

PRESENTATION OF THE THEME
AN OVERVIEW OF STRENNA 2023

STRENNA 2023

COME LIEVITO NELLA FAMIGLIA UMANA D'OGGI.

La dimensione laicale della Famiglia di Don Bosco

COMO FERMENTO EN LA FAMILIA HUMANA de Hoy.

La dimensión laical de la Familia de Don Bosco

AS THE YEAST IN TODAY'S HUMAN FAMILY.

The lay dimension in the family of Don Bosco

COMME LEVAIN DANS LA FAMILLE HUMAINE AUJOURD'HUI.

La dimension laïque de la famille di Don Bosco

COMO FERMENTO NA FAMILIA HUMANA HOJE.

A dimensão laical da família de Dom Bosco

First of all, I would like to remind you that this strenna for 2023 is addressed to two target groups: young children, adolescents, and young adults wherever Don Bosco's Family is to be found around the world. At the same time, it is addressed to all the groups of the Salesian Family, who are invited to discover or rediscover their own *lay dimension*.

How is it that there can be two different sets of addressees? The answer is simple. In the light of what is most characteristic of our pedagogy and spirituality, our aim is to help little children, but above all adolescents and older young people, to discover that each of them can be like the yeast that Jesus speaks of; like the good yeast that helps the "bread of the human family" grow and become more flavorsome. Each of them can be a true pro-active agent and have a genuine mission alongside Jesus, or as a good believer in the religion he or she professes.

For Don Bosco's Family, the strenna aims at being a clear and thought-provoking message directed to discovering the lay dimension in this family in which we are all involved, and where the majority of its members are lay people, women and men from every country, with their lay and Christian life that calls upon them to be true leaven in humanity, which is so much in need of this.

Those of us who are consecrated members in the Salesian Family also are invited to be "leaven in the dough of the bread of humanity" and to have the close-up experience of letting ourselves be enriched by the evangelical secular dimension of these brothers and sisters of ours. In short, we are called on as a Family to complete each other.

*And again he said,
"To what should I compare the kingdom of God?
It is like yeast that a woman took
and mixed in with three measures of flour
until all of it was leavened" (Luke 13:20-21)*

Yeast goes to work silently.

Leavening takes place in silence, just like the work of God's kingdom in its inner work.

And indeed, who has been able to hear the yeast as it goes to work on the flour and dough in which it has been mixed while it is leavening it all? This makes us understand how God's kingdom acts. The Apostle Paul presents the kingdom from its most intimate aspect when he says: "For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom 14:17). This is the inner and invisible action of the Spirit; it is yeast placed in the heart. And just like yeast, whose activity takes place through contact, so is the case with the Gospel.

The parable of the yeast, chosen as the theme for Strenna 2023, is a parable of great evangelical wisdom and pedagogical and educational relevance, expressing the nature of the kingdom of God that Jesus lived and taught.

There are various theological interpretations of this passage. Our choice of interpretation for this year's strenna is precisely to present yeast as an image of the fruitfulness and growth of the kingdom of God in the hearts of people, which fertilizes the richness of the gift of the call to life and of the vocation where God has planted us, directing the mission of the laity and of the entire Family of Don Bosco throughout the world.

"A little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough" (Gal 5:9). It is surprising how a small quantity of flour doubles or triples in size once a small amount of yeast is added. The Lord tells us that *the Kingdom of God is like the yeast* with which flour (dough) is leavened when making bread. There is something very special about yeast. It is its ability to influence the mix "positively."

Among the ingredients we use for making bread, yeast, as the Lord emphasizes in the Gospel parable, is not the largest in quantity. To the contrary. Very little of it is used, but what distinguishes it is that it is ***the only living ingredient***, and because it is alive it has the ability to *influence, condition, and transform the whole batch of dough*.

We can say, then, that the kingdom of God is like this: "a humanly small and seemingly irrelevant reality. To become a part of it, one must be poor of heart; not trusting in his own abilities, but in the power of the love of God; not acting to be important in the eyes of the world, but precious in the eyes of God, who prefers the simple and the humble.... [Certainly] God's kingdom requires our cooperation, but it is above all the initiative and gift of the Lord. Our weak effort, seemingly small before the complexity of the problems of the world, when integrated with God's effort, fears no difficulty. The victory of the Lord is certain: his love will make every seed of goodness present on the ground sprout and grow. This opens us up to trust and hope, despite the tragedies, the injustices, the sufferings that we encounter. The seed of goodness and peace sprouts and develops, because the merciful love of God makes it ripen" (Angelus, His Holiness Pope Francis, June 14, 2015).

1. A Kingdom of God germinating in our world, between light and shadow

But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him.

When Jesus became aware of this, he departed. Many crowds followed him, and he cured all of them, and he ordered them not to make him known. This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah:

"Here is my servant, whom I have chosen,
my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased.
I will put my Spirit upon him,
and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles.

He will not wrangle or cry aloud,
nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets.
He will not break a bruised reed
or quench a smoldering wick
until he brings justice to victory.
And in his name the Gentiles will hope” (Matt 12:14-21).

* Here, it is Jesus himself who works as leaven among the most ordinary people, among the sick who need healing. “And he cured all of them” – this is the “lay” face of Jesus amid the *laos*, the people, where no distinction is made between social class or origins. They all seem to be united by poverty and the need for help.

* The most historically reliable fact of Jesus’ life is the symbol that dominated all his preaching, the reality that gave meaning to all his activities, namely the “Kingdom of God.” The synoptic Gospels summarize the teaching and preaching of Jesus in this terse sentence: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Matt 4:17). This is found 122 times in the Gospels and 90 times on Jesus’ lips. Therefore, it is more than evident that Jesus preached the kingdom of God and not himself (Karl Rahner).

* The word and the proclamation of the kingdom are not only the central theme of Jesus’ preaching, however, the focus of most of his parables, and the subject of a large number of his sayings. The Kingdom is also the content of his symbolic actions, which form a large part of his ministry, namely his friendship with tax collectors and sinners, even sitting at table with them, his healings and exorcisms, etc. In fact, in his communion with the marginalized and in his compassion for the poorest, the least, the excluded, Jesus lived the Kingdom to the full, demonstrating, indeed, God’s unconditional love for the least.

* Today we recognize that there is so much good in our world, in this Kingdom under construction, and we likewise recognize that there is so much sorrow and pain: sorrow and pain created by our way of being and acting as a human family. Therefore, we must open our eyes and hearts to God’s “way of acting” that establishes his Kingdom in a very special way. And it is in this way – by assuming his way of being and acting – that we must cooperate with him. We cannot do otherwise, unless we want the Kingdom to cease being “God’s” and become “ours,” not God’s.

* Relevant here is the style of the presence of the Kingdom of God embodied in Jesus as the Gospel describes it through the words of Isaiah: “He will not wrangle or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets. He will not break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick, until he brings justice to victory. And in his name the Gentiles will hope.” And it will be all nations who will hope, not just Israel – **to gather together God’s children who were scattered**. The universal openness that characterizes us as a Salesian Family is very much in tune with the Gospel of the Kingdom. The Church is made up of well over 99% lay people; imagine what the proportion becomes if we embrace the whole world. They are the dough as well as the leaven of the Kingdom.

* At times our human contribution or our small efforts can seem insignificant, but they will always be important before God. We must not and cannot measure the effectiveness or results of our efforts by placing the value on how much we invest in them, the effort required of us, because the ultimate reason for everything is God; and at the same time, we cannot fall into an inferiority complex or false justifications about how impossible the mission and the building of the Kingdom are, because this blocks and paralyzes us.

* Standing under the “eyes” and before the “heart” of our God, we must not confuse littleness and humility with weakness. We can do little in the face of the “much” that is required of us. It is never “not enough” or irrelevant, however, because it is God who gives it growth. It is God’s strength that comes to the rescue. And it is God who ultimately

accompanies our commitment, our efforts, our being poor yeast in the dough – provided we do all we can and always in his name.

2. A human family in need of ...

Every individual is called – in this world – to discover the meaning of his or her existence, which is precisely to live a healthy and fraternal lifestyle within the human family. This parable of the yeast and this strenna proposal, then, lead us to enter this world of great challenges through the dynamics of time and human history. The yeast added to the dough needs its own time to ferment.

This time of God, this *kairos*, teaches us to enter a dynamic where time is more important than space,¹ as Pope Francis has said. Especially in a world where virtual and digital communication creates a habitat of networks, of instantaneous and interactive presences, it is very important to deepen the meaning of time in our lives, in our way of communicating, working, and being together as people.

Building the human family is the responsibility and task of all of us. We know the amount of good that surrounds us but also the amount of pain that we have not yet been able to overcome in the world in which we live. Pope Francis reminds us precisely of this when he says that *“each new generation must take up the struggles and attainments of past generations, while setting its sights even higher. This is the path. Goodness, together with love, justice, and solidarity, are not achieved once and for all; they have to be realized each day. It is not possible to settle for what was achieved in the past and complacently enjoy it, as if we could somehow disregard the fact that many of our brothers and sisters still endure situations that cry out for our attention.”*²

This is why we recognize that our *human family* is a family with so many needs:

- a. in need of justice and dignity for the least and those cast aside (FT, 15-17; 18-21; 29-31; 69-71; 80-83; 124-127; 234);
- b. in need of truth (LF 23-25; FT 226-227);
- c. in need of peace and fraternity (FT 88-111; FT 216-221; ChV 163-167);
- d. in need of God (LF 50-51; LF 1-7; LF 35; LF 58-60);
- e. in need of care for our common home (Cf. *Laudato Si'*);
- f. In need of ...

We must not leave until tomorrow the good that we must do today! We are called, as Don Bosco’s Family, to be the leaven in this human family. Guided by this vision – of the gospel dynamic of the yeast – we want to deepen and recognize the richness of the spiritual, religious, and Christian vocation of our lay people in all the world’s presences and of the lay people who are members of Don Bosco’s Family, valuing in the different cultures and societies the gift of their life, the strength of their faith, the beauty of their family, their experience of life and work.

3. The lay person: a Christian who “sanctifies the world from within”

A certain habit has done us a great wrong by associating holiness exclusively with monasticism and not at all or little with the life of the laity, with public life. This separation has not been good throughout history.

¹ “Let us refuse to be robbed of hope, or to allow our hope to be dimmed by facile answers and solutions which block our progress, ‘fragmenting’ time and changing it into space. Time is always much greater than space. Space hardens processes, whereas time propels toward the future and encourages us to go forward in hope.” (Pope Francis, *Lumen Fidei*, no. 57).

² *Fratelli Tutti*, 8 and 11.

1. From the fact that God is Father it follows that we are all brothers and sisters. From this universal brotherhood flows the call for solidarity, charity, and communion.
2. From the Incarnation of the Son it is evident that any temporal reality can reveal the Mystery of God.
3. Considering the human person as the Temple of the Spirit, it follows that the human being is the most qualified setting for the encounter with the sacred. “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?” (1 Cor 6:19), the Scriptures say.³

“Theologically, the secular nature of the whole Church is understood from the meaning of the church-world relationship, and from the common priesthood, prophecy, and kingly dimension; every baptized person is a member of a Church who must serve the world to make God’s salvific will and his kingdom present, even if each baptized person exercises or develops this secularity in a particular way, so that there is a diversity of ministries and functions and, to a certain extent, of ‘presence and situation’ in the world, history, and society.”⁴ And it is from the lay life itself, which in many cases passes through the specific vocation in the family and one’s professional task in the world, that the laity, and in particular the Christian laity, the laity of Don Bosco’s family, are called to establish, promote, and sustain Gospel values in society and history, thus contributing to the *consecratio mundi*, the consecration of the world, to the establishment of the Kingdom of God in the here and now.

At any rate, it would be a serious error to have people believe that when we speak of secularity as a characteristic proper to the Church, we are referring only to one part of the Church’s membership, that is, to the laity, as if vocations of special consecration and those who have received the consecration of the ordained ministry did not have a “secular dimension.” “Recognizing [the laity’s] dignity clarifies their function within the Church itself and hence their necessity for the Church. The Council sees the mission of the laity in ‘managing temporal affairs and ordering them according to God’ and ‘building up the sanctification of the world from within.’ The laity are called ‘to make the Church present and active in those places and circumstances where only through them can she become the salt of the earth.’ Before the world, it is a full recognition of the Church’s need for the lay faithful. In them she reaches places where she could not otherwise go.”⁵

If we are told that someone has come to our house, we go out and look for them. This is the attitude required of the Christian who knows **the continuous visitation of the Spirit in the depths of his or her soul. “Living for God” means having an attitude of seeking all that is rich in humanity. For only that which is fully human is divine.** Living for God means being faithful to discoveries; and filling the world with surprise, with “God’s surprise”; and working by radiating the desire to restore the upset temporal order because we have so often made it so by our human actions.

4. Don Bosco’s Family called to be yeast

One episode in our Salesian history is especially illuminating: “It was **June 24, 1855**, and at the Oratory there was a double celebration: lots of good cheer to say the least.... All Turin was honoring and celebrating the city’s patron [St. John the Baptist], but it was also **John Bosco’s name day**. Everyone tried to show him affection, and the priest reciprocated

³ Claretians, Ciudad Redonda, “*Vivir para Dios: dimensión política de la Espiritualidad Laical*” pdf

⁴ R. Berzosa, “¿Una teología y espiritualidad laical?” *Revista Misión Abierta* (mercaba.org/fichas/laico).

⁵ L.C., Nicolás Núñez, “La vocación laical en la Iglesia: Una reflexión desde la perspectiva eclesiológica,” *Ecclesia*, XXIX, n. 3-4 (2015), p. 218.

with a big heart.

“On the evening of **June 23, 1855**, he told his boys: ‘Tomorrow you want to give me a celebration, and I thank you. For my part, I want to give you the gift you most desire. Therefore, let each of you take a **note** and write on it the gift that you want. I am not rich, but if you don’t ask me for the Royal Palace, I will do everything to satisfy you.’

“When he read the notes, Don Bosco found some serious requests and some that were a bit bizarre. One asked for ‘a hundred kilos of *torrone* (nougat) so I can have it all year round,’ while another asked for a puppy ‘to replace the one I left at home.’ Giovanni Roda, a friend of Dominic Savio’s, asked him for ‘a trumpet like the *bersaglieri* have, because I want to enter the band.’

“Instead, on Dominic Savio’s note he found just six words: **‘Help me to become a saint.’**

“Don Bosco called the lad and said: ‘When your mom makes a cake, she uses a recipe indicating the various ingredients to be mixed: sugar, flour, eggs, yeast [baking powder]....

“To become a saint you also need a **recipe**, and I am going to give you one as a gift. It is made up of three ingredients you need to mix together.

- **“First: cheerfulness.** What troubles you and takes away your peace does not please the Lord. Cast it out.
- **“Second: your duties** of study and prayer. Pay attention in school, be committed to study, pray gladly when you are invited to do so.
- **“Third: do good** to others. Help your friends when they need it, even if it costs you some trouble and effort. The recipe for holiness is all here.

“Dominic thought about it. The first two **‘ingredients’** he seemed already to have.

“As for doing good to others, however, something more could be done, thought about, invented. And from that day on he tried.”

Like Mom’s cake recipe, which includes sugar, flour, eggs, and some leavening agent (baking powder) – **the recipe for holiness** Don Bosco offered his boys, especially Dominic Savio (on the evening of June 24, 1855) contained *cheerfulness, doing your duty, and doing good*. It was a complete program for being leaven in the little area where God has planted us.

We were born charismatically as a community and communion of people from different social backgrounds, states of life, professional profiles – united by the same mission and motivated by the same charismatic charge that Don Bosco knew how to communicate. This is the nature of the Oratory in the years of its foundation, from 1841 to 1859: that is 18 years! The first draft of the Constitutions still strongly reflected this fusion of God’s people cooperating in various ways to make the young people most at risk “good Christians and upright citizens.” It is undeniable that we were born from the outset as a collection of God’s people: it is the nature of our charism and mission.

I believe I am very aware, and I try to convey this awareness of a particularly obvious fact to our entire Salesian Family called to be a true leaven in today’s world, in today’s human family: only together, only in communion can we do something significant today. I have made a strong appeal to the entire Salesian Congregation about our shared mission with the laity (an appeal that serves the entire Don Bosco Family) because not listening to it would lead us in the not too distant future to a situation of dangerous no-return. I have said that *“our GC24 was certainly a charismatic response to Vatican II’s ecclesiology of*

communion. We know well that Don Bosco, from the outset of his mission at Valdocco, involved many lay people, friends, and collaborators in such a way that they could be part of his mission among young people. He immediately 'fostered participation and the sharing of responsibility by ecclesiastics and laity, men and women.'⁶ It is therefore, in spite of our resistance, a point of no-return, because, in addition to corresponding to Don Bosco's actions, the model of the mission shared with the laity proposed by GC24 is in fact 'the only practicable model in present conditions.'⁷

The ultimate goal of Don Bosco's mission is, along with the salvation of his youngsters, the transformation of society. Writing this also makes me think of the 2020 Strenna ("Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven": GOOD CHRISTIANS AND UPRIGHT CITIZENS). The Preventive System is not only geared toward educating individuals "to make them happy in time and eternity": it is intended also to prevent "that part of human society that is so exposed yet so rich in promise" (SDB Const. 1) from entering a vicious circle of evils that ruin the present and future of the Church and society, when it can be the greatest resource for the future and growth for all. Don Bosco's broad and courageous vision, his untiring industriousness, his resilience in the face of obstacles can only be explained by this horizon of social transformation and evangelization of young people on a global scale.

I believe it is a valuable element not only to admire our father, but also to enhance the potential for such a wide and far-reaching presence in the world of youth that we have when TOGETHER we motivate all those who share the same faith in young people as a solution, as an answer to the present and future of the world, rather than merely seeing them (and perhaps fearing them) as a problem.

Don Bosco did not engage in politics, but he could speak to all the representatives of the various levels of government because his commitment was so transparently oriented toward the good of the young, in whom no one who had human society and service to others at heart, even public service for the good of all, the *raison d'être* of politics, could fail to take an interest. Our common voice can find access and a listening ear far beyond confessional boundaries if together we embody today that same zeal of caring for young people that has been given to us as a charism: and this way of being Church in the world, on the peripheries, is very much in line with the current magisterium of the Church (from *Gaudium et Spes* to *Laudato Si'*, and many other authoritative documents). It is a way of being Church that we cannot bring about except **together as the Family of Don Bosco**.

The complementary nature of vocations in Don Bosco's Family. It is becoming increasingly clear that if one really wants to make an effective impact on the education of young people, the commitment and shared responsibility of each and every one is important and indispensable. **Being TOGETHER as a Salesian Family, and always together with so many lay people from the world's presences in mission and formation, becomes an inescapable requirement of mission**, if we are not to end up being irrelevant.

Communion in the spirit of family and the broad Salesian movement

There are fields where we are really all in the same boat and in need of formation, such as matters that concern the digital world in relation to the new generations, or the whole vast inescapable field of integral ecology. We all have something to learn: if it becomes a common path, then while learning we can become much more effective and faithful to reality. The dynamics that are created in the learning process also transform the way of doing mission and formation together. It is this new type of mission that makes us become that leaven which the Church, the world, young people expect from us. We are not there

⁶ GC24, no. 71.

⁷ GC24, no. 39.

yet. The dough has changed; we have to become once more what we are called to be, and we can do it only together. After all, it was the same dynamic as in the beginning. Don Bosco did not have all the skills and knowledge: these were formed together. Without lay people like Mama Margaret and so many other collaborators of the time, and without his boys, Dominic Savio, to name the best known, neither Don Bosco nor we who come after him would be the same.

5. In the shade of a large tree with beautiful fruit

In my letter at the conclusion of the Second Seminar to Promote the Causes of Beatification and Canonization of the Salesian Family, I said: *“From Don Bosco down to our own times, we recognize a tradition of holiness to which we need to pay attention, since the incarnation of the charism that had its origin in him found its expression in a variety of states of life and in different forms. It is a question of men and women, young people and adults, consecrated persons and lay people, bishops and missionaries who in certain historical, cultural, and social contexts, different in time and place, made the special light of the Salesian charism shine out, representing a heritage that continues to play an effective role in the life and in the communities of believers and of men and women of good will.”*⁸

With humility and a deep sense of gratitude, we recognize in the Salesian Congregation and family a great tree with many fruits of holiness. These saints are young people, lay people, martyrs, people who have filled their lives with the leaven of love, love that gives itself to the full, faithful to Jesus Christ and his Gospel.

- A large tree with beautiful fruits of holiness such as (among others): Ceferino Namuncurá and Laura Vicuña, Albert Marvelli, Dominic Savio, Alessandrina da Costa, Attilio Giordani, the young martyrs of Poznan, young Bashir from Pakistan, and Simao Boi-Bororo (Brazil), or the benefactor Dorothy Chopitea.
- Not to speak of the beautiful figure of Mama Margaret, like holiness next door, the holiness of a mother who molded the heart of her beloved son John, and who accompanied the birth of this charism, without knowing it, in a simple way by giving her life, the life she had and the one she had left behind.
- And let us not forget Artemides Zatti in the year of his canonization. He was certainly a consecrated religious, but let us not forget the secular dimension of his holiness, namely the exercise of charity in the simplicity of a small hospital and a small village. He is an example and model of consecration to his people in their daily work, having God as the source, motivation in faith, and goal of his life.
- Their lives, the lives of all of them and their example are like “yeast in the dough.”

6. Our young people as yeast in today’s world

* Every human action that produces good for society or for individuals is linked to God’s intervention in the world and implies a loving collaboration with the mission. Especially in the Salesian context, everything that concerns the good of young people and their integral development carries with it the seeds of the Gospel – even a glass of fresh water given in the name of Jesus. Hence the need to insist on and promote this youth spirituality of the Salesian movement, which fully touches the apostolate and the experience of faith in all that is realized in the spirit of Don Bosco, and which generates adherence and solidarity, building communion and community with the young people who are the active agents and recipients of the Salesian mission in the world today.

* This being a leaven in today’s world is once again and quite seriously in tune with Strenna 2020 regarding **political involvement and the formation this demands**, nurtured by the

⁸ Rector Major, “Concluding letter for the Second Seminar promoting the Causes of Beatification and Canonization of the Salesian Family,” Rome, April 2018.

rich tradition of the Church's social teaching. "Politics is the highest form of charity," Paul VI said. Unfortunately, in many parts of the world what we find is just a gross educational vacuum. In speaking of the laity as yeast, as leaven, this element certainly cannot be overlooked. We have excellent examples within our family (Albert Marvelli) or close to it (Giorgio La Pira, Julius Nyerere).

Let me conclude by assuring you that as the Salesian Family we wish to continue walking alongside our young people throughout the world, not forgetting the yeast that is "*Christ is alive! He is our hope, and in a wonderful way he brings youth to our world, and everything he touches becomes young, new, full of life. The very first words, then, that I would like to say to every young Christian are these: Christ is alive, and he wants you to be alive!*"⁹

Pope Francis, always very sensitive and attentive to the situation of young people and open to the vision of the collaboration of the human family in building a more human and fraternal society, invites us to "*envisage and engender an open world.*" He makes a strong plea that to find truth and happiness in life, the only way is to love one's neighbor and to serve others in an open and generous manner because it is "*in the depths of every heart [that] love creates bonds and expands existence, for it draws people out of themselves and toward others.*"¹⁰

With great hope and trust, I invite all of Don Bosco's Family and especially the lay members of this family and so many others who belong to this vast Salesian movement to respond creatively, collaboratively, and concretely, in every possible way, to this humble proposal of the strenna for 2023 truly to be this *yeast like that in the Gospel of which Jesus our Lord reminded us.*

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⁹ ChV, 1.

¹⁰ FT, 88.