

A renewed call to holiness

Dearest Sisters,

I think I interpret all of you in saying thank you to Pope Francis for the Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate* (GE). It is the third Exhortation after *Amoris laetitia* and *Evangelii Gaudium*. A true providential gift for all Christians and for every person of good will. A vocational call to take the path of holiness without fear, with more courage. The Exhortation was welcomed with joy and enthusiasm all over the world, and also in our Institute, for its concreteness and clarity, for its simple language, adhering to daily life, and in harmony with our Salesian mission: the way of holiness with young people who are entrusted to us.

I am sure that many of you already have the Exhortation in your hands and make it the object not only of reading, but of deepening, of prayer, and of vital sharing.

In this circular, with simplicity, I offer you some reflections that emerged after having approached this beautiful document with a Salesian gaze and heart. I discovered significant aspects in full consonance with our spirituality, so much so that I was told: this is an Apostolic Exhortation that must more decisively inspire our journey. I perceived it as a letter that Pope Francis addresses to you, to me, to every brother and sister, to every young person with the familiar expression of 'you'. This closeness is a source of joy, of encouragement, of renewed commitment to continue the journey of holiness in daily life with greater vigor.

Gathering the reflections of Pope Francis, I will highlight the beauty of the *universal call to holiness* which is a gift of God *to be lived in community and to be realized in the mission with the young and for the young*.

The universal call to holiness

The Apostolic Exhortation does not pretend to be a treatise on sanctity, but rather to "make the call to holiness resound once again, endeavoring to incarnate it in the current context, with its risks, its challenges, and its opportunities. Because the Lord has chosen each one of us "to be holy and immaculate before Him in love" (Eph 1: 4) "(GE, 2).

Many are the witnesses who from the beginning of the history of humanity encourage us to walk with perseverance towards the goal that lies before us. In the letter to the Hebrews Abraham, Sarah, Moses, and others are remembered (cf Heb 11: 1-12, 3). We are also surrounded by many witnesses recognized as holy for their martyrdom, for the offering of life until death, and for the heroism of their virtues. These are the beatified and canonized. But the Holy Spirit does not cease to arouse holiness in all the people of God. In fact "God wanted to sanctify and save us not individually and unrelated to each other, but He wanted to make them a people, to recognize Him according to truth and serve Him in holiness "(LG, 9).

It is the 'next door' holiness, as the Pope defines it, formed by people who live close to us and are the sign of God's presence, or to use another expression, 'the middle class of holiness'. But who are those 'next door' who habitually do not enter into the parameters of common thought? They can be parents, men and women who work and labor, the sick, the elderly religious who continue to smile. It is here that Pope Francis sees the holiness of the journeying Church (cf GE, 7).

He seems to want to say that the holiness we are called to is every day, discrete, accessible to everyone, that does not require guarantees of belonging. For this reason, it can be found everywhere, even outside the Catholic Church and in different places. Even in people who are fragile, weak, not perfect, but who in the midst of limitations and falls continue to move forward; people who do not impose themselves due to heroic actions, but who every day, almost without their knowledge, live the Gospel, witness to it, and thus give glory to God (cf. GE, 3).

Holiness thus understood is for Pope Francis 'the most beautiful face of the Church'. But, as already emphasized, it is also present outside it (cf. GE, 9). The Apostolic Exhortation takes up again a reality matured in the Second Vatican Council and decisive for every person: the universal call to holiness. The Lord does not tire of reminding us that we are all called to holiness: "Be holy, because I am holy" (Lev 11:44; 1 Pt 1:16)). This is what the Council clearly emphasized: "All the faithful of every state and condition are called by the Lord, each one on their way, to a holiness whose perfection is the same as that of the heavenly Father" (LG, 11).

There are various models of holiness, but what counts is that every believer discovers their own way and makes the best of themselves emerge, according to what God has placed in them (cf. 1 Cor 12,7). It is interesting to note that there are many forms of witness recalled in the Apostolic Exhortation, among which also the '*feminine genius*' which expresses feminine styles of holiness, indispensable for reflecting the face of God in the world. Throughout the centuries, the Holy Spirit has inspired great saints who with their attraction have activated spiritual dynamisms and important reforms in the Church. But we cannot forget many other unknown women, I also add excluded, who supported and transformed families and communities with the courage of their witness (cf. GE, 12).

The holiness to which the Lord calls us, grows and is strengthened through little gestures; sometimes facing huge challenges that are a trampoline toward new conversions. Other times, it deals with living what we already do in a more perfect way, in other words, living the present moment filling it with love (cf. GE, 17), as our first sisters in Mornese did at the school of Mother Mazzarello. If we were asked, 'Which is the most beautiful day?' We should be able to answer, today, because today is the time given to me to love! Love in the measure of the Lord, in the awareness that this requires embracing the demands of the Paschal Mystery in its depths. Holiness is none other than charity fully lived (cf. GE, 21).

Dear Sisters, are we encouraged and enthused to receive the gift of God who works in us and to follow the road to holiness in collaboration with Him and with determination? It is a sometimes arduous, tiring journey, but it is possible when the heart is open and if it is a *community journey*, "a theological space in which we can experience the mystical presence of the risen Lord" (Consecrated Life 42). Our Constitutions invite us to build communities where 'we tend together toward holiness' (Consecrated Life, 42) and to walk with the young on the road of holiness (cf. C 5).

The community place to walk together in holiness

Approaching the the Apostolic Exhortation has aroused in me incessant praise to the Lord for the gift of holiness poured into the Church, into the Salesian Family, into our Institute.

Valdocco, Mornese: places where sanctity was at home, where there was a competition to realize the dream of God and make the seeds of holiness received in Baptism shine with new light.

Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello can be rightly called engravers, artisans of saints: adults and young people who have enriched society and the Church with their credible witness, capable of *going against the current*, up to martyrdom if necessary. They wrote a page in the history of the Church that still perfumes it and fills it with prophecy, hope, and evangelical resourcefulness.

From the beginning, in the simplicity of Mornese, our first sisters incarnated a holiness defined in the words of Pope Francis as 'next door'. A concrete, discrete, and realistic holiness, which with courage and wisdom, knew how to measure itself against the challenges, difficulties, and inevitable contradictions characteristic of their times, but radiant, sparkling with joy and apostolic creativity.

Mother Mazzarello had understood that, not alone, but *together with the community*, she was called to live a 'transfigured life', so much so as to create in that small and unknown town, a climate of evangelical freshness and of missionary courage that reached vast horizons. She understood the importance not only of words, although useful, but of the quality of actions: "For us religious it is not enough to save only our own soul. We must become holy and through our holy good works, help many other souls who are waiting for our help to become holy. Courage then, after a few days of struggle, we will have heaven forever" (L 18, 3).

Thus, *together*, as people who have at heart the true happiness of the young and want to be signs of Love with optimism and hope.

This, *together*. Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and young people realized in Mornese, spread throughout the world and reminds us, as Pope Francis highlights, that sanctification is a community journey (cf *GE*, 140) to the point of creating, as already mentioned, that "theological space in which one can experience the mystical presence of the risen Lord" (*GE*, 142).

It is a high goal, undoubtedly! Are we convinced that it is possible to reach it with the young, the laity, or do we let ourselves become lukewarm through fatigue, fragility, an individualistic mentality, and by a culture that keeps far from God and His Word because it is 'inconvenient'?

During my visits to various realities, I have met Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, young people and adults, who live daily holiness naturally, simply, and in some situations, even heroically, sustained by a human sensitivity attentive to the needs of the poorest. Sisters and brothers who know how to mark their everyday life with concrete gestures, provoking that "revolution" of tenderness and humanity that we all feel greatly in need of. I recognized in them a beautiful Gospel profile, expressed not in striking actions, but in those typical of the "spirituality made of many small daily details" in the style of Jesus who invited His disciples to be attentive to details (cf. *GE*, 143). A community that safeguards and expresses small loving gestures, where we take care of each other, where together we create an evangelizing space of deep breath, becoming a place of the presence of the Risen One, who step after step, sanctifies it according to the Father's plan.

Dear Sisters, now is the time to listen with a new heart to the call to be, not alone, but as educating communities, people able to give light again, if there is need, to our realities, so that they may truly become, with the power of the Holy Spirit, a 'theological space', where the Word shared and where the Eucharist celebrated together transforms us into holy and missionary communities (cf *GE*, 142).

I intuit that in many of us the question may arise: what is the way to follow today? The answer is offered by Pope Francis, addressing not only consecrated life, but everyone, because we are all called to be saints: in everyday occupations, in the commitments of family and social life, in the exercise of political, cultural, and economic responsibilities, with an attitude of love and service, as opportunities to live Baptism and evangelical holiness fully (cf. Regina Coeli, 29 April 2018).

The road is that of the Beatitudes, which are the identity card of Christians and doubtlessly of every consecrated person. They delineate the face of Jesus that we are called to make appear in our days (cf *GE*, 63). In fact, at our religious profession, each one of us commits herself to 'live the Beatitudes of the Kingdom radically' (C 10).

The Beatitudes are the eight tracks to climb the high summit of holiness. Walking on these paths requires the courage to assume different attitudes in regard to the life style habitual in society. For this reason, only if the Holy Spirit pervades us with all His power and frees us from egoism, laziness, and pride is it possible to live them (cf *GE*, 65).

The Pope proposes them one after the other with the heart of a Pastor, expert in the human soul and faithful to the Lord's expectations in regard to His creatures. There are concrete and clear passages: *poverty of heart* that requires austerity of life; in a world that easily litigates, he places *humble meekness*; while the "worldly turn away", to let ourselves be pierced by the *suffering* of brothers and sisters and to feel compassion. When corruption divides the "cake of life", *to hunger and thirst for justice*. From *acting with mercy and knowing how to forgive*, to keeping a heart far from that which can ruin the love of God and our sisters and brothers. To be sowers of peace and friendship in solidarity, with sensitivity, serenity, and creativity. Knowing how to accept even *persecution*, because fidelity to the demands of the Beatitudes can be frowned upon, held suspect, ridiculed. On the other hand, one

should not expect that those who live the Gospel radically will find everything favorable around them (cf. GE, 91).

The Holy Father then goes on to present some characteristics of holiness dear to him and which we find in our spirituality: meekness, patience, joy and humor, audacity and fervor in the evangelizing impulse that leaves a mark on a world that is sometimes arid, indifferent but always loved by God and open to a message of hope.

It is a spiritual journey that asks to be marked with prayer until we reach contemplation. At this point Pope Francis posed questions that touch our experience and that I share with you: "Are there moments when you place yourself in His presence [of Christ] in silence, stay with Him without haste, and let yourself be looked at by Him? Do you let His fire inflame your heart? [...] Otherwise, how will you be able to inflame the hearts of others with your testimony and your words?" (GE, 151).

Only by clinging to Him will our communities find the courage to put the charism at the service of the young, and with the young to walk the joyful path of holiness.

Youthful holiness flourishes in the mission

The Apostolic Exhortation frequently repeats that the call to holiness is for everyone, nobody excluded. Certainly in this 'all' young people are included who are at the center of the thoughts, love, and attention of Pope Francis; of his determination to make them active protagonists, builders of a new humanity, encouraging them to be the "saints of our time". In this regard, the choice of Synod 2018 for young people is significant: *Youth, faith, and vocational discernment*.

It is the task of the ecclesial community and of every educating community to help young people feel enveloped by the gaze of Jesus, provoked by His voice that calls them to set out on a journey, to go to build a more just and fraternal society according to the desire that young people themselves carry in their heart. But they need to be accompanied by wise people, available and able to guide them, support them and, above all, contagion them with the witness of a credible and happy life.

The goal of our mission is precisely to encourage the encounter of young people with the God of life, with Jesus, who has taken on fragility and suffering, joy and hope and brings to full realization the dreams of happiness young people thirst for.

The mission lived in the spirit of the Beatitudes makes holiness flourish in the communities and at the same time fosters youthful holiness. From the experience of encounters with various educating communities, I have found confirmation of the importance of the environment as an indispensable condition to contagion the young with holiness, and for the birth of new vocations. Holiness is something fascinating, attractive, accessible that fills their hearts and places them at the service of others. It is an appeal to get rid of the comfort of the *sofa* and not to stay on the *balcony*, as Pope Francis often says, to open eyes and heart to those in need, who are waiting for words of hope and gestures of humanity.

I have met many young people who are open to undertaking this journey. Perhaps they are waiting for someone to launch an explicit, convincing, joyful proposal of holiness. It may be that this proposal causes unsuspected, hidden resources to blossom in them.

The Holy Spirit acts silently even in the hearts of young people who apparently seem distant, indifferent, perhaps even hostile; to those exposed to constant *zapping*, as the Pope points out (cf. GE, 167). As educators, we must never despair, because our mission is made fruitful by the Holy Spirit who challenges us to be holy, hopeful, open to a future inhabited by God. Let us not be tempted to think that presenting to young people the beauty of sanctity is anachronistic, or an extraordinary fact. Offering *high life goals* responds to the deep aspirations of the heart that does not want to dwell in mediocrity, in the darkness of a meaningless existence. Let's not disappoint them!

Dear Sisters, are we convinced that it is an essential part of our mission to walk with young people in holiness? Do we believe that every young person has the potential to reach it and that it is congenial to them because it is the way to true happiness?

In re-visiting Valdocco and Mornese, we discover how youth holiness was one of the great intuitions of Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello.

At Valdocco, the young people who arrived at the Oratory were immediately approached, accompanied, understood in their reality: Domenic Savio, Francis Besucco, and Michael Magone whom we would define today as a delinquent, and many, many others. With them and for them, in different ways, a journey of youth holiness was proposed, one with the face of joy, of happiness, of realistic optimism, and the gift of self. So much so, that the young people themselves became companions of other young people.

The same happened in Mornese with *miracles of inner transformation* that often provoked a change of life in the young and, moreover, also the acceptance of the invitation of Jesus to follow Him with evangelical radicality. Other times? Of course! But the truth is that the hearts of young people preserve the same aspirations, dreams, and expectations of all times: it is a heart open to great horizons, it is wide open to the tenderness of the love of a Father who believes in them and does not disappoint them.

So, dear sisters, what could be greater in our mission than the awareness that we are all called to be educators of holiness in a reality like the current one that is ever thirstier for God?

At this time of Pentecost, I make my own the words of Pope Francis at the conclusion of the Apostolic Exhortation: "We ask the Holy Spirit to instill in us an intense desire to be saints for the greater glory of God and to encourage each other in this regard. Thus, we will share a happiness that the world cannot take away from us".

With humility of heart and with joy, we welcome this invitation to make 'next door' holiness lived in the spirit of the Beatitudes shine in us, in the young people, in our environments.

Let us entrust ourselves to Mary, the saint par excellence, the blessed one, who lived like no other the Beatitudes of Jesus. She shows us the way of holiness and accompanies us on this journey.

God bless you.

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Aff.ma Madre

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