

When the Lord Knocks

A confrere told me, "Father, we only need your closeness, your listening, your prayer. This consoles us, encourages us, and gives us strength and hope so that we can continue to serve the young, the poor and wounded, the frightened and terrified!"

On March 25, 2025, the Church celebrates the Solemnity of the Annunciation of the Angel Gabriel to Mary. One of the most significant solemnities for the Christian faith. On this solemnity, we remember the initiative of God who becomes part of that human history that he himself created. On that day in the Holy Eucharist, we recite the Creed, and when we profess that the Son of God became man, we believers kneel as a sign of amazement at this wonderful initiative of God before which we can only kneel.

In the experience of the Annunciation, Mary is afraid: "Do not be afraid, Mary," the Angel tells her. After she has expressed her questions, being assured that it is God's plan for her, Mary responds with a simple phrase that remains for us today a reminder and an invitation. Mary, the Blessed among women, simply says, "Let it be done to me according to your word."

Last March 25, the Lord knocked on the door of my heart through the call that my brothers at the 29th General Chapter addressed to me. They asked me to make myself available to take on the mission of being Rector Major of the Salesians of Don Bosco, the Congregation of St. Francis de Sales. I confess that at that moment I felt the weight of the invitation, moments that disorient because what the Lord was asking of me was not a light thing. The point is that when the call comes, we as believers enter that sacred space where we strongly feel the fact that it is He who takes the initiative. The only path before us is to simply abandon ourselves into the hands of God, without ifs, ands, or buts. And all this is naturally not easy.

“You will see how the Lord works”

In these first weeks, I am still asking myself like Mary, what is the meaning of all this? Then little by little I begin to arrive at that consolation that one of my Provincials once told me: “When the Lord calls, it is He who takes the initiative, what is done depends on Him. You just keep yourself ready and available. You will see how the Lord works.”

In light of this personal but very broad experience, because it concerns the Salesian Congregation and the Salesian Family, I immediately turned to my dear Salesian brothers. From the first moment, I asked them to accompany me with their prayer, their closeness, their support.

I must confess that in these first weeks I already feel that this mission must be inspired by Mary. After the Annunciation by the Angel, she set out to help her cousin Elizabeth. And thus, I set out to serve my brothers, listening to them, sharing with them, and reassuring them of the support of the entire Congregation, especially for those who live in situations of war, conflict, and extreme poverty.

I was struck by the comment of a Provincial who is experiencing an extremely difficult situation with his confreres. After a very fraternal conversation, he said to me, “Father, we only need your closeness, your listening, your prayer. This consoles us, encourages us, and gives us strength and hope so that we can continue to serve the young, the poor and wounded, the frightened and terrified!” After this comment, we remained silent, he and I, with some tears falling from his eyes and, I must say, also from mine.

After the meeting, I remained alone in my office. I asked myself if this mission that the Lord is asking me to accept is not perhaps that of making myself a brother alongside my brothers who suffer but hope? Who fight to do good for the poor and have no intention of stopping? I felt a voice inside me saying that it is worth saying ‘yes’ when the Lord knocks, whatever the cost!

Salesians in Ukraine (video)

The Salesian Vice-Province of Mary Help of Christians of the Byzantine Rite (UKR) has reshaped its educational-pastoral mission since the beginning of the Russian invasion in 2022. Amidst air raid sirens, makeshift shelters, and schools in basements, the Salesians have become a tangible presence: they host displaced people, distribute aid, provide spiritual accompaniment to soldiers and civilians, transformed a house into a reception centre, and run the "Mariapolis" modular campus, where they serve a thousand meals daily and organize oratory and sports activities, even founding the first Ukrainian Amputee Football team. The personal testimony of a confrere reveals the wounds, hopes, and prayers of those who have lost everything but continue to believe that, after this long national Way of the Cross, the Easter of peace will dawn for Ukraine.

The Pastoral Work of the Vice-Province of Mary Help of Christians of the Byzantine Rite (UKR) During the War

Our pastoral work had to change when the war began. Our educational-pastoral activities had to adapt to a completely different reality, often marked by the incessant sound of sirens announcing the danger of missile attacks and bombings. Every time the alarm sounds, we are forced to interrupt activities and go down with the young people into underground shelters or bunkers. In some schools, lessons are held directly in the basements to ensure greater safety for the students.

From the very beginning, we immediately set about helping and assisting the suffering population. We opened our houses to welcome displaced people, organized the collection and distribution of humanitarian aid: with our boys and young

people, we prepare thousands of packages with food, clothing, and everything necessary to send to needy people in territories near the fighting or in the combat zones themselves. Furthermore, some of our Salesian confreres serve as chaplains in the combat zones. There, they provide spiritual support to young soldiers, but also bring humanitarian aid to people who have remained in villages under constant bombardment, helping some of them move to a safer place. One deacon confrere who was in the trenches suffered damage to his health and lost his ankle. When, some years ago, I read an article in the Italian Salesian Bulletin about Salesians in the trenches during the First or Second World War, I never thought this would happen in this modern era in my own country. I was once struck by the words of a very young Ukrainian soldier who, quoting a historian and eminent officer, defender, and fighter for our people's independence, said: *"We fight defending our independence not because we hate those before us, but because we love those behind us."*

During this period, we also transformed one of our Salesian Houses into a reception centre for displaced people.

To support the physical, mental, psychological, and social rehabilitation of young people who lost limbs in the war, we created an Amputee Football team, the first team of its kind in Ukraine.

Since the beginning of the invasion in 2022, we made available to the Lviv City Council a plot of our land, intended for the construction of a Salesian school, to build a modular campus for internally displaced persons: "Mariapolis," where we Salesians operate in collaboration with the Centre of the City Council's Social Department. We provide welfare support and spiritual accompaniment, making the environment more welcoming. Supported by aid from our Congregation, various organizations including VIS and Don Bosco Missions, various mission offices and other charitable foundations, and even state agencies from other countries, we were able to set up

the campus kitchen with its respective staff, allowing us to offer lunch every day for about 1,000 people. Furthermore, thanks to their help, we can organize various Salesian-style activities for the 240 children and young people present on the campus.

A Small Experience and a Humble Personal Testimony

I would like to share my small experience and testimony here.. I truly thank the Lord who, through my Provincial, called me to this particular service. For three years, I have been working in the campus that hosts about 1,000 internally displaced persons. From the beginning, I have been alongside people who lost everything in an instant, except their dignity. Their homes are destroyed and looted; the savings and possessions painstakingly accumulated over years of life have vanished. Many have lost much more, and more precious things: their loved ones, killed before their eyes by missiles or mines. Some of the people on campus had to live for months in the basements of collapsed buildings, feeding on whatever little they could find, even if expired. They drank water from radiators and boiled potato peels to feed themselves. Then, at the first opportunity, they fled or were evacuated without knowing where to go, with no certainty about what awaited them. Moreover, some saw their cities, like Mariupol, razed to the ground. In fact, in honour of this beautiful city of Mary, we Salesians named the campus for the displaced “Mariapolis,” entrusting this place and its inhabitants to the Virgin Mary. And She, like a mother, stands by everyone in these times of trial. In the campus, I set up a chapel dedicated to Her, where there is an icon painted by a lady from the campus, originally from the tormented city of Kharkiv. The chapel has become a place of encounter with God and with oneself for all residents, regardless of their Christian faith denomination.

Being with them, loving them, welcoming them, listening to them, consoling them, encouraging them, praying for them and with them, and supporting them in whatever way I can – these

are the moments that make up my service, which has now become my life during this period. It is a true school of life, of spirituality, where I learn so much by being close to their suffering. Almost all of them hope that the war will end soon and peace will come, so they can return home. But for many, that dream is now unattainable: their homes no longer exist. So, as best I can, I try to offer them some anchor of hope, helping them to encounter the One who abandons no one, who is close in the sufferings and difficulties of life.

Sometimes they ask me to prepare them for Reconciliation: with God, with themselves, with the harsh reality they are forced to live. Other times, I help them with more concrete needs: medicine, clothes, diapers, hospital visits. I also do administrative work alongside my three lay colleagues. Every day, at 5:00 PM, we pray for peace, and a small group has learned to recite the Rosary, praying it daily.

As a Salesian, I try to be attentive to the needs of the young people. From the beginning, with the help of animators, we created an oratory within the campus. We also have activities, trips, and mountain camps during the summer. Furthermore, one of the commitments I carry forward is overseeing the canteen, to ensure that none of the residents on campus go without a hot meal.

Among the campus inhabitants is little Maksym, who wakes up in the middle of the night, terrified by any loud noise. Maria, a mother who lost everything, including her husband, smiles at her children every day so as not to burden them with her suffering. Then there is Petro, 25 years old, who was at home with his girlfriend when a Russian drone dropped a bomb. The explosion amputated both his legs, while his girlfriend died shortly after. Petro lay dying all night until soldiers found him in the morning and brought him to safety. The ambulance couldn't get close due to the fighting.

Amidst so much suffering, I continue my apostolate with the Lord's help and the support of my confreres.

We Byzantine Rite Salesians, together with our 13 Latin Rite confreres present in Ukraine – largely of Polish origin and belonging to the Salesian Province of Krakow (PLS) – deeply share the pain and suffering of the Ukrainian people. As sons of Don Bosco, we continue our educative-pastoral mission with faith and hope, adapting daily to the difficult conditions imposed by the war.

We stand alongside the young, the families, and all those who suffer and need help. We wish to be visible signs of God's love, so that the life, hope, and joy of the young may never be stifled by violence and pain.

In this common witness, we reaffirm the vitality of our Salesian charism, which knows how to respond even to the most dramatic challenges of history. Our two particularities, that of the Byzantine rite and that of the Latin rite, make visible the indivisible unity of the Salesian Charism as affirmed by the Salesian Constitutions in Art. 100: *"The Founder's charism is the principle of unity of the Congregation and, through its fruitfulness, is the origin of the different ways of living the one Salesian vocation."*

We believe that pain and suffering do not have the last word, and that in faith, every Cross already contains the seed of the Resurrection. After this long Holy Week, the Resurrection will inevitably come for Ukraine: true and just PEACE will arrive.

Some Information

Some chapter confreres asked for information about the war in Ukraine. Allow me to say something in the form of a Snapshot. A clarification: the war in Ukraine cannot be interpreted as an ethnic conflict or a territorial dispute between two peoples with opposing claims or rights over a specific territory. It is not a quarrel between two parties fighting over a piece of land. And therefore, it is not a battle

between equals. What is happening in Ukraine is an invasion, a unilateral aggression. Here, it is about one people improperly attacking another. A nation, which fabricated baseless motives, inventing a supposed right, violating international order and laws, decided to attack another State, violating its sovereignty and territorial integrity, its right to decide its own fate and direction of development, occupying and annexing territories. Destroying cities and towns, many razed to the ground, taking the lives of thousands of civilians. Here there is an aggressor and an attacked party: this is precisely the peculiarity and horror of this war.

And it is starting from this premise that the peace we await should also be conceived. A peace that has the flavour of justice and is based on truth, not temporary, not opportunistic, not a peace founded on hidden commercial conveniences, avoiding the creation of precedents for autocratic regimes in the world that might one day decide to invade other countries, occupy or annex part of a neighbouring or distant country, simply because they wish to or because they feel like it, or because they are more powerful.

Another absurdity of this unprovoked and undeclared war is that the aggressor forbids the victim the right to defend itself, tries to intimidate and threaten all those – in this case, other countries – who side with the defenceless and set out to help the unjustly attacked victim defend itself and resist.

Some Sad Statistics

From the beginning of the 2022 invasion until today (08.04.2025), the UN has recorded and confirmed data relating to 12,654 deaths and 29,392 injuries among CIVILIANS in Ukraine.

According to the latest available verified UNICEF news, at least 2,406 CHILDREN have been killed or injured by the escalation of the war in Ukraine since 2022. Child victims

include 659 CHILDREN KILLED and 1,747 INJURED – meaning at least 16 children killed or injured every week. Millions of children continue to have their lives disrupted due to ongoing attacks or having to flee and evacuate to other places and countries. The children of Donbas have been already suffering from the war for 11 years.

Alongside the plan for an invasion of Ukraine, Russia also initiated a program of forced deportations of Ukrainian children. Latest data indicate 20,000 children taken from their homes, detained for months, and subjected to forced Russification through intense propaganda before forced adoption.

Fr. Andrii Platosh, sdb

The way to hell paved with feeble resolutions (1873)

San Giovanni Bosco recounts in a “good night” the result of a long plea to Mary Help of Christians: to understand the main cause of eternal damnation. The answer, received in repeated dreams, is shocking in its simplicity: the lack of a firm, concrete resolution at the end of Confession. Without a sincere decision to change one’s life, even the sacrament becomes ineffective and sins are repeated.

A solemn warning: Why do so many go to destruction? Because they do not make good resolutions when they go to confession.

At the "Good Night" on May 31, 1873, Don Bosco gave his pupils a serious warning, which, he said, was "the result of his humble prayers" and came from the Lord:

Throughout the whole month of May-he said-particularly during the novena of Mary, Help of Christians, I constantly offered Masses and prayers to Our Lord and the Blessed Virgin imploring them to let me know what, most of all drags souls into hell. I do not say now that the Lord did or did not enlighten me. I only say that almost every night I dreamed that this is due to the lack of firm resolves in confessions. I seemed to see boys leaving church after confession, their heads sprouting two horns.

What causes this? I asked myself. *Ah, this is due to feeble resolutions.* That's why so many go frequently to confession but never mend their ways and keep confessing the same sins over and over again. There are some (I am only conjecturing. not going on anything heard in confession, because of the seal) who at the start of the school year were doing rather poorly in studies and are still doing no better: there are others who griped and are still griping. I thought it best to let you know this, because it is the result of my humble prayers and because it does come from the Lord.

Publicly he gave no other details, but undoubtedly he took advantage of this dream to encourage and admonish. What little he did say and the way he said it constituted a grave warning, such as should frequently be given to our boys. (BM X, 48-49)

Don Bosco promoter of “divine mercy”

As a very young priest, Don Bosco published a booklet, in tiny format, entitled “Exercise of Devotion to God’s Mercy”.

It all began with the Marchioness Barolo

The Marchioness Giulia Colbert di Barolo (1785-1864), declared Venerable by Pope Francis on 12 May 2015, personally cultivated a special devotion to divine mercy, so she had the custom of a week of meditations and prayers on the subject introduced to the religious and educational communities she founded near Valdocco. But she was not satisfied. She wanted this practice to spread elsewhere, especially in parishes, among the people. She sought the consent of the Holy See, which not only granted it, but also granted various indulgences for this devotional practice. At this point, it was a question of making a publication suitable for the purpose.

We are now in the summer of 1846, when Don Bosco, having overcome the serious crisis of exhaustion that had brought him to the brink of the grave, had withdrawn to spend time with Mamma Margaret at the Becchi to convalesce and had by then “resigned” from his much appreciated service as chaplain to one of the Barolo works, to the great displeasure of the Marchioness herself. But “his young people” called him to the newly rented Pinardi house.

At this point the famous patriot Silvio Pellico, secretary-librarian to the Marchioness and an admirer and friend of Don Bosco, who had set some of his poems to music, intervened. The Salesian memoirs tell us that Pellico, with a certain boldness, proposed to the Marchioness that she commission Don Bosco to do the publication she was interested in. What did the Marchioness do? She accepted, albeit not too enthusiastically. Who knows? Perhaps she wanted to put him to

the test. And Don Bosco, too, accepted.

A theme close to his heart

The theme of God's mercy was among his spiritual interests, those on which he had been formed in the seminary in Chieri and especially at the Turin *Convitto*. Only two years earlier he had finished attending the lessons of his fellow countryman Saint Joseph Cafasso, just four years older than him, but his spiritual director, whose sermons he followed at retreats for priests, but also the formator for half a dozen other founders, some even saints. Well then, Cafasso, although a child of the religious culture of his time – made up of prescriptions and “doing good to escape divine punishment and deserve Paradise” – did not miss an opportunity in both his teaching and preaching to speak of God's mercy. And how could he not do so when he was constantly devoted to the Sacrament of Penance and to assisting those condemned to death? All the more so since such indulgent devotion at the time was a pastoral reaction against the rigours of Jansenism that supported the predestination of those who were saved.

So, Don Bosco, as soon as he returned from the country at the beginning of November, set to work, following the pious practices approved by Rome and spread throughout Piedmont. With the help of a few texts that he could easily find in the *Convitto* library which he knew well, at the end of the year he published at his own expense a small booklet of 111 pages, tiny format, entitled “[Exercise of devotion to God's Mercy](#)”. He immediately gave it to the girls, women and Sisters at the Barolo foundations. It is not documented, but logic and gratitude would have it that he also made a gift of it to the Marchioness Barolo, the promoter of the project: but the same logic and gratitude would have it that the Marchioness did not let herself be outdone in generosity, sending him, perhaps anonymously as on other occasions, a contribution of her own to the expenses.

There is no space here to present the “classic” contents of Don Bosco's booklet of meditations and prayers; we

would just like to point out that its basic principle is: “everyone must invoke God’s Mercy for himself and for all people, because ‘we are all sinners’ [...] all in need of forgiveness and grace [...] all called to eternal salvation.”

Significant, then, is the fact that at the conclusion of each day of the week Don Bosco, by way of “devotional exercises”, assigns a practice of piety: invite others to intervene, forgive those who have offended us, make an immediate mortification to obtain mercy from God for all sinners, give some alms or replace them with the recitation of prayers etc. On the last day, the practice is replaced by a nice invitation, perhaps even alluding the Marchioness Barolo, to say “at least one *Hail Mary* for the person who has promoted this devotion!”

Educational practice

But beyond the writings with edifying and formative purposes, one can ask how Don Bosco in fact educated his youngsters to trust in divine mercy. The answer is not difficult and could be documented in many ways. We will limit ourselves to three vital experiences lived at Valdocco: the sacraments of Confession and Communion and his figure of a “father full of goodness and love”.

Confession

Don Bosco initiated hundreds of young people from Valdocco into adult Christian life. But by what means? Two in particular: Confession and Communion.

Don Bosco, as we know, is one of the great apostles of Confession, and this is first of all because he exercised this ministry to the full, as did, for that matter, his teacher and spiritual director Cafasso mentioned above, and the much admired figure of his almost contemporary the saintly Curé d’Ars (1876-1859). If the latter’s life, as has been written, “was spent in the confessional” and if Cafasso was able to offer many hours of the day (“the necessary time”) to listen in confession to “bishops, priests, religious,

eminent laymen and simple people who flocked to him", Don Bosco could not do the same because of the many occupations in which he was immersed. Nevertheless, he made himself available in the confessional for the young people (and the Salesians) every day that religious services were celebrated at Valdocco or in Salesian houses, or on special occasions.

He had begun to do this as soon as he had finished "learning to be a priest" at the Convitto (1841-1844), when on Sundays he would gather the young men in the wandering oratory over two years, when he went to hear confessions at the Consolata or in the Piedmontese parishes to which he was invited, or when he took advantage of carriage or train journeys to hear confessions from coachmen or passengers. He never stopped doing this until the very end, and when asked not to tire himself out with confessions, he replied that by now it was the only thing he could do for his young people. And what was his sorrow when, due to bureaucratic reasons and misunderstandings, his confession licence was not renewed by the archbishop! The testimonies about Don Bosco as a confessor are innumerable and, in fact, the famous photograph depicting him in the act of confessing a young boy surrounded by so many others waiting to do so, must have pleased the saint himself, who was maybe behind the idea. It still remains a significant and indelible icon of his figure in the collective imagination.

But beyond his experience as a confessor, Don Bosco was a tireless promoter of the sacrament of Reconciliation. He spoke of its necessity, its importance, the usefulness of receiving it frequently. He pointed out the dangers of a celebration lacking the necessary conditions, and illustrated the classic ways of approaching it fruitfully. He did this through lectures, good nights, witty mottos and little words in the ear, circular letters to the young people at the colleges, personal letters, and by recounting numerous dreams focusing on confession, either well or badly done. In accordance with his intelligent catechetical practice, he told them episodes of conversions of great sinners, and also his

own personal experiences in this regard.

Don Bosco, who knew the youthful soul in depth, used love and gratitude to God, whom he presented in his infinite goodness, generosity and mercy in order to lead all young people to sincere repentance. Instead, to shake the coldest and most hardened hearts, he described the likely punishments of sin and impressed them with vivid descriptions of divine judgement and Hell. Even in these cases, however, not satisfied with urging the boys to be sorry for their sins, he tried to bring them to the need for divine mercy, an important provision to anticipate their forgiveness even before sacramental confession. Don Bosco, as usual, did not enter into doctrinal matters. He was only interested in a sincere confession, which therapeutically heals the wound of the past, recomposes the spiritual fabric of the present for a future of a "life of grace".

Don Bosco believed in sin, believed in serious sin, believed in hell and spoke of their existence to readers and listeners. But he was also convinced that God is mercy in person, which is why he has given us the sacrament of Reconciliation. And so he insisted on the conditions for receiving it well, and above all on the confessor as "father" and "doctor" and not so much as "doctor and judge": "The confessor knows how much greater than your faults is the mercy of God who grants you forgiveness through his intervention" ([Life of Michael Magone](#), pp. 24-25).

According to Salesian memoirs, he often suggested to his youngsters to invoke divine mercy, not to be discouraged after sin, but to return to confession without fear, trusting in the goodness of the Lord and then making firm resolutions for good.

As an "educator in the youth field" Don Bosco felt the need to insist less on *ex opere operato* and more on *ex opere operantis*, that is, on the dispositions of the penitent. At Valdocco everyone felt invited to make a good confession, all felt the risk of bad confessions and the importance of making a good confession; many of them then felt they were

living in a land blessed by the Lord. It was not for nothing that divine mercy had caused a deceased young man to wake up after the funeral shroud had been pulled away so that he could confess his sins (to Don Bosco).

In short, the sacrament of confession, well explained in its specific features and frequently celebrated, was perhaps the most effective means by which the Piedmontese saint led his young people to trust in God's immense mercy.

Communion

But Communion, the second pillar of Don Bosco's religious pedagogy, also served its purpose.

Don Bosco is certainly one of the greatest promoters of the sacramental practice of frequent Communion. His doctrine, modelled on the Counter-Reformation way of thinking, gave importance to Communion rather than to the liturgical celebration of the Eucharist, even if there was an evolution in its frequency. In the first twenty years of his priestly life, in the wake of St. Alphonsus, but also of the Council of Trent and before that of Tertullian and St Augustine, he suggested weekly Communion, or several times a week or even daily depending on the perfection of the dispositions corresponding to the graces of the sacrament. Dominic Savio, who at Valdocco had begun to go to confession and communion every fortnight, then went on to receive it every week, then three times a week, finally, after a year of intense spiritual growth, every day, obviously always following the advice of his confessor, Don Bosco himself.

Later, in the second half of the 1860s, on the basis of his pedagogical experiences and a strong theological current in favour of frequent Communion, which saw the French Bishop de Ségur and the prior of Genoa Fr Giuseppe Frassinetti as leaders, Don Bosco moved on to inviting his young men to receive Communion more often, convinced that it allowed decisive steps in the spiritual life and favoured their growth in the love of God. And in the case of the impossibility of daily Sacramental Communion, he suggested spiritual Communion,

perhaps during a visit to the Blessed Sacrament, so much appreciated by St Alphonsus. However, the important thing was to keep the conscience in a state to be able to receive Communion every day: the decision was in a way up to the confessor.

For Don Bosco, every Communion worthily received – the prescribed fasting, state of grace, willingness to detach oneself from sin, a beautiful thanksgiving afterwards – cancels daily faults, strengthens the soul to avoid them in the future, increases confidence in God and in his infinite goodness and mercy; moreover, it is a source of grace to succeed in school and in life, it is help in bearing sufferings and overcoming temptations.

Don Bosco believes that Communion is a necessity for the “good” to keep themselves as such and for the “bad” to become “good”. It is for those who want to become saints, not for the saints, like medicine is given to the sick. Obviously, he knows that its reception alone is not a sure indication of goodness, as there are those who receive it very lukewarmly and out of habit, especially since the very superficiality of young people often does not allow them to understand the full importance of what they are doing.

With Communion then, one can implore from the Lord particular graces for oneself and for others. Don Bosco’s letters are full of requests to his young men to pray and receive Communion according to his intention, so that the Lord may grant him good success in the “affairs” of every order in which he finds himself immersed. And he did the same with all his correspondents, who were invited to approach this sacrament to obtain the graces requested, while he would do the same in the celebration of Holy Mass.

Don Bosco cared so much that his boys grew up nourished by the sacraments, but he also wanted the utmost respect for their freedom. And he left precise instructions to his educators in his treatise on the Preventive System: “Never force young people to attend the holy sacraments but only encourage them, and give them the comfort of taking advantage

of them.”

At the same time, however, he remained adamant in his conviction that the sacraments are of paramount importance. He wrote peremptorily: “Say what you will about the various systems of education, but I find no sure basis except in the frequency of Confession and Communion” ([The Young Shepherd Boy from the Alps, the Life of Francis Besucco from Argentera](#), 1864. p. 100).

Fatherliness and mercy

God’ mercy, at work particularly at the time of the sacraments of Confession and Communion, then found its external expression not only in a Don Bosco “father confessor”, but also “father, brother, friend” of the young men in ordinary everyday life. With some exaggeration it could be said that their confidence in Don Bosco was such that many of them hardly made a distinction between Don Bosco “confessor” and Don Bosco “friend” and “brother”; others could sometimes exchange the sacramental accusation with the sincere effusions of a son towards his father; on the other hand Don Bosco’s knowledge of the young was such that with sober questions he inspired them with extreme confidence and not infrequently knew how to make the accusation in their place.

The figure of God the father, merciful and provident, who throughout history has shown his goodness from Adam onwards towards men, righteous or sinners, but all in need of help and the object of paternal care, and in any case all called to salvation in Jesus Christ, is thus modulated and reflected in the goodness of Don Bosco “Father of his young people”, who only wants their good, who does not abandon them, always ready to understand them, pity them, forgive them. For many of them, orphans, poor and abandoned, accustomed from an early age to hard daily work, the object of very modest manifestations of tenderness, children of an era in which what prevailed was decisive submission and absolute obedience to any constituted authority, Don Bosco was perhaps the caress never experienced by a father, the “tenderness” of which Pope

Francis speaks.

His letter to the young men of the Mirabello house at the end of 1864 is still moving: "Those voices, those cheers, that kissing and shaking hands, that cordial smile, that talking to each other about the soul, that encouraging each other to do good are things that embalm my heart, and for that reason I cannot think about them without feeling moved to tears. I will tell you [...] that you are the apple of my eye" (*Epistolario* II edited by F. Motto II, letter no. 792).

Even more moving is his letter to the young men of Lanzo on 3 January 1876: "Let me tell you and let no-one take offence, you are all thieves; I say it and I repeat it – you have stolen everything from me. When I was at Lanzo, you enchanted me with your benevolence and loving kindness, you bound the faculties of my mind with your pity; I was still left with this poor heart, whose affections you had already stolen from me entirely. Now your letter signed by 200 friendly and dearest hands have taken possession of this whole heart of mine, and nothing remains except a lively desire to love you in the Lord, to do you good and save the souls of all of you" (*Epistolario* III, letter no. 1389).

The loving kindness with which he treated and wanted the Salesians to treat the boys had a divine foundation. He affirmed this by quoting an expression from St. Paul: 'Charity is benign and patient; it suffers all things, but hopes all things, and sustains all troubles'.

Loving kindness was therefore a sign of mercy and divine love that escaped sentimentalism and forms of sensuality because of the theological charity that was its source. Don Bosco communicated this love to individual boys and also to groups of them: "That I bear you much affection, I don't need to tell you, I have given you clear proof of it. That you love me, I do not need to tell you, because you have constantly shown it to me. But on what is this mutual affection of ours founded? [...] So the good of our souls is the foundation of our affection" (*Epistolary* II, no. 1148). Love of God, the theological *primum*, is thus the foundation of the

pedagogical *primum*.

Loving-kindness was also the translation of divine love into truly human love, made up of right sensitivity, amiable cordiality, benevolent and patient affection tending to deep communion of the heart. In short, the effective and affective love that is experienced in a privileged form in the relationship between the educand and the educator, when gestures of friendship and forgiveness on the part of the educator induce the young person, by virtue of the love that guides the educator, to open up to confidence, to feel supported in his effort to surpass himself and to commit himself, to give consent and to adhere in depth to the values that the educator lives personally and proposes to him. The young person understands that this relationship reconstructs and restructures him as a man. The most arduous undertaking of the Preventive System is precisely that of winning the young person's heart, of enjoying his esteem, his trust, of making him a friend. If a young person does not love the educator, he can do very little of the young person and for the young person.

Works of mercy

We could now continue with the works of mercy, which the Catechism distinguishes between corporal and spiritual works, setting out two groups of seven. It would not be difficult to document both how Don Bosco lived, practised and encouraged the practice of these works of mercy and how by his "being and working" he in fact constituted a sign and visible witness, in deeds and words, of God's love for mankind. Due to space limitations, we limit ourselves to indicating the possibility of research. It remains, however, that today they seem to be abandoned also because of the false opposition between mercy and justice, as if mercy were not a typical way of expressing that love which, as such, can never contradict justice.

The Legacy of Pope Francis

Amid the flood of articles and comments that have accompanied these days, we simply want to express our **thanks** to Pope Francis for the human and spiritual heritage he leaves us:

1. For Divine Mercy. Thank you for tirelessly reminding us that “God never tires of forgiving” and for the extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy.

2. For the joy of faith. Thank you for teaching us that faith in Jesus Christ allows us to live “on the wings of hope”: truly *Spes non confundit*.

3. For devotion to Mary. Thank you for the testimony of filial devotion to the Mother of God, the Most Holy Mary.

4. For disarming simplicity. Thank you for a sober lifestyle that has marked every gesture of his pontificate.

5. For prioritizing the least. Thank you for placing the poor, the homeless, refugees, migrants, and prisoners at the center.

6. For denouncing the “throwaway culture”. Thank you for condemning the exploitation and instrumentalization of people, unscrupulous profit, and rampant consumerism.

7. For the value of the family. Thank you for warning us that pets cannot replace children.

8. For attention to the elderly. Thank you for reminding us that fragile life is not to be discarded: the elderly are not to be euthanized for being useless or unproductive, but are witnesses of peace, love, and blessing.

9. For synodality. Thank you for showing that Christianity is

not a “do-it-yourself” project, but communion with God and with brothers and sisters.

10. For ecumenical openness. Thank you for seeking unity among Christians with concrete and courageous gestures.

11. For the fight for peace. Thank you for raising your voice in a world torn apart by a “third world war in pieces.”

12. For the prophetic vision of the present time. Thank you for helping us understand that we are not simply living through an era of change, but the change of an era.

Thank you. May God reward all the good sown on earth.

Educating our emotions with Saint Francis de Sales

Modern psychology has demonstrated the importance and influence of emotions in the life of the human psyche, and everyone knows that emotions are particularly strong during youth. But there is hardly talk anymore of the “passions of the soul,” which classical anthropology has carefully analysed, as evidenced by the work of Francis de Sales, and, in particular, when he writes that “the soul, as such, is the source of the passions.” In his vocabulary, the term “emotion” did not yet appear with the connotations we attribute to it. Instead, he would say that our “passions” in certain circumstances are “moved.” In the educational field, the question that arises concerns the attitude that is appropriate to have in the face of these involuntary manifestations of our sensibility, which always have a physiological component.

“I am a poor man and nothing more”

All those who knew Francis de Sales noted his great sensitivity and emotionality. The blood would rush to his head and his face would turn red. We know of his outbursts of anger against the “heretics” and the courtesan of Padua. Like any good Savoyard, he was “usually calm and gentle, but capable of terrible outbursts of anger; a volcano under the snow.” His sensitivity was very much alive. On the occasion of the death of his little sister Jeanne, he wrote to Jane Frances de Chantal, who was also dismayed:

Alas, my Daughter: I am a poor man and nothing more. My heart has been touched more than I could ever imagine; but the truth is that your grief as well as my mother's have contributed a great deal to this: I was afraid for your heart as well as my mother's.

At the death of his mother, he did not hide that the separation had made him shed tears. He certainly had the courage to close her eyes and mouth and give her a last kiss, but after that, he confided to Jane Frances de Chantal, “my heart swelled greatly, and I wept for this good mother more than I had ever done since the day I embraced the priesthood.” In fact, he did not systematically restrain from manifesting his feelings externally. He accepted them serenely given his humanistic approach. A precious testimony from Jane Frances de Chantal informs us that “our saint was not exempt from feelings and outbursts of passions, and did not want to be freed from them.”

It is commonly known that the passions of the soul influence the body, causing external reactions to their internal movements: “We externalize and manifest our passions and the movements that our souls have in common with animals through the eyes, with movements of the eyebrows, forehead and entire face.” Thus, it is not in our power not to feel fear in certain circumstances: “It is as if one were to say to a person who sees a lion or a bear coming towards them: Do not

be afraid." Now, "when feeling fear, one becomes pale, and when we are called to account for something that displeases us, our blood rushes to our faces and we become red, or feeling displeasure can also make tears well up in our eyes." Children, "if they see a dog barking, they immediately start screaming and do not stop until they are near their mother."

When Ms. de Chantal meets her husband's murderer, how will her "heart" react? "I know that, without a doubt, that heart of yours will throb and feel shaken, and your blood will boil," her spiritual director predicts, adding this lesson of wisdom: "God makes us see with our own eyes, through these emotions, how true it is that we are made of flesh, bone, and spirit."

The twelve passions of the soul

In ancient times, Virgil, Cicero, and Boethius broke the passions of the soul down to four, while Saint Augustine knew only one dominant passion, love, articulated in turn into four secondary passions: "Love that tends to possess what it loves is called cupidity or *desire*; when it achieves and possesses it, it is called *joy*; when it flees what is contrary to it, it is called *fear*; if it happens to lose it and feels the weight of it, it is called *sadness*."

In *Philothea*, Francis de Sales points out seven, comparing them to the strings that the luthier must tune from time to time: *love, hate, desire, fear, hope, sadness, and joy*.

In the *Treatise on the Love of God*, on the other hand, he lists up to twelve. It is surprising that "this multitude of passions [...] is left in our souls!" The first five have as their object the good, that is, everything that our sensibility makes us spontaneously seek and appreciate as good for us (we think of the fundamental goods of life, health, and joy):

*If good be considered in itself according to its natural goodness, it excites **love**, the first and principal passion; if*

*good be regarded as absent, it provokes us to **desire**; if being desired we think we are able to obtain it, we enter into hope; if we think we are unable, we feel **despair**; but when we possess it as present, it moves us to **joy**.*

The other seven passions are those that make us spontaneously react negatively to everything that appears to us as evil to be avoided and fought against (we think of illness, suffering, and death):

*As soon as we discover evil, we **hate** it; if it is absent, we **fly** it; if we cannot avoid it, we **fear** it; if we think we can avoid it, we grow bold and **courageous**; but if we feel it present, we grieve, and then **anger** and wrath suddenly rush forth to reject and repel the evil or at least to take vengeance for it. If we cannot succeed we remain in **grief**. But if we repulse or avenge it we feel satisfaction and satiation, which is a pleasure of **triumph**, for as the possession of good gladdens the heart, so the victory over evil exalts the spirits.*

As can be noted, to the eleven passions of the soul proposed by Saint Thomas Aquinas, Francis de Sales adds victory over evil, which “exalts the spirits” and provokes the joy of triumph.

Love, the first and main passion

As was easy to foresee, love is presented as the “first and main passion”: “Love comes first, among the passions of the soul: it is the king of all the outbursts of the heart, it transforms everything else into itself and makes us be what it loves.” “Love is the first passion of the soul,” he repeats.

It manifests itself in a thousand ways and its language is very diversified. In fact, “it is not expressed only in words, but also with the eyes, with gestures, and with actions. As far as the eyes are concerned, the tears that flow

from them are proof of love." There are also the "sighs of love." But these manifestations of love are different. The most habitual and superficial is the emotion or passion, which puts sensitivity in motion almost involuntarily.

And *hate*? We spontaneously hate what appears to be evil. It should be noted that among people there are forms of hatred and instinctive, irrational, unconscious aversions, like those that exist between a mule and a horse, or between a vine and cabbages. We are not responsible for these at all, because they do not depend on our will.

Desire and flight

Desire is another fundamental reality of our soul. Everyday life triggers multiple desires, because desire consists in the "hope of a future good." The most common natural desires are those that "concern goods, pleasures, and honours."

On the other hand, we spontaneously flee from the evils of life. The human will of Christ pushed Him to *flee* from the pains and sufferings of passion; hence the trembling, anguish, and sweating of blood.

Hope and despair

Hope concerns a good that one believes can be obtained. Philothea is invited to examine how she behaved as regards "hope, perhaps too often placed in the world and in creatures; and too little in God and eternal things."

As for *despair*, look for example at that of the "youth who aspire to perfection": "As soon as they encounter a difficulty along their path, one immediately gets a feeling of disappointment, which pushes him/her to make many complaints, so as to give the impression of being troubled by great torments. Pride and vanity cannot tolerate the slightest defect, without immediately feeling strongly disturbed to the point of despair."

Joy and sadness

Joy is "satisfaction for the good obtained." Thus, "when we meet those we love, it is not possible not to feel moved by joy and happiness." The possession of a good infallibly produces a complacency or joy, as the law of gravity moves the stone: "It is the weight that shakes things, moves them, and stops them: it is the weight that moves the stone and drags it down as soon as the obstacles are removed; it is the same weight that makes it continue the movement downwards; finally, it is always the same weight that makes it stop and settle when it has reached its place."

Sometimes joy comes with laughter. "Laughter is a passion that erupts without us wanting it and it is not in our power to restrain it, all the more so as we laugh and are moved to laugh by unforeseen circumstances." Did Our Lord laugh? The bishop of Geneva thinks that Jesus smiled when He wanted to: "Our Lord could not laugh, because for Him nothing was unforeseen, since He knew everything before it happened; He could, of course, smile, but He did so deliberately."

The young Visitation nuns, sometimes seized by uncontrollable laughter when a companion beat her chest or a reader made a mistake during the reading at the table, needed a little lesson on this point: "Fools laugh at every situation, because everything surprises them, not being able to foresee anything; but the wise do not laugh so lightly, because they employ reflection more, which makes them foresee the things that are to happen." That said, it is not a defect to laugh at some imperfection, "provided one does not go too far."

Sadness is "sorrow for pain that is present." It "disturbs the soul, provokes immoderate fears, makes one feel disgust for prayer, weakens and lulls the brain to sleep, deprives the soul of wisdom, resolution, judgment, and courage, and annihilates strength"; it is "like a harsh winter that ruins all the beauty of the earth and makes all the animals indolent; because it takes away all sweetness from the soul and makes it as lazy and impotent in all its faculties."

In certain cases, it can lead to weeping: a

father, when sending his son to court or to study, cannot refrain “from crying when saying goodbye to him”; and “a daughter, although she has married according to the wishes of her father and mother, moves them to tears when receiving their blessing.” Alexander the Great wept when he learned that there were other lands that he would never be able to conquer: “Like a child who whines for an apple that is denied him, that Alexander, whom historians call the Great, more foolish than a child, begins to weep warm tears, because it seems impossible for him to conquer the other worlds.”

Courage and fear

Fear refers to a “future evil.” Some, wanting to be brave, hang around somewhere during the night, but “as soon as they hear a stone fall or the rustle of a mouse running away, they start screaming: My God! – What is it, they are asked, what did you find? – I heard a noise. – But what? – I don’t know.” It is necessary to be wary, because “fear is a greater evil than the evil itself.”

As for *courage*, before being a virtue, it is a feeling that supports us in the face of difficulties that would normally overwhelm us. Francis de Sales experienced it when undertaking a long and risky visit to his mountain diocese:

I was about to mount my horse for the pastoral visit, which would last about five months. [...] I left full of courage, and, since that morning, I felt a great joy in being able to begin, although, before, for several days, I had experienced vain fears and sadness.

Anger and the feeling of triumph

As for *anger* or *wrath*, we cannot prevent ourselves from being seized by it in certain circumstances: “If they tell me that someone has spoken ill of me, or that I am being treated with any other form of discourtesy, I immediately fly into a rage and there isn’t a vein in my body that isn’t

twisting, because the blood is boiling." Even in the Visitation monasteries, occasions for irritation and anger were not lacking, and the attacks of the "irascible appetite" were felt to be overwhelming. There is nothing strange in this: "To prevent the resentment of anger from awakening in us and the blood from rising to our heads will never be possible; we will be fortunate if we can reach this perfection a quarter of an hour before we die." It can also happen "that anger upsets and turns my poor heart upside down, that my head smokes from all sides, that the blood boils like a pot on the fire."

The satisfaction of anger, for having overcome evil, provokes the exhilarating emotion of triumph. He who triumphs "cannot contain the transport of his joy."

In search of balance

Passions and outbursts of the soul are most often independent of our will: "It is not expected of you to not have no passions; it is not in your power," he said to the Daughters of the Visitation, adding: "What can a person do to have such and such a temperament, subject to this or that passion? Everything therefore lies in the actions that we derive from it by means of that movement, which depends on our will."

One thing is certain, moods and passions make a person an extremely variable being in terms of one's psychological "temperature," just like climatic variations. "His/her life flows on this earth like water, fluctuating and undulating in a perpetual variety of movements." "Today one will be excessively happy, and, immediately after, exaggeratedly sad. In carnival time one will see manifestations of joy and cheerfulness, with foolish and crazy actions, then, immediately afterwards, you will see such exaggerated signs of sadness and boredom so as to make one think that these are terrible and, apparently, irremediable things. Another, at present, will be too confident and nothing will frighten him, and, immediately afterwards, he will be

seized by an anguish that will sink him down to the ground.”

Jane de Chantal’s spiritual director identified the different “seasons of the soul” experienced by her at the beginning of her fervent life very well:

I see that all the seasons of the year are in your soul. Now you feel the winter through all the barrenness, distractions, heaviness and boredom; now the dew of the month of May with the scent of the little holy flowers, and now the warmth of the desires to please our good God. Only autumn remains of which, as you say, you do not see many fruits. Well, it often happens that, threshing the wheat or pressing the grapes, one finds a more abundant fruit than the harvests and the vintage promised. You would like for it to always be spring or summer; but no, my Daughter: the alternation of the seasons must take place inside as well as outside. Only in Heaven will everything be spring as regards beauty, everything will be autumn as regards enjoyment and everything will be summer as regards love. Up there, there will no longer be winter, but here it is necessary for the exercise of self-denial and the thousand small beautiful virtues, which are exercised in the time of aridity.

The health of the soul as well as that of the body cannot consist in eliminating these four moods, rather in obtaining a “invariability of moods.” When one passion predominates over the others, it causes diseases of the soul; and since it is extremely difficult to regulate it, it follows that people are bizarre and variable, so that nothing else is discerned among them but fantasies, inconstancy and stupidity.

What is good about passions is that they allow us “to exercise the will to acquire virtues and spiritual vigilance.” Despite certain manifestations, in which one must “suffocate and repress the passions,” for Francis de Sales it is not about eliminating them, which is impossible, rather controlling them as much as possible, that is, moderating them and orienting them to an end that is good.

It is not, therefore, about pretending to ignore our psychic manifestations, as if they did not exist (which once again is impossible), but of “constantly watching over one’s heart and one’s spirit to keep the passions in order and under the control of reason; otherwise there will only be originality and unequal behaviours.” Philothea will not be happy, if not when she has “sedated and pacified so many passions that [they] caused [her] restlessness.”

Having a constant spirit is one of the best ornaments of Christian life and one of the most lovable means of acquiring and preserving the grace of God, and also of edifying one’s neighbour. “Perfection, therefore, does not consist in the absence of passions, but in their correct regulation; the passions are to the heart as the strings to a harp: they must be tuned so that we can say: We will praise you with the harp.”

When passions make us lose inner and outer balance, two methods are possible: “opposing contrary passions to them, or opposing greater passions of the same kind.” If I am disturbed by the “desire for riches or voluptuous pleasure,” I will fight such passion with contempt and flight, or I will aspire to higher riches and pleasures. I can fight physical fear with the opposite, which is courage, or by developing a healthy fear regarding the soul.

The love of God, for its part, imprints a true conversion on the passions, changing their natural orientation and presenting them with a spiritual end. For example, “the appetite for food is made very spiritual if, before satisfying it, one gives it the motive of love: and no, Lord, it is not to please this poor belly, nor to satisfy this appetite that I go to the table, but, according to your Providence, to maintain this body that you have made subject to such misery; yes, Lord, because it has pleased you so.”

The transformation thus operated will resemble an “artifice” used in alchemy that changes iron into gold. “O holy and sacred alchemy! – writes the Bishop of Geneva -, O divine powder of fusion, with which all the metals of our

passions, affections and actions are changed into the purest gold of heavenly delight!".

Moods of the soul, passions and imaginations are deeply rooted in the human soul: they represent an exceptional resource for the life of the soul. It will be the task of the higher faculties, reason and above all will, to moderate and govern them. A difficult undertaking: Francis de Sales accomplished it successfully, because, according to what the mother of Chantal affirms, "he possessed such absolute dominion over his passions as to render them obedient as slaves; and in the end they almost no longer appeared."

A Blessed Easter of the Resurrection 2025!

"But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened." (Luke 24:12)

To behold the Risen Lord, our human eyes do not suffice; we need the light of faith. May this faith, enlightened and strengthened by the joy of the Resurrection we celebrate this Holy Easter 2025, always guide your earthly journey towards our heavenly home.

Christ is risen!

Purity and ways it can be safeguarded (1884)

In this dream of Don Bosco, a heavenly garden appears: a green slope, festooned trees, and, in the center, an immense, snow-white carpet adorned with biblical inscriptions praising purity. On its edge sit two twelve-year-old girls, dressed in white with red sashes and floral crowns: they personify Innocence and Penance. With gentle voices, they discuss the value of baptismal innocence, the dangers that threaten it, and the sacrifices needed to preserve it: prayer, mortification, obedience, purity of the senses.

He seemed to see before him an enchanting and immense green slope, gently inclined and leveled. At the foot of it, a meadow formed that was equivalent to a low step from which one could jump off onto the little path where Don Bosco was standing. All around it looked like an earthly paradise, magnificently illuminated by a light that was brighter and purer even than that of the sun. It was covered all around by green vegetation, star-spangled by a thousand different kinds of flowers, and shaded by an infinite number of trees, whose branches intertwined, stretching out like immense festoons.

In the center of the garden and stretching to its further border was a carpet of magic candor, so dazzling that the eyes were blinded. It was several miles wide, as magnificent as royal pomp. Several inscriptions in golden letters ornamented the border encircling it. On one side it read: *Beati immaculati in via, qui ambulant in lege Domini*; on another side: *Non privabit bonis eos, qui ambulant in innocentia*; on the third side: *Non confundentur in tempore malo, in diebus famis saturabuntur*; on the fourth: *Novit Dominus dies immaculatum et haereditas eorum in aeternum erit.*

At the four corners of the area surrounding a

magnificent rose bed were four more inscriptions: *Cum simplicibus sermocinatio eius; Proteget gradientes simpliciter; Qui ambulant simpliciter, ambulant confidenter; Voluntas eius in iis, qui simpliciter ambulant.*

In the middle of this area was the last inscription: *Qui ambulant simpliciter, salvus erit.* In the middle of the slope and on the upper border of this carpet, there was a pure white streamer with gold letters that read: *Fili mi, tu semper mecum es et omnia mea tua sunt.*

Though Don Bosco was enchanted by the garden, his attention was drawn to two lovely, little maidens who were about twelve years old and who were sitting at the edge of the carpet where the slope formed a low step. Their whole gracious mien emanated a heavenly modesty. One did not only perceive the innocent simplicity of a dove in their eyes that gazed steadily upward, but also a most pure, fervent love and a joyful, heavenly happiness. Their broad, serene brows seemed to harbor candor and sincerity, while a sweet, enchanting smile hovered on their lips. Their features denoted tender, ardent hearts, and the graceful movements of their bodies conferred a dignity and nobility on them that contrasted oddly with their youth.

A pure, white garment fell to their feet, and no stain, wrinkle, or even speck of dust was apparent on it. Around their waists were fiery red sashes, bordered with gold and adorned by what looked like a ribbon embroidered with lilies, violets and roses. They wore a similar ribbon like a necklace that was made of the same flowers, though somewhat different in design. There were little wreaths of white daisies at their wrists, like bracelets, and all of these things and flowers were so beautiful in form and color that it would have been impossible to describe them. Even the most precious jewels of this world mounted with the most exquisite work-manship would have looked like mud in contrast.

Their pure, white shoes were edged with a white ribbon interwoven with gold, handsomely tied into a center bow. They were laced with a narrow white cord, in which small

golden threads glinted.

Their long hair, forming a shadow in its thickness and falling in curled ringlets over their shoulders, was covered by a crown.

They were talking with each other. They took turns to speak, asking each other questions and issuing exclamations. They would both sit, or one sat while the other stood or they would stroll together, but they never stepped off the candid carpet or touched either the grass or the flowers. Don Bosco stood there like a spectator in his dream, without speaking to the little maidens, and they did not seem to be aware of his presence. One of them addressed the other in a harmonious voice: "What is innocence? The happy condition of sanctifying grace preserved by constant, scrupulous observance of the Divine Commandments."

The other girl answered in a voice that was no less sweet: "The purity of innocence preserved is the source and origin of all knowledge and virtue."

The first maiden: "How splendid, how glorious, how magnificent is the virtue to live honestly among those who are evil, to retain the candor of innocence and purity of one's habits amid those who are evil."

The other maiden rose to her feet and standing beside her companion said, "Blessed is the boy who does not heed the council of the godless, who does not walk in the way of the sinner, but who delights in the Commandments of the Lord, contemplating them day and night. He shall be like a tree planted beside the river where the water of God's grace flows, and which shall, in its good time, yield the abundant fruit of good works. The leaves of his holy intentions and his merit shall not fall before the blowing of the wind, and all that he shall do shall be successful. In all circumstances of his life, he shall work to enhance his reward."

So saying, she pointed to the trees laden with beautiful, fragrant fruits in the garden around them, while sparkling little brooks ran between two flowering banks or fell in tiny waterfalls, forming small lakes, bathing the

trunks of the trees with a murmur that sounded like the mysterious strains of distant music.

The first maiden answered, "He is like a lily amid the thorns which God shall pluck in His garden to wear as an ornament over His heart. He may say to his Lord, 'My Beloved is mine, and I am His, who feeds among the lilies.'"

So saying, she pointed to a great cluster of beautiful lilies that lifted their candid heads amid the grass and other flowers, and also to a tall hedge in the distance that surrounded the gardens with greenery. This hedge was thick with thorns and beyond it one could perceive horrible monsters moving around like shadows, trying to get inside the garden, though the thorns on the hedge barred their way.

"It is true! How much truth there is in your words!" the other girl said. "Blessed is the boy who shall be found without sin! But who can he be? How are we to praise him? For he has done wondrous things in his life. He was found to be perfect and shall have glory in eternity. He could sin and did not; he could have done wrong, but did not. For this the Lord has prepared his reward, and his good deeds shall be celebrated by all the Congregations of Saints."

"And what great glory God has in store for them here on earth! He will summon them, giving them a place in His Sanctuary, He will make them ministers of His Mysteries, and shall confer on them an eternal name which shall never perish," the first said.

The second rose to her feet now and exclaimed, "Who could describe the beauty of the innocent? The soul is magnificently arrayed like one of us, adorned with the white stole of Holy Baptism. His neck and arms are ablaze with divine jewels, and on his finger gleams the ring of an alliance with God. His soul moves lightly along its journey toward eternity. Before him there is a path spangled with stars. The innocent is a living tabernacle of the Holy Spirit. The blood of Jesus runs through his veins, staining crimson his cheeks and lips, and the Most Holy Trinity on his immaculate heart sheds torrents of light all around it, which

clothes it in the brightness of the sun. From on high, clouds of celestial flowers fill the air in a downpour of rain. All around him, sweet melodies are heard and the angels echo the prayer of his soul. The Most Holy Mary is at his side, ready to defend him. Heaven stands open for him. The infinite legions of the saints and of the Blessed Spirits stand ranged before him, inviting him to advance by waving their palms. In the inaccessible radiance of His Throne of Glory, God lifts His Right Hand to indicate the place prepared for him, while in His Left, He holds the magnificent crown with which he shall be crowned forever. The innocent is the desire, the joy and the pride of Paradise. An ineffable joy is engraved on his countenance. He is the Son of God. God is his Father. Paradise is his heritage. He is constantly with God. He sees Him, loves Him, serves Him, possesses Him, enjoys Him, and possesses a range of heavenly delights. He is in possession of all treasures, all graces, all secrets, all gifts, all perfections, and the whole of God himself.

“That is why the innocence of saints, and especially of the martyrs in the old and New Testament, is depicted so gloriously. Oh, innocence! How beautiful you are! Tempted, you grow in perfection; humiliated, you soar even higher; embattled, you emerge triumphant; when slain, you soar toward your crown. You are free in slavery, serene and certain in peril, happy when in chains. The mighty bow before you, princes hail you, the great do seek you. The pious obey you, the evil envy you, your rivals emulate you, and your enemies succumb before you. Always shall you be victorious, even when men shall condemn you unjustly!”

The two little maidens were silent for a moment, as if to take a breath after this impassioned rhapsody. Then, they took each other by the hand, exchanged glances, and spoke in turn.

“Oh, if only the young knew how precious is the treasure of innocence, how jealously would they defend the stole of Holy Baptism from the beginning of their days! But alas, they do not reflect, and do not know what it means to

soil it. Innocence is a most precious nectar."

"But it is contained in a jar of fragile clay, and unless one carries it with great care, it is easily broken."

"Innocence is a most precious jewel."

"But if one is unaware of its value, it can be lost and will easily be transformed into base metal."

"Innocence is a golden mirror which reflects the likeness of God."

"Yet a breath of humid air is enough to make it rusty, and one must needs keep it wrapped in a veil."

"Innocence is a lily."

"Yet a mere touch from a rough hand will wither it."

"Innocence is a candid garment. *Omni tempore sint vestimenta tua candida* [May your garment be always white]."

"Yet a single blemish will defile it, so one must proceed with great caution."

"Innocence and integrity are violated if soiled by only one stain, and will lose the treasure of grace."

"Only one mortal sin is enough."

"And once lost, it is lost forever."

"What a tragedy it is that so many lose their innocence in one single day! When a boy falls victim to sin, Paradise closes its doors; the Blessed Virgin and his Guardian Angel disappear; music is silent; light fades away. God will no longer be in his heart; the star-spangled path he was following vanishes; he falls and will linger like an island in the midst of the sea, in one single place; a sea of fire will extend to the furthest horizon of eternity, falling down into the abyss of chaos. Over his head in the darkly menacing sky, flash the lightning flares of divine justice. Satan has hastened to join him, and loads him now with chains; he places a foot upon his neck, and raising his horrible countenance toward the sky, he shouts, 'I have won. Your son is now my slave. He is no longer yours. Joy is over for him.' If in His Justice God then removes from beneath him that one little

place where he is standing, he will be lost forever.”

“Yet he may rise again! The Mercy of God is infinite! A good confession will restore grace to him and his title as the son of God.”

“But not his innocence! And what consequences will linger on in him after that initial sin! He is now aware of the sin of which he had no knowledge previously; terrible will be the evil inclinations he will experience; he will feel the terrible debt he has contracted toward Divine Justice and will find that he is now weaker in his spiritual battles. He will feel that which he had never felt before: shame, sadness, remorse.”

“To think that previously it was said of him, ‘Let the little children come unto Me. They will be like God’s Angels in Heaven. My Son, give me your heart.’”

“Ah, those wretches who are guilty for the loss of innocence in a child commit a hideous crime. Jesus said, ‘Whoever shall give scandal to any of these little ones who believe in Me, it would have been better if he had put a millstone around his neck, and drown in the depths of the sea. Woe unto the world because of scandal. It is not possible that scandal be prevented, but woe unto him who is guilty of it. Beware, lest you despise any of these little ones, for I tell you that their angels in Heaven see constantly the face of My Father Who is in Heaven and Who demands vengeance.’”

“Wretches, indeed, are they! But no less wretched are those who permit them to steal their innocence.”

Then they both began to stroll up and down, talking about how innocence could be preserved.

One of them said, “Boys make a great mistake when they think that only those who have sinned should do penance. Penance is necessary so that innocence may be retained. Had St. Aloysius not done penance, he would, beyond any doubt, have committed mortal sins. This should be preached, driven home, and taught constantly to the young. How many more there would be who would retain their innocence, whereas now there are so few.”

"The Apostle says it. We should be carrying within our own body the mortification of Jesus Christ everywhere, so that the life of Jesus may manifest in our body."

"Jesus, who was holy, immaculate and innocent lived His Life in privation and suffering."

"So did the Blessed Virgin Mary and all the saints."

"They did this to give an example to youth. St. Paul says, 'If you live by the flesh, you shall die; but if you slay the action of the flesh with the spirit, you shall live.'"

"So innocence can only be retained through penance!"

"Yet, many wish to retain their innocence while living in freedom!"

"Fools! Is it not written that he was taken away, so that malice should not destroy his spirit, and temptation might not lead his soul into sin? For the lure of vanity obscures what is good, and the vortex of lust perverts the innocent soul. The innocent, therefore, has two enemies: the evil maxims and bad words of the wicked and concupiscence. Does not the Lord say that death at an early age is the reward of the innocent because it sets him free from battle? 'Because he was pleasing to God, He was loved, and because he lived among sinners, he snatched him away.' 'He lived but briefly, and had a great career.' 'For his soul was loved by God, and for this He hastened to pluck him forth out of iniquity.' 'He was taken away so that malice might not destroy his spirit, and temptation might not lead his soul into sin.'"

"Fortunate are the young who embrace the cross of penance and who repeat with Job (27:5) with a steadfast resolution '*Donec deficiam, non recedam ab innocentia mea* [I will maintain my innocence to my dying day].'"

"Hence, mortification is needed to overcome the boredom they experience in prayer."

"It is also written: *Psallam et intelligam in via immaculata* (Psalm 100:2). *Quando venies ad me? Petite et accipietis. Pater noster!* [All along the immaculate path I will sing and I will understand. When will you come to me and ask and you shall receive Our Father!]"

"Mortification of the mind by accepting humiliation, by obedience to one's superiors and to the rules."

"It is likewise written: *Si mei non fuerint dominati, tunc immaculatus ero et emendabor a delicto maximo* [Never let (pride) dominate me, then I shall be above reproach and free from grave sin] (Psalm 19:13). This is pride. God resists against the proud and gives grace to the humble. He who humbles himself shall be exalted, and he who exalts himself shall be humbled. Obey your superiors."

"Mortification always in telling the truth, in acknowledging one's faults and whatever dangers one may find himself in. Then, one will always be well advised, especially by his confessor."

"*Pro anima tua ne confundaris dicere verum*, for your soul be not ashamed to tell the truth (Ecclesiasticus 4:24). For there is a kind of blush that calls for sin, and another kind of blush which calls for glory and grace."

"Mortification of the heart by restraining its ill-advised impulses, by loving everyone for God's sake, and resolutely turning away from anyone who we realize is tempting our innocence."

"Jesus said it. If your hand or your foot give scandal, cut it off and cast it from thee; it is better that you go through life without a foot or without a hand than to be cast into eternal fire with both your hands and your feet. If your eye offends you, pluck it out and cast it away from you; it is better that you should enter eternity with but one eye only than to be cast with both your eyes into the flames of Hell."

"Mortification in courageously and frankly enduring the scorn of human respect. *Exacerunt, ut gladium*,

linguas suas: intenderunt arcum, rem amaram, ut sagittent in occultis immaculatum [They sharpened their tongues like swords shooting bitter words like arrows shooting them at the innocent from cover](Psalm 64:3)."

"They will overcome the evil person who scoffs, fearing that his superiors may find him out, at the thought of the terrible words of Jesus: 'The son of man shall be ashamed of the one who will be ashamed of him and his words, when He shall come in all His majesty, and the majesty of His Father and of the Holy Angels.'"

"Mortification of the eyes, in looking at things, and people, in reading, and by avoiding all bad or unsuitable books."

"One essential thing. I have made a pact with my eyes never to even think of a virgin. And in the psalms: Turn away your eyes, so that they may not look on vanity."

"Mortification of the ears: never listen to evil conversations or mawkish or godless speech."

"In Ecclesiasticus 28:28, we read: *Sepi aures tuas spinis, linguam nequam noli audire* [Fence your ears with a quick thorn hedge never heed a wicked tongue]."

"Mortification is speech: do not let curiosity overcome you."

"It is likewise written: Put a door and a lock upon you lips. Take heed, lest you slip with your tongue and fall in the sight of you enemies who lie in wait for you, and your fall will be incurable unto death (Ecclesiasticus, ib)."

"Mortification of the palate: Do not eat or drink too much."

"Too much eating and drinking brought the flood upon the world, and fire rained down over Sodom and Gomorrah, and a thousand other punishments came over the Jewish people."

"In short, mortification by bearing all that happens to us during the course of the day, the cold and heat, without seeking our own comforts. Mortify your members that are on earth (Colossians 3:5)."

"Remember that Jesus told us: *Si quis vult post*

me venire, abneget semetipsum et tollat crucem suam quotidie et sequatur me [If anyone wants to come after Me, let him deny himself, carry his cross daily and follow Me] (Luke 9:23)."

"With his provident hand, God surrounds the innocent with crosses and thorns, even as He did with Job, Joseph, Tobias and other saints. *Quia acceptus eras Deo, necesse fuit, ut tentatio probaret te* [Because you were acceptable to God, it was necessary that you be tested]."

"The path of the innocent has its trials and sacrifices, but it finds strength in Holy Communion, for he who goes often to Communion will have life everlasting: he lives in Jesus and Jesus lives in him. He lives of the very life of Jesus, and will he be raised by Him on the Last Day. This is the wheat of the elect, the vine that buds with virgins. *Parasti in conspectu meo mensam adversus eos, qui tribulant me. Cadent a latere tuo mille et decem millia a dextris tuis, ad te autem non appropinquabunt* [You set up a dining table right in front of those who give me trouble, but they will fall thousands and ten thousands by your sides and they shall not get close to you]."

"And the most sweet Virgin by Him beloved is His Mother. *Ego mater pulchrae. dilectionis et timoris et agnitionis et sanctae spei. In me gratia omnis (to know) viae et veritatis; in me omnis spes vitae et virtutis. Ego diligentes me diligo. Qui elucidant me, vitam aeternam habebunt Terribilis, ut castrorum acies ordinata.* [I am the mother of beautiful love and fear and knowledge. In me you will come to know the right way and the ways to truth; all hope to live and be virtuous is found in me. I love those who love me. Those who make me known will have eternal life. I am terrible just like an army set for war]."

The two little maidens then turned and slowly climbed the slope. One of them exclaimed, "The salvation of the just stems from the Lord. He is their protector in times of tribulation. The Lord shall help them and shall set them free. He seizes them from the hands of sinners and shall save them because they put their hopes in Him (Psalm 57)."

The other went on: "God girdled me with strength and made the road I was to follow immaculate."

When the two of them came to the center of the magnificent carpet, they turned around.

"Yes!" one of them cried out. "Innocence, when crowned by penance, is the queen of all virtue."

The other also exclaimed, "How beautiful and splendid is a chaste generation! Its memory is immortal in the eyes of God and man. Men imitate it when it is present, and long for it when it is gone to Heaven, crowned triumphantly in eternity, having wrested their reward for their chaste battles. What a triumph! What rejoicing! How glorious a thing to present God with the immaculate stole of one's Holy Baptism after so many battles waged, amid the applause, the canticles, the splendor of the heavenly hosts!"

As they were thus speaking of the rewards awaiting innocence retained through penance, Don Bosco saw hosts of angels appear, who descended on that candid carpet. They joined the two young maidens, who took their place in the middle of them all. There was a vast multitude of them, and they sang, "*Benedictus Deus et Pater Domini Nostri Iesu Christi, qui benedixit nos in ipso in omni benedictione spirituali in coelestibus in Christo; qui elegit nos in ipso ante mundi constitutionem, ut essemus sancti et immaculati in conspectu eius in charitate et praedestinavit nos in adoptionem per Iesum Christum* (Eph. 1:4) [Blessed be God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us with all the spiritual blessings of Heaven in Christ. Before the world was made, He chose us, chose us in Christ to be holy and spotless and live through love in His presence, determining that we should become his adopted sons, through Jesus Christ]."

The two maidens then intoned a magnificent hymn, with such words and notes that only the angels nearer to the center were able to follow. The others sang too, but Don Bosco could not hear their voices, although they made gestures and moved their lips as if singing.

The two maidens sang, "*Me propter innocentiam suscepisti et confirmasti me in conspectu tuo in aeternum. Benedictus Dominus Deus a saeculo et usque in saeculum. Fiat! Fiat!* [You have made me welcome because I was innocent, you have made me steadfast in Your presence forever. May the Lord God be ever praised, forever and ever. So be it! So be it!"]

Now, other hosts of angels came to join the first ones, and the others after them. They were arrayed in many colors, with ornaments differing one from the other, and very different from those worn by the two little maidens. Yet, the richness and splendor of it was magnificent. They were each so handsome that the human mind could never in any way conceive even a remote idea of what they were like. Nothing could describe this scene, though if one adds words to words, one may perhaps render some confused idea of it.

When the two girls had completed their canticle, they could all be heard singing together in one immense, harmonious canticle, the likes of which has never before been heard nor will ever be heard here on earth.

They sang, "*Ei, qui potens est vos conservare sine peccato et constituere ante conspectum gloriae suae immaculatos in exultatione, in adventu Domini nostri Iesu Christi; Soli Deo Salvatori nostro, per Iesum Christum Dominum nostrum, gloria et magnificentia, imperium et potestas ante omne saeculum, et nunc et in omnia saecula saeculorum. Amen* [To him, who is able to keep you without sin and has allowed you to stand immaculate right in front of His glory, when our Lord Jesus will appear, to him alone, who is our Savior Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory and splendor, power and rule before all ages for now and for all ages. Amen]."

As they were singing, ever more angels came to join them, and when the canticle was over, they all soared slowly aloft, one after the other, and disappeared together with the entire vision.

Then, Don Bosco woke up.

(*MB IT XVII, 722-730 / MB EN XVII, 688-697*)

Final Address of the Rector Major at the conclusion of the General Chapter 29

Dear confreres,

We have come to the end of this experience of the 29th General Chapter with hearts filled with joy and gratitude for all that we have been able to experience, share and plan. The gift of the presence of the Spirit of God that we have prayed for daily in morning prayer as well as during our work through conversation in the Spirit, has been the central strength of the General Chapter experience. We asked that the Spirit play a leading role, and this has been given to us abundantly.

The celebration of any General Chapter is like a milestone in the life of every religious congregation. This also applies to us, to our beloved Salesian Congregation. It is a moment that gives continuity to the journey from Valdocco that continues to be experienced with commitment and carried forward with zeal and determination in various parts of the world.

We have come to the end of this General Chapter with the approval of a Final Document that will serve as a chart to navigate the next six years – 2025-2031. We will see and feel the value of this Final Document to the extent that we are able to maintain the same dedication to listening, the same care to letting ourselves be accompanied by the Holy Spirit who has marked these weeks, once this Salesian Pentecost experience has concluded.

Since the beginning, when the Rector Major Fr

Angel Fernández Artime made the ***Letter of Convocation of the 29th General Chapter*** public on 24 September 2023, in **AGC 441**, the motivations that were to guide the Pre-Chapter work were clear and subsequently, the work of the General Chapter itself. The Rector Major wrote that,

The chosen theme is the result of a rich and profound reflection that we have carried out in the General Council on the basis of the answers received from the Provinces and the vision that we have of the Congregation at this time. We were pleasantly surprised by the great convergence and harmony we found in the many contributions from the Provinces, which had a lot to do with the reality we see in the Congregation, with the path of fidelity that exists in many sectors and also with present challenges. (AGC 441)

The process of listening to the provinces that led to the identification of the theme for this General Chapter is already a clear indication of a listening methodology. In light of what we have experienced in recent weeks, the value of the listening process is confirmed. The way in which we first identified and then interpreted the challenges that the Congregation is determined to face has highlighted our typical Salesian atmosphere, a family spirit which does not seek to avoid challenges, which does not try to standardise thinking, but which does everything possible to arrive at that spirit of communion where each of us can recognise the way to be Don Bosco today.

The focal point of the challenges identified has to do with the fact that “it refers to the centrality of God (as Trinity) and Jesus Christ as Lord of our lives, without ever forgetting young people and our commitment to them” (ACG 441). The way the General Chapter developed testifies not only to the fact that we have the ability to identify challenges but that we have also found ways to

bring out agreement and unity, recognising and treasuring the fact that we are in different continents and

contexts, different cultures and languages. What is more, this atmosphere confirms that when we look at reality with Don Bosco's eyes and hear today, when we are truly passionate about Christ and dedicated to young people, then we discover that this diversity becomes a wealth, that journeying together is beautiful even if it is tiring, that together we can face challenges.

In a world fragmented by wars, conflicts and depersonalising ideologies; in a world marked by economic and political thinking and models that remove the active role that young people can play, our presence is a sign, a "sacrament" of hope. Young people, regardless of skin colour, religious or ethnic affiliation, ask us to put forward proposals and places of hope. They are the sons and daughters of God who expect us to be humble servants.

A second point that was confirmed and reaffirmed by this General Chapter is the shared conviction that "if fidelity and prophecy were lacking in our Congregation, we would be like the light that does not shine and the salt that does not give flavour" (AGC 441). The point here is not so much whether we want to be more authentic or not, but the very fact that this is the only path we have and it is the one that has been strongly reiterated here over these weeks: to grow in authenticity!

The courage shown during some moments of the General Chapter is an excellent premise for the courage that will be asked of us in the future on other issues that came out of this General Chapter. I am sure that this courage here has found fertile ground, a healthy and promising ecosystem that holds great promise for the future. Having courage means not letting fear have the last word. The parable of the talents clearly teaches us this. The Lord has given us only one talent: the Salesian charism, concentrated in the Preventive System. Each of us will be asked what we have done with this talent. Together, we are called to make it bear fruit in challenging, new and unprecedented contexts. We have no reason to bury it. We have so many reasons, so many cries

from young people who urge us to “go out” to sow hope. Don Bosco already experienced this courageous step, filled with conviction, in his time, and today he asks us to experience it like he did and with him.

I would like to comment on some points that are already found in the Final Document and which I believe can serve as pointers to encourage us on the journey over the next six years.

1. Personal conversion

Our journey as a Salesian Congregation depends on the personal, intimate and profound choices that each of us decides to make. Broadening the background against which we need to reflect on the theme of personal conversion, it is important to remember how, over these years after the Second Vatican Council, the Congregation has embarked on a journey of spiritual, charismatic and pastoral reflection that has been masterfully commented on by Fr Pascual in his weekly talks. This interpretation and contribution further enriches the important reflection that the Rector Major Fr Egidio Viganó left us in his last letter to the Congregation: Reading the Founder’s Charism at the Present Day (AGC 352, 1995). If today we talk about a “change of era”, Fr Viganó wrote in 1995:

The reinterpretation of our Founder’s charism has kept us busy for the last thirty years, And in our task we have been helped by two great beacons of light: the first is the Second Vatican Council, and the second the epoch-making acceleration of history at the present time.” (AGC 352, 1995).

I am referring to this journey of the Congregation with its riches and heritage because the matter of personal conversion is the space where this journey of the Congregation finds its confirmation and further impetus. Personal conversion is not an intimate, self-referential affair. This is not a call that only touches me in a way that is detached from everything and everyone. Personal conversion is that

special experience from which a renewed pastoral care will emerge. We can see the Congregation's journey because it finds its starting point in the heart of each one of us. It is from here that we can notice the continuous and convinced pastoral renewal. Pope Francis condenses this urgent cry in a single sentence: "The Church's closeness to Jesus is part of a common journey; "communion and mission are profoundly interconnected" (*Christifideles laici* no.32 , *Evangelii Gaudium* 23).

This leads us to discover that when we are insisting on personal conversion we must be careful not to fall into an intimist interpretation of spiritual experience on the one hand, and, not underestimating what is the foundation of every pastoral journey on the other.

In this call of renewed passion for Jesus, I invite every Salesian and every community to take the concrete choices and commitments that as a General Chapter we

believed to be urgent for a more authentic educative and pastoral witness seriously. We believe that we cannot grow pastorally without this attitude of listening to the Word of God. We recognise that the various pastoral commitments we have, the ever-increasing needs that confront us and that testify to unceasing poverty, risk taking away the necessary time to "be with him." We already find this challenge at the very beginning of our Congregation. It is about having clear priorities that strengthen our spiritual and charismatic backbone that gives soul and credibility to our mission

Fr Alberto Caviglia, when commenting on the topic of "Salesian Spirituality" in his *Conferences on the Salesian Spirit* writes:

What was most astonishing for those who studied Don Bosco during the canonisation process was the discovery of his incredible work of building the inner man.

Cardinal Salotti... in reference to the study he was then engaged in, told the Holy Father that "in studying the voluminous Turin processes, more than the external grandeur of

his colossal work, [he] was struck by the inner life of the spirit, from which the whole prodigious apostolate of Ven. Don Bosco originated and was nourished."

Many are only familiar with the external work that seems so impressive, but are largely ignorant of the wise, sublime edifice of Christian perfection that he had patiently erected in his soul by practising the virtue of his state every day, every hour.

Dear brothers, here we have our Don Bosco. It is this Don Bosco that we are called to discover today:

We study and imitate him, admiring in him a splendid blending of nature and grace. He was deeply human, rich in the qualities of his people, open to the realities of this earth; and he was just as deeply the man of God, filled with the gifts of the Holy Spirit and living "as though he saw him who is invisible."

These two aspects combined to create a closely-knit life project, the service of the young. He realized his aim with firmness, constancy and the sensitivity of a generous heart, in the midst of difficulties and fatigue. "He took no step, he said no word, he took up no task that was not directed to the saving of the young... Truly the only concern of his heart was for souls" (C 21).

I would like to recall here an invitation from Mother Teresa to her sisters a few years before her death. Her dedication and that of her sisters to the poor is known to everyone. However, it is good for us to hear these words of hers written to her sisters: However, it is good for us to listen to these words of hers written to her sisters:

Until you can hear Jesus in the silence of your heart, you will not be able to hear him say "I am thirsty" in the hearts of the poor. Never give up this intimate and daily contact with Jesus as a living and real person, not just as an idea

("Until you can hear Jesus in the silence of your own heart, you will not be able to hear Him saying, "I thirst" in the hearts of the poor. Never give up this daily intimate contact with Jesus as the real living person – not just the idea", in <https://catholiceducation.org/en/religion-and-philosophy/the-fulfillment-jesus-wants-for-us.html>).

Only by listening in the depths of our hearts to those who call us to follow him, Jesus Christ, can we truly listen with an authentic heart to those who call us to serve them. If the radical motivation of our being servants does not find its roots in the person of Christ, the alternative is that our motivations are nourished by the soil of our ego. And the consequence is that then our own pastoral action ends up inflating the same ego. The urgency of recovering the mystical space, the sacred ground of the encounter with God, a ground in which we have to take off the sandals of our certainties and our ways of interpreting reality with its challenges over these weeks, has been repeated many times and in various ways.

Dear brothers, here we have the first step. Here we give proof if we really want to be authentic sons of Don Bosco. Here we prove if we really love and imitate Don Bosco.

2. Getting to know Don Bosco not only loving Don Bosco

We are aware that one of the central challenges we have as Salesians is to communicate the good news through our witness and through our educative and pastoral proposals in a culture that is undergoing radical change. While in the West we talk about the indifference to religious proposal that is the result of the challenge of secularisation, we notice how the challenge takes other forms in other continents, first of all in the shift towards a globalised culture that radically shifts the scale of values and lifestyles. In a fluid and hyper-connected world, what we knew yesterday has radically changed today: in short, we are dealing here with the oft-mentioned question of the change of epoch.

With this change affects every area, it is positive to see how, since the SCG (1972), the Congregation has been on a continuous journey, until today, rethinking and reflecting on its educative and pastoral proposal. It is a process that responds to the question "what would Don Bosco do today, in a secularised and globalised culture like ours?"

Throughout this process we recognise how, from its very origins, the beauty and strength of the Salesian charism lies precisely in its inner capacity to dialogue with the history of the young people we are called to encounter in every age. What we have been contemplating at Valdocco, in this Salesian holy land, is the breath of the Spirit that guided Don Bosco and that we recognise as continuing to guide us today. The Constitutions begin precisely with this foundational and fundamental certainty:

"Through the motherly intervention of Mary, the Holy Spirit raised up St John Bosco to contribute to the salvation of youth ...

The Spirit formed within him the heart of a father and teacher, capable of total self-giving. "I have promised God that until my dying breath I would dedicate myself entirely to my poor boys."

To ensure the continuation of this mission, the Spirit inspired him to initiate various apostolic endeavours, first among them our Society.

The Church has acknowledged God's hand in this, especially by approving our Constitutions and by proclaiming our Founder a saint.

From this active presence of the Holy Spirit we draw strength for our fidelity and support for our hope. (C 1).

The Salesian charism contains an innate invitation to place ourselves before young people in the same way that Don Bosco placed himself before Bartholomew Garelli... "his friend"!

All this sounds very easy to say, and it comes

across as a friendly exhortation. In reality, it conceals within itself an urgent invitation to us, the sons of Don Bosco, to re-present the Salesian charism in a suitable and meaningful way in today's world, wherever we may find ourselves. However, there is an essential condition that allows us to undertake this journey: a true and profound knowledge of Don Bosco. We cannot say that we truly "love" Don Bosco if we are not seriously committed to "knowing" Don Bosco.

Often the risk is to settle with a knowledge of Don Bosco that fails to connect with current challenges. With a superficial knowledge of Don Bosco, we are really poor in the charismatic baggage that makes us his authentic sons. Without knowing Don Bosco, we cannot and do not end up embodying Don Bosco in the cultures where we are. All our efforts in this poverty of charismatic knowledge results only in charismatic cosmetic operations, which in the end are a betrayal of Don Bosco's very legacy.

If we want the Salesian charism to be capable of engaging in dialogue with today's culture, today's cultures, we must continually deepen our understanding of it, both in itself and in light of the ever-changing conditions in which we live. The foundation we received at the beginning of our initial formation, if not seriously deepened today, is not sufficient – it is simply useless if not even harmful.

In this direction, the Congregation has made, and continues to make, a tremendous effort to reread the life of Don Bosco and the Salesian charism in light of the current social and cultural conditions throughout the world. It is a legacy we have, but we run the risk of not knowing it because we fail to study it as it deserves. The loss of memory risks not only makes us lose touch with the treasure we have, but also risks making us believe that this treasure does not exist. And this would be really tragic not so much and only for us Salesians, but for those crowds of young people who are waiting for us.

The urgency of this deeper understanding is not

merely intellectual in nature, but responds to the thirst that exists for a serious charismatic formation of the laity in our Educative and Pastoral Communities (EPCs). The Final Document deals with this issue often and systematically. The lay people who today share in the Salesian mission with us are individuals eager for a clearer and more meaningfully Salesian formation proposal. We cannot truly experience these spaces of educational and pastoral convergence if our language and the way we communicate the charism lack the depth of understanding and the proper preparation needed to spark curiosity and capture the attention of those who share the Salesian mission with us.

It is not enough to say that we love Don Bosco. True “love” for Don Bosco implies the commitment to know and study him, not only in the light of his time, but also in the light of the great potential of his relevance in the light of our time. The Rector Major, Fr Pascual Chávez, made an invitation to the entire Congregation and the Salesian Family for the three years that preceded the “Bicentenary of the birth of Don Bosco 1815-2013”. (Fr Pascual Chávez, *Strenna* 2012, “*Let us make the young our life’s mission by coming to know and imitate Don Bosco*” [AGC 412]) It is an invitation that is more relevant than ever. This General Chapter is a call and an opportunity to strengthen the historical, pedagogical, and spiritual knowledge of our Father and Teacher.

We recognise dear brothers, that at this point this issue connects with the previous one – personal conversion. If we do not know Don Bosco and if we do not study him, we cannot understand the dynamics and efforts of his spiritual journey and consequently the roots of his pastoral choices. We end up loving him only superficially, without the true ability to imitate him as a profoundly holy man. Above all, it will be impossible to inculturate his charism today in different contexts and situations. Only by strengthening our charismatic identity will we be able to offer the Church and Society a credible witness and a meaningful and relevant

educative and pastoral proposal to young people.

3. The journey continues

In this third part, I would like to encourage the entire Congregation to keep alive the focus on certain areas where, through the various **Resolutions** and concrete commitments, we have sought to give a sign of continuity.

The area of animation and coordination of marginalisation and youth distress has been an area in which the Congregation has been very committed over recent decades. I believe that the response by the provinces to growing poverty is a prophetic sign that sets us apart and finds all of us determined to continue to strengthen the Salesian response for the poorest.

The provinces' efforts in the area of **promoting safe environments** continue to find a growing and professional response in the provinces. The effort in this area is a testimony that this is the right direction to affirm the commitment to the dignity of all, especially the most vulnerable.

The area of integral ecology emerges as a call for greater educative and pastoral work. The growth of attention in educative and pastoral communities to environmental issues requires a systematic commitment to promote a change in mentality. The various proposals for formation in this area found in the Congregation should be acknowledged and accompanied.

There are also two areas that I would like to invite the Congregation to consider carefully for the coming years. They are part of a broader perspective of the Congregation's efforts. I believe these are two areas will have substantial consequences for our educative and pastoral processes.

3.1 Artificial intelligence – a real mission in an artificial world

As Salesians of Don Bosco, we are called to walk

with young people in every environment in which they live and grow, even in the vast and complex digital world. Today, Artificial Intelligence (AI) presents itself as a revolutionary innovation that can shape the way people learn, communicate and build relationships. However, as revolutionary as it may be, AI remains exactly that: artificial. Our ministry, rooted in authentic human connection and guided by the Preventive System, is profoundly real. Artificial intelligence can assist us, but it cannot love like we do. It can organise, analyse and teach in new ways, but it can never replace the relational and pastoral touch that defines our Salesian mission.

Don Bosco was a visionary who was not afraid of innovation, both at the ecclesial level and at the educational, cultural and social levels. When this innovation served the good of young people, Don Bosco went ahead with astonishing speed. He took advantage of the press, new educational methods and workshops to lift young people up and prepare them for life. If he were among us today, he would undoubtedly look at AI with a critical and creative eye. He would see it not as an end but as a means, a tool to amplify pastoral effectiveness without losing sight of the human person at the centre.

Artificial Intelligence is not just a tool: it is part of our mission as Salesians living in the digital age. The virtual world is no longer a separate space but an integral part of young people's daily lives. AI can help us respond to their needs more efficiently and creatively, offering personalised learning paths, virtual mentorship, and platforms that foster meaningful connections.

In this sense, artificial intelligence becomes both a *tool* and a *mission*, as it helps us reach young people where they are, often immersed in the digital world. While embracing AI, we need to recognise that it is just one aspect of a larger reality that encompasses social media, virtual communities, digital storytelling, and much more. Together, these elements form a new pastoral frontier that challenges us

to be present and proactive. Our mission is not simply to use technology, but to *evangelise the digital* world, bringing the gospel into spaces where it might otherwise be absent.

Our response to AI and digital challenges must be rooted in the Salesian spirit of optimism and proactive engagement. Let us continue to walk with young people, even in the vast digital world, with hearts full of love because they are passionate about Christ and rooted in the charism of Don Bosco. The future is bright when technology is at the service of humanity and when the digital presence is full of authentic Salesian warmth and pastoral commitment. Let us embrace this new challenge, confident that the spirit of Don Bosco will guide us in every new opportunity.

3.2 The Pontifical Salesian University

The Pontifical Salesian University (UPS) is the University of the Salesian Congregation, of all of us. It is a structure of great and strategic importance for the Congregation. Its mission is to bring the charism into dialogue with culture, the energy of Don Bosco's educative and pastoral experience with academic research, so as to develop a high-profile formation proposal at the service of the Congregation, the Church and society.

From the outset, our University has played an irreplaceable role in the formation of many confreres for roles of animation and government and still performs this valuable task. In an era characterised by widespread disorientation about the grammar of the human being and the meaning of existence, by the disintegration of the social bond and the fragmentation of religious experience, by international crises and migratory phenomena, a Congregation like ours is urgently called to face the educative and pastoral mission by making use of the solid intellectual resources that are developed within a university.

As Rector Major and as Grand Chancellor of UPS, I would like to reiterate that the two fundamental priorities for the University of the Congregation are *the formation of*

educators and pastors, Salesians and laity, at the service of young people and the cultural – historical, pedagogical and theological – deepening of the charism. Around these two pillars, which require interdisciplinary dialogue and intercultural attention, the UPS is called upon to develop its commitment to research, teaching and the passing on of knowledge. I am therefore pleased that in view of the 150th anniversary of Don Bosco's text on the Preventive System, a serious research project has been launched in collaboration with the FMA's "Auxilium" Faculty to focus on the original inspiration of Don Bosco's educational practice and to examine how it inspires pedagogical and pastoral practices today in different contexts and cultures.

The governance and animation of the Congregation and the Salesian Family will certainly benefit from the cultural work of the University, just as academic study will receive valuable nourishment by maintaining a close connection with the life of the Congregation and its daily service to the poorest youth around the world.

3.3 150 years – the journey continues

We are called to give thanks and praise to God in this jubilee year of hope because during this year we remember the missionary commitment of Don Bosco which arrived at a very significant moment of development in 1875. The reflection that the Vicar of the Rector Major, Fr Stefano Martoglio, offered us in *Strenna* 2025 reminds us of the central theme of the 150th anniversary of Don Bosco's first missionary expedition: ***recognising, rethinking*** and ***relaunching***.

In the light of the 29th General Chapter that we are concluding, it helps us to place this invitation in the six-year period ahead of us. We are called to be ***grateful*** because "it makes the fatherly nature of every beautiful accomplishment evident. Without recognition, gratitude, there is no capacity to accept."

To gratitude we add the duty to ***rethink*** our fidelity, because "fidelity involves the ability to change",

in obedience towards a vision that comes from God and from interpreting the 'signs of the times... Rethinking, then, becomes a generative act in which faith and life come together; a moment in which to ask ourselves: what do you want to tell us Lord?"

Finally, the courage to **re-launch**, to start over again every day. As we are doing in these days, we look far ahead, "welcoming new challenges, relaunching the mission with hope. (Because the) Mission is to bring the hope of Christ with clear and conscious awareness, linked to faith."

4. Conclusion

At the end of this concluding address I would like to present a reflection by **Tomas HALIK**, taken from his book ***The Afternoon of Christianity was*** The author, in the last chapter of the book entitled "The Society of the Way", presents **four ecclesiological concepts**.

I believe that these **four ecclesiological concepts can help us to positively interpret the great pastoral opportunities that await us**. I offer this reflection with the understanding that what the author proposes is intimately related to the heart of Salesian charism. It is striking and surprising that the more we venture into a charismatic, pastoral as well as pedagogical and cultural interpretation of the current reality, the more the conviction is confirmed that our charism provides us with a solid basis so that the various processes that we are accompanying find their rightful place in a world where young people are waiting for hope, joy and optimism to be offered to them. It is good that we recognise with great humility but at the same time with a great sense of responsibility how Don Bosco's charism continues to provide guidelines today, not only for us, but for the whole Church.

4.1 Church as the people of God on pilgrimage through history. This image outlines a Church on the move and grappling with incessant change. God moulds the Church throughout history, reveals himself to her through history, and imparts his

teachings to her through historical events. God is in history (HALÍK, Tomáš, *Afternoon of Christianity*, p. 229)

Our call to be educators and pastors consists precisely in walking with the flock in this history, in this constantly changing society. Our **presence in the various “courtyards of people’s lives”** is the sacramental presence of **a God who wants to meet those who seek him without knowing it**. In this context, **“The sacrament of presence”** acquires an inestimable value for us because it is intertwined with the historical events of our young people and of all those who turn to us in the various expressions of the Salesian mission – the **COURTYARD** or playground.

4.2 The ‘school’ is the second vision of the Church – school of life and school of wisdom. *We live in an era in which, in the public space of many European countries, neither a traditional religion nor atheism dominates, but rather agnosticism, apathy and religious illiteracy prevail... In this era it is urgently necessary that Christian society is transformed into a ‘school’ following the original ideal of medieval universities, which arose as a community of teachers and pupils, a community of life, prayer and teaching* (HALÍK, Tomáš, *Afternoon of Christianity*, pp. 231-232).

Retracing Don Bosco’s educative and pastoral project from its origins, we discover how this second proposal directly touches the experience we currently offer to our young people: **school and vocational training**. They are educational paths which are an essential tool for giving life to an integral process where culture and faith meet. For us today, this space is an excellent opportunity where we can witness to the good news in the human and fraternal, educational and pastoral encounter with so many people and, above all, with so many children and young people who feel they are accompanied toward a dignified future. The educational experience for us pastors is a lifestyle that communicates wisdom and values in a context that encounters

and goes beyond resistance and that dissolves indifference through empathy and closeness. Walking together promotes a space of integral growth inspired by the wisdom and values of the Gospel – the **SCHOOL**.

*4.3 The Church as a field hospital... for too long, face to face with the diseases of society, the Church has limited itself to morality; now it is faced with the task of rediscovering and applying the therapeutic potential of faith. The diagnostic mission should be carried out by the discipline which I have suggested be called kairology – the art of reading and interpreting the signs of the times, the theological hermeneutics of the facts of society and culture. Kairology should devote its attention to times of crisis and changing cultural paradigms. It should see them as part of a ‘pedagogy of God’, as the opportune time to deepen the reflection on the faith and renew its practice. In a certain sense, kairology develops the method of spiritual discernment, which is an important component of the spirituality of Saint Ignatius and his disciples; it applies this method when it delves into and evaluates the current state of the world and our tasks within it (HALÍK, Tomáš, *Afternoon of Christianity*, pp. 233-234).*

This third ecclesiological criterion goes to the heart of the Salesian approach. We are not present in the lives of children and young people to condemn them. **We make ourselves available to offer them a healthy space of (ecclesial) communion, enlightened by the presence of a merciful God who places no conditions on anyone. We develop and communicate our various pastoral proposals precisely with this perspective of facilitating the encounter of young people with a spiritual proposal capable of enlightening the times in which they live, of offering them hope for the future.** The proposal of the person of Jesus Christ is not the result of sterile confessionalism or blind proselytism, but the discovery of a relationship with a person who offers unconditional love to all. Our testimony, and that of all those who live the educational and pastoral experience as

community, is the most eloquent sign and the most credible message of the values we wish to communicate in order to share them – the **CHURCH**.

4.4 The fourth model of the Church... it is necessary that the Church establish spiritual centres, places of adoration and contemplation, but also of encounter and dialogue, where it is possible to share the experience of faith. Many Christians are concerned that in a large number of countries the network of parishes, which was formed a few centuries ago in a completely different socio-cultural and pastoral situation and within a different interpretation of the Church's self, is fraying (HALÍK, Tomáš, Afternoon of Christianity, pp. 236-237).

The fourth concept is that of a “**home**” capable of communicating **welcome, listening and accompaniment**. A “home” in which the human dimension of each individual's story is recognised and, at the same time, the possibility is offered to allow this humanity to reach its maturity. Don Bosco rightly calls “home” the place where the community lives its call because, by welcoming our children and young people, it is able to ensure the conditions and pastoral proposals necessary for this humanity to grow in an integral way. Each of our communities, each “house” or home is called to be a witness to the originality of the Valdocco experience: a “home” that intersects with the history of our young people, offering them a dignified future – the **HOME**.

In our Constitutions, Art. 40 we find the *synthesis of all these “four ecclesiological concepts”*. It is a synthesis that serves as an invitation and also as an encouragement for the present and the future of our educative and pastoral communities, of our provinces, of our beloved Salesian Congregation:

Don Bosco's Oratory a permanent criterion

Don Bosco lived a pastoral experience in his first Oratory which serves as a model; it was for the youngsters a

home that welcomed, a parish that evangelized, a school that prepared them for life, and a playground where friends could meet and enjoy themselves.

As we carry out our mission today, the Valdocco experience is still the lasting criterion for discernment and renewal in all our activities and works.

Thank you.

Rome, April 12, 2025

Interview with the new inspector don Peter Končan

Short biography

He completed his novitiate in the community of Pinerolo, Italy, professed his first vows on September 8, 1993, in Ljubljana Rakovnik, and his perpetual vows six years later. He received his theological training at the Salesian Pontifical University in Rome from 1997 to 2000, and was ordained a priest in Ljubljana on June 29, 2001.

As a priest, most of his educational and pastoral work was carried out within the Salesian work of Želimlje. From 2000 to 2003, he served as an educator and then, until 2020, as Director of the boarding school. During those years, he also taught religion at the high school and was responsible for the Salesian formation of the laity.

From 2010 to 2016, he was the Director of the Želimlje community and from 2021 to 2024, the Director of the Salesian Community of Ljubljana Rakovnik. From 2018 to 2024, he served as Vicar of the Inspector and his Delegate for Formation. In 2021, he also took on the coordination of this sector at the European level as the coordinator of RECN.

On December 6, 2023, he was appointed the 15th Inspector of the Province of Saints Cyril and Methodius of Ljubljana.

Can you introduce yourself?

I was born on May 30, 1974, in Ljubljana, Slovenia, into a farming family in a small village called Šentjošt. I am the youngest of 4 children, who all have families today, so I have 11 nieces and nephews and we are all very close. My native country and my family were strongly marked by the Communist terror during and after the Second World War. Some relatives were killed, houses destroyed... In the very difficult situation, my parents had to start building the farmhouse from scratch. They had to use all their hard work and resourcefulness to provide for us children. My parents involved us children in daily work and in this way, I also learned that to achieve something important you have to work hard.

Who first told you the story of Jesus?

My parents always openly expressed their Christian identity, even though being a Christian was not appropriate in those times, and they had quite a few problems because of this. Every evening, after the work was done, we gathered as a family to pray the rosary, the litanies, and other prayers. I liked being an altar boy and for this, I often walked to the church, which was 2 kilometres from my house, to attend Mass. The example of my parents, Christian life in the family and in the parish are therefore the fundamental reasons for feeling God's call from an early age.

How did you meet Don Bosco?

My parents often went on pilgrimage to Ljubljana Rakovnik where the Salesians were, and so I also met Don Bosco, who fascinated me immediately. I started attending retreats organised by the Salesians and after elementary school at 14, it was very natural for me to go to the minor seminary led by the Salesians in Želimlje. My parents were very happy with my decision and always supported me on my journey. I am truly

very grateful to them for all the love, for the peaceful family in which I grew up, and for so many important values that they passed on to me. Don Bosco also fascinated them, and so, in the process of my formation, they also made the promise as Salesian cooperators.

The experience of initial formation

I was in high school at the time when Communism collapsed and Slovenia became independent, and then the Salesians could resume our typical work. For this reason, I was taken by the enthusiasm of so many opportunities for youth work that were opening up. In the years spent in international formation houses in Italy, my horizons were also broadened because I had the opportunity to meet many Salesians from all over the world and live many new experiences. During this period, I worked a lot on my human and spiritual growth, and I also learned to love Don Bosco and his way of being and working with young people very much. I became more and more convinced that this is a path thought of by God for me and that the Salesian charism is a great gift for the young people of our time.

What is your best experience?

The 20 years spent in the boarding school in Želimlje and then in Rakovnik, living with almost 300 young people every day, were truly very beautiful and greatly marked my life. I had the privilege of following their human, intellectual, and spiritual growth and of touching their joys, hopes, and wounds from close up. The young people taught me how important it is to “waste” time being with them. In this period, I also learned and experienced how precious the lay collaborators are, without whom we cannot carry out our mission.

What are the local youth like and what are the most relevant challenges?

In the Salesian works and around our programmes there are still many generous young people, with open hearts and willing to do good for their peers. I am very proud of their enthusiasm and also happy that many in Don Bosco find the

model and strength for their human and spiritual growth.

On the other hand, it is also true that they are strongly marked by the virtual world and all the other challenges of our time. Fortunately, traditional values have not completely disappeared, but it is also true that they are no longer strong enough to guide young people. For this reason, we Salesians try to help young people with concrete proposals of support and by walking with them. At the last provincial chapter, we identified some poverties (challenges) of our context: the weak family, lukewarm spiritual tendency, relativism and the search for identity, passivity, apathy, and the lack of concrete preparation of young people for life.

Where do you find the strength to continue?

First of all, in the confreres. Fortunately, I have very good and generous confreres around me who are of great support to me. The provincial alone cannot do much. I am convinced that the only right way to progress is that we all (Salesians, young people, and lay people) contribute our gifts and strengths for the common good. And secondly, we all and our mission are only a small part in a great design of God. It is He who is the true protagonist and this awareness gives me great inner serenity.

What place does Mary Help of Christians occupy in your life?

Already in my family, I learned that Mary is a great support for daily life. I very willingly and with great confidence go on pilgrimage to the various Marian shrines, where Mary fills me with peace and inner strength for all the challenges of my life. I can testify to many of the graces that have been granted to me or my loved ones through Mary.

Fr. Peter KONČAN,
Slovenia Provincial