

Toward the Synod with the young

Dearest Sisters,

I want to express my gratitude to you for your participation in the World Feast of Gratitude celebrated at Cotonou, Benin in Mother of God Province – West Africa. It was an experience lived in a beautiful communicative and joyous family atmosphere.

The 'Oratorian heart' was the leitmotif that involved the whole Institute, the young, the educating communities, the Salesian Family. I thanked the Lord for the communion it created in our realities and that we want to strengthen more and more - to be among the young, credible signs of the foreseeing love of God the Father. The gesture of solidarity that you have generously given will contribute to the building of the new work at Koubri in Burkina Faso for the formation of the neediest young people. I had the joy of being present for the laying of the first stone! It is a sign of new hope for many children who have not had the possibility of studying.

I renew my gratitude to the Provincial, Sr. Yolande Kikange, to the Cotonou community, and to all the sisters of the AFO Province for having prepared the Celebration with an 'oratorian heart' and for having made us experience the richness and actuality of the Salesian charism witnessed to in daily life with the characteristics typical of the culture of the place.

We are living a special time of grace in preparation for the Bishops' Synod that will take place in October 2018, on the theme: "The Young, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment". This event brings us deep joy and calls to us as an Institute whose mission is the education of the young people. What is foreseen is a Synod in step with the young and for the young, a precious resource for the Church herself and for society; certainly not a problem. Questions arose in me as I read the Synod Document and I want to share these with you. How does the Synod call to us? What is the synergy between the Synod and the choices of the Institute? What specific contribution can we give to feel we are the 'journeying' Church, ready to place ourselves in harmony with the young to discover the project of life God has for them?

With these and other questions, I let myself be guided by the light of the Holy Spirit to be able to choose reflections useful for this Circular. I am certain that you will know how to receive them and complete them with an open heart, with an ecclesial breath, with renewed love for the mission the Lord entrusts to us in a very complex time, rich with new possibilities. Let us journey personally and as educating communities, placing ourselves in an attitude of listening to the young to help them decide and consequently choose, and finally to collaborate for their joy. This is only the first step. We will have a way to continue to follow the journey toward the Synod when the Work Instrument is published.

Listening to the Young

Pope Francis in his letter to the young people in view of the Synod, exhorts them to participate actively in the synod journey: "The whole church desires to listen to your voice, to your sensibilities, to your faith; even to your doubts and your criticisms. Let us hear your cry, let it resound in the communities and make it reach your pastors" (Letter of Pope Francis, January 13, 2017).

Listening to the cry of today's youth is a challenge for the church, for society, for the Institute. It is an essential challenge to be able to accompany them along the sometimes tiring roads of research and discernment to discover their project of life and accomplish it with joy. This requires a knowledge of the reality in which the young are immersed and in which they intend to be protagonists and not considered as a disadvantaged category or a social group to protect, but rather to have an active part in the processes to change the present (Cf. Preparatory Document, Chap. 1, no. 2).

In regard to this, the Document highlights some aspects of the youth world and of society that I suggest you make the object of reflection and sharing among yourselves and with the educating community. Make them with a 'Salesian heart', I dare say, with 'pastoral curiosity' to 'look at' the young with the eyes of God, to believe in their dreams, in their potential at times suffocated by a liquid and opportunistic society that often treats them as "waste material" (Cf. Pope Francis, Prayer Vigil, April 8, 2017). We want to listen to them and 'look at them tenderly' as the springtime of the Church and of society, as bearers of happiness and of new hope. This is in harmony with the attitude of Don Bosco and of Mother Mazzarello, and is a value very present in our Constitutions and in the Institute Documents.

It is important to listen to the young in the context in which they live, where they face a complex reality that is fluid and in rapid movement, never before experienced. It is a reality that makes them collide with a scientific culture often dominated by technology. In this situation, they find themselves living the experience of insecurity, unemployment, corruption, exploitation which sometimes drags them into drug abuse, prostitution, meaninglessness. The conditions of vulnerability multiply their forms of sadness and of solitude, of poverty and of exclusion. They do not trust their abilities and do not see a future in the precariousness that characterizes them. The challenge of multi-cultures and multi-religions crosses the youth world and provokes disorientation and relativism. However, it is also a precious opportunity for comparison and reciprocal enrichment.

In regard to the Church or to religion in general, the young are not against them but, in some contexts, they are learning to live without them. Many nourish distrust of the Church as happens with other institutions that they perceive as distant. Even in places where Christian communities are growing and show great vitality, we must evaluate their coherence of life and the capacity to let themselves be involved through their sense of belonging to the Church. They feel themselves questioned by the conversion of young Catholics to other religions and also by those who have no faith horizon. Relationships among the young often occur in a virtual way, which undoubtedly offers great communicative possibilities, but contemporaneously presents real risks (Cf. Chap. 1, no. 1).

Dear sisters, your 'remaining' amid the young people allows you to grasp these and other characteristics common to the new generations on the various continents. You are the witnesses of their extreme need, not always expressed, to have close reference figures who are credible, coherent, and honest, in addition to places and occasions in which to test their capacity to relate to others, both adults and peers. They look for people who are able to express harmony and offer support, encouragement, and help to recognize limitations without heavy judgments (Cf. chap. 1, no. 2).

It is 'a charismatic duty' to put into act all our possibilities to listen to them so that they may gradually perceive the voice of God who speaks to their heart and thus, place themselves before the truth of life without fear and with trust. Let us never say, "I don't have time to listen", because listening, lived with humility and empathy has the value of an embrace: that of Jesus and can bring the re-birth of hope in those who are sad and can even, in some circumstance, save a life.

Listening in our charism is a fundamental dimension. Remember how Don Bosco listened to the suffering of the young of Turin and let himself be touched by their wounds, by their need for a home, a father, work, faith. The first educative dialog of his mission was made with a life question addressed to a poor boy, but rich in resources that had until then remained latent. How can we forget the resourcefulness of Mother Mazzarello who, even before meeting Don Bosco, had felt the need to listen to reality alongside the girls of the town, going against the current to the point of letting herself be laughed at by the people of Mornese without being ashamed; rather by acquiring new strength in prayer and in educational planning?

GC XXIII was an experience of great listening to the world and to the young who gave us optimal suggestions, indicating the columns of a religious life that wants to have a future and be fruitful. The laity themselves recommended that we listen to the young and learn from them (Cf. Acts GC XXIII, nos. 12-18). The future is in their hands if we successfully gift them with the present, making them protagonists, soliciting them in decisions, supporting them in responsibility, believing that they are capable of actuating a real revolution, that of love.

In the numerous encounters with provincial communities, I have seen true miracles of transformation among the young. Some of them have been re-born thanks to the trust of those who knew how to listen to them, learn from them, include them in decisions, thus opening roads of hope to them. As FMA, our joy is to help them discover Jesus' gaze of predilection on their existence. Jesus is the only one who knows them in profundity and loves them without conditions. His gaze expresses the trust He has in each young person and in their capacity to place themselves at the service of humanity.

On one of my trips, a young girl wanted to share her experience with me. "Mother, I feel the need to thank you because only with the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians did I have the experience of feeling myself loved; in them I experienced maternity". This is only one voice, the expression of many voices. Do we believe that through listening and sharing we can support and strengthen faith in the young, even those most distant, supported by the light and the strength that comes from the Holy Spirit?

To Help them Decide and Choose

The insecurity of today's world and the continually new possibilities offered by technology place the young in front of the challenge to choose among the various opportunities and not renounce any choice. As a consequence, they often remain undecided and have real difficulty in directing themselves to a project of life. From here stems the importance of discernment that begins with daily choices. Adults are responsible for favoring a climate in which the young can perceive the certainty of being cared for in love. Through their presence, adults help them to be oriented to deciding, choosing, favoring participation. They encourage them to take on responsibility and the consequences of their actions, promoting a journey of healthy autonomy and of personal and social responsibility.

We know that the young fear assuming responsibility, especially for definitive choices. However, we need to admit that often adults do not facilitate this effort. Sometimes they are too protective; other times, they abandon the young to themselves when they are not yet sufficiently mature to be autonomous. There are parents who do not really know their children because they have little contact with them. They sate them with things, but are not always able to transmit the Good to them.

On her part, the Church is called to place herself in discussion and to rediscover her vocation of safeguarding life. "Taking care, safeguarding, require goodness, require being lived with tenderness...which is not a virtue of the weak, but on the contrary, denotes strength of soul and capacity for attention, compassion, real openness to the other, the capacity of love" (Introduction to Chap. II). In this context, it is possible to accompany the young on their journey of human maturation and on their journey of faith.

What is the rapport between faith and vocation? Faith, like vocation, is a gift. Jesus tells us in the Gospel: "It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain... This I command you: love one another" (John 15:16-17). Therefore, faith is a gratuitous gift from God. He calls to joy and to love. This fundamental call is present in the heart of every person. But the gift must have a generous response (Cf. Chap. II, no. 1). "Faith is not a haven for people without courage, but the dilation of life. It makes us discover a grand call, the vocation to love, and assures us that this love is trustworthy...because its foundation is found in the fidelity of God, stronger than our fragility" (Lumen fidei cited in chap. II, no. 1).

To discover this call, especially in times of uncertainty and of confusion in which the young find themselves, we must discern events, personal situations, history. Events and situations are in themselves mute or ambiguous. Thus, the need for discernment that leads to recognize, interpret, choose.

Above all, recognize the situations of life, the people we meet, the feelings that inhabit our heart, the wealth of emotions and passions. In this stage, the Word of God has great importance; meditate it and let it question us, putting in movement all the experiences, placing them in rapport with our spiritual life.

Then, realistically interpret what is felt; realistically evaluate it on the basis of one's interior dispositions, attitudes, personal gifts, and the Word of God that always calls to us. In this phase, it is very important for the young to speak with people who are experts in listening to the Spirit.

Finally, choosing implies the exercise of the freedom and responsibility of the person, ready to be involved, to translate the interior decision into concrete action. It is precisely in this phase that we need to encourage them to put aside their fear of making a mistake that can be paralyzing and leave them in eternal indecisiveness (Cf. chap. II, nos. 2-3).

We know how difficult it is for young people to arrive at a choice. Vocational accompaniment is fundamental in helping them understand, decide, and follow the journey that is indispensable to individuate what the Holy Spirit is arousing in their heart, without however, forcing it toward a direction or conditioning their choice.

Our religious Family, which has the mission of educating the young generations, has a long experience of accompaniment as continually emerges from meetings, evaluations, and even from General Chapters. GC XXIII explicitly asks us, "to make discernment a lifestyle, an ongoing commitment to welcome the newness of the Spirit, which sometimes leads to huge changes in vision and structures and sometimes only to small steps forward" (Acts GC XXIII, no. 35).

Let us ask ourselves: do we make the experience of discernment in our personal journey? Do we live it in the community and in the educative mission? Which roads can we follow to understand how to accompany the young today?

Collaborate for their Joy

Listening to the young, helping them to decide and to choose, means collaborating for their joy by bringing them to meet Jesus, the authentic source of happiness. Only a process of real interior freedom leads to the encounter with Him and therefore, to profound peace in the heart.

The icon of the disciples of Emmaus teaches us that it is important to have companions on the journey, to walk together. This is not always easy or to be taken for granted. It requires overcoming prejudices in regard to the young, taking them seriously, receiving their questions, anxieties, doubts, and fears, and living the patience of 'small steps'.

The ways and the places of pastoral action must aim at calling upon the freedom of the young, valuing their creativity and originality, and assisting in their development.

The Synod Document expresses all this with three verbs: leave, see, call. Leaving aside rigidity, offering radiant witness, surely makes the proclamation of the joy of the Gospel more credible. An attractive Church is a Church that is welcoming, hospitable, where everyone feels at ease and each one contributes to the joy of the others. Seeing is the fruit of the interior disposition to remain with the young, sharing joys and hopes. Finally, calling, awakening the desire to go on the journey and share something that is worth living for (Cf. chap. III, no. 1).

In regard to this, I invite you to take Circular 960 where I ask you to individuate adequate roads for an explicit vocational proposal and to suggest some operative strategies for a renewed vocational animation. Be courageous in speaking of Jesus to the young and of the call to follow Him without timidity or fear. Our mission is to communicate to them that He has a plan of love for each one; that His gaze of predilection invites them to be a gift of love in the Church, in society, in the family, in religious life, among the young themselves. We are also called to accompany the young who profess another faith to discover their vocation in coherence with their situation. We can certainly speak to

the young generations of vocation if we are happy to be Salesian consecrated women; in prayer and with the strength of the Holy Spirit we fan the 'fire' of our first yes, even in the fatigue of each day. They are a providential opportunity to witness to and reinforce our fidelity to the call of Jesus to follow Him unconditionally. Here is the source of true joy!

Thus, I deem it important to emphasize that all this requires a community that feels responsible to educate the young and that witnesses to the transforming power of the Gospel. "The role of adults of faith, with whom to enter into a positive covenant, is fundamental to every journey of human maturation and of vocational discernment", we read in the Synod Document. In the ecclesial community, parents and the family are indispensable, as also the teachers and other educational figures. Daily life and social effort among the poor, the cry of the earth are concrete places in which the young can feel called, putting their faith to the test, and helping them to grow (Cf. chap. III, nos. 2-3).

Besides the traditional educative environments, the digital world calls to us as the new meeting place in which to make the proclamation resound and make the young protagonists of a journey of human and Christian maturity that also involves others. The new youth languages can become spaces of encounter in which they can express their creativity and talents and also their faith.

From the point of view of vocational maturation, the experience of social and missionary volunteers is important: the effort for justice, peace, safeguarding creation, attention to promote fundamental human rights, especially of the poorest beyond religious and cultural affiliations. Fundamental as well are the conditions that favor discernment about one's vocation: silence, contemplation, prayer, listening, sharing the Word of God, as also the way of beauty that leads to God (Cf. chap. III, nos. 3-4).

Dear sisters, what does all this say to you? I think you have been able to see the marvelous harmony that exists between the Synod, the major lines of Salesian youth spirituality, and the choices of the Institute shared in GC XXIII. To be with the young missionaries of hope and joy requires listening to the reality of the young and 'broadening our gaze'. The young ask us: "Trust us enough to plan these changes together; consider us as hardworking partners and not just recipients, creating spaces for dialog in order to live the commandment of love in the family spirit. We ourselves are the key to reach those young people. help us to feel that we are not guests, but children in the House of God, in your homes" (Acts GC XXIII, n. 18).

For us, vocational animation is a call intrinsic to the educative mission and the educating community is the most fruitful environment to discover the beauty and the variety of the various vocations. Accompaniment of the young in their process of growth can only happen in comparison with the various choices of life, in continual dialog with the family, and in communion with the whole Salesian Family. Together we have more possibilities and more efficacy in accompanying the young generations.

I end with the conclusive words of the Document with which I entrust you to Mary on this journey of the Church: "In Her we find the style of listening, the courage of faith, the depth of discernment, and the courage of witness and of mission". On the day of her Feast, may Mary Help of Christians speak to the heart of her daughters, making resound the call of Jesus to the mission ad gentes.

Dear sisters, on this 140th anniversary of the first missionary expedition, I await with great trust new and generous missionary requests.

On May 24th, I will be in Turin and in the Basilica I will ask Mary to renew us in missionary ardor and the joy of fidelity to the vocation of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

God bless you.

Rome, 24 May 2017

Aff.ma Madre

ATTACHMENT TO CIRCULAR No. 970

New Provincials 2017

	America
Mexican Province "Mother of the Church" <i>Sr. Leonor SALAZAR</i>	MMO
United States East-Canada Province "St. Joseph" <i>Sr. Joanne HOLLoman</i>	SEC
United States Province "Mary Immaculate" <i>Sr. Rosann RUIZ</i>	SUO
	Asia
Indian Province "Sacred Heart of Jesus" <i>Sr. Celine JACOB</i>	INK
Indian Province "St. Thomas Apostle" <i>Sr. Maria Nirmala LAZAR</i>	INM
Indian Province "Our Lady of the Snow" <i>Sr. Mary Margaret Amalanathan</i>	INT
Thailand Province "St. Mary Mazzarello" <i>Sr. Nipha Agnese RANGABPIT</i>	THA
	Europe
Portuguese Province "Our Lady of Fatima " <i>Sr. Rosa Cândida GOMES</i>	POR
Slovenia-Croatia Province "Our Lady of Brezje" <i>Sr. Marija ŠIMENC</i>	SLC
Spanish Province "Mary Help of Christians" <i>Sr. María del Rosario GARCÍA</i>	SPA