

# PRESENTATION OF THE 2018 STRENNA

Rome, July 16, 2017

Feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel

## STRENNA

“Sir, give me this water” (John 4:15)

### LET US CULTIVATE THE ARTS OF LISTENING AND ACCOMPANIMENT

**Synthesis: a summary of how the strenna will be presented when sent out at the end of this year. I begin by saying that *this is not the commentary on the Strenna 2018; here I limit myself to offering some hints.***

The phrase that synthesizes the Strenna corresponds to the heartfelt request that the Samaritan woman makes to Jesus at Jacob’s well. In her meeting with him, the woman feels that she has been listened to, respected, and appreciated; and so in her heart she feels impelled to ask for something even more precious: “Sir, give me some of that water” (the water of life to the full that you’re offering me).

Following the central theme of this gospel passage, we would point out, in the context of the coming Synod of Bishops (“Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment”), the importance for our whole Salesian Family and its mission in the world of cultivating the precious arts of listening and accompaniment, with the conditions that need to be ensured; the demands and the service that are involved in both listening and accompanying, in the process of personal, Christian, and vocational development.

#### I. A MEETING THAT CANNOT LEAVE US UNMOVED

The starting point for our reflection must be the calm and meditative reading of the gospel passage that we know as “the meeting of Jesus with the Samaritan woman” (John 4:3-42); a meeting that then becomes the icon to refer to in order to see how the Lord relates to her, the sort of relationship he establishes, its results, and the consequences that the meeting with him has in this woman’s life.

*There came a woman of Samaria to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink."*

*(For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.)*

*The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (John 4:7-9).*

Jesus is in a situation in which he is powerless and vulnerable in the face of a practical need. To the Samaritan woman he is a foreigner, he is thirsty, he does not have a bucket to draw water, and the water in that deep well is out of his reach.

On the other hand, as far as one can tell from the story, the woman – to put it mildly – has a doubtful reputation, living in an “irregular” situation.

In addition, between Jesus and the Samaritan woman there is the barrier of well-established ethnic and religious conventions. According to the customs of the time, it is reprehensible behavior for him to ask water from this woman.

In this situation, from our point of view, we can observe something very interesting: a secular place, a well in the open countryside, that becomes *a place for an encounter with God*.

Jesus, the real protagonist and leading person in the encounter, in the listening and the opening dialog, “has a plan” for conducting this meeting, beginning by **listening** to the other person and the situation, which he knows intuitively.

For us nowadays, this process of **LISTENING** is a real art. “We need to practice the art of listening, which is more than simply hearing. In communication, listening is an openness of heart which makes possible that closeness without which genuine spiritual encounter cannot occur.”<sup>1</sup>

This process of **listening** begins with a *meeting* that becomes an opportunity for a human relationship freely entered, “with a respectful, compassionate gaze that also heals, liberates, and encourages growth in the Christian life.”<sup>2</sup>

When a meeting happens in this way, among other things **listening**:

- fosters *openness* toward the other person;
- implies giving one’s whole *attention* to what the other person may be saying and making a conscious effort to understand what the person wants to communicate;
- accompanies *with real interest* the person and what is being sought and expected;
- sets to one side one’s own world, one’s own situation, in order, as far as possible, *to draw close* to that of the other person.
- Listening, to put it briefly, is the art that requires *giving careful attention* to a person, his or her struggles, weaknesses, joys, sufferings, and expectations; in fact, we do not limit

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<sup>1</sup> EG 171

<sup>2</sup> EG 169

ourselves to listening to something; rather, we are attentive to someone.

- This listening, when it refers to personal spiritual accompaniment, goes beyond the psychological dimension and acquires a *spiritual and religious dimension*, because it takes us along pathways on which one is waiting for Someone.
- Our gaze as educators turned in a special way to young people and also to the life of their families, gives us reassurance that there is much that is *positive* in every heart;<sup>3</sup> and there is a need to bring out this positive element through the patient work of paying attention to ourselves, to openness to others, to listening and reflection.

This listening ought to lead us to understand properly the needs of young people nowadays, and sometimes the needs of their parents, or of those people with whom we come into contact through our ministry. In fact, young people approach us not so much in search of accompaniment as, rather, because of the pressure of their *needs*, when they find themselves facing *doubts, problems, emergencies, difficulties, conflicts, tensions, decisions to be made, problematic situations to be coped with*.

And, in general, they make an approach if there is someone who takes the first step by showing an interest in them, approaches them, and has time for them. Sometimes these casual meetings can become the doorway opening onto a more serious journey that leads to growth.

This is what happened in the meeting between Jesus and the woman who had gone to the well simply to draw water.

## II. A MEETING THAT MOVES A PERSON ON FURTHER

*Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."*

*The woman said to him, "Sir, you have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep; where do you get that living water?" ...*

*Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; ...*

*"Sir," said the woman, "give me this water that I may not thirst." (John 4:10-15)*

\* As a master of wisdom and an able conversationalist, Jesus makes use of all that words can offer – expressions and gestures – to make contact with people.

- ✓ He asks questions, discusses, explains, tells stories, pays attention to the way the person he is speaking to sees things, make suggestions, affirms, provokes a reaction.
- ✓ He helps the woman face up to the real situation she is in and to her evasive replies; even with regard to her delicate position – as she says in the following verses – “I have no

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<sup>3</sup> “[In every boy ... there is] a soft spot. The first duty of the educator is to locate that sensitive spot, that responsive chord in the boy’s heart...” (BM 5:237, quoted in GC 23, n. 151).

husband.”

- ✓ Jesus is not discouraged; he does not give up when faced with the initial resistance.
- ✓ The conversation helps her clear up some ambiguities, reveal herself in an honest way; the enigmatic and provocative replies draw the woman closer, she grows in trust, and in her surprise she really wants to have what can make her life better.

\* Jesus, who is seeking what is best for the other person, the one he is speaking with, rather than pronounce a moral judgment of disapproval or reproach establishes a personal relationship.

- ✓ Instead of accusing, he discusses and makes a suggestion.
- ✓ His language, his words, are addressed to the heart of the one he is speaking to.
- ✓ In conversations (in practice, on this occasion with the Samaritan woman), he speaks calmly, without haste in presenting himself as the one who can change her life, in order to awaken gradually in her the desire to be able to have access to a spring of water that promises a special, different, better life.

\* As an expert in humanity, Jesus shows himself to be attentive and full of interest in the inner world of those he is speaking with; he reads their hearts, studies them, and knows how to interpret them.

These attitudes of the Lord make us understand the importance of the **gift of discernment**.

In the Church’s tradition, the exercise of discernment has been applied in many different situations: for example, discerning the signs of the times, or discerning in view of acting in a moral manner, or spiritual discernment in order to follow a path of Christian life to the full, or again, spiritual discernment when it is a question of one’s own vocation or choice of life.

In all these cases, dialog with the Lord and listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit are essential; there are some **basic (fundamental) prerequisites**, however, that make further discernment possible.

- The starting point will be what leads the individual, the young person, the married couple, or one of them, to feel the need to give meaning to his or her life, to make it significant. It is in this situation that one becomes aware that something is not really going well.
- When one does not feel well, is not living harmoniously and does not find real and full meaning in what forms part of himself, or of the “us” in a marriage or a family, the situation can arise from an “existential void,” which often leads to personal disorientation and frustration.
- In the societies in which we are living that make us live our lives on the outside, as though we were in a glass case, without any visible limitations or defects, without the right to be old or to grow old, because “that is in bad taste,” more than ever there is need for an education that encourages depth and an inner life.

These are all situations that can stimulate, encourage, or assist with discernment, and one needs to undertake every process of discernment, as Pope Francis proposes in the letter in preparation

for the Synod,<sup>4</sup> by **recognizing, interpreting, and choosing.**<sup>5</sup>

- **RECOGNIZING,**<sup>6</sup> in the light of what the Spirit inspires.

- ✓ To have clarity in the high and low moments of life; in the periods of a real interior struggle that can occur.
- ✓ To help bring to fruition all the emotional qualities that a person may have, and give a name to what one is experiencing or what we find present in ourselves.
- ✓ To capture the “flavor” that I find in the consonance or dissonance between what I experience and what is in the depth of my heart.
- ✓ All of this enlightened by the Word of God on which one should meditate. Putting at the center the person’s ability to listen and even one’s affective nature, without being afraid even of silence.
- ✓ Taking up everything as part of the journey of growing to personal maturity.

- **INTERPRETING**<sup>7</sup>

- ✓ That is, understanding what the Spirit of God is calling someone to do through what is stirred up in each one.
- ✓ Interpreting and being interpreted is a very sensitive task that requires patience, vigilance, and even a certain knowledge. It is necessary to be aware that social and psychological conditioning exists.
- ✓ It will be necessary to face up to reality, and at the same time not to be satisfied with the minimum, nor deal only with what is easy; being aware of one’s own gifts and possibilities.
- ✓ Naturally this task of interpretation cannot be developed in a believer, in a Christian:
  - without a real dialog with the Lord (a dialog such as the Samaritan woman had with Jesus).
  - unless all the capacities of the person are engaged (acting in such a way that what happens is not unimportant, as occurs in the heart of the woman in conversation with Jesus).
  - without the help of an experienced person in listening to the Spirit (who, in the case of the gospel passage was Jesus himself guiding her).

- **CHOOSING**<sup>8</sup>

The time then comes when the individual, the young person, the wife or husband – whoever – has to decide, exercising authentic human freedom and personal responsibility.

The Samaritan woman had to decide for herself whether to ignore Jesus and continue her life as

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<sup>4</sup> Pope Francis, *Young people, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment. XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. Preparatory Document and questionnaire* (Turin: Elle Di Ci, 2017), pp. 22-65.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44, quoting EG 51.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 45-46.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 46-47.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 47-48

though nothing had happened in that meeting, or to make the decision to allow herself to be surprised by him and involved to the point of going to call her fellow townsmen because that man had reached the depths of her inner world.

- ✓ The choice that is made when discernment is carried out in the light of the Spirit, very often brings a person freedom, and at the same time demands coherence in life.
- ✓ For this reason, it can be said that to encourage people, and in a very special way young people, to make life choices that really are free and responsible is the final aim of every serious process in the faith journey and in personal growth (and in any vocational ministry that one can imagine).

**Discernment** – the Pope tells us – “is the main tool which permits safeguarding the inviolable place of conscience, without pretending to replace it,”<sup>9</sup> precisely because “*we have been called to form consciences, not to replace them,*”<sup>10</sup> following the example of Jesus who in his conversation with the Samaritan woman, accompanies her on the journey toward the truth and her own inner life.

### III. A MEETING THAT TRANSFORMS A LIFE

*Just then his disciples came. They marveled that he was talking with a woman, but none said, “What do you wish?” or, “Why are you talking with her?” So the woman left her water jar, and went away into the city, and said to the people, “Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?” They went out of the city and were coming to him. ...*

*Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me all that I ever did.” So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, “It is no longer because of your words that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world.” (John 4:27-30, 39-42).*

- The Samaritan woman enters the scene in the gospel as “a woman from Samaria,” and she leaves it having come to know the spring of living water in such a very personal way that she feels the need to run and tell her own people what has happened to her, and through her *witnessing* there are many who then approach Jesus.
- To those whom he meets, as in this case the Samaritan woman, Jesus does not offer more things to think about or to get to know, but rather a way to grow and change their lives. Even “Jacob’s well,” a symbol of the wisdom that comes from the Law, loses its value and is replaced by living water (by the spring).

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p.40, n.2

<sup>10</sup> AL 37

- The image of God that comes through in the meeting with Jesus is not the image of a god unmoved, distant, philosophically cold. On the contrary, Jesus reveals him as the God who gives life, who can be called Father, who does not cut himself off, seek to control, or possess, because he is Spirit (worship in Spirit and truth).
- The conclusion of the meeting goes beyond what one might have expected for a normal ending, that the woman would return to her ordinary life with the jar full of water. Instead, the jar, which the woman leaves behind empty so as to go and call her neighbors, speaks to us of a gain and not a loss.

### **Like Jesus – accompanying**

There are numerous biblical accounts which in the first place tell the story of the accompaniment that God promises his people throughout time.

On the boundary between the two Testaments, John the Baptist appears as the first spiritual companion in the Gospels, first of Jesus himself. John could bear witness and prepare the way because God had spoken to his heart.

On so many occasions in the New Testament Jesus makes himself a neighbor, a traveling companion, in order to communicate himself and meet the people of his time in a personal way.

The meeting of the Lord with the Samaritan woman helps us to see the way the Spirit of God can act in the heart of every man and woman – that human heart which, because of fragility and its own sins, feels quite often confused and divided, attracted by temptations and suggestions that are varied and often contradictory.<sup>11</sup>

Faced with this human dilemma, **Personal Accompaniment** would appear to become an extremely valid means of the Christian spiritual tradition, in the desire to help believers avail of the instruments and resources that enable them to recognize the presence of the Lord, his challenges, and his calls.

How can we describe **Accompaniment**? As an example, “like a kind of ongoing conversation between companions in order to Welcome Life, accompanying life;”<sup>12</sup> a dialog that has as its purpose the fostering of the relationship between the individual person and the Lord, helping to overcome any potential obstacles.

As with Jesus in every **meeting**, in every experience of accompaniment there is need for:

- ✓ a loving glance, like that of Jesus when calling the twelve to their vocation (John 1:35-51);
- ✓ an authoritative word, like that of Jesus in the synagogue at Capernaum (Luke 4:32);
- ✓ the ability to come close to someone. like Jesus with the Samaritan woman (John 4:3-34, 39-42);

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<sup>11</sup> Pope Francis, Document of the Synod. op. cit., p. 50

<sup>12</sup> Lola Arrieta, *Aquel que acompaña sale al encuentro y regala preguntas de vida para andar el camino: Apuntes provisionales* (Barcelona: Simposio CCEE, 2017), p. 11.

- ✓ The decision to walk side by side, to become a traveling companion like Jesus with the disciples on the way to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35).

Therefore, to accompany involves:

- knowing the journey the other person is making, the point at which she has arrived and where she is going, in order to be able to walk with her;
- ensuring that there is a **meeting** that is an opportunity for a relationship that is human and humanizing and not utilitarian;
- a **listening** attitude (once again reference is made to the art of knowing how to listen!), that makes it possible to know and understand where the other person is coming from, the journey he is on, the situation he is in: of sorrow, lack of hope, fatigue, searching, etc.
- It is also always a matter of a meeting of **mediation**, because the real Companion is the Holy Spirit.
- The one who accompanies as the traveling companion has to become **the witness to and the proclaimer of** the action of the Spirit in the person accompanied, but in a quiet way, staying at his side, content to occupy one's allotted place and not another one. In truth the spiritual companion is molded in the *fundamental experience of being first of all met by Him*.
- To discover the way in which God manifests himself in our lives to the extent of surprising us **as we are met by him**.
- **The initiative will always be God's**; we need to show responsibility and freedom.

All of this is undertaken by means of **a pedagogy of processes**, which is so common in the spiritual tradition. "The Christian life is lived in a progressive way, according to distinct degrees of depth and fulness, and is always open to an ever greater development."<sup>13</sup>

- Following processes that *should not be forced* either from within or from without.

- To the point of *becoming conscious* of the process and making it one's own, given that it is the Spirit who unleashes it in each one.

#### IV. WITH WHAT PASTORAL ACTION IN MIND?

This will be the final part of the strenna, which I shall present fully at the end of the year, since it deals with the pastoral application of what has been said so far. I shall refer to the strategic (key) points of the pastoral method of the Church at the present time, and to what is specific to our *Salesian spirituality*. I intend to develop the following points, of which I indicate

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<sup>13</sup> Stefano de Fiores, "Itinerario espiritual," in *Nuevo Diccionario de Espiritualidad* (Madrid: Paulinas, 2004), p. 755.



only some possible headings:

- *Walking* with the young, with families, with fathers and the mothers, who need to follow this path. With those in mind with whom the different groups of the Salesian Family in the world are engaged in their mission.
- Providing opportunities for all young people, excluding no one, *because the Spirit is at work in each one*.
- With a religious or lay or educational-pastoral community that feels itself responsible for the education of the new generations.
- In which the adults are *significant and credible persons of reference*.
- With the appropriate means.

**V. IN COMPANY WITH THE SAMARITAN WOMAN.** As Jesus called his own followers, toward what goal would he be leading us today?

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