

1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

WE ARE FAMILY!

Every home, a school of Life and Love

STRENNA 2017

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PRESENTATION

On 1st January 2006, my predecessor Fr Pascual Chávez Villanueva, the Rector Major at that time introduced the yearly Strenna with a letter entitled: “And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years and in favour with God and man” (Lk 2,52).¹ It was an invitation by the Rector Major to renew our commitment to the family, taking up the challenge issued by John Paul II to defend life through the family and also on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the death of Mamma Margaret, mamma of Don Bosco and a true mamma to the boys of the Oratory of Valdocco.

Ten years later I offer the whole Salesian Family around the world this new Strenna, which is meant to focus our attention on families in the most diverse situations in which we find ourselves. The subject has been suggested, and it could not be otherwise, by the priority that the Church wants to give to the need for ever greater and more appropriate pastoral care for families.

Pope Francis decided to devote two Synods to reflection on the « Family », following on from some of the pastoral ideas that he had proposed in the Apostolic Exhortation « *Evangelii Gaudium* » in 2013. There was the Extraordinary Synod in 2014 and the Ordinary one in 2015. After these Synods came the Apostolic Exhortation « *Amoris Laetitia* », signed by the Pope on 19 March this year 2016.

I think that this stage in the life of the Church that we are now living through demands that we the Salesian Family of Don Bosco give priority to the educative pastoral care that we need to devote to families around the Salesian world.

As is the case every year, the Strenna is addressed to each and every one of the members and of the groups of the Salesian Family, with the aim of making us more aware of our task and of our duty towards families, so that we may find practical ways of carrying out that service of accompaniment that is expected of us.

¹ PASCUAL CHÁVEZ VILLANUEVA, Letter of the Rector Major: “And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years and in favour with God and man” (Lk 2,52), AGC 392, 3-46

1. THE TOPIC OF THE STRENNA

When we say: «**We are Family! Every home a school of Life and Love**», we want to declare from the start that all of us, each one of us has had the experience of being born into a family, with the good things and the limitations of every single family. We are born into the bosom of a family and are essentially part of a family, where, ideally we find a school of life and of love. We are convinced that the family is the human experience in which we learn the art of life and of love.

The family, all families throughout the world – while being different – are made up of individuals who love, speak to and communicate with each other, who share and make sacrifices for each other; people who look out for each other and protect each other's lives.

We grew up as people living normally in a family enjoying the warmth of our home in which from our parents or from one of them we received our name and the dignity this brings. In the family we experienced affection for the first time and enjoyed the sense of «feeling at home». In the family we learned to say thank you, to ask for forgiveness and to ask for permission.

We are well aware that not all babies who are born have the good fortune of experiencing this, but while taking account of the diversity of contexts and cultures, I think it can be said that most of us have experienced this kind of family life.

Someone might say: What does this have to do with us as the Salesian Family? It is relevant because we ourselves, as the Salesian Family of Don Bosco, are the first to whom this message is addressed, since we are well aware of the links that bind us together as a religious family. It is a family within which, while taking into account the diversity of our 31 groups (Congregations, Institutes of Consecrated Life, Societies of Apostolic life, Associations of the Faithful, etc.), the respective Constitutions, Regulations or Statutes present the *family spirit* and the family atmosphere as the constitutive element of our being, of our identity, and they make explicit reference to pastoral activity in the family and with families.

This helps us realise our responsibility as the Salesian Family, a responsibility that in practical terms means that we cannot turn our gaze in a different direction to that which the Universal Church under the guidance of Pope Francis is strongly committed. It is a responsibility that demands that we as educators of boys and girls, teenagers and young people look through «Salesian eyes» at the real situation of families nowadays and in all humility offer our contribution.

2. AN INVITATION TO A CALM AND QUIET READING OF THE EXHORTATION *AMORIS LAETITIA*, WITH A HEART OPEN TO DIALOGUE AND TO AN ENCOUNTER.

I now invite everyone of you to read carefully and calmly with a heart open to dialogue and personal involvement to what the Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (AL) is saying to us, in order to discover what the document is offering us and requesting from us. Anyone who is a believer and loves the Church will realise that this Apostolic Exhortation is indeed a service to the human race and a true spiritual and pastoral treasure. It is from our awareness of being the «Salesian Family» that we want to become involved.

The Exhortation of Pope Francis is based on the Magisterium of the recent Popes, Saint John Paul II and Benedict XVI, and on the two Synods of 2014 and 2015, the final reports of which are quoted in abundance. It therefore sums up the Church's reflection over many years, but at the same time it introduces a change of tone, of language and of perspective which moves from the canonical level to a more pastoral one. The Supreme Pontiff himself declares: «We also need to be humble and realistic, acknowledging that at times... we have proposed a far too abstract and almost artificial theological ideal of marriage, far removed from the concrete situations and practical possibilities of real families.

This excessive idealization, especially when we have failed to inspire trust in God's grace, has not helped to make marriage more desirable and attractive, but quite the opposite».²

INTRODUCTION (AL nn. 1-7)

The Exhortation speaks about the joy of Love as it is lived in the family and of the rejoicing of the Church in this regard. As we have said, it brings together the contributions of **two Synods**³ and points out that the family has very many complex and varied features in which religious, political, cultural, economic and legal aspects all come together. In such a varied and diverse situation, we are all called to safeguard family life with love. Rather than a problem families are an opportunity. In fact we can say that in spite of the crises with which the family nowadays is faced the new generations still see it as the safest place for them in which they can find unconditional acceptance.

CHAPTER I. THE FAMILY IN THE LIGHT OF THE WORD OF GOD (AL nn. 8-30)

The family appears frequently in the Scriptures, from the opening pages until the book of Revelation; they speak about generations, about love stories, of family crises, of violence in the family. «The idyllic picture presented in Psalm 128⁴ is not at odds with a bitter truth found throughout sacred Scripture, that is the presence of pain, evil and violence that break up families and their communion of life and love »⁵.

At the centre of this Psalm 128 is a couple, a man and a woman and their love story. «So God created man in his own image ; in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them» (Gen 1,27). This couple who love and generate life is an image of God the Creator and Saviour. This fruitful love is a sign of the intimate reality of God, because God in the depth of his mystery is not solitude but family.

The experience of suffering and bloodshed in the family.

Suffering, evil and violence are a reality present in the family from its very beginning, as sacred Scripture describes it. In the first family there is Cain's murder of his brother Abel; there are great disputes in the families of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Tobias and Job ... In his sickness Job bitterly complains about his family in these words:

*«He has put my brothers far from me,
My kinsfolk and my close friends have failed me...
The guests **in my house** have forgotten me ...
I am repulsive to my wife , loathsome to the sons of my own mother.
Those I loved best have turned against me ...» (Job 19,13-19)⁶.*

The Gospels too report many family tragedies and sad situations at which Jesus was present: the illness of Peter's mother-in-law, the death of Lazarus, the death of the daughter of Jairus, the widow of Naim's tragic loss, the lack of wine at the marriage feast in Cana of Galilee ... This makes us

² *Amoris Laetitia*, 36

³ The first Synod on the family: between 5 and 19 October 2014 (in the Vatican), with the Theme: "The pastoral challenges of the family in the context of evangelization"; the second Synod, between 4 and 25 October 2015 (in the Vatican), with the Theme: "The vocation and the mission of the family in the Church and contemporary world." Taking part in these Synods were bishops, priests, religious men and women and married people.

⁴ We read in psalm 128: "Blessed are those who fear the Lord and walk in his ways. By the labour of your hands you shall eat. You will be happy and prosper; your wife like a fruitful vine in the heart of your house; your children like the shoots of the olive, around your table. Indeed thus shall be blessed the man who fears the Lord. May the Lord bless you from Sion all the days of your life. May you see your children's children in a happy Jerusalem! On Israel peace!" (Psalm 128/127,1-6).

⁵ *Amoris Laetitia*, 19

⁶ Bold type has been used to highlight references to family relationships.

understand that the family as presented in the Bible is not an abstract reality: there are crises, sufferings, tribulations, weakness, sorrow, cries of anguish ... The same thing can be said about the lights and shadows that illuminate or obscure family situations, or work which is the means of sustenance and something that can be a source of happiness or sorrow and anxiety.

CHAPTER II THE EXPERIENCES AND THE CHALLENGES OF FAMILIES (AL nn. 31-57)

In this chapter Pope Francis offers a vast panorama of the problems and the challenges that affect families nowadays, without presuming to present an exhaustive analysis of a complex social institution that the family has become at the present time.

In a context marked by profound changes, cultural, structural and in life styles which deeply affect the family, the Pope identifies the following situations:

- *Individualism, internal tensions, stress, a reduction in the number of marriages, civil unions;*
- *Loneliness, self-centredness, sexuality commercialized, the commercialization of the body, separation, divorce, fall in the birthrate, a mentality against having children;*
- *New models of families, the development of biotechnologies, the sexual revolution, sterilization (female and male), abortion, the weakening of religious practice;*
- *Poverty, the lack of decent or affordable housing, the absence of an adequate policy for the family, insecurity at work;*
- *Domestic violence, terrorism, drug abuse, economic insecurity, the breakdown of family relationships, resentment and hatred, dysfunctional families, the weakening of family ties;*
- *Polygamy, genital mutilation, verbal, physical and sexual violence, sexual abuse, discrimination, feminism, male chauvinism, the lack of the affective education of children, the ideology of 'gender' ...*

In the face of these difficult situations, it is however necessary to reaffirm that the welfare of the family is fundamental to the well-being of the world and of the Church. For this reason the family ought to be the focus of attention in the Church's mission while at the same time it should be recognised that practice of the mission has not always been what was required. «We have often been on the defensive, wasting pastoral energy on denouncing a decadent world without being proactive in proposing ways of finding true happiness »⁷.

CHAPTER III LOOKING TO JESUS: THE VOCATION OF THE FAMILY (AL nn. 58-88)

Jesus gazed at the women and the men of his time; he went to meet them with love and tenderness, accompanying their steps with truth, patience and mercy while he proclaimed the demands of the Kingdom of God, and he accompanies us too today in our commitment to live and to hand on the Gospel.

In and among the families of today the Gospel message should always resound, that which is «most beautiful, most excellent, most appealing and at the same time most necessary ... because nothing is more solid, profound, secure, meaningful and wise than that message ».⁸

Our teaching on marriage and the family, the Pope affirms, must necessarily be inspired and transformed in the light of the first message, the message of tenderness and love that comes from the Gospel; it is not simply the defence of a dry and lifeless doctrine.

⁷ *O.c.* 38

⁸ *Ibid.* 58

In the Gospel Jesus takes up and brings to fulfilment the Father's plan for marriage: he restores marriage as a gift and proposes its indissolubility, restoring the original plan of God for the family and for marriage (Mt 19, 3-8).

Christian marriage is seen by the Church as an expression of the covenant of the Son of God with human nature. But it should not be forgotten that, faced with the difficult situations in which wounded families find themselves, it is always necessary to bear in mind the criterion of discernment. The degree of responsibility is not the same in all cases; judgements should be avoided that do not take into account the complexity of the various situations, and it is necessary to be attentive to the way in which people are living and suffering because of their circumstances.

A fundamental point in this chapter is that of the **family as the transmitter of life**. Marriage is considered as a community of life in which conjugal love between a man and a woman is ordered also to fruitfulness. The spouses to whom God not grants the gift of having children can have a life full of meaning from a human and a Christian point of view as they strive not to close in on themselves, For this reason the family is the sanctuary of life, the human place where life at its various stages is generated, cared for and protected.

This essential dimension is accompanied by the challenge of the education of children. **Parents are responsible for the all-round development and education of their children**; this is a very important duty and a primary right of parents. States and the governments of nations have the obligation to provide an educational service by way of assistance, but according to their own convictions parents have the right to freely choose the type of accessible and good quality education that they want for their children. The school cannot take the place of parents but rather complements them.

Unfortunately nowadays a wide gap has opened up between the family and society. There is a crisis in the partnership between society and the family, and in such a situation the Church is concerned more than ever to collaborate through its specialized pastoral activity in helping parents in their mission of education.

In a special way the **Christian family** as the domestic Church, living according to the teachings of the Gospel, is called upon to help to bring to maturity the ecclesial experience of communion among people: communion, forgiveness, tenderness, fraternal love, prayer ...

CHAPTER IV LOVE IN MARRIAGE (AL nn. 89-164)

In this chapter the Pope presents a theological vision of love in marriage and in the family commenting on several expressions in the hymn of love from the first letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians, highlighting some essential attitudes:

«Love is patient, love is kind: love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way, it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. » (1 Cor 13,4-7).

Patience is not simply a matter of putting up with everything; it does not mean letting others ill-treat us, or accepting physical aggression or allowing others to treat us as objects. Patience is a characteristic of the God of the Covenant. He shows his patience through Mercy. Therefore for us patience ought to be an experience of *compassion* and of self-control in not reacting with anger in the face of the weaknesses of others, and so not allowing ourselves to be overcome by evil, or to be discouraged in doing what is right.

The Pope also speaks about an **attitude of service** as a dynamic and creative approach in the face of other peoples' needs, as that kindly love that seeks what is best for others; a generous love that does good things because love is not only a question of feelings but the ability to do what is good..

It is being **happy about what is best for others** because where there is love there cannot be displeasure with regard to the well-being of others. True love appreciates the success of others not seeing it as a personal threat; it sincerely values every human person recognising their right to happiness. Envy on the other hand means being sad about another person's good fortune, which shows that their happiness is of no concern to us.

In this list of Gospel attitudes in life there is also reference to **pride**, which certainly is not compatible with love, because pride is a desire for glory by someone who considers themselves superior to others. Love, on the other hand does not exaggerate its own importance before others; on the contrary it is attentive, positive, understanding, takes care, protects and helps the weak; arrogant people the Pope goes so far as to say are unbearable.

So that there can be a real encounter with the other person a **kind look** is necessary; looking at the other with a kindly eye. Loving kindness builds bonds, makes new links, creates new networks of integration, knits together a firm social fabric. Someone who loves is able to say words of encouragement, build up trust and strength, console and energize.

Jesus was like that. He loved people...He said: "Take heart my son, your sins are forgiven" (Mt 9,2); "Great is your faith!" (Mt 15, 28); "Arise!" (Mk 5,41); "Go in peace" (Lk 7,50); "Be not afraid" (Mt 14,27). His were words that infused courage and hope. In our families we can learn much from the words and especially from the friendly attitude of Jesus.

Detachment is another component of love. To love others we must first love ourselves but not with a love that seeks its own interests. "Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Phil 2,4).

Being ready to forgive means not taking account of evil; it is a question of adopting a positive attitude, trying to understand other people's weaknesses and finding excuses for them, as Jesus did: "Father forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Lk 23, 34). To be able to forgive we need to have an experience that is liberating; we need to feel the embrace of the unconditional love of God...who loves without limit.

Love rejoices with others, rejoices in the truth, is pleased at the good of others, recognising their dignity, their good works. Love gives of itself, is able to take a risk ... because "God loves a cheerful giver" ("2 Cor 9,7) and "it is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20, 35).

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ...; this brings out very strongly how counter-cultural love is in being able to face up to everything. Love does not damage the reputation of others and does not unload its feelings of resentment. Love also welcomes someone who causes them inconvenience, knowing how to live with imperfection, excuses and remains silent in the face of the limitations of the one loved.

Spouses, the Pope writes, need to learn to speak well of each other, highlighting the good points of their partner and not making so much of the weaknesses. This means watching what they say because sometimes the tongue "is full of deadly poison" (James 3,8).

Love is motivated by trust. There is no need to keep a check on the other person, to follow every step they take to prevent them escaping from us. Love leaves others free, has no wish to keep a check on everything, to possess, to control the other. Love leaves room for autonomy, for openness, for freedom since where there is no love there is no freedom.

Love hopes all things. It is important to believe that the other person can change and become better; to believe that a growth in maturity is possible and that hidden potential can bear fruit.

Love, sanctified by the sacrament of matrimony or “conjugal love”, is dynamic and continues to grow under the inspiration of Grace (since it is God who sanctifies); and if this love does not grow it can be dangerous. It is said that growth in Conjugal Love is possible through divine Grace, but it also grows with the help of human effort, of inner silence, of a listening heart, of detachment, of dialogue, of prayer, of the education of the emotions (overcoming a lack of self-control and obsessiveness), of the attitude of someone who knows how to give importance to the other person and not under-rate the requests and the wishes of the other.

Towards the end of the chapter the Pope refers to **celibacy and virginity for the sake of the Kingdom**. Love – the Pope says – shows itself in different ways and in different styles of life in accordance with the different vocations. Celibacy and virginity for the sake of the Kingdom are forms of love, they are a gift of God (1 Cor 7,7). There is neither superiority nor inferiority among the different vocations. Matrimony and celibacy are two complementary vocations.

CHAPTER V LOVE MADE FRUITFUL (AL n. 165-198)

Love is always open to welcome new life; love always gives life, and the family is the place where life is generated, where life is welcomed and grows. Every new life comes as a gift from God as a sign of his selfless love.

The Pope states that every woman shares in “the mystery of creation, which is renewed with each birth;”⁹ for this reason motherhood is a collaboration with God in the miracle of every new life.

As we read in sacred Scripture:

«You knit me together in my mother’s womb» (Psalm 139,13).

«Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you » (Jer 1,5).

The Pope with the heart of a real Father and Shepherd writes: «With great affection I urge all future mothers: keep happy and let nothing rob you of the interior joy of motherhood. Your child deserves your happiness. Don’t let fears, worries, other people’s comments or problems lessen your joy at being God’s means of bringing a new life to the world »¹⁰.

Every child has the right to receive **the love of a mother and of a father**, each of them necessary for its harmonious and complete growth to maturity. Respecting the dignity of a child means affirming its need and its natural right to have a mother and a father, collaborators with the love of God. Father and mother together teach the value of complementarity, the coming together of different people where each one brings their own identity, paternity and maternity, masculine and feminine, for the harmonious development of the child.

We are aware – the Pope says – that nowadays many children and young people suffer from the absence of their parents; there is a lack of a maternal presence and a crisis of paternity. And particularly in the face of these difficult situations such as the crisis of paternity he says: «Mothers are the strongest antidote to the spread of self-centred individualism... It is they who testify to the beauty of life»¹¹. Certainly, a society without mothers would be dehumanized, for mothers are always, even in the worst of times, witnesses to tenderness, dedication, moral strength.

Finally there is the idea of the **enlarged family**. Motherhood is not a solely biological reality, but is expressed in diverse ways, for example in adoption. Adopting is an act of love; through adoption the fruitfulness of love is extended and enlarged.

CHAPTER VI SOME PASTORAL PERSPECTIVES (AL nn.199-258)

⁹ JOHN PAUL II, *Catechesis* (12 March 1980), 3: *Teachings III*, 1 (1980), 543, quoted in *Amoris Laetitia*, 168.

¹⁰ *Amoris Laetitia*, 171.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 174.

It is not a question here of presenting a set of rules but of being attentive to the deepest yearnings of human beings and of proposing values. What is needed is an evangelization that denounces the cultural, social, political and economic conditioning factors of the present time. A pastoral ministry is needed that opens up a dialogue and collaboration with social structures, that encourages and supports lay people in the cultural and socio-political fields.

The contribution of the Church to the family requires an appropriate family ministry and better training for priests, male and female religious and lay workers.

In this pastoral ministry it is necessary to help young people to discover the **value and the richness of marriage** through the process of **preparation** for engaged couples which helps them in their genuine growth in love for each other. They need to be accompanied in the process of preparation so as to be able to enter into marriage as a vocation, as a process of growing to maturity in love.

It is also essential to ensure a good preparation of the celebration of the marriage and **accompaniment in the first years of married life**. In the same way, **becoming fathers and mothers**, which need to be decisions taken responsibly, presupposes the formation of the consciences of the spouses.

CHAPTER VII STRENGTHENING THE EDUCATION OF CHILDREN (AL nn.259-290)

Parents always have an influence for good or ill on the moral development of their children. This educational mission of the family is important and complex. The family cannot withdraw from being the **best place for the support, accompaniment and guidance of children**. Giving this up is never a solution. On the contrary, educating means creating processes leading to the mature living of freedom; educating is the fostering of all-round development and the cultivating of real and genuine autonomy.

The education of children includes the task of fostering responsible freedom so that they may be able to cope with critical moments in life wisely, safely and intelligently.

It is also the task of parents to promote **the ethical formation of their children**, a formation that cannot be delegated or entrusted to others. It always needs to be undertaken in a positive manner, speaking in a way that recognises the sensitivities of children and is intended to show them what is best for them in particular situations. Education encourages the formation of good habits and develops the responsible freedom that ensures a mature autonomy.

One educational dimension not to be neglected is **sex education**, which ought to be given when appropriate. This is an education that includes respect for and appreciation of the differences, that help young people to accept their own body in its individuality.

In the way of being female or male not only biological or genetic factors come into play, since sexual difference involves many elements ... Sexual difference (being male or female) is the work of God.

Finally we should not forget that **responsibility for the handing on of the faith** to their children it is also that of the parents. The family still ought to be the place in which the depth and the beauty of the faith are taught and appreciated. This presupposes that the parents really have trust in God, whom they seek and have need of, and that they recognise that children are sensitive to symbols, gestures and stories. It is essential that children can see the faith experience and prayer in their parents in practical ways.

CHAPTER VIII ACCOMPANYING, DISCERNING AND INTEGRATING WEAKNESS (AL nn. 291-312)

The Church needs to accompany families giving them confidence and hope. There are however, wounded families; and so the work of the Church is often like that of a “field hospital”. In our pastoral activity it is necessary to make use of the law of gradual progression since nowadays the absence of a real understanding of marriage and of the value of commitment is very widespread ... It follows that in order to promote Christian marriage what is needed is a pastoral approach of mercy, encouragement, dialogue and discernment...

Pope Francis points out that many young people and adults, under the influence of a now widespread mentality, prefer simply living together. It is a sad situation that needs to be faced up to in a constructive way by being aware of it, and by offering patient and sensitive guidance as Jesus used with the Samaritan woman.

At this point in the Apostolic Exhortation the Pope deals with the important and sensitive issue of the **discernment of the circumstances**, that requires careful examination and deep reflection.

During the Synod, the Synod Fathers looked into various situations of weakness and of imperfection, experienced by a large number of families. The approach of the Church must not be that of condemning people. It is essential to consider the complexity of the situations. No one can be condemned ... We are called to exercise the divine pedagogy, avoiding any occasion of scandal.

In ordinary circumstances it is for the priests and pastoral workers to accompany and to promote discernment, seeking to understand the degree of responsibility, which is not the same for everyone. R The thinking behind the mission ought to be that of pastoral mercy. It is necessary to accompany the various stages of growth of individuals with mercy and patience.

CHAPER IX THE SPIRITUALITY OF MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY (AL nn. 313-325)

Love takes on different forms according to the state of life to which each one has been called. The spirituality of Marriage is a spirituality of the bond, nourished by divine love and by communion in the family, which is lived as a path of holiness in ordinary life: «If we love one another, God abides in us » (1 Jn 4,12).

When the family succeeds in centring itself in Christ, **He unifies and illuminates the whole of family life** with its problems and sufferings. In this way any split is avoided and family prayer is the best way of expressing and consolidating Paschal faith.

The Spirituality of exclusive love. In marriage the spouses live with that sense of belonging completely to one other person taking up the challenge and the yearning of growing old together; for this reason everyday they renew before God the decision to be faithful whatever the passing of the days may bring. In this partnership each spouse is for the other a sign and an instrument of the closeness of the Lord: “I am with you always to the close of the age” (Mt 28,20).

The Spirituality of availability and of consolation. Christian spouses are cooperators in grace and in the witness of faith for each other. God invites them to create and to care for the whole life of the family, where the person loved deserves their total attention. Jesus is the model for us because whenever someone approached him to speak with him he gazed on them and looked at them with love (cf Mk 10,21); he awakened in the other person the joy of feeling themselves loved.

We are well aware that no family is perfect, but needs to develop its ability to love gradually. Every family needs positive encouragement.

Families, let us move on. Let us continue to move on. What is proposed to us urges us to go further. Let us not be discouraged as we look at our limitations, but neither let us give up from seeking that fulness of love and of communion that we have been promised.

3. EVERY HOME A SCHOOL OF LIFE AND OF LOVE. OUR EDUCATIVE-PASTORAL CONTRIBUTION

3.1 *The family the choice of the incarnate God.*¹²

«God chose a mother in order to become man and a family in order to grow and mature as such. It is a truth of faith that a Christian cannot ignore when he wants to reflect on the family». This is how the article I want to refer to begins. In fact belief in the incarnation of God is a distinctive element of the Christian faith as the Catechism of the Catholic Church affirms. Certainly if the reason for our salvation was the love that God has for us then the incarnation was the way of bringing it about. But in this fact there is something else that really draws our attention. The decision of God to assume in the Son the human condition leads to two very significant facts: that of being born of a woman, *becoming the son of the Virgin Mary*, and that of *being born into a family*, that is to say the fact of having sought a family in which to be born and to grow as a human being.

One thing we know very well and which deeply moves us is the fact that God became son and he himself told his parents about his birth and convinced them to give their consent – to say yes.

Mary is full of grace before being mother; the son has already been thought about by God before being wished for by the mother. Mary does not ask for a sign in order to believe. God proposes a plan to her of which she does not feel capable. The virgin will conceive a son, who is not the fruit of a previous married life. (Lk 1,35).

As far as Joseph is concerned, and different from what happened to Mary, God reveals his plan not in a conversation (Lk 1,28), but in a dream (Mt 1,18,24). Joseph ‘dreams’ what God wants of him after the shock he experiences at the forced entry of God into his marriage: that which is conceived in Mary is the work of the Spirit (Mt 1,18,20). And God, who “has usurped” his paternity without him knowing about it and without his consent now asks him to accept the *fait accompli*.

Both Mary and Joseph, although in different ways since their responsibilities and roles within the family were different, had to *pay a price for being the family of God* both during the infancy and the boyhood of Jesus and also during his public ministry following a path that was not without its many difficulties. This experience makes the family of Nazareth and the families of yesterday, of today and of all times closer together.

The salvific will of God, that is the fact that God wanted to save us, “obliged” him to make himself like us. Once he was made man he wanted to learn how to be like us, learning to grow up as a man within the bosom of a family, “the cradle of life and of love in which a person is born and grows”¹³.

We can say with certainty that it was a family that “humanized the Son of God” and this undeniable fact gives to the family an exceptional sacred value.

3.2 *Don Bosco, in a family but without a father.*

«I was not yet two years old when the merciful Lord hit us with a sad bereavement. My dearly loved Father, strong and healthy still young and actively interested in promoting a good Christian upbringing for his offspring, one day came home from work covered in sweat and imprudently went down into a cold cellar. That night he developed a high temperature the first sign of a serious illness.

¹² This is the title of a piece of work by Prof. Juan José Bartolomé, a talk prepared for the Salesian Family Days on the Family in January 2006. It was not published. The content of what I am writing here is largely inspired by that work.

¹³ *Christifideles Laici*, 40

Every effort to cure him proved vain. Within a few days he was at death's door, Stenghtened by all the comforts of religion , he recommended to my mother confidence in God, then died aged only 34 on 12 May 1817. ¹⁴. I do not know how I reacted on that sad occasion. One thing only do I remember and it is my earliest memory. We were all going out of the room where he had died and I insisted on staying behind. My grieving Mother addressed me— ‘Come John, come with me.’ — ‘If papa is not coming I don't want to come’, I answered. —‘My poor son’ my mother replied. ‘ Come with me, you no longer have a father.’¹⁵.

In this way Don Bosco himself 56 years later described that moment in his life. Don Bosco was very sparing when he spoke about himself, particularly in expressing his feelings, but with these few lines he displayed his tears, his inability as a little child to understand what was happening, realising that his father was not moving and did not reply to him, and the weeping of his mother now a widow, who on that day saw her life change completely.

Whether the memory of that moment remained so vivid in Don Bosco or whether, that being hardly credible as one writer believes¹⁶, according to whom it is more likely that it is a memory of what the grownups had told him while he was still a child, in any case Don Bosco tells us about the new circumstances his family found themselves in, which now were no longer what many other “normal” families were in, and they had to learn to grow up and develop without the person of the father and with the person of a mother who certainly had shown exceptional gifts. We can come to understand this from everything that Don Bosco describes in a very under-stated manner. The great human and Christian qualities of that peasant woman, a widow and a mother with a family of five to care for can be seen. A woman who rejects a proposal for a second marriage that would have been very helpful for her. Her three sons would have been entrusted to a good guardian who would have taken great care of them. But the generous woman replied: «The guardian could only be their friend, but I am a mother to these sons of mine. All the gold in the world could never make me abandon them. »¹⁷ Don Bosco tells how his mother's greatest care was given «to instructing her sons in their religion, making them value obedience, and keeping them busy with tasks suited to their age.

From this we can see that the family of little John suffering from being an orphan could enjoy the deep love of a mother who consecrated her whole life to her sons, a mother who was for them the first and most important religious teacher; a woman taught them to be responsible, to work hard and be diligent, and to show loving care for those poorer than themselves. A mother who in the midst of so many difficulties and straightened circumstances did everything possible so that her son might follow his vocation and the call to the priesthood.

Having considered Don Bosco's experience, it seems to me a good idea to refer to another great woman and saint in the Salesian Family, Mary Domenica Mazzarello, who in her turn was “marked” by her family situation, even though it is a matter of a family from several points of view different from that of Don Bosco. The state of poverty was similar, common to simple peasants, but the childhood and the family of Mary Domenica Mazzarello were very different. Mary Domenica did not grow up without a father and she was the first of a numerous group of siblings. She did not have to leave the place of her birth, Mornese, during her childhood and youth. She certainly shared the same atmosphere of piety. In fact it was a different family model that profoundly marked the personality of Mary Mazzarello.

¹⁴ Critical studies state that he died in fact on 11 March 1817.

¹⁵ Istituto Storico Salesiano, *Fonti Salesiane. Don Bosco e la sua opera*, LAS-Roma, 2014, 1173-1174./ Don Bosco Publications New Rochelle “Memoirs of the Oratory” pp 7-8

¹⁶ “Don Bosco used to say his earliest memory was the death of his father; this is hardly credible since it happened when little John was only two years old. It is probable that he remembered what the adults in the family circle told him about it later”. In Giacomo Dacquino, *Psicologia di Don Bosco*, SEI, Torino, 1988, 19.

¹⁷ Istituto Storico Salesiano, *o.c.* 1175. Don Bosco Publications New Rochelle Memoirs of the Oratory p 9

3.3 *Close by helping to build up and restore.*

So far I have referred to the family of Jesus of Nazareth (the Lord), to the family of Don Bosco and that of Mother Mazzarello, in order to highlight the importance and the transcendence of the family in their lives. I am sure that in reading these pages many of us will recall one way or another our own personal experience of living in a family.

-- A situation always more complex

It is a fact that the family, no matter how contradictory and controversial nowadays it is seen to be, continues to be the *structure of origin of human culture*¹⁸. It goes back to the beginnings of the human race and is found in all the known cultures, even if in a great variety of forms and models. In general, also today the majority of babies and children grow up in a family and it is there that they are marked in a way that will affect their whole lives. However, one cannot ignore and still less deny the fact that the family, as the structure of origin to which reference has already been made, is going through a profound transformation and a crisis. The causes of these changes and of this crisis are complex and very diverse.

We have seen the long list of situations and challenges that Pope Francis mentions between numbers 31 and 57 in the Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris laetitia*. Other authors refer to others, even though all have much in common¹⁹: situations of poverty unworthy of human beings that make a normal family life impossible; migrations that break up and divide so many families; the long absences of parents because of work commitments. Often it is the economic conditions that make it difficult for them to live together as a family. Very often it is the economic factors that determine family values, the family's plans, a precondition to fatherhood and motherhood being financial well-being; social structures which have a great impact and the influence of which affect everyone in one way or another.

To all of these can be added the anthropological crisis of models of liberation, that cannot be ignored. Facts such as : the promotion of a culture at odds with the family, that leads to a diminution in its social value/estimation and to the "normalization" and at times to the championing of marital infidelity; the rejection of motherhood and fatherhood in the name of personal freedom; the acceptance of the idea of a child as being in competition with or even as an obstacle to greater economic well-being. It is a climate ever more widespread and propagated suggesting the social irrelevance of the family.

Finally one could mention the complex geography of so-called types of family: new family units, restructured families²⁰ as an emerging phenomenon due to the increase of "natural" children, an increase in the number of divorces, changing partners for cohabitation ...; all phenomena that give rise to not only many different kinds of families (one-parent, reorganised, homo-parents), but also various kinds of cohabitation according to different criteria: marriage, free unions, civil contract unions (PACS), etc. To have a more precise idea of the complexity of this situation, as it exists in some parts of the world, it should be said that a reorganised family is one that is made up of one of two parents, the child or children of the first union and the partner of this parent. This is only one possible

¹⁸ Walter Kasper, *El futuro de la familia desde la perspectiva cristiana*, in George Augustin (ed). *El matrimonio y la familia*. Sal Terrae, Cantabria, 2014, 146.

¹⁹ Cf. Walter Kasper, o.c. 146-147.

Cf. Reinhard Marx, *No te desprecupes de tus parientes*, in Georges Augustin, o.c. 164-174.

Cf. Christoph Schönborn, *Cinco recordatorios...* in Georges Augustin, o.c. 216-218.

Cf. Pascual Chávez, "And Jesus increased in wisdom, age and favour with God" (Lk 2,52) AGC n° 392, Rome, 2006, 8-13.

Cf. David Le Breton-Daniel Marcelli (de), *Dizionario dell'adolescenza e della giovinezza*, LAS, Roma, 289-292

²⁰ Cf. David Le Breton-Daniel Marcelli, o.c. 290-291

exemple because there can be a variety of similar models. The sociologist Irène Théry was able to identify (already in 1993) 25 different kinds of reorganised families²¹.

All of this leads us to think that the institution of the family is something that is becoming ever more complex, without forgetting that the cultural differences in the five continents add many other elements to the complexity we are talking about.

Faced with this situation, we ask ourselves whether, starting from our position as educators, pastors and evangelisers there is anything we can do for families.

-- **Empathy as the first human response.**

Precisely in these contexts what is expected from us is the *ability to empathise* in the face of pain and weakness. It is an empathy that is very much connected to something that is characteristically our own: *the family spirit*.

By *empathy* we mean that thoughtful ability, that makes people able to understand the inner world of others. It makes it possible to be aware of their feelings, to understand their actions better, and the way they respond to particular situations. *Empathy* makes it possible in a certain sense to put oneself in another person's shoes. It helps the educators and the evangelizers of boys and girls and young people to understand the often complicated world of their families and become bridges and mediators in sensitive and important situations.

In these difficult circumstances what is expected from us is *empathy* in the face of broken or *patchwork* families, or families that are deeply wounded in which selfish personal interests caused a breakdown. There are families in which it is the children above all who suffer deeply, or in which they become "hostages against the other spouse", as Pope Francis puts it²².

Empathy is needed from us in those life situations in which we have to help to build up relationships, to treat or heal the wounds; situations in which we can help to overcome fears, remembering as in the text from the bible, "not to quench the smouldering wick"²³.

Empathy when families, as will have happened also in our own, have to learn to be families by their mistakes. This needs humility and understanding, forgiveness and mercy, since in the family all have the right to forgiveness and all have the ability to forgive in order to build and to rebuild the family.

Empathy when we are called to accept our limitations and those of others. This gives every member of the family an opportunity to become enriched by the love that is being offered and to make others rich with their own gift, aware that gratuitousness is the starting point for building the family.

Empathy, finally in helping to build and to re-build lived situations.

-- **Attitude proper to our family spirit.**

In the different situations in which it plays a part the Salesian Family around the world finds itself in a great variety of complex circumstances. Our boys and girls, together with their families, have the right to experience our ability to understand, to empathise, to appreciate their feelings, since having a deep and attractive *family spirit* is – and needs to continue to be – a special characteristic of ours.

This family spirit was fundamental and a guiding principle for Don Bosco and it inspired him while he was beginning his work, dreaming about it, planning and sustaining it,²⁴ so that love might

²¹ Cf. *Ibid.* 291.

²² Cf. AL 245

²³ Mt 12,20; Is 42,3

always reign in it in an atmosphere of openness and familiarity. A feature of this family spirit should also be “the qualities of genuine brotherhood, affection, open-hearted friendliness, accompanied by a simple, cordial and welcoming human approach»²⁵

Our young people and their families need to be able to have the experience that the Salesian houses in our Family throughout the world are *places where life is cared for, their lives*; places where one can expect that the doors are always open and that awaiting them there is a civilised atmosphere of welcome (full of human feeling) on the most important and often most difficult occasions in life. They ought to feel, as Don Bosco would have ensured, that they are always well received and never judged or condemned. And this by the fact that even when it has to be said that something is not possible or cannot be allowed, the point is made with the greatest respect for the dignity of the individuals, and with a sense of fairness and justice. In this way we shall not fall short in what should be our distinguishing features as the Salesian Family in the world.

3.4 In the school of Life and Love that is the family.

This is one of the fundamental keys of the Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* and is something of the utmost importance for the contribution that we as the Salesian Family ought to be offering in response to the call that the Church is making on behalf of families: awareness of the great mission that families have, from their different standpoints, as *schools of Life and of Love*.

With other people, groups and institutions we shall be at the side of families, we shall walk together with them, but we can never substitute what is irreplaceable in families, that is their essential vocation to be “communities of love and of life”²⁶

◆ A first contribution to be offered to families will be that of helping them to become aware that they really are the “patrimony of Humanity”²⁷ and **the first and the shared school of humanity** in which the vocation to love grows and is cultivated, since it is in families, at least as long as they have not been too deeply damaged, that things are considered not so much in terms of the advantage to the individual but as being to the benefit of all. Every member is recognised as being something good in themselves and, in general, preferential treatment is given to the weakest: the little ones, the sick, the handicapped and the elderly.

◆ Another special characteristic of the family is its being a school of life and of love because **the family is the home**, it is the hearth. This expression « hearth and home » in some of our cultures is full of affection and of human warmth – ‘making oneself at home’ – because it involves something much richer than the physical space of the house. «The hearth and home is the nest, the cradle of life. It is the special place for life, where it is welcomed responsibly, educated with generous dedication, celebrated joyfully, fed with the bread of work and tears, healed when injured, and mourned when it is no more.»²⁸ For this reason when the family is missing it is very difficult to replace it. The social services of the State as far as is possible, can only compensate for or mitigate its absence. In fact « for the infant the family is a primary unlimited ‘resource’, and it continues to be so also for the adult»²⁹.

²⁴ Salesian General Chapter XX (SGC), n.º 649

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 427; GCXXIV, n.º 91-93; Pascual Chávez, Letter of the Rector Major, *o.c.*41

²⁶ Vatican Council II, GS 48

²⁷ Document of the Latin American Assembly of Bishops at Aparecida, n.º 302 e 402

²⁸ Card, Jorge Mario Bergoglio, *La familia a la luz del documento de Aparecida*, An article published in *Familia e Vita* XIII n.º 2-3/2008, 64-72 and quoted in *Papa Francisco y la Familia* LEV Romana, 2015, Madrid, 51

²⁹ Walter Kasper, *El futuro de la familia desde la perspectiva cristiana*, in Goerge Augustin (de), *o.c.*, 169

◆ Families are accompanied in the concrete circumstances of their lives when parents are given the help they need – in some situations fathers or mothers who are struggling on alone – to understand the fundamental value of the **affective support they are providing for their children**. This means doing everything humanly possible to ensure that their children feel deeply loved, which helps them to grow up in a well-balanced and harmonious way, because love is like the fire that is kept burning in the hearth. « We love our children because they are children; not because they are beautiful, or for this or that reason. Not because they look or think as we do. We love them because they are children! A child is a child»³⁰ Pope Francis declares. It means accepting children as they are and devoting oneself to them, giving them time and attention. It is not enough for a father or mother to think that though they spend little time with them it is quality time. It is necessary that the amount of time is proportionate to the needs of the children, since someone who is unable to share their tiny interests and the smallest things in their lives, without noticing it runs the risk of slowly distancing themselves from being part of their experience.

◆ In the more stable families **the life of the parents is characterized by their dedication**, by that giving of themselves to each other in love and that giving of themselves together to their children. In the Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Francis strongly affirms that «every child has the right to receive love from a mother and a father: both are necessary for a child's integral and harmonious development.³¹ He continues « We are speaking not simply of the love of father and mother as individuals, but also of their mutual love, perceived as the source of one's life and the solid foundation of the family »³².

We know that it is not always possible to enjoy the presence of both parents. In the world there are millions of families in which the children are living with just the father or the mother, but that does not mean that we have to refrain from saying what a great benefit the witness of both parents is for the sons and daughters. At the same time whatever the make-up of the family may be it should never be forgotten that the dedication and selfless devotion of the parents shape the values that the children assimilate and prepare them in the best way possible to face up to the difficulties they will meet in life.

◆ The family becomes a school that prepares for life when within it **dialogue, communication and mutual understanding are taught and learned**. When these values are being lived in the family the children learn to listen, to converse, to share and to take an interest in whatever concerns their life together, the house and individuals. And we all know that being able to live together, to understand each other, to excuse and to forgive are attitudes that go together.

When such an atmosphere is fostered, the family becomes a place to live in which people look out for each other and think about what is best for the others who they respect and for whose ways they make allowances. They learn different attitudes that may seem contradictory but which prepare them for life when they are adopted in harmony:

- dialogue and personal responsibility ;
- autonomy and solidarity ;
- taking care of oneself and seeking what is best for everyone ;
- being assertive about one's proper place in the family and being able to forgive ;

³⁰ AL, 170.

³¹ Cf. AL, 172.

³² AL, 172.

- a readiness to express one's own opinion and at the same time capable of listening and a respectful silence.

◆ In the family one also learns **to recognise and to experience limitations**. Nothing that happens within the family can be outside the concern of its members, even more so when the children are involved. It follows that the parents or the father or the mother when only one of them is head of the family wherever they may be or whatever happens have to keep everything in their thoughts and in their hearts. Parents are called to be attentive observers, capable of following their children with a caring heart, but also capable of setting limits to their children's freedom for their own good. « Vigilance is always needed and neglect is never beneficial ... Obsession, however, is not education »³³. It is for this reason that the Pope tells us « What is most important is the ability lovingly to help them grow in freedom, maturity, overall discipline and real autonomy »³⁴.

◆ **The most precious and essential virtues** (love, faith, freedom, justice, respect, being hardworking, integrity ...) **put down roots in family life**, and this apprenticeship undertaken in life with affection, is decisive and fundamental for the children. Consequently, it ought to be the constant concern of parents and educators to act with educational sensitivity to put down the roots of what is essential. It is in this context that efforts are made to educate³⁵ to freedom, to responsibility, to ethical and moral development, to affectivity, to empathy, to openness, to the care of others and of nature, as well as to love and to a responsible sexuality. All of this is a huge task in the formation of individuals and the family has a fundamental role; to carry it out it can rely on the help of other institutions and in particular from our convinced point of view on the help of the Church.

◆ Faced with the actual situation in many societies in which the most hoped for aspiration is for a comfortable and easy life so that comfort and well-being become the first and final goal and people are convinced that with money everything is possible, it is vitally important to **educate families to a life of temperance and moderation**, to the consumption of what is necessary and not totally superfluous, to the value of simplicity of life. Parents who shower their children with an abundance of superfluities run the risk of neglecting what for them is more necessary, that is their guidance and principles, their affection and their love. In this regard Pope Benedict XVI declares: «Suffering is also part of the truth of our life. So, by seeking to shield the youngest from every difficulty and experience of suffering, we risk raising brittle and ungenerous people, despite our good intentions: indeed, the capacity for loving corresponds to the capacity for suffering and for suffering together»³⁶.

It is unfortunately true that there are many more families who are living in a «forced poverty» who cannot aspire even to what is necessary. We are aware that the distribution of wealth is not just. But it is opportune to point out that our help to families is demonstrated in our offering them guidance in the education of their children in this regard, *without taking it for granted that enza dare per scontato che that this mentalizzazione could be even more important for some parents.*

◆ **The ability to commit oneself is vital in peoples lives**, and it will be in the lives of the children. The family prepares for life when it teaches that being responsible individuals means making the right use of freedom and keeping one's word; making clear that exercising one's freedom is much more than deciding between what I like and what I don't like. It means being aware of the value of *responsibility* and of a *spirit of hard work*; from this point of view it is very important that in the family they learn that you can be free when you put your heart into what you are doing.

³³ AL, 260 e 261.

³⁴ AL, 261.

³⁵ Cf. AL, 262,263,264,268,282,283.

³⁶ BENEDICT XVI, *To the Diocese and the City of Rome on the urgent task of education* (January 21 2008)

◆ Following our consideration of life and from the perspective of the values that motivate us, **the great gift that parents can offer to their children is the process of handing on the faith**, a committed and active faith. «The home must continue to be the place where we learn to appreciate the meaning and the beauty of the faith, to pray and to serve our neighbour»³⁷. We know very well that the faith is a gift of God and not the result of our actions «yet parents are the means that God uses for it to grow and develop»³⁸. Certainly as the Pope says in the same place this «handing on the faith presumes that parents themselves genuinely trust God, seek him and sense their need for him, for only in this way does ‘one generation laud your works to another and declare your mighty acts’ (Psalm 144,4)»³⁹.

◆ The challenges and the tasks so far considered speak to us about the «**art of guidance and government**» of parents or of the mother or father who in an heroic way are guiding the family. With the expression «the art of guidance and government» we are referring in this context, to the fact that every son and every daughter represents a unique task very similar to the production of a work of art which even though it may never be completely finished is considered finished to the extent that every child is capable of safely making their own way in life.

3.5 Decisive Salesian Pastoral Mission: ACCOMPANYING and CREATING PROCEDURES.

What we have said so far with plenty of proposals and suggestions, allows us to offer to the Salesian Family faced with this exciting and relevant challenge, some pastoral and pedagogical guidelines *starting with some questions* :

- How do you accompany parents, married couples and those at the head of their own family?
- How do you accompany the children especially those in our own Salesian circles, so many boys and girls throughout the world?
- How do you accompany through our youth ministry, our family and parish ministry those young people who are already making plans to get married and raise a family?

The answers to these questions demand our pastoral initiatives, actions and decisions :

1. To take up in a determined manner the challenge of **considering as our educative-pastoral priority that of giving attention to Families**. It has been said many times in so many assemblies, in Provincial Chapters and also in General Chapters. The time has come to declare in every Salesian centre in the world that it is not possible to think of a single educational and pastoral work with boys and girls and young people in which the need is not clear of how to be in close connection and communication with their families and how to involve them. «Enabling families to take up their role as active agents of the family apostolate calls for an effort at evangelization and catechesis inside the family».⁴⁰ We have to convince ourselves that it is not enough that the priority of the young as those to whom our mission is directed is clear to us. Today more than ever this task of education and evangelization is *inseparable from the family*.

³⁷ AL, 287.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ AL, 200

2. To take decisive and appropriate steps to undertake **accompaniment** as a priority by means of practical concrete initiatives according to the various contexts :
 - Accompaniment of parents and married couples who are willing to accept it.
 - Accompaniment of boys and girls and young people in Salesian centres around the world that is real, especially in regard to difficult family and personal situations.
 - Vocational accompaniment of all the young people and in particular of those who are planning their way of life in marriage.
 - Accompaniment which in practical terms becomes a project of spirituality and of faith as giving meaning to life in the most diverse family situations with which we come into contact.
3. **Helping families to educate and to grow with affection and the heart**, with all that this implies in our educational system (Preventive). We know how slow the process of growth to human maturity is. After first being born comes the second initiation into life that consists in the transmission of values. For this reason «the children need that protected space and that affective security that they find in the love of their parents; and in their turn they strengthen and enrich the bond of love in the relationship between the parents»⁴¹ In our role as educators and evangelizers we have to give priority to this aspect. Along these lines we have to *build up permanent bridges with parents* in order to discover together how to cultivate in the families and in our centres for the benefit of their children, a welcoming, listening attitude, dialogue that avoids being authoritative without providing reasons, close relationships, giving people the time they need, personal contact, the affection that overcomes barriers and distances.

In the letter we have mentioned, Pope Benedict XVI, referring to the «educational emergency» underlines the need to educate on the basis of love : «It needs first of all that closeness and trust which are born from love: I am thinking of the first and fundamental experience of love which children have, or at least should have, from their parents. Yet every true teacher knows that if he is to educate he must give a part of himself, and that it is only in this way that he can help his pupils overcome selfishness and become in their turn capable of authentic love»⁴². We know very well what he is talking about if we think about Don Bosco, who asks of us that we not only love the young but that they know that they are loved. We need to be able to pass on to parents this message in a very convincing manner.

4. **Accompanying and supporting parents in their mission of education, involving them as much as possible**; sometimes parents themselves, even though they may very much want to take on the responsibility of being the primary educators, do not know how to do so. «Collaboration with youngsters' families should be intensified, since parents are the primary educators of their sons and daughters. To this end they should be offered in our works an educative climate rich in family values» the GC24 declared addressing itself to Salesians⁴³. We need to be creative; some initiatives have been successful in some periods but then have become less so. It is not always easy to motivate parents but this problem should urge us on to reflect even more, together with them, on what they really need. « In this regard, dialogue with parents at a deeper level is required in order to identify the ways in which it is possible to profit from the potential of the families themselves»⁴⁴.
5. Seriously taking up the task of **helping parents in the education to love and in the sex education of their sons and daughters**. Pope Francis in the Apostolic Exhortation referring to what Vatican II requested in the Declaration *Gravissimum Educationis*, exclaims : «We may well ask ourselves

⁴¹ Walter Kasper, *El futuro de la familia desde la perspectiva cristiana*, in Goerge Augustin (de), *o.c.*, 150

⁴² Benedict XVI, *To the Diocese and the City of Rome on the urgent task of education* (January 21 2008)

⁴³ General Chapter XXIV of the Society of Saint Francis of Sales, Rome 1996, 177; Pascual Chávez, *o.c.* 41

⁴⁴ Walter Kasper, *o.c.* 175

if our educational institutions have taken up this challenge»⁴⁵. Many indicators seem to suggest that as regards this responsibility in Salesian centres around the world there has been instead a retreat. It seems that the inherent difficulties have restricted us not a little. However, as educators (male and female) we feel the obligation to educate to love those to whom we are sent, and we are convinced that fostering in our houses an educational setting that is fully open to communication and affection is itself a great lesson about love. We are convinced of the need for suitable affective and sex education and for a careful catechesis that helps young people to understand the nature and the expression of love.⁴⁶

6. **Offering in a Salesian manner our services and our help to parents and to families when they are dealing with difficult and critical personal situations.** And while we may advise them in their personal problems as couples to seek help by having recourse to other professionals, we, as educators and pastors, can provide a very important bridge for the benefit of their children. One can easily understand that they may make mistakes in their married life and in their families. Our help as far as possible will consist in helping them to try to work on their relationship with each other, to find ways to maintain communication and recommend forgiving each other as an effective way forward and of believing in the possibility of a fresh start. Finally helping in the process of growth and maturity through the relationship with the other person.
7. **Being an open house for everyone⁴⁷ in domestic churches within the one Church.** In many parts of the world domestic churches have been the support and defence of the faith in times of persecution, of the lack of religious freedom, etc. Often parents and their children are far from any religious experience or unfamiliar with it. In situations like these the Salesian centres with their groups and associations, our religious communities, the various apostolic groups, prayer groups, Bible study or adult catechetical groups, voluntary service, etc., can all provide the opening and the spiritual setting favourable to the welcoming and integration of groups of parents and of families.
8. **Accompanying young people in their planned way of married life.** Is Christian marriage celebrated and lived as a sacrament perhaps a model that is obsolete and a thing of the past? It was Pope Benedict XVI, during the VII World Meeting of Families, held in Milan in 2012, who raised this issue, this challenge about marriage to young people declaring that «it is possible and a joyfilled experience, even though it takes an effort to live a faithful love, for always, open to life». It is of the greatest importance to help young people to discover the richness and the value of marriage. Young people «should be helped to perceive the attraction of a complete union that elevates and perfects the social dimension of existence, gives sexuality its deepest meaning and benefits children by offering them the best context for their growth and development»⁴⁸. From the faith perspective the Christian ideal is given support by the conviction that it is beneficial for people to commit themselves by means of their free choice and together to set themselves an elevated and ambitious goal which is very different from a too idealistic view of marriage. For this reason :
 - We ought to help young people to discover that it is a good thing to want what marriage and the family have to offer when they are lived in a positive way.
 - Help them to believe confidently that from the perspective of love, this way of life, if this is their vocation and God's call, is possible for them.

⁴⁵ AL, 280

⁴⁶ General Chapter XXIII of the Society of Saint Francis of Sales, *Educating young people to the faith*. Rome, 1990, 195-202

⁴⁷ Walter Kasper, *o.c.*, 159-160

⁴⁸ AL, 205

- Let us walk beside them helping them to become aware in a realistic manner of the dangers of a starry-eyed approach that can lead to disappointment when all their dreams are not realised.
 - Help them to discover that in Christian marriage there is something of extraordinary beauty based on the fact that *love falls within the realm of God*. This is the meaning of the sacrament as an effective sign of the Love of God within them.
9. Helping parents and families understand, especially in times of difficulty, that, **from the spiritual point of view, the life of every marriage and of every family unfolds on the basis of the law of progression and gradualness**⁴⁹, and likewise on a development that is continuously renewed and deepened in the Mystery of Christ. There are many values that can be shared with parents and children, for example: the value of constantly exercising tolerance and patience; spending time with each other; giving expression to signs of love, affection, tenderness and respect; gratitude and love for one another. Part also of this experience are family prayers and the celebration of faith. « It is a beautiful thing to be with adult couples who in spite of their advanced age, show in a mature way that they are in love. It is an expression of a human experience preserved and made a success from the human and spiritual points of view»⁵⁰.
- 10 Taking part in the long process of **reflection and discernment** being carried out by the Church, **paying more attention to families, and emphasising the** priority of mercy as the essential value of the Gospel. All of this ought to have an influence on our educative and pastoral practice. We need to be fully convinced of the need to follow the **criterion of gradualness, which is a characteristic of pastoral activity with families**, and use it in our vision, our planning and our educative and pastoral practice.
11. To all of this can be added many other initiatives and criteria, which in the light of what I have suggested to you, I invite you to think about at local level and in your different situations. The following may serve as examples :
- Let us not to be afraid of *proposing human and spiritual values to our young people and to their families*. The families often need this and are grateful for it.
 - As far as is possible let us contribute to ensuring and promoting in families *the sense of the joy of Loving*.
 - Let us ensure that in our houses, as an expression of our availability, there is hospitality and a welcome especially for those to whom we are sent and their families.
 - In our centres let us provide opportunities for married couples to become front-line animators, guides and companions, educators and apostles among other married people who feel the need for them.
 - We are convinced that our commitment to the accompaniment of families can provide an extraordinary opportunity to contribute to *the eradication of every form of discrimination against girls and women*.
 - Let us profit from the examples of “good practice” regarding families that there are in many of our houses, sharing them among ourselves and making them known to others.
 - With honesty let us assess our attitude of *empathy* with mothers and fathers who are often living in situations of sorrow and anxiety.

⁴⁹ Walter Kasper, *o.c.*, 156

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

- Let us harness ever more effectively the pastoral energies of our Educative Pastoral Communities, taking full advantage of the fact that our educative and evangelizing activity is community based.
- Let us so act that Salesian houses throughout the world will present a face and a model of the Church that will help parents and families to discover the faith or rediscover it should it have become weak or been abandoned.
- *Finally let us tirelessly and decisively return to the atmosphere of Valdocco.*

I conclude this appeal which I address to the whole Salesian Family, for greater attention to be given to families, to their sons and daughters in the different places where we find ourselves, making my own a special passage from the Apostolic Exhortation and taking from it the final prayer to the Holy Family of Nazareth.

«Our teaching on marriage and the family cannot fail to be inspired and transformed by this message of love and tenderness; otherwise, it becomes nothing more than the defence of a dry and lifeless doctrine. The mystery of the Christian family can be fully understood only in the light of the Father's infinite love revealed in Christ, who gave himself up for our sake and who continues to dwell in our midst. *I now wish to turn my gaze to the living Christ, who is at the heart of so many love stories, and to invoke the fire of the Spirit upon all the world's families* »⁵¹.

Prayer to the Holy Family

Jesus, Mary and Joseph,
in you we contemplate
the splendour of true love;
to you we turn with trust.

Holy Family of Nazareth,
grant that our families too
may be places of communion and prayer,
authentic schools of the Gospel
and small domestic churches.

Holy Family of Nazareth,
may families never again experience
violence, rejection and division;
may all who have been hurt or scandalized
find ready comfort and healing.

Holy Family of Nazareth,
make us once more mindful
of the sacredness and inviolability of the family,
and its beauty in God's plan.

Jesus, Mary and Joseph,
Graciously hear our prayer. Amen

⁵¹ AL, 59 (the italics which are not in the original have been introduced by the writer)

Rome, 31 December 2016

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