

□ Reading time: 4 min.

Rediscover the great value of closeness, friendship, simple joy in everyday life, the value of sharing, of talking and communicating.

I write these lines, dear friends of Don Bosco and his precious charism, looking at the draft of the Salesian Bulletin for September. My greeting is the last thing to be included: I am the last to write, depending on the month's content. Just as Don Bosco did.

In this month, at the start of the academic year in the schools, in the oratories, I am pleased to see that the messages have such a missionary flavour (and that is why the Philippines and Papua New Guinea are mentioned), and also the simplicity of a "Salesian mission" with the local flavour of the Saluzzo house.

Reading the Bulletin makes me appreciate something that is very much ours, very Salesian, and which I am sure pleases so many of you: I refer to the great value of closeness, friendship, simple joy in everyday life, the value of sharing, talking and communicating. The great gift of having friends, of knowing that you are not alone. The feeling of being loved by so many good people in our lives.

And thinking about all this, a sincere and very honest testimony came to mind from a young woman who wrote to Father Luigi Maria Epicoco and which he published in his book *La luce in fondo*. It is a testimony that I would like you to know because I consider it the antithesis of what we try to build every day in every Salesian house. This young woman feels, in a certain sense, that there is no success or fulfilment if the most human of encounters, of beautiful human relationships, is missing, and this school year that we are beginning brings this back to us.

This young woman writes of herself: "Dear Father, I am writing to you because I would like you to help me understand if the nostalgia I feel in these months says that I am strange or that something important has changed for me. It will perhaps be helpful if I tell you a little about myself. I decided to leave home when I was barely eighteen. It was a way to escape from an environment that seemed so narrow, so suffocating for my dreams. So I arrived in Milan in search of work. My family could not support my studies. That was also why I was angry with them. All my friends were in a frenzy to choose a faculty. I had no choice because no one could support me. I looked for a job to live on and dreamt for years of a chance to study. I succeeded and with immense sacrifices I graduated. On the day of my graduation, I did not want my family to attend. I thought that peasants with only secondary school would not understand anything about my studies. I only told my

mother that everything had gone well, and I felt her tears that for a moment woke me up to a sense of guilt that I had never felt before. But it was a no great matter. What I did was my own efforts and never could or wanted to rely on anyone else. Even at work I got ahead because I chose to ally myself with myself. I spent years like that. And I don't understand why it is only now, in the midst of the lockdown during this pandemic, that a longing for my family has burst inside me. I dream of telling them everything I never told them. I dream of hugging my father. At night I wake up and wonder if one can live a life free of such meaningful relationships. Even the relationships I have had over the years, I have never allowed them to cross the border of true intimacy. But now everything seems so different to me. Now that I cannot choose to leave the house, or go to whoever I consider important, I have awakened to the realisation of the big lie I have been living all this time within me.

Who are we without relationships? Maybe just unhappy people looking for affirmation. I now realised that everything I did, in reality I did because I hoped someone would tell me who I really was. But the only ones who could help me answer that question I cut them off by closing off relationships. And now they are risking their lives, hundreds of kilometres away from me. If I were to die, I would want to be with them and not with my successes,"

A shared joy

I appreciate the honesty and courage of this young woman who made me think a lot about our situation today. It made me reflect on the lifestyle we are living in so many families where the important thing is to have good results, to achieve a good economic situation, to fill our days with things to do so that everything is profitable, etc.... but we pay very high prices for living always, and more and more, not outside the home but outside ourselves. There is a danger of living without a centre, i.e. "off centre". And believe me, dear friends, you cannot imagine how much this can be seen especially in the boys and girls in our homes, our courtyards and our oratories. Don Bosco's second successor, Fr Paul Albera recalls: "Don Bosco educated by loving, attracting, conquering and transforming. He enveloped us all almost entirely in an atmosphere of contentment and happiness, from which sorrows, sadness and melancholy were banished... He listened to the children with the greatest attention as if the things they were saying were all very important."

The first pleasure in life is to be happy together: "A shared joy is twice a joy!" The educator's watchword is "'I feel good when I am with you.'" A presence that is intensity of life.

A biographer of Don Bosco, Fr Ceria, recounts that an important prelate after a visit

to Valdocco declared: "You have a great fortune in your house, which no one else has in Turin and neither do other religious communities. You have a room into which anyone who enters full of affliction, comes out radiant with joy." Fr Lemoyne noted in pencil: "And a thousand of us have had that experience."

One day Don Bosco said: "Among us, the young people now seem like sons in the family, all householders; they make the interests of the Congregation their own. They say *our* church, *our* college and whatever concerns the Salesians, they call it *ours*."

That is why this new year is an opportunity to take care, to take care of ourselves in what is most essential and most important. For our family.