

Mamma Margaret's basket

At the end of a year, we all have a memory basket in our soul. It contains what we have experienced – a rich year, full of pleasant memories, but also of unexpected events. A year in which there was no lack of surprises.

Dear friends of Don Bosco and his charism. At the end of the year 2023, it seemed interesting to me to use the symbolism of the basket that Mamma Margaret always carries on her arm. Even in the new Strenna poster, her distinguishing mark is the basket hanging from her arm. We are all used to seeing Mamma Margaret like this. Without the basket, the handkerchief on her head and the poor peasant's dress, she would not look like herself.

The basket was made of wicker woven with great care. She had carried layettes for her grandchildren, fragrant freshly baked loaves of bread and clean-smelling linen.

But on 3 November 1846, as Don Bosco recounts in his *Memoirs of the Oratory*, when he and his mother came down from the Becchi to Turin to take in the city's abandoned youngsters, Mamma Margaret filled it with her wedding trousseau, carefully folded and, in the middle, deposited a few lavender bunches. In the bottom, well hidden under the fabric lining, she hid her little treasure: a small velvet parcel with two rings and a gold pendant.

With these few possessions, they were able to meet the first needs of the Oratory. Mamma Margaret had a heart as big as all the hills of Asti and the linen began to disappear, turning into shirts and underwear for the boys. Curious was the fate of the wedding dress that became the first altar cloth in the Pinardi Chapel and then a sheet for a cholera patient.

But the basket was not empty, it contained the scent of all the good and beautiful things in her life.

The treasure chest of happy memories

At the end of the year, we should all have a basket like this. Hanging in our minds and hearts. A basket which is a treasure chest of happy memories. We should fill it with the amazement of the dance of life that has quickly passed: the people who have done us good, graced events, the encounters that have given us breath and courage, the certainties, the hopes and beneath, all the precious gold of God's presence.

In my basket I found many things to thank the Lord of Life, our good God and Father, for. And certainly, as happens in everyone's life including you who are reading me now, not everything you experience in a year has produced joy. There are also sorrows, hardships, demands, losses, but all this, lived in faith, is illuminated in a precious way.

- In my basket I find so many efforts, both mine and of those who help me in the animation and governance of the Congregation, and which have served to give life, so much life: we have been able to help so many people, so many children and young people throughout the Salesian world, encouraging my confreres and the Salesian Family to continue on a path of Salesian fidelity. The basket is filled with so many donations from so many people around the world, in the 135 nations and in the thousands of works of the entire Salesian Family around the world.

- In my basket this year is Don Bosco's visit to the centre for minors (the old Generala that Don Bosco visited with Fr Cafasso), and from which I returned home with a heavy heart and full of sorrow at being there with those young people (who I hope will soon overcome this situation), but with the joy of knowing that they will make it through. The farewell from the young man who asked me "When are you coming back?" is etched in my memory. And I will be back soon.

- In my basket is the joy of so many trips made during the year – this time again to the five continents, as I came back to Australia. I could write pages about all the trips. I will only mention my visit to Peru, twice in February, to the plateau of Huancayo, with its cold and hills and the meeting with more than a thousand young people at an

altitude of 2,500 metres, and the immense heat of the city of eternal warmth (as they like to say) that is Piura, where I found a devotion to Mary Help of Christians that moved me.

- My basket contains the joy of seeing myself in Viedma – Argentina, five months after the canonisation of Salesian Brother St Artemides Zatti and retracing the roads he travelled on, and living where he lived and where he made holiness a reality in everyday life.

- And this year, the basket, deep in my heart, contains the most profound experience a human being can have. The experience of losing one's mother, especially when one's father has already gone to heaven. You really feel that the "umbilical cord" that supported you not only until you were brought into the world, but throughout your life, is permanently cut. But, with the Lord's grace, while this was certainly a loss, I have also experienced it as something full of meaning, full of hope, and with immense gratitude to the Lord of life for a long and beautiful life in the case of both my father and my mother. How can I not thank the Lord for that?

- My basket this year contains the immense joy of the precious days spent in Lisbon for World Youth Day. More than a million young people gave a precious testimony of humanity and humanism, of the ability to live in harmony, friendship and peace despite being very different, coming from all over the world. What a great lesson they teach us.

- And finally, my basket this year contains a profound act of faith and obedience. Undoubtedly faith since the Holy Father has done so by appointing me Cardinal of the Holy Roman Church. And certainly in faith, and with the certainty that our God accompanies the life of each of us in the unique way that only He knows, I have accepted this design and this obedience. Certainly with gratitude and with the promise of fidelity and loyalty to the Vicar of Christ, as we declared when we receive the cardinal's ring. Only in faith can such a thing be lived worthily.

As you can see, my friends, my basket is full. I am sure it is

the same in the life of each of you. This is the great gift of life from God.

I wish you a blessed time this month. And I wish you that, as you await the coming of Jesus Christ, you continue to work as a Salesian Family to ensure that our world is purified of hatred and discord and filled with the Christian spirit, so that we may all always live in peace with one another.