

## With an Oratorian Heart our Thanks

Dearest Sisters,

THANK YOU! With these simple and intense words I wish to reach you to express my gratitude for the annual appointment for the World Feast of Gratitude that unites us as a family and renders our communion ever truer and deeper.

This year, we will celebrate the awaited event on April 26 in Cotonou, Benin in Mother of God Province West Africa (AFO). We will be profoundly united also with the educating communities of the whole world in a huge activity of gratitude to the Lord for the numerous signs of His Love. On the occasion of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its canonical erection on August 5, 1992, the Province has chosen to commemorate this historic event by giving life to a new missionary presence in the state of Burkina Faso, opening a formation center and a family home for youth at risk in the rural town of Koubri.

Your solidarity in this event will certainly be marvelous and it will speak to your heart that has the dimensions of the entire world. The generous contribution of the whole Institute will thus be used for this new work and for other needs of the Institute.

Above all, my gratitude goes to the Provincial, Sr. Yolande Kikange, and to each Sister of the AFO Province for having involved the whole Institute around a timely theme that is powerfully charismatic: *With an Oratorian heart in the educating community, we bring the joy of the Gospel to the young with daring.*

It is a beautiful synthesis of the timeless values that always impassions, questions, and solicits us to follow the journey *together*, with an Oratorian heart and with the joy that is an essential part of our identity as Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

I thank the Vicar General, Sr. Chiara Cazzuola, for having communicated to the Institute the proposal of the AFO Province with concrete indications, useful for accomplishing the journey with deep gratitude to the Lord who makes Himself continually present in our religious Family in ways that are always new.

Therefore: the *joy of the proclamation, witnessed with an Oratorian heart to the young and with the young, as educating communities*, are the reflections that I wish to share with you in the awareness that the proposed theme is very rich and would require a broader study, and in the attitude of prayer to listen to what the Holy Spirit wants to tell us in order to renew the passion of the *da mihi animas cetera tolle*.

I trust in your commitment to live this experience, reinforcing the *Oratorian heart* in the communities. I think that the most beautiful gift will be the witness of communities that are joyful and contagious, because they are communities of life and of the future.

### **Proclaim the joy of the Gospel**

“May the world of our time that searches -- sometimes in anguish, sometimes in hope -- receive the Good News, not from sad and discouraged evangelists who are impatient and

anxious, but from ministers of the Gospel whose life radiates fervor, who have first received in themselves the joy of Christ". These words of Paul VI (*Evangelli nuntiandi*, no. 75) are re-proposed with energy by Pope Francis in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangeli gaudium* that makes joy the basic motive for all the pastoral and missionary action of the Church.

The Gospel is to be proclaimed with joy because joy is the very meaning of Gospel. It is joy, the happy News. All the prophets had prepared Israel to receive this *Good News*. The joy of salvation, in fact, becomes superabundant in messianic times. Isaiah, turning to the future Messiah as though he saw him, says with jubilation: "You have brought them abundant joy and great rejoicing" (Is 9: 2). This joy is to be proclaimed, not only as a wish, but as a present certainty, out loud, and without fear. All of creation is invited to participate in it: "Sing out, heavens, and rejoice, earth, break forth into song, you mountains, for the Lord comforts his people and shows mercy to his afflicted" (Is 49: 13). The prophet Zephaniah is even more explicit: "The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a mighty savior, who will rejoice over you with gladness, and renew you in his love, who will sing joyfully because of you" (Ze. 3: 17).

Joy becomes overabundant with the arrival of the Messiah. The Gospel begins with the invitation addressed to a young woman of Nazareth: "Rejoice!". When God reaches us, He invites us to joy. Mary communicates it to her cousin Elizabeth, to the point of making the child in her womb dance. Jesus begins His mission by identifying Himself with the Messiah announced by the prophets: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord. Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4: 14-22).

It is truly the coming of Jesus among the people that is the source of the joy that fills His heart above all. "I exult with joy in the Holy Spirit" (Luke 10: 21). He wants His disciples to be in joy even in the hardest and most delicate moments: "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete" (John 15:11).

But from where can we draw this joy? The secret is in the encounter with Jesus. He does not leave us alone. He reassures His disciples of all times: "But I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy away from you" (John 16: 22).

The apostles do not forget this consignment. Wherever they go, their message brings consolation. They celebrate the Eucharist in joy, arousing joy even in the prisoners who listen to their message (Cf. Acts 2: 46; 16: 34).

Almost as a provocation, Pope Francis asks: "Why should we not also enter into this great stream of joy?" (EG, no.5). Entering into it is the condition to be able to evangelize. In fact, joy cannot be imprisoned or held: it is love that gives itself, that overflows and contagions. We can proclaim the joy of the Gospel if we are filled with it; if we go back to the day in which Jesus looked at us and made us feel loved, calling us to be His announcers among the people, especially among the young generations.

The world in which we find ourselves seems to have lost the sources of joy. With its offering of consumerism, it does not make people happier; instead, it generates individualistic sadness, expressions of a comfortable and greedy heart, of a sick seeking for superficial pleasures. Many conflicts in the world are provoked by the search for economic interests. Many walls are being built to close self to relationships with brothers and sisters of other cultures, with religions coming from other realities, for fear of opening self to differences. When the interior life is enclosed in its own interests, Pope Francis observes, there is no longer room for others; the poor can no longer enter; the voice of God is no longer listened to, the joy of His love is no longer enjoyed, enthusiasm for the good no longer palpates.

Even believers run this risk continually. Many fall into it and are transformed into resentful, discontented, lifeless people (Cf. EG, no. 2).

Dear Sisters, in this feast of gratitude I want to say to you, above all, a big thank you. Visiting the various Provinces, I was able to see with my own eyes, the light that radiates from the human heart of sisters and communities; where they vibrate for the mission to bring Jesus to the people, to the young, with special attention to the neediest. It is precisely in the mission that we draw strength to renew our love for Jesus every day. The proclamation discomfords us, calls us to change attitudes that weaken our hope; allows us to be outgoing communities, filling our day with joy, empowering fraternity and communion in the educating community, it transforms us. The source of our vocational enthusiasm is the encounter with Jesus. Thus, let us *together* bring joy and hope to the world, to the young, and with the young.

### **To the Young and with the Young**

Going to the young with an Oratorian heart, and *with* them reach many others who wait for small signs of life, of hope, of joy, deeply impassions us because it is a mission rich in charismatic memories. In fact, how can we not re-visit Valdocco and Mornese where the Oratorian heart beat strongly; where joy, even in the midst of many difficulties, connoted an environment in which the encounter with God and with the young flowed from one source: love given with joy and continuity?

*“Broaden your vision. With the Young, Missionaries of Hope and Joy”* is the invitation of GC XXIII that reconfirms us in the privileged choice for the young with their expectations and fragilities. In the effort *to go* to them and *to remain* with them, we learn to discover and appreciate the need for authentic love that inhabits them; to look at their faces at times reveals an interior life often conditioned by ephemeral promises of happiness; to penetrate the richness of a young heart often obscured by an egotistical culture and placed on the market at a low price to violate the dignity of those who are fragile, but also rich because they are created in God’s image.

We are all children of one Father and therefore, every human being has the right to taste true happiness, to feel loved, and to be able to love; to understand that life is never poor when we know how to discover the seeds of beauty, of meaning, of the future.

“Don Bosco and Mary Domenica Mazzarello were convinced that those who love the young also love their joy, and that without joy we cannot live” (Guidelines for the Educational Mission of the FMA p. 6).

I think there are numerous experiences that we can share in this regard in every part of the world. The young desire to meet witnesses of joy and not only people who talk about joy!

To bring the Joy of the Gospel to the young with daring, as is asked in the theme for the Feast of Gratitude, is a challenge to assume together with the young themselves, because in their life there is energy, a fire that waits to be able to burn and illuminate existence with new hope. This journey is not impossible. Certainly, it demands going against the current, not allowing ourselves to be blocked by a domineering relativism that obscures the possibility of the good present in every heart. In a fragmented society like ours, it is often the young who run the risk of losing themselves, and for this reason it is important to reawaken in them their drowsy desires, their authentic motivations and hidden dreams.

In very critical times, Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello dared to propose to the young a plan of life able to arouse questions, to keep them alive, experiencing with them the journey of searching, sometimes tiring but promising, for reaching the true goal: the encounter with

Jesus. With Him, existence is no longer a tangle of meaninglessness, of uncertainty, but the possibility of facing the joys and fatigues, the shadows and lights of each day, precariousness and opportunities like a reachable goal. Not only this, but life is also the space to discover, with the grace of the Holy Spirit, God's love which is the source of true and lasting joy. In fact, love is at the base of every vocation: to matrimony, to religious life, to social and missionary commitment. To help the young discern the plan of God for their life is the aim toward which pastoral action is directed (Cf. C 72).

Like every vocation, also the Salesian vocation blossoms in a climate of meaningful relationships and needs to be accompanied. Creating in our communities a climate of trust and joy that favors the birth of Salesian vocations is a fundamental condition (Cf. C 50).

Do we believe, dear sisters, that even today we are called to offer this gift to the young in the certainty that God always calls, but asks for our collaboration? How can we overcome the eventual impediments due to our weak courage in making proposals or, perhaps, our little faith in believing that God turns His gaze of predilection even on the young who in our eyes do not seem 'suitable'? How many people we meet in the pages of the Gospel who felt themselves 'called' and left everything to follow Him radically? Why not believe that the same things can happen today?

In this time of gratitude, let us make the gift of sharing in community and in the educating community a reflection, illumined by prayer, on how to seek adequate ways and launch a clear vocational proposal with joy and conviction.

I thank you a lot for this and I ask God to grant that you may be His Voice resounding in many young people who are often lost and wait for the breath of the Word: "Come, follow Me".

There is the great example of Pope Francis. In the letter addressed to all the young people, in which he announces the Synod of Bishops on the theme: *The Young, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment*, recalled the words that God addressed to Abraham, inviting him to leave his own land to open himself to the land the He would indicate to him (Cf. Genesis 12: 1). These words are also addressed to today's youth. It is an invitation *to go out* to face an unknown future, but the bearer of secure realizations, an encounter in which Jesus Himself accompanies us. It is not a flight from the world, but listening to the voice of God to go toward the *new land* that is : a more just and fraternal society, that you young people, affirms the Pope, deeply desire and that you want to build to the peripheries of the world".

To those who ask, "Rabbi, where do you live?", Jesus turns His gaze on them and responds with determination: "Come and see" (John 1: 38-39).

Pope Francis turns to the young with provoking, profound, and existential questions because, notwithstanding the noise and loudness that reign in the world, this call continues to resound in their soul to open it to full joy. This will be possible in the measure in which expert guides are ready to take up an itinerary of discernment to accompany the young to discover God's plan for their life (Cf. Letter to the Young, 13 January 2017).

A question probably rises in us: Does all this have a relationship with the 'Oratorian heart' that proclaims the joy of the Gospel"? Yes, on the condition that, *together*, as an educating community in the style of Valdocco and Mornese, we believe with new passion that living the Salesian charism today means *consuming* our life for the young so that they will meet Jesus and "be happy in time and in eternity".

Sisters, are we ready to exchange this gift among ourselves without reserve and in complete gratuity, with a renewed spirit of faith?

I like to refer back to the words of the young people present at GC XXIII: “The true home is one where a family lives, where no one thinks they have ‘arrived’ or believes that only the other has to change. For this, we would like you to be able to build relationships with the courage to open your facilities, your minds, and your hearts. We want you to share your daily life with those who cross the threshold of our homes, with an authentic and sympathetic presence, letting go of perfectionism, anxiety, and control. Trust us enough to plan these changes together” (Acts GC XXIII, no. 18).

What experience do we have of living in this way? How does the encounter with the young transform us? How can we build a home WITH the young? Which step ahead can we take to decide together?

### **As Educating Communities with the passion of the charism**

In GC XXIII there emerged the need to dare prophetic gestures *together*, agreeing on common steps for the whole Institute, offering real life responses to the great challenges that call us to make the freshness of the Gospel reach the young, above all the poorest, most vulnerable and forgotten.

Among these prophetic gestures to implement at the Provincial or inter-Provincial level, the commitment to revive the passion of the ‘oratorian heart’ as a characteristic trait of our Salesian identity was emphasized (Cf. Acts GC XXIII, no. 74).

On my visits to various parts of the world, I was able to see with joy a notable effort to find new ways even for informal and working class education, assuming together – young people and laity – the *Oratory-Youth Center Project* – to give a response to young people in needy situations. I noted how this can also be a privileged place of vocational/missionary experience and of solidarity among the young people themselves.

I see them enthused, passionate for the Salesian charism, ready to acquire the competencies in ‘humanity’ to be little lights of compassion toward the most deprived and abandoned. *Together*, it is possible to do what sometimes seems impossible, in an unheard of time of solitude, of desert, of evident conflict.

*Awakening* the world as Pope Francis asks us to do, requires some conditions that involve the resources present in the Church, in the territory, in the Salesian Family, and in the educating communities. It is essential to share the dream of being open and welcoming educating communities where Jesus is at the center and where the young can breathe a family climate typical of the origins, with *respect* for each person, in mature *co-responsibility* around the values of Salesian spirituality.

In many realities, the awareness is consolidated of the importance of *sharing the mission with the lay people and with the young*; others are still journeying. However, I can affirm that in everyone there is the awareness that this is the right road to take to proclaim to the young the Gospel of joy. The ‘Oratorian heart’ makes us feel that the best interlocutors are the young people themselves with their language and their sensitivity for those who believe and for those who are still searching or find themselves in darkness.

As educating communities, it is beautiful and encouraging to let ourselves transform relationships with them, valuing them as *protagonists in announcing Jesus to other young people* and not consider them exclusively as recipients. Staying with them, listening to them without thinking we are wasting time, offering them the ‘little word in the ear’ with humility and ‘heart’, going where they live, is what renews our communities and opens our gaze toward

those peripheries of life that we hear so often spoken of and that deeply question us (Cf. Acts GC XXIII, nos. 58-61).

What I have shared until now does not exhaust the wealth of the proposals made by the AFO Province. I am aware of not having transmitted any particular novelty in this regard. I thank you if you receive the invitation to continue the reflection and the effort to be educating communities that witness to joy and hope with an 'oratorian heart', without getting tired. The grace of God is our strength and the presence of Mary Help of Christians is our Guide, Mother, and Teacher. She was thus for our Founders and desires to be this for us as well today.

If joy must permeate every educating community, this goes for religious communities even more. Pope Francis affirms, "Where there are religious, there is joy. We are called to experience and show that God is able to fill our heart and to make us happy...that authentic fraternity lived in the communities nourishes our joy; that our total gift in the service of the Church, of families, of the young, of the elderly, of the poor fulfils us as persons and gives fullness to our life" (Apostolic Letter in the Year of Consecrated Life, 21 November 2014).

Dearest Sisters, I close this circular with the words of Pope Francis. It is my intention that they enter deeply into you and become a reciprocal gift in this time of gratitude illumined by Easter in which the presence of the Holy Spirit shines forth with more intensity.

To each of you, I express my thank you for your availability to be totally open to God and for the mission entrusted to us. I want to express a special thanks to the elderly or sick sisters. They are a precious gift for their prayer and offering of every moment and for their loving support of the Institute in daily fatigues and joys.

To all, I assure prayer to the Lord so that together, in whatever situation we find ourselves, we will continue the journey of holiness with an 'oratorian heart', full of love for God and of passion for the salvation of the young. Let us be guided by Mary the Teacher of Don Bosco and our Mother.

In the atmosphere of preparation for Easter, I send you my greetings, dear sisters, and to your families, the Rector Major Fr. Ángel Fernández Artime, the Salesian confreres, the members of the Salesian Family, to every person involved in the area of education and of the proclamation of the Good News. A special greeting to the young who occupy a privileged place in our heart.

God bless you!

Rome, 24 March 2017

Aff.ma Madre