

□ Reading time: 4 min.

Dear confreres,

A fraternal and warm greeting from the “Sacro Cuore” in Rome.

Today, 18 December, as is the case every year, in memory of the foundation of our Congregation in 1859 I am addressing this letter to you, renewing the spirit of our origins, the missionary spirit that has made the Congregation what it is from the beginning.

It is with emotion that I give voice to the heart of the Congregation this year, on the 150th anniversary of the first missionary expedition. The celebration of this anniversary marks our heart and soul. It asks us to renew the missionary spirit that has always been at the heart of the charism, so that in thanking God for his fidelity, he may give future energy to evangelisation and the Congregation.

Celebrating the 150th anniversary of Don Bosco’s first missionary expedition is a great gift to:

Give thanks for, recognising God’s grace.

Gratitude makes the authorship of every beautiful achievement clear. Without gratitude there is no capacity to welcome. Every time we fail to recognise a gift in our personal and institutional lives we seriously risk jeopardising it and “taking it over”. In speaking of the spirit of mission we are at the heart of the life of a disciple: something infinitely greater than us, which is the founding and original dynamic of the Church, for every generation.

Rethink, because “nothing is forever”.

Fidelity also involves the ability to change, in obedience, to a perspective that comes from God and from reading the “signs of the times”. Nothing is forever: from a personal and institutional point of view, true fidelity is the ability to change, recognising what the Lord calls each of us to. Rethinking, then, becomes a productive act in which faith and life come together; a moment in which to ask ourselves: what do you want to tell us, Lord, with this person, with this situation in the light of the signs of the times that ask that we have the very heart of God to be able to interpret it?

Relaunch, starting over every day.

Gratitude leads to looking far ahead and welcoming new challenges, relaunching missions with hope. Missionary activity is bringing the hope of Christ with a lucid and clear awareness linked to faith, which makes me recognise that what I see and live “is not my own”, and gives me the strength to move forward, personally and institutionally.

All this requires the courage to be oneself, to recognise one’s identity in the gift of God and to invest one’s energies in a precise responsibility. Aware that what has been entrusted to us is not ours, and that we have the task of passing it on to the next generations.

This is the heart of God; this is the life of the Church.

In recent times the Holy Father has given us the Encyclical Letter “Dilexit Nos” on the human and Divine love of the heart of Jesus Christ. This gift from Pope Francis enlightens our missionary heart.

The Pope shows us social action and the whole world as a natural destination of authentic devotion to the Sacred Heart. In number 205 of the Encyclical he says: *“What kind of worship would we give to Christ if we were to rest content with an individual relationship with him and show no interest in relieving the sufferings of others or helping them to live a better life? Would it please the heart that so loved us, if we were to bask in a private religious experience while ignoring its implications for the society in which we live?”*

Pope Francis tells us clearly that those who are intimate with the Lord’s heart cannot but be endowed with a missionary spirit that embraces the whole world, because their heart has expanded, widened! There is a direct relationship: the more we inhabit the intimacy of the Heart of Christ, the more we will be able to reach the most distant corners of the earth.

The heart of Christ urges me to be attentive to the wounds of humanity’s heart In a word: the heart of the mission is the heart of God.

What strength and energy the Holy Father is passing on to us in this year that introduces us to the 150th anniversary of the first missionary expedition!

The story continues with us. Today Don Bosco needs Salesians who make themselves available as “simple tools” to realise the missionary dream. This is my appeal to the confreres who feel the call of God in the depths of their heart within our common Salesian vocation, to make themselves available as missionaries with a lifelong commitment (*ad vitam*) wherever the Rector Major will send them.

48 Salesians replied to Father Angel’s last appeal in December 2023, and 24 were chosen as members of the 155th missionary expedition. In this year of preparation for the 150th of the first missionary expedition, my prayer and my hope is that there can be even more.

Discussion with the General Councillor for the Missions and reflection shared within the General Council on the basis of the missionary project presented to the Council (AGC 437, p. 66) allows me to specify the urgent needs identified for 2025, where I would like a significant number of confreres to be sent:

- North Africa, Southern Africa (AFM), North West Africa (AON), Mozambique;
- the new presence that we will start in Vanuatu;
- Albania, Romania, for the ‘Calabria-Basilicata Project’ (IME);
- Chile, Mongolia, Uruguay, and other frontiers and any other urgent needs.

I invite Provincials, and with them the Provincial Delegates for mission animation, to be the first to help the confreres to facilitate their discernment, inviting them, after discussion with them personally, to make themselves available to the Rector Major to respond to the missionary needs of the Congregation. Then the General Councillor for the Missions will continue the discernment that will lead to the choice of missionaries for the next and 156th missionary expedition, which will be held in Valdocco on 11 November 2025.

May the Lord bless us and may Our Lady accompany all of us. A blessed Christmas to you all and a Happy New Year in the name of Hope, which is the presence of God.

Rome, 18 December 2024

Fr. Stefano Martoglio
Vicar (ex. art. 143 cost. S.D.B.)
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