 Reading time: 10 min.

Saint John Bosco had a deep devotion to Mary Help of Christians, a devotion that had its roots in the numerous experiences of her maternal intervention in his life, beginning with the Dream of Nine. This true devotion could not remain merely personal. Don Bosco felt the need to share it with others. In 1869, he founded the Association of Mary Help of Christians (ADMA), which continues to be a vibrant spiritual reality today. Every 5-6 years, the association organizes international congresses in honor of Mary Help of Christians. The latest, the IX Congress, was held in Fatima, Portugal, from August 29 to September 1 2024. We present the concluding address of the Vicar of the Rector Major, Don Stefano Martoglio.

I gladly take the floor at this Marian Congress, after what we have heard and experienced, in order to reaffirm a personal and institutional act of entrustment, according to the heart of Don Bosco and the faith of the Church. We conclude these days with one of the characteristic dimensions of Don Bosco's life and mission, namely, Marian devotion. We entrust ourselves to the maternal hands of Mary. Here and now, in this place made holy by the apparition of Mary, we ask her to make what we have heard, experienced, and prayed over in this Congress ever fruitful.

I hope that my words, after all that we have heard and experienced, may stat imprinted in your memories. This memory is important. It means that we acknowledge that it is not ours; rather it is a legacy entrusted to us and we should pass it on to succeeding generations.

With great simplicity, I share with myself and each of one of you some central aspects of the presence of Mary in Don Bosco's life and mission, and thus in our devotion.

1. Mary in the Writings of Don Bosco, from the very beginning.
The woman "of majestic appearance, dressed in a mantle that shone from all sides," was described in the Dream of Nine. We have meditated on her in this Bicentennial of the Dream. She is the Madonna dear to the popular tradition of the masses. Don Bosco emphasized her maternal kindness. This image of Mary was most in tune with his soul and it will accompany him until his last breath.

Many popular devotions were recounted in the *Memoirs of the Oratory.* Among

these were the family rosary, the Angelus, novenas and tridua, short invocations, consecrations, visits to altars and shrines, Marian feasts (Divine Motherhood, the Name of Mary, the Madonna of the Rosary, Our Lady of Sorrows, Our Lady of Consolation, Mary Immaculate, and the Madonna of Grace). By popular devotion, we do not refer to easy and spontaneous practices. Popular religiosity is the quintessence of centuries of experience that is given to us as a gift. We must own it.

During his studies in Chieri, more elements appeared that connected Marian devotion to the spiritual choices of the young Bosco. This was linked especially to his vocational growth and to the maturing of the virtues that would form a good seminarian. The Madonna of the seminary was the Mary Immaculate. In all the Piedmontese seminaries, and in those influenced by the Lazarist tradition, the seminary chapel was dedicated to the Immaculate Conception since the 1600's. This characterized the Marian piety of the young Bosco, formed in the school of St. Alphonsus. *True devotion must be expressed in virtuous living; it guaranteed the most powerful patronage one can have in life and in death.*

Don Bosco would also write in *The Companion of Youth* in 1847: "If you are her devotees, in addition to filling you with blessings in this world, you will have paradise in the next life."

But it was especially in the booklet *The Month of May Dedicated to Mary Most Holy Immaculate for the Use of the People* (1858) that the saint explicitly and insistently discussed popular and youthful Marian devotion within the context of serious, fervent, and loving Christian commitment.

"*Three things are to be practiced the whole month: 1. Do what you can to commit no sin during this month: let it be entirely dedicated to Mary. 2. Take great care in fulfilling the spiritual and temporal duties of your state of life. 3. Invite your relatives and friends and all those who depend on you to participate in the pious practices that are done in honor of Mary during the month.*"

The other theme discussed by Don Bosco was inherited from a whole devout tradition. It is the link between Marian devotion and eternal salvation: "Since the most beautiful ornament of Christianity is the Mother of the Savior, Most Holy Mary, so to you I turn, O most clement Virgin Mary, I am sure of obtaining the grace of God, the right to Paradise, to regain my lost dignity, if you pray for me: *Auxilium Christianorum, ora pro nobis."* Don Bosco was convinced that Mary intervenes as a

most effective advocate and a powerful mediatrix before God.
Ten years later (1868), for the inauguration of the church of Mary Help of Christians, the saint wrote and distributed a pamphlet entitled *Wonders of the Mother of God invoked under the Title of Mary Help of Christians.* In this work, Don Bosco emphasized the ecclesial dimension of Marian devotion. Don Bosco meant to expand his missionary outlook and his educational concerns.

The titles of *Immaculate Conception* and of *Help of Christians* in the ecclesial context of the time evoked struggles and produced triumphs. It was the “great clash” between the Church and liberal society. A religious reading of political and social events was made, along the lines of the Catholic reaction to atheism, liberalism, and de-Christianization.

However, Don Bosco continued to emphasize among his boys and his Salesians the predominantly ascetic-spiritual and apostolic dimensions of Marian piety. In fact, the practice of the month of Mary and the various devotions aimed at instilling in young people the aspiration to greater commitment to duty, to the practice of virtue, to asceticism with mortifications offered in honor of Mary, to an operative charity, to a generous apostolate among one’s companions.
Don Bosco tended to assign to the Immaculate Conception and to the Help of Christians a decisive role in the educational and formative work and in the enhancement of virtue and devotion, within a climate of Marian fervor, in order to lead a life free from sin and its enticements and to grow in total self-giving to God.

Therefore, Don Bosco urged young people to struggle against sin and to direct one’s life to God, to the sanctification of oneself and of others, to the service of charity, to the patient carrying of the cross, and to missionary commitment. These are the salient traits of a Marian devotion that was devoid of sentimentalism. despite the climate of the times.

What a journey it was for Don Bosco – the man of faith that he was! He said: “Among the preoccupations of your hearts, I would like to emphasize that we cannot stagnate in our devotion. We must always move on! One who does not move forward, always moves backward, and there is no room for such a one in the Oratory!”

2. Mary in the Life of Don Bosco; the Daily Expressions of Don Bosco’s Devotion and of Our Devotion

2.1. The Sense of a Presence

Mary was, in the life of Don Bosco, a perceived, loved, active, and stimulating presence, aimed at salvation and holiness. He felt her closeness and entrusted himself to her, allowing himself to be guided and led by her in the pursuit of his vocation. Don Bosco dreamed of her. It seemed he was seeing her.

At Nizza Monferrato in June 1885, Don Bosco was conversing in the parlor with the chapter members of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. He felt very tired and his voice was faint. He was asked to leave them a final remembrance. “Oh then, you want me to say something. If I could speak, how many things I would like to tell you! But I am old, old and frail, as you see; I can hardly speak. I want to tell you only that the Madonna loves you very, very much. And, you know, she is here among you.” Then Don Bonetti, seeing him moved, interrupted him and began to say, solely to distract him:
– “Yes, that’s right! Don Bosco means that the Madonna is your Mother and that she watches over you and protects you.”
– “No, no,” the Saint replied, “I mean that the Madonna is really here, in this house, and that she is happy with you, and that if you continue to live with the present spirit, which is what the Madonna desires …” The good Father became even more emotional, and Don Bonetti took the floor again:
– “Yes, that’s right! Don Bosco means to tell you that if you are always good, the Madonna will be happy with you.”
– “But no, but no,” Don Bosco struggled to explain, trying to control his emotion. “I mean that the Madonna is truly here, here among you! The Madonna walks in this house and covers it with her mantle.” – In saying this, he stretched out his arms, raised his tearful eyes upwards, and seemed to want to persuade the sisters that he saw the Madonna walking here and there as in her own home.

It is an operative presence: Mary accompanies, supports, guides, and encourages. She was given to him as Teacher: “I will give you the Teacher under whose discipline you can become wise, and without whom all wisdom becomes foolishness.” Mary’s presence stimulates living consciously in the presence of God: “At the thought of God present / let the lips, the heart, the mind / follow the way of virtue / O great Virgin Mary. / Sac. Gio Bosco” (prayer written by the saint at the foot of one of his photographs).

Splendid and essential: what is not a living presence in one’s life means total

absence! The sense of Presence is one of God's Providence and of Mary's action. This is a continuous journey for each one of us and for all of us together in the Salesian Family.

2.2. The Energy of the Mission

Don Bosco closely linked Mary with his vocation and his ministry. Here it is good to revisit the presentation that Don Bosco made of the Dream of Nine: "Taking me kindly by the hand, 'Look,' he said to me, here is your field, here is where you must work. Make yourself humble, strong, and robust; and what you see happening with these animals at this moment, you must do for my children." It is the mission of salvation, of transformation, and of formation of young people, through prevention, education, instruction, evangelization, and a solid set of virtues in the educator.

Mary's Son taught Don Bosco the method and the objective for the realization of the dream: "Not with blows, but with meekness and charity you must win over these friends of yours. Therefore, immediately instruct them on the ugliness of sin and the beauty of virtue."

The narration made in 1873-74 of the Dream of Nine brings together all the many other accounts of Marian interventions and inspirations, where the Blessed Mother took on the role of animation, guidance, and support for his mission of saving young people.

It is in this context that Don Bosco recognized as miraculous Mary's interventions: the "graces" granted to people, both spiritual and physical, her powerful protection for the Oratory and the nascent Salesian Family, and her intervention for its prodigious growth for the good of souls.

Personal graces and the awareness of the particular presence of God, through the intercession of Mary, were evident in the personal life of Don Bosco and in the life of the Salesian Family. If one does not perceive the presence of Mary, one is at the mercy of chance.

2.3. Stimulus to Holiness

Don Bosco lived his Marian devotion as a stimulus and support for the movement towards Christian perfection. In this same perspective, he wisely instilled in the young the promotion of Christian life and the desire for holiness.

Don Bosco knew well the sensitivity of his boys and their popular taste of piety. Thus, he was able to transform a devotional tendency, touched with romantic sentiment, into a powerful tool for spiritual formation, for encouraging, correcting, and directing the young.

Mary never leaves us where she finds us. As at the beginning of the Book of Signs in the Gospel of John, she knows that we must be guided, and accompanied for a precise goal. Don Bosco says: “Do what Jesus tells you and you will arrive at where he is waiting for you,” which is to see the Invisible.

3. Salesian Identity and Marian devotion
In conclusion, I wish to share with you, simply, what we as brothers and sisters live at the very center of our Salesian vocation. I love to conclude with what is the very backbone of my life and of yours as well. If it does so much good to me, it will also do a lot of good to you and to everyone.

First of all, the *Constitutions* outline the characteristic traits of our Marian devotion. Article 8, found in the first chapter on the elements that comprise the identity of the Salesian Congregation, summarizes the meaning of Mary’s presence in our Society. She showed Don Bosco his field of work. She constantly guided and supported him. She continued among us her mission as Mother and Helper: we “entrust ourselves to her, humble servant in whom the Lord has done great things, to become among the young witnesses of the inexhaustible love of her Son.”

Article 92 presents the role of Mary in the life and piety of the Salesian. She is a model of prayer and of pastoral charity, a teacher of wisdom, and a guide of our family, an example of faith, of solicitude for the needy, of fidelity in the hour of the cross, and of spiritual joy. She is our educator to the fullness of self-donation to the Lord and to the courageous service of our brothers and sisters. It follows, therefore, that a filial and strong devotion, is expressed in prayer, like the daily rosary and the celebration of her feasts, and in convinced personal imitation of her.

The best summary, however, is found, in my opinion, in the Prayer of entrustment to Mary Help of Christians, which is recited daily in each of our communities after meditation. It was composed by Don Rua in 1894 as an expression of daily consecration in the commitment to fidelity and generosity. Today it has been revised, but it retains the same structure as the old one and the same contents. Here is the original text:

“*Most Holy and Immaculate Virgin Helper, we consecrate ourselves entirely to you and promise to always act for the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls.*

We ask you to turn your merciful gaze upon the Church, its august Head, the priests

and missionaries, upon the Salesian Family, our relatives and benefactors, and the youth entrusted to our care, upon poor sinners, the dying, and the souls in purgatory.

Teach us, O most tender Mother, to replicate in ourselves the virtues of our Founder, especially angelic modesty, profound humility, and ardent charity.

Grant, O Mary Help of Christians, that your powerful intercession may make us victorious against the enemies of our soul in life and in death, so that we may come to crown you with Don Bosco in Paradise. Amen."

As can be seen, the current version merely takes up, with some developments, the text of Don Rua. I believe it is good, every now and then, to revisit it and meditate on it. It is structured in four parts: promise; intercession; docility, entrustment.

In the first part (*Most Holy*), the ultimate purpose of our consecration is recalled by promising to orient every action solely to the service of God and the salvation of others, in fidelity to the essence of the Salesian vocation.

In the second part (*We ask you*), the ecclesial, Salesian, and missionary sense of our consecration is condensed, entrusting to Mary's intercession the Church, the Congregation, and the Salesian Family, the youth, especially the poorest, all men redeemed by Christ. Here, the passion that must nourish and characterize Salesian prayer is well outlined: universality, ecclesiality, youthful missionary spirit.

In the third part (*Teach us*), the virtues that characterize the typical physiognomy of the Salesian disciple of Don Bosco are concentrated: we place ourselves in the school of Mary to grow in union with God, in chastity, in humility, and in poverty, in love for work and temperance, in ardent loving charity (goodness and unlimited self-donation to our brothers and sisters), in fidelity to the Church and its Magisterium.

In the last part (*Grant, O Mary Help of Christians*), we entrust ourselves to the intercession of the Virgin to obtain fidelity and generosity in the service of God until death and admission into the eternal communion of saints.

This excellent summary, which contains a complete program of spiritual life and outlines the physiognomy of our identity, can serve us today as a point of reference

and as a concrete guideline for our spiritual verification and planning. May it be so for each one of us!