

LIKE DON BOSCO, WITH THE YOUNG AND FOR THE YOUNG

LETTER OF THE HOLY FATHER, POPE FRANCIS

to Reverend Fr. Ángel Fernández Artime
Rector Major of the Salesians
on the Bicentenary of the birth of St. John Bosco

The memory of St. John Bosco is alive in the Church. He is remembered as the founder of the Salesian Congregation, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, the Association of the Salesian Cooperators, the Association of Mary Help of Christians, and as the father of the present-day Salesian Family. He is likewise remembered in the Church as a holy educator and pastor of the young who opened the way of holiness for young people, offered a method of education that is at the same time a spirituality, and received from the Holy Spirit a charism for modern times.

In the Bicentenary of his birth I had the joy of meeting the Salesian Family gathered in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians in Turin, where lie the Founder's mortal remains. Through this message I wish to join with you again in thanking God, and at the same time in recalling the essential aspects of Don Bosco's spiritual and pastoral legacy and urging you to live them courageously.

Italy, Europe and the world have changed considerably in these two centuries, but the soul of the young has not: even today boys and girls are open to life and to the encounter with God and with others, but there are so many of them exposed to discouragement, spiritual anemia and marginalization.

Don Bosco teaches us first of all to not stand idly by, but to put ourselves in the vanguard by *offering young people an integral educational experience* which, firmly based on the religious dimension, affects the mind, the emotions and the whole person, always considered as someone created and loved by God. This leads to a genuinely human and Christian pedagogy, one that is animated by a concern for prevention and inclusion, especially of the children of the working classes and the marginalized groups of society, and offers them an opportunity for education and learning a trade in order to become good Christians and honest citizens. By working for the moral, civil and cultural education of youth, Don Bosco worked for the good of people and civil society, following his particular view of man that combines happiness, study and prayer, or to put it another way, work, religion and virtue. An integral part of this process is the development of a person's vocation in order to enable him to assume the concrete way of life in the Church to which the Lord calls him. This wide-ranging and demanding educational vision which Don Bosco condensed in his motto, "Da mihi animas", accomplished what we today express in the phrase, "educate by evangelizing and evangelize by educating" (Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis* [August 15, 1997], n. 147).

A characteristic feature of Don Bosco's pedagogy is loving kindness, which is to be understood as a love that is manifested and perceived, and reveals itself in caring, affection, understanding and involvement in the life of another person. In the experiential process of education, according to Don Bosco, it is not enough to love, but love needs to be expressed in gestures that are concrete and effective. Thanks to this loving kindness, so many children and adolescents in Salesian settings have experienced an intense and serene emotional growth, which has proved very valuable in the shaping of their personality and in their life's journey.

Within this framework lie *other distinctive traits* of Don Bosco's educational method: a family environment; the presence of the educator as a father, teacher and friend of the young person, which is conveyed by a classical term of Salesian pedagogy: assistance; a climate of joy and

celebration; ample space offered for singing, music and the theatre; the importance of the playground, games, sports and outings.

We can summarize the salient aspects of Don Bosco's personality in the following manner: he lived the total surrender of himself to God in his dedication to the salvation of souls and lived his fidelity to God and to the young in one and the same act of love. These attitudes led him to "go out" and take courageous decisions: the decision to devote himself to poor youth with the aim of giving rise to a vast movement of poor people for poor people; and the decision to extend this service beyond the boundaries of language, race, culture and religion, thanks to his tireless missionary impulse. He realized this project through his style of joyfully accepting and personally caring for each one whom he met and accompanied.

He was able to elicit the cooperation of Saint Mary Domenica Mazzarello and the cooperation of lay people, giving rise to the large tree of the Salesian Family which has received and enhanced his legacy.

In short, Don Bosco lived with a great passion for the salvation of the young, appearing as a credible witness of Jesus Christ and an outstanding herald of his Gospel, in profound communion with the Church, and in particular, with the Pope. He lived in constant prayer and union with God, with a strong and tender devotion to Our Lady, whom he invoked as the Immaculate Virgin and the Help of Christians; he was endowed with mystical experiences and the gift of miracles for the sake of his boys.

Even today the Salesian Family opens out to new frontiers in education and missionary work, pursuing the paths traced out by the new means of social communication and by an intercultural education among peoples of different religions in countries of the developing world or in places marked by migration. The challenges of the Turin of the nineteenth century have assumed global dimensions: the idolatry of money, an inequality that generates violence, an ideological colonization and cultural challenges related to urban contexts. Some aspects are more directly connected with the world of the young, such as the spread of the Internet, and therefore they pose a challenge to you, sons and daughters of Don Bosco, called as you are to work and to keep in mind, together with the hurts, also the resources that the Holy Spirit inspires in crisis situations.

As a Salesian Family you are called to *let the creativity typical of your charism flourish* once more in and beyond your educational institutions, as you take your place with apostolic dedication among young people, especially those on the peripheries.

"Youth ministry, as traditionally organized, has also suffered the impact of social changes. Young people often fail to find responses to their concerns, needs, problems and hurts in the usual structures. As adults, we find it hard to listen patiently to them, to appreciate their concerns and demands, and to speak to them in a language they can understand" (Apost. Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 105). Let us ensure that, as educators and as a community, we accompany them on their journey so that they feel the joy of bringing Jesus to every street, to every square, to every corner of the earth (cf. *ibid.*, 106).

May Don Bosco help you to *not disappoint the deep aspirations of the young*: their need for life, openness, joy, freedom, and the future; their desire to collaborate in building up a more just and fraternal world, in fostering the development of all peoples, in safeguarding nature and the living environment. Following his example, you will help them to experience that only in the life of grace, i.e., in friendship with Christ, does one fully attain the most authentic ideals. You will have the joy of accompanying them in their search for a synthesis of faith, culture and life at moments when they take weighty decisions or attempt to interpret a reality that is complex.

In particular, I want to point out *two tasks* that arise today from a discernment of the youth reality: the first is that of *educating, in accordance with a Christian anthropology, to the language of the new means of social communication and of the social networks*, that deeply shape the cultural and value systems of the young, and therefore their outlook on the reality of man and religion; the second is that of *promoting forms of social volunteering*, and not resigning yourselves to the

ideologies that place the market and production above the dignity of the person and the value of work.

To be educators who evangelize is a gift of nature and grace, but it is also the result of *formation, study, reflection, prayer and asceticism*. Don Bosco used to say to young people: "For you I study, for you I work, for you I live, for you I am ready even to give my life" (*Salesian Constitutions*, art. 14).

Today more than ever, in the face of what Pope Benedict XVI often referred to as an "educational emergency" (cf. *Letter to the diocese and the city of Rome on the urgent task of educating young people*, 21 January 2008), I invite the Salesian Family to promote an effective educational alliance between different religious and secular agencies so as to move forward with the diversity of your charisms at the service of youth in the different continents. In particular, I remind you of the imperative need to involve the families of young people. There can indeed be no effective youth ministry without a good family ministry.

The Salesian is an educator who, in the midst of his many relationships and commitments, *always lets the first proclamation resound*, the good news that directly or indirectly can never be absent: "Jesus Christ loves you; he gave his life to save you, and now he is living at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen and free you" (Apost. Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 164). To be faithful disciples of Don Bosco requires you to renew *the choice of catechesis* that was his lifelong commitment, understanding it today within the mission of a new evangelization (cf. *ibid.*, 160-175). This evangelizing catechesis deserves pride of place in Salesian institutions, and must be made with theological and pedagogical competence and the educator's transparent witness. It requires a process that involves listening to the Word of God, frequenting the sacraments, especially Confession and the Eucharist, and a filial relationship with the Virgin Mary.

Dear Salesian Brothers and Sisters, Don Bosco testifies that *Christianity is the source of happiness*, because it is the Gospel of love. It is from this source, and in your Salesian educational practice as well, that joy and celebration find their consistency and continuity. "We become fully human when we become more than human, when we let God bring us beyond ourselves in order to attain the fullest truth of our being. Here we find the source and inspiration of all our efforts at evangelization" (Apost. Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 8).

The Church has great expectations concerning the care of the young; great too is the charism that the Holy Spirit bestowed on St. John Bosco, a charism that has been carried forward by the Salesian Family with a passionate dedication to the youth of all continents and a flowering of numerous priestly, religious and lay vocations. I therefore cordially encourage you to take up the legacy of your founder and father with the Gospel radicalism that he made his own in his thinking, speaking and acting, with a proper competence and a generous spirit of service, *like Don Bosco, with the young and for the young*.

From the Vatican, 24 June 2015
Solemnity of the Birth of St. John the Baptist