

140 years since the first missionary expedition

Dearest Sisters,

At the conclusion of the spiritual exercises lived in Mornese with the General Council, I had the joy of pausing at the Port of Genoa in the year in which the Institute celebrates the 140 years since the first missionary expedition of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians on November 14, 1877.

In this circular I wish to share what this event aroused in my heart. I intend not only to recall a past rich in the good, but to make the past speak in order to give new life to the present and to project toward the future. I would like us all to live the same attitude of marvel and of joy of our first missionaries for a dream that was being realized then and that will come true today. This dream is for us a reminder to let ourselves be contagioned by new missionary ardor, able to keep burning the courage and joy of the Gospel proclamation, understood as spring water within an often arid reality. This is why it is necessary to return to the origins, to the source from which our charism flowed and rediscover all its richness. Especially today, it is urgent that in a society with a 'weak memory' and sometimes indifferent toward those who have transmitted indispensable values for social and ecclesial living together of human beings. It is up to us to rediscover the fire that burned in the heart of these first missionaries in order to live the present with a sense of responsibility and look to the future with hope.

In regard to this, I thank the Counselor for the Missions, Sr. Alaide Deretti, and her collaborators for the documented and engaging monthly letter sent to all the Provinces in preparation for November 14, 2017. I am also grateful to Sr. Maria Collino who, in her recent book: *The Daring of a Dream that Spreads in the World*, presents us an essential profile of the first six missionaries chosen by Don Bosco and some figures of young people of various cultures where the Salesian charism was sown by our missionaries. Dear Sisters, let us receive the appeal to leave again, as an outgoing Church, rediscovering the missionary face of the Institute in synergy with the young people, missionaries of other young people. I invite you to follow this journey together with faith and hope, in the certainty that you will know how to receive it and concretize it with a missionary heart.

Church in missionary outreach

Pope Francis, in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, proposes an outgoing Church as the key for the transformation of the Church herself, missionary by nature. Born at Pentecost, she centers on living and joyfully proclaiming the Risen Christ. From that moment, she opens doors and windows and adventures out into the streets of the world to make this proclamation of salvation resound everywhere.

The whole Bible, beginning with Abraham, attests to an outgoing people. For Abraham, as for us, responding to the call means leaving our own land, our own comforts and securities, to entrust ourselves to the Word: "Go where I show you!"

Today, the dynamic of the exodus is imposed with renewed vigor: go, walk, meet, sow are outgoing verbs in continuity with those of gathering in the Cenacle. Pope Francis clarifies that the intimacy of the Church in listening to God, is an itinerant intimacy, and communion "is essentially configured as missionary communion" (Cf. EG n. 23).

The missionary Church is the Church of daring and of hope. It is the outgoing Church formed by the missionary disciples who take the initiative, involve, accompany, bear fruit, and celebrate (Cf. EG n.

24). It is a Church that does not remain closed in on itself. If it remains isolated, it will sicken. If it brings the Gospel proclamation outside its secure confines, it puts itself into play, it incarnates itself in situations, it bends over pain, seeks to soothe human wounds, brings consolation and relief. It is a Church capable of seeing every small victory, every least sign of hope, and thanking the Lord together. Pope Francis advises us various times that, in order to be this way, a “pastoral in conversion” is needed insofar as “we cannot leave things as they are”.

The fidelity of the Church to the missionary mandate keeps it young and vital. All that is not renewed in this light, becomes sterile and void. The joy of the Church is that of being among the people, inserted in the territory, able to listen, dialog, proclaim, arouse new hope, involve in the dynamics of the proclamation of the Good News, and witness to charity.

A missionary Church is able to enculturate itself, to adapt its language to make itself understood. Without ever forgetting the heart of the Gospel and its perennial novelty, it incarnates itself in human limitations to reach the heart of the men and women of today. She is a mother with her heart open to receive everyone, privileging the poor, the forgotten, and the marginalized, those who cannot give back (Cf. EG n. 48). The Church lives the missionary mandate entrusted by Jesus to His disciples: “Go therefore and make disciples of all people, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And, behold, I am with you all days, until the end of the world” (Mt 28: 19-20).

Every disciple of Jesus is questioned by this mandate. Pope Francis reveals that he felt himself questioned in a specific way. To a girl who asked him why he became a Jesuit, he responded: “What I liked most about the Company is its missionary spirit; I wanted to become a missionary”. We know that due to reasons of health, he could never be sent far away, but today he is the successor of Peter to remind the whole Church of this identity and missionary vocation. Above all, to witness to it.

An Institute with a Missionary Face

As Institute, we share the missionary vocation of the Church. We recognize the truth and actuality of the words of Pope Francis: “The mission at the heart of the people is not a part of my life, or an ornament that I can remove; it is not an appendix, or one moment among many others of life. It is something that I cannot eradicate from my being if I do not want to destroy myself. I am a mission on this earth, and for this reason, I find myself in this world. We need to recognize ourselves as marked by the fire of this mission to illumine, bless, vivify, uplift, heal, free” (EG n. 273).

These words are particularly demanding for us since the missionary dimension is an essential element of the Salesian vocation (Cf. C 75).

In fact, Don Bosco in founding our Institute, “Imparted to it a strong missionary characteristic” (C 1) and therefore, we are invited today to “strive to keep alive the missionary fervor of the origins” (C 6).

Impulse and fervor are pregnant and meaningful words; they speak of movement, journey, pilgrim and essential style, free from all that retards the course of the Word of salvation. They are interior energy, spiritual power that urge to proclaim with the typical paresis which characterizes those who let themselves be guided by the Holy Spirit.

Dear sisters, those who follow Jesus are always on a journey; they cannot have a comfortable life, ‘sedentary’. Fervor, the fire of the Spirit, when it is visible, acts and attracts. Missionary vocations can be born only where there is a fire burning; where the spirit of the universe is vibrant, as in Mother Mazzarello and the first community of Mornese. This was the secret of the expansion of our Institute and of many other Institutes in the Church.

140 years have passed since the first missionary expedition on that distant November 14, 1877, only five years after the foundation of the Institute. However, I believe that some suggestions of the climate of the first departure can ‘reawaken’ in our heart the joy of feeling called by God to spread His love to all peoples, above all the young, with the same simplicity and conviction of the first missionaries.

In volume II of the Cronistoria, we find pages of moving human intensity and of evangelical initiative proper to hearts in love with God. On September 8, 1877 – feast of Our Lady and the first Saturday of the month – Mornese receives the decision of Don Bosco for the first departure of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians for America. The goal will be Uruguay. Their hearts leapt with joy and gratitude to Mary for “the choice she wanted to make of such poor daughters in launching them across the ocean for the redemption of many souls thirsting for light, for the good, for eternal life”. From that moment, the missionary fervor in Mornese is in continual growth. There is a general contest to make the missionary request and “each one expresses herself in the most convincing terms, hoping to be among the chosen”. Finally, they are told of the first six missionaries, poor in culture, young and inexperienced, but rich in the fervor of the *da mihi animas cetera tolle* learned from Don Bosco and transmitted with life in unknown but already loved lands.

Dear sisters, I imagine the enthusiasm that exploded in the whole house; the delicacy of Mother Mazzarello to study every detail and to prepare conveniently for the journey, above all, to intensify prayer in order to face this great adventure with faith and trust in God.

Before the departure, Mother Mazzarello with two new missionaries, accompanied by Fr. John Cagliero, experience the encounter with Pope Pius IX who leaves the missionaries this remembrance, “be like the large shells of the fountain that receive the water and pour it out for everyone; that is, shells of virtue and of knowledge for the benefit of others”. And placing his two hands on the head of each one, he paternally adds: “May God bless you so that you will be able to do much, much good!”. With the blessing of the Holy Father and with the protection of Mary Help of Christians who holds in her arms a lovely smiling Baby (we know well the story of the picture brought from Turin to Uruguay), these sisters prepare themselves to face the long voyage.

Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello are there, at the port of Genoa to greet, comfort, and dry tears that they themselves hold back with difficulty.

“Mother Mazzarello visits cabin by cabin, berth by berth, to make certain that nothing is lacking of what could alleviate the sisters from the discomforts of the trip. Then, as her heart seems to still feel the need to give something to those daughters whom she thinks she will never see again, she spends time with each one individually, she speaks to them all together, she tries to bring them herself where Don Bosco is so that he can repeat to them some of his inspiring and very efficacious words”.

They leave with a special piece of luggage accurately prepared together with Mother: great trust in God, joy at being able to proclaim the love of Jesus, humility in accepting new customs and new cultures, availability to live sacrifices, knowing that the good costs to the point of facing, if the situation calls for it, the cross and martyrdom, in the conviction that when God asks, He asks for everything!

I refer you to the Cronistoria to savor the beauty and the profundity of that great missionary experience which brought the seed of the charism to the whole world (Cf. Volume II of the Cronistoria, pp. 276 - 291).

Every community, every Daughter of Mary Help of Christians has a missionary face. How many sisters I have met in my numerous trips who are to all effects missionaries there where the Lord calls them to witness to His love: missionaries fully active; missionaries in suffering and in offering; missionaries with apostolic daring.

I express my deep gratitude to all of you for the generosity with which you live the *da mihi animas cetera tolle* in the various realities that are often tiring, arid, and I ask the Lord to continue to arouse many vocations *ad gentes*. The needs in so many parts of the world are immense and there are numberless young people who still do not know Jesus and His message of salvation, and have few opportunities to have an adequate integral education.

While I thank the Provinces for the missionaries with which they have gifted the Institute, I think that there are others who are ready to leave with the same apostolic daring of the first sisters, involving the young so that they can be with them, missionaries of hope and of joy.

I know that there can be objections in this regard because there are many needs in the Provinces, there are numerous pastoral demands, always insufficient in respect to the needs and the strength available. Mother Mazzarello did not hesitate to send the sisters to distant lands, and yet even the

Institute needed them. The development of our religious Family began with a shared poverty, that later became the wealth multiplied in the whole world.

Pope Francis reminds us that “life is strengthened by giving it and is weakened by isolation and by comfort...it grows and matures in the measure in which we give it for the life of others” (EG n. 10).

Dear sisters, why not now? Are we perhaps lacking trust? Are we too involved in our urgencies, although real. Has our universal gaze cultivated at Mornese diminished?

I leave these questions to your reflection so that in our hearts, in our environments, the fire may be revived that makes us outgoing communities, open to the requests of the Church that frequently arrive asking for missionaries to go to proclaim the Gospel in the Salesian spirit, there where it is as yet unknown.

With the Young, missionaries of other Young People

Pope Francis, in his message for the World Day of the Missions 2017, affirmed with a prophetic spirit that the young are the hope of the mission. The person of Jesus and the Good News proclaimed by Him continue to attract many of them. They seek journeys where they can fulfill the courage and zeal of their heart at the service of humanity. It is beautiful to see that the young are wayfarers of faith, happy to bring Jesus along every road, in every town square, in every corner of the earth! In many parts of the world, they offer their help in solidarity, in the face of the world's evils, and undertake ever new forms of volunteering.

In this regard, I receive meaningful echoes of young people who go back to their countries of origin after a period of contact with different realities, lived at the service of other young people, in mission lands or in places of poverty in their own contexts. It deals with young people who belong to various Volunteer Associations, particularly VIDES, but also of boys and girls from multiple origins who often network to express solidarity in favor of the weakest sections of society: children and women; young people living various forms of poverty, among whom significant poverty. Some make an experience at the Office of Human Rights at Veyrier and discover how it is possible to be involved in supporting and defending Human Rights in the name of the Gospel and thus give a small contribution to the transformation of the world. I invite you to empower the volunteer experience, attending to preparation and accompaniment during and after the experience when they return to daily life.

As Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, we are questioned in a special way by educational poverty, asking ourselves to act in the area of prevention with proposals aimed at integral formation so as to prevent the young from receiving false or illusory promises. This journey is the privileged way to communicate the joy of the Gospel to the young. We can all ask ourselves the question: am I a person who reveals with my life the joy of being inhabited by Jesus and called to proclaim Him even at the risk of my life? In this sense, how do we form the young and let ourselves be formed by them? It is a need of my heart to thank all the people who with deep intuition and competence create networks of solidarity even as Salesian Family. And a special thank you to the many young people who allow themselves to be involved personally in building a new humanity.

In the month of August, at Turin and at Mornese, I had the joy of living the experience of SYM Confront 2017. There were about 250 young people of the Salesian Youth Movement coming from Europe and the Middle East. In the places of origin, they breathed fully the spirit of Don Bosco and of Mother Mazzarello and, in order to give continuity and concreteness to this event, they made themselves available to be missionaries among the young: “From this Confront – they said – we feel we have been sent as protagonists of the vision, of the passion, and of the mission of Don Bosco to live our project of life in today's world. We commit ourselves to reach other young people, especially those most in need. We are not afraid because God is always with us! Our journey begins right now!” These young people filled my heart with hope.

I rejoiced at the initiative of the Project of Missionary Spirituality (PEM) that was carried out on August 24-29, 2017 at Montevideo, Uruguay. For the first time it involved a significant group of young people

with the objective of relaunching the missionary fire of the origins, lighting in them the desire to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus with the witness of their life. This initiative began with the same lay people who, after having lived the experience of Project Mornese in which the missionary dimension is evident, asked me to extend to the young people the experience of the Project of Missionary Spirituality.

As Institute, we are preparing to celebrate the Bishops Synod planned for October 2018 on the theme: "The Young, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment". It is a new call to 'look at' the young with the same gaze as Jesus, to believe in their dreams, in their potential. It is a call to enter into the complexity of our actual culture where they live and seek together, through educational accompaniment, unheard of opportunities to make them missionaries of the Gospel among other young people. There is only one road to take in order to make this challenge real, which is that of GC XXIII: witness that we are in love with God, that the 'first love' vibrates in us, and that we desire to proclaim Him with our life, cultivating missionary passion in every area. God wants us capable of dreaming like Him and with Him, while we walk very attentive to reality, not listening to those who cynically extinguish at birth every enthusiasm and hope of life (Cf. Pope Francis, General Audience 30 August 2017).

Dear Sisters, as I write, I think that many of us have known people of hope who, perhaps unknown to them, have been simple and credible witnesses of a happy, fulfilled, and fruitful life. We have experienced the grace of meeting FMA or SDB missionaries who have literally enchanted us with their life stories, the freshness of their genuinely Salesian witness. I myself had the joy of having an uncle who was a Salesian missionary in Canada, and certainly, his example and his prayer were important in the story of my vocation. They were missionaries of much prayer, humility, charity, spirit of sacrifice, enthusiastic. Their simple narrations adhering to life, often constituted a provocation for those who listened to them and this listening matured the decision: "I want to be like this!".

Whatever mission is entrusted to us, we too can be mediations able to awaken authentic Salesian and missionary vocations. There is so much generosity among the young, so much solidarity for the poorest and most marginalized. If they are sufficiently motivated, and if we ourselves are convinced and happy in our vocation, they too will open themselves to higher ideals, and perhaps, will follow Jesus on the same road. In our mission, I invite you to present to the young and the laity, the missionary reality of the Institute because there exists a great possibility for this dimension that is part of our family life. It seems to be the best way to prepare ourselves for the celebration of November 14, 2017.

Dear sisters, receive these reflections as an invitation to listen today to the voice of the Lord who calls us to go *ad gentes* with the trust that He opens for us beautiful universal horizons, rich in good. Mary, the first Missionary, is with us and accompanies us on the new roads traced out by God.

God bless you.

24 September 2017

Aff.ma Madre