for the Institute. Recovering this characteristic of mutual gratitude requires that continuous reconciliation given by the Spirit of love which continually renews the community.

How do we live these aspects in our reality? Do we feel the responsibility of being today, as a community, a *living memory* of the lifestyle of Mary to be transmitted with joy to the young generations? This is our identity!

From generation to generation

The monument, which is always under construction, will be more complete if it is able to include also the laity and the young: they offer the beauty of novelty that opens up to the future and to hope. Without them, our Magnificat of gratitude to Mary would not be complete and would not have the beauty that characterizes the Salesian charism. We want our monument to be joyful, attractive, able to nourish dreams, or rather, to arouse the ability to dream big.

We can be a *living monument* with the young, if we educate them in the style of the Preventive System, the style that Mary herself inspired Don Bosco with: "Not with the blows, but with persuasion and goodness you will earn these your friends". So, the method is to prevent with reason and goodness, and helping young people to cultivate great desires, big dreams, great ideals. Above all, to show these embodied in the witness of our life as educating communities. Young people formed according to the Marian spirituality of the Preventive System are the ones most suited to 'regenerate society' from within.

At GC XXIII, they told us that they expect us to have a benevolent and trusting gaze that listens to them, values them, welcomes them, loves them, and enjoys being with them. They asked us not to be afraid of not immediately understanding their language and their way of being, and not to distrust them when we do not understand, but to have the patience of long times.

The living monument is unthinkable without the young. They are the new stones, stones that bring dreams, colors, and future. *Young people offer the unpublished monument*: the new way to express the Marian face today. They themselves show us the ways to educate them and to allow ourselves to be educated.

So that the monument of gratitude - formed by FMA, laity, and the young - can shine from generation to generation, it is necessary that it maintain its specificity. A monument of gratitude can only be formed by grateful hearts.

As educators, we must not only form a grateful heart in ourselves, but also form it in the young entrusted to us. This attitude is all the more necessary in a time when often the attitude of '*everything is due me*' prevails, of an exasperated protagonism and individualism, of violence and bullying. Educating to gratitude and nonviolence is not for weak people or people without personality, but for people strong in spirit, able to open themselves to the good, to discover it in the present. It means to educate a child-like heart, a Marian heart

In the preparation for GC XXIII, we shared the observation that young people are looking for a 'home', that is, affective points of reference, able to make them feel esteemed, valued, and above all loved, and accompanied to integral maturation. How much sadness exists in the hearts of young people who

vandalize spaces and monuments to occupy their time, because there is no one to take care of them and they often feel insignificant.

Making them feel part of the *living monument*, means making sure that they feel they belong to something and someone, accomplishing together a great project that will bring them joy and happiness.

A grateful heart can only be cultivated by those who know they have received gratuitous love. Our task is precisely this: to make young people feel loved, sought, desired, precious for our life and for society. A grateful and non-violent heart is open to tenderness, compassion, the richness of diversity. Those who have a grateful heart can accept weakness without judging. Its authoritativeness comes from life witness, from the coherence between words and deeds, from the joy that inhabits the heart.

There is a field that has always fascinated young people: that of volunteering and that of belonging to the various Associations of solidarity, commitment and prayer.

Remaining in the Salesian context, there are many young people and families who adhere to ADMA, the Salesian Youth Movement, VIDES, and other volunteer Associations. Today, young people are nostalgic for a clean world, a world to the measure of the person, where there is no discrimination, and each one contributes in a chain of solidarity from generation to generation.

Young people who open themselves to the gift of self are young people who have found the meaning of life, their place in history: in the history of the group to which they belong and in their society; they are young missionaries. Young people are ready to collaborate in building a better world, to offer their contribution to build the civilization of love. In my visits to some Countries of the world, I am often impressed by the suffering of children, young people, women, and entire families because of the violence that increases their poverty.

I think that for our Institute, being a living monument is also a historic commitment in a time that needs a renewed alliance between young people and adults, a more vital connection with history, a meaning to give to life. Our time needs to look to the future with hope and love: we cannot disappoint this need!

I conclude, dear Sisters, with this beautiful invitation of Pope Francis: "Let's make Mary our Mother the guest of our daily life, the constant presence in our home, our safe haven. Let's entrust every day to her. Let's invoke her in every storm. And let's not forget to go back to her to thank her" (*Homily*, January 28, 2018).

With all my heart I wish you a radiant month of May with the renewed joy of being Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, like her 'helpers' among the young who are entrusted to us.

On May 24th you will all be present with me in Turin and together we will thank the Lord for the great things He works in each of us, in the Institute, in the Salesian Family, and in the hearts of many young people.

God bless you!

Rome, 24 April 2018

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