 Reading time: 4 min.

It had been many years since I had last heard that expression from a young man in such a light-hearted context, in the presence of all his companions crowding around us.

Dear friends of the Salesian Bulletin, we have ’rounded the cape’ of the year, as they say in seafaring parlance, and are facing up to the New Year. Every beginning possesses something magical, and the new always has its own special charm. The year 2023 seemed like a distant time, and yet here it is. The New Year is each time a promise that some good news will come for us too. The New Year springs from the light and enthusiasm given to us at Christmas.

‘There is a time to be born’ says Qohelet in the Bible. It is never too late to begin again. God always begins anew with us, filling us with his blessing.
One lesson I have learnt from these last few years: to be prepared for surprises and the unexpected. As St Paul says in a letter, that no human heart: ‘has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him’ (1 Cor 2:9). The content of Christian hope is to live by surrendering oneself into the arms of God. Today, many ways of living, of expressing oneself, of communicating have changed. But the human heart, especially the hearts of young people, is always the same, like a bud in spring, full of life ready to burst forth. Young people ‘are’ walking hope. What I am telling you now seems to me very appropriate for this greeting from the Salesian Bulletin for January, the ‘month of Don Bosco’.
A few weeks ago, I visited Salesian presences in the United States of America (USA), and one day, early in the morning, I arrived at St Dominic Savio Middle and High School in Los Angeles. I spent several hours with hundreds of students, followed by a panel discussion with forty-five young people from the high school. We talked about their personal plans and dreams. It was a very pleasant and enriching few hours.
At the end of the morning, I shared a sandwich with the young people in the courtyard. I was sitting at a wooden table in the courtyard with my sandwich and a bottle of water. Four other Salesians were with me at the time; I had greeted many young people, some sitting at tables, others standing. It was a cheerful lunch. At my table there were two empty seats, and at one point two young men approached and sat down with us. Naturally I started talking to them. After a couple of minutes, one of the young men said to me: “I want to ask you a question” to which I replied, “Of course, ask me.”

The young man said: “What do I have to do to become Pope? I want to be Pope.
I looked surprised, but I smiled. I replied that I had never been asked such a question and that I was surprised by his clarity and determination. It came to me spontaneously to explain to him that among so many millions of Catholics there is a lot of competition and it is not so easy to be elected Pope.



Rector Major in the Salesian Family Youth Centre located in Boyle Heights, East Los Angeles, USA, Nov. 2022

I suggested: “Listen, you could start by becoming a Salesian.”
The young man smiled and said: “Well, I’m not saying no” and added, very seriously: “because what is certain is that my passion is Christ’.” I must say that I was impressed and pleasantly surprised. I think it had been many years since I had heard that expression from a young man in such a light-hearted context, in the presence of all his companions, who were now crowding around us.
The young man had a genuine smile on his face and I told him that I liked his answer very much, because I understood that it was absolutely sincere. I added that, if he agreed, I would like to recount our conversation at another time and place, and so I did.
But already at that moment my thoughts had flown to Don Bosco. Surely Don Bosco

would have appreciated a conversation with a young man like this. There is no doubt that in many conversations he had with Savio, Besucco, Magone, Rua, Cagliero, Francesia and many others there was much of this, the desire of those young men to do something beautiful with their lives.
And I thought how important it is today, 163 years after the beginning of the Salesian Congregation, to continue to believe deeply that young people are good, that they have so many seeds of goodness in their hearts, that they have dreams and projects that often carry within them so much generosity and gift of self.

How important it is to continue to believe that it is God who acts in the heart of each of us, each of his sons and daughters.
It seems to me that today, in our time, we are in danger of becoming so practical and efficient in looking at everything that happens to us and what we experience that we risk losing the ability to surprise ourselves and others and, more worryingly, not letting ourselves be “surprised by God”.
Hope is like a volcano within us, like a secret spring gushing in our hearts, like a spring bursting forth in the depths of our souls: it involves us like a divine whirlpool into which we are inserted, by the grace of God. I think that like yesterday with Don Bosco, today there are thousands and thousands of young people who want to see Jesus, who need to experience friendship with him, who are looking for someone to accompany them on this beautiful journey.
I invite you to join them, dear friends of the Bulletin, and I wish you time to be amazed and time to trust, time to look at the stars, time to grow and mature, time to hope again and to love. I wish you time to live each day, each hour as a gift. I also wish you time to forgive, time to give to others and plenty of time to pray, dream and be happy.