

With Mary for a Culture of Peace

Dearest Sisters,

The experience of the Feast of Gratitude that we are about to celebrate at the world level opens the heart to gratitude for the gift the Lord offers us to be signs of His foreseeing love. I have been receiving numerous gestures of solidarity in attention to the needs of communities that work in situations of difficulty, where the richness of the Salesian charism shines forth with life witness in the educative mission among the poorest young people.

I express my renewed THANK YOU to each of you and to the educating communities for this involvement and I pray that communion may be ever more credible and that vocational fruitfulness may grow, especially in quality.

I have dedicated a time of prayer and reflection to have light on the theme of this circular and I have felt encouraged to meditate with you on Mary: Mother of Life, Woman of dialog, of tenderness, of mercy, and therefore, *Woman of peace*. We are preparing to live the month of May dedicated to her with new trust, in full synergy with the celebration of the 100th anniversary of Mary's apparitions at Fatima, where Pope Francis will go to celebrate this event that continues to be a message for the whole world. In communion with him, let us ask Mary to help us to be women of peace, educators to peace, and ready to accomplish concrete gestures of peace.

The human family is living difficult times. It is wounded in many areas by unheard of violence that strikes the most vulnerable people, especially children, young people, families, the poor, refugees, migrants. It is a time that asks for great courage and commitment. However, there is always the good news to receive that peace is possible and a duty. It is everyone's right. It regards the peace that Jesus came to bring and motivates us to be artificers of peace today through daily gestures, small sacrifices, real choices that model in us a new style of life based on true and lasting peace. Above all, as consecrated women and educators, we are called upon to walk this road with hope and trust.

Not alone, but with Mary who generated Jesus, Prince of Peace and with her, follow Him with evangelical initiative in this historic time in which unfortunately we are living the "third world war in pieces", as Pope Francis affirms.

The points on which I intend to reflect bring us to the *sources of peace as a gift of God and as a duty*. They show the exemplarity of Mary who encourages us *to build communities of peace*, and that stimulate us to *educate ourselves and to educate to peace*. We want to undertake this 'journey' with humility, disarming our heart, our thoughts from every kind of violence in order to make room for peace. Mary accompanies us in this journey. With her, every step can be a positive response to God's plan of love and to the expectations of the whole world.

Peace as a Gift and a Duty

Shalom! It is the Hebrew greeting the heavenly Messenger addressed to a young woman: Mary of Nazareth. When God approaches a human creature, He gives the gift of peace. This fills the heart and womb of Mary. God had chosen her to be the Mother of Jesus, the Savior of the world, the Prince of Peace. The gift is too great for her, a humble and poor girl in a forgotten village, so she limits herself to ask: "How can this be?" (*Luke 1: 34*).

Mary receives the Peace but she does not remain passive: she enters into dialog with the angel who reassures her: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." (*Luke 1, 35*).

After receiving the news, Mary journeys with solicitude. The peace that dwells in her cannot be held. She feels impelled to communicate it. The fatigue does not matter. There is her elderly cousin who needs her because she is pregnant at this unusual time of her life. Mary can bring her the joy she experiences in her heart. It is a mysterious unexpected joy but yet so real. The fruit of peace cannot be held for oneself, nor considered a privilege; it must always be shared.

The peace that is Jesus generates peace. Thus begins a generative chain of hope and of joy for the entire world. Nothing is taken for granted or simple in the life of Mary. The Most High preserves her from evil and makes her blest among women, but does not preserve her from the 'heart's fatigue' (John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*, n. 17).

Each day, she must take the mystery into account. Simeon leads her to intuit that the encounter with God does not make her immune from suffering. Jesus Himself, who lived docile and obedient for thirty years, escapes a solely human understanding that is rational and emotional. And His Mother faces this fatigue of the heart every time. She, woman of peace, free from any kind of violence, must do 'violence' to herself when Jesus says: "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know I must be about my Father's business?" (*Luke 2: 49*).

Or when at Cana He tells her that his hour has not yet come (Cf. *John 2: 4*). Nor does He save her the clarification that His mother and His brothers and sisters are those who listen to the Word of God and put it into practice (Cf. *Luke 8: 21*). Elsewhere it says that His relatives were worried because it seemed "He is out of His mind" (*Mark 3: 21*). Each time, Jesus also re-dimensions the legitimate expectations of His Mother, who becomes the disciple of Her Son, to the point of accepting the exchange with John when Jesus tells her from the Cross: "Woman, behold your son!" (*John 19: 26*). It is the highest of demands from the One who is Peace. Jesus is present in His sisters and brothers. All of humanity has been saved, redeemed by His blood. Not even His Mother, who generated Him according to the flesh, can boast of privileges, because the greatest privilege is that of being His disciple, of learning to love always, to love everyone unconditionally.

The peace Mary received in the humble house of Nazareth is a duty and a responsibility for every disciple of Christ. Therefore, peace means disarming the heart. It is pure availability to learn each day to what point we can love. Peace is recognizing in the other "one who belongs to me" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 43); it is letting ourselves be reconciled every day; it is safeguarding the Word and letting it safeguard us. Peace is making ourselves be responsible for humanity along the roads of the world. It is an interior pilgrimage that makes us uncomfortable, calls into question our certainties in order to open us to the unprecedented ways of God.

Mary did this: she received and gave peace, even by overcoming the legitimate needs of a mother. Hers was a journey of total availability beginning from her heart.

Pope Francis, with clarity and great confidence, entrusts this journey to all of humanity in his message for the World Day of Peace – January 1, 2017. He suggests that we consider it as reference and light to be, as he says, "artisans of peace".

We ask ourselves: how do we look at Mary as the exemplary model of Mother and disciple open to the needs of peace? Do we live peace in the fraternal life of the community? Do we let ourselves be involved in the call to peace as an educating community and as educators of the young?

Fraternity as the Way to Peace

God's dream for the entire Human Family is communion and peace. This is the first gift of the Risen One: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give it to you" (*John 14: 27*).

Dearest Sisters, before sharing some aspects that I consider essential for our fraternal life, I recall a very important event for the Church and for all of humanity. In 1967, exactly fifty years ago, Blessed Pope Paul VI gave every person of good will the encyclical *Populorum progressio*. Still today it is of great timeliness and prophetic relevance. Unfortunately, it is disregarded under many aspects. I emphasize an incisive affirmation that calls to us as educators: "Development is the new name of peace". It is an affirmation that moves our sense of responsibility at the personal, educative, local, and world levels. I invite you, within the limits possible, to take this precious document in hand and make it the object of reflection. We will discover some essential and urgent elements taken up again by Pope Francis in the message for the World Day of Peace 2017, which as you know has for its theme: "Non-violence: A Political Style for Peace".

We all desire peace, but true peace is the one Jesus came to bring and that we are called to proclaim. We can all be *missionaries of peace* through a constant effort of reconciliation with God, with ourselves, with every person, with creation. The journey that Jesus asks of us today is marvelous and at the same time, demanding.

It makes us understand that to be “community-workshop of peace” does not only depend on human ability, the fruit of sophistic techniques, but on the encounter with Him who is our peace and only in Him can it be realized. In this sense, Mary is for us a model to whom to look to take courageous steps, perhaps against the current, of pacification in the concreteness and reality of daily life.

How many sisters and lay people I have met in my travels who invoke peace, aspire to non-violence as an urgent value. In such troubled times, non-violence favors the inclusion of the weakest, of the forgotten, of the exploited. But only if we are close to the Lord will we have the strength to be beside them, to console them, to feel ourselves simply ‘a channel’ that transmits what we have received from God. In this way we become sowers of peace (Cf. General Audience, 22 March 2017). If there is hope, peace cannot be absent.

The peace that Mary lived asks to be received by Easter people, overflowing with hope. As FMA, we identify in a special way with the Woman of the Resurrection; Woman with a heart freed from every kind of impurity. I think it would be a very useful work to involve ourselves in the ecology of words, of thoughts, of feelings, thus experiencing the joy of being a community where we accept each other reciprocally and we take care of each other. Pope Francis points out that “This vocation is often contrasted and belied by the facts, in a world characterized by the ‘globalization of indifference’ that makes us gradually become used to the suffering of others, closing in on ourselves” (Message for the World Day of Peace 2014).

Fraternity is the way to peace. This however, asks for conditions without which all remains a utopia, an unreachable goal, an illusory adventure.

The fundamental condition, the root of all the others, is placing Jesus at the center of our life so that in humility and credibility, we can be people of peace, dedicated to removing barriers that could be obstacles to it. If we do not witness with our life that Jesus is Absolute for us and that in Him we find all our sisters and brothers, we risk proclaiming and living attempts at fraternity, but certainly not the one God dreams of. Putting Jesus at the center favors a new way of living together, based on the power of faith and on deep communion with Him (Cf. C 36).

We all hunger for the bread of fraternity. Our problems, that sometimes provoke great personal and community suffering, are not always tied to factors of organization or structural difficulties, but to the fatigue of building communities that find their security in God, “outgoing communities”, rich in faith, reconciled, able to forgive ‘seventy times seven’, available for joyful, gratuitous giving.

I communicate to you a dream that gives me hope and trust: think of our communities as places where peace dwells, forgiveness; where we are ready to compassionate fragility, weakness, fear, and tepidity with a heart inhabited by the Holy Spirit and by the maternal solicitude of Mary. I am aware that there are times of fatigue caused by the diversity of characters, of mentalities, by inevitable conflicts in community life. In every reality there are conflicts, but the desire to be witnesses of peace must always prevail over conflict. Certainly, these are not to be ignored, but faced, received, and transformed into an opportunity to consider the person in her deepest dignity and open new roads of new life (Cf. *Evangelii gaudium*, nos. 226-228). This is a privileged road to become workers of peace.

What Pope Francis suggests for us is a motive for personal reflection and renewed joy of living together in the certainty that it is possible, even urgent, that we become gospels of peace today. Let us help each other to be worthy of this gift!

In the presence of Mary, we can ask a question: which personal attitudes and which community choices do we deem indispensable to be today a gospel of peace in the Church and in the society of our times? How can we respond with the young to this challenge?

Educate Ourselves and Educate to Peace

I want to open this last part of the circular by citing the words of Pope Francis as though they were addressed directly to us, committed to educating ourselves and to educating to peace.

“We all desire peace; many people are building it each day with little gestures and many suffer and patiently support the fatigue of many attempts to build it.

In the course of these years, I have expressly written to the world community to ask it to invoke peace. In this year of 2017, we want to commit ourselves with prayer and with action, to become people who have banished violence from their heart, from their words, and from their gestures; and to build non-violent communities able to take care of our common home. Nothing is impossible if we turn to God in prayer. All of us can be artisans of peace” (Message for the World Day of Peace 2017).

My thought goes to Valdocco and Mornese where the commitment to educate to the value of peace was a fundamental element of the educative mission, understood as a work of mercy through which to offer the young the certainty that God loves them. The Preventive System is totally based on the conviction that every young person has an accessible point for the good, a chord to vibrate, so that the heart opens to goodness. Don Bosco was convinced that we need to begin from the young to regenerate society. He desired that we pray for 'peace in the house', every morning, convinced that in education we must favor an adequate climate to form "good Christians and honest citizens". His character was fiery and not at all pacific, but he learned as a young cleric the value of non-violence. "His friend Comollo told him one day, 'Your strength frightens me'" (MB I 337). Don Bosco did not forget the lesson of this mild and humble friend. He wanted to be the father and friend of all young people and this is what he was to the end of this life.

Mother Mazzarello as well, had to do violence to herself to dominate her impatience, but she understood the most efficacious way was that of attending to the relationships among the sisters and among the young girls in a 'family climate' animated by the presence of Mary Help of Christians. She recognized that this climate was the basis for rapports of serenity and of peace, the indispensable presuppositions to favor participation and co-responsibility even among the girls.

Dearest sisters, we have in Mary and in our Founders credible witnesses of peace understood as a culture of non-violence and of love given and made perceptible to the young. Following their example we intend to set out on the journey with the spirit of disciples of Jesus who learn every day to respect everyone in their diversity, seeking unity and community in spite of everything.

We are called to walk with the young not only to teach them something, but to learn from them. In general, they are freer from the temptation of 'we have always done it this way'. We can teach them something, only if we learn and understand the reality they live in, as the laity present at GC XXIII told us. In this way we can help them to acquire a critical gaze on today's culture, to communicate without violence, to manage conflict; to lose without taking revenge, and to win without crushing (Cf. *Acts GC XXIII*, n. 13).

Sometimes, we become intimated by certain behaviors of the young that however do not always correspond to their interior world that is often searching for signs of peace, of hope, of respect toward cultural, religious, professional differences. With a Salesian heart, we must believe that in each of them there is that 'accessible point for the good' that sustains our educative effort in favor of *justice*, of *peace*, of the *integrity of creation*, and of the *defense of life* (Cf. *Acts GC XXIII*, n. 63). Volunteer experiences are for the young an excellent opportunity to help them grow in the capacity for intercultural dialog, to let themselves be transformed by the encounter with the poorest, to feel involved in the building of a culture of peace.

We are aware that the family is the first environment in which to educate to peace. And yet, it cannot face the challenge of non-violence and peace by itself. We have a great responsibility as educating communities. I propose some elements for a journey that can be useful in this Marian month:

Educate ourselves and educate to live together, that is, educate from the perspective of intercultural and inter-religious dialog, where the variety of cultures is considered the font of enrichment, and difference as a good to safeguard, not a threat from which to defend ourselves;

Educate ourselves and educate from a perspective of inclusion, receiving every person without partiality and promoting fundamental human rights in a society in which they are often disregarded in outrageous and dehumanizing ways;

Educate ourselves and educate to live quality relationships, favoring on every occasion a culture of life, of dialog, of sharing; overcoming individualism and functionality of rapports;

Cultivate the attitude of saying words of blessing that express pleasantness for every person, for their true good, more than for self-assertion.

Allow me to give resonance to the conclusion for Peace proclaimed at Assisi on September 20, 2016 on the occasion of the prayer encounter in which I participated in the name of the Institute: "Finally, we open a new time in which the globalized world becomes a family of peoples. We actuate the responsibility of building a true peace, one that is attentive to the authentic needs of individuals and of peoples; that prevents conflicts with collaboration, that wins hatreds and overcomes barriers with encounter and dialog. Nothing is lost by effectively practicing dialog. Nothing is impossible if we turn to God in prayer. All of us can be artisans of peace: from Assisi we renew with conviction our commitment to do this, with God's help, together with all men and women of good will".

Dear sisters, favoring a *culture of peace* is not simple, but it is possible if we form ourselves together, young people and adults, in the style of the Gospel and we let ourselves be guided by Mary, Mediator of peace, of harmony, of fraternity. Peace begins in the heart of each one of us, and of every young person who shares our mission.

Helped by Mary, we live the *da mihi animas cetera tolle* with the passion of Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello, and we find in the depths of our heart the happiness of being *new creatures* ready to gather those seeds of good that can blossom into true joy for ourselves and those around us.

This is what the young people await from us; this is the dream of God for us, for our Institute, for our Salesian Family, and for all the educating communities, for all those who strive to be workers of peace even at the cost of losing their life.

I am sure we do not want to disappoint the Lord.

I wish you a joyful month of May with the blessing of the Lord and of Mary Help of Christians.

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Aff.ma Madre