

# Saint Monica, mother of Saint Augustine, witness of hope

*A woman of unshakeable faith, of fruitful tears, answered by God after seventeen long years. A model of a Christian wife and mother for the whole Church. A witness of hope who transformed herself into a powerful intercessor in Heaven. Don Bosco himself recommended to mothers afflicted by the unchristian lives of their children, to entrust themselves to her in prayer.*

In the great gallery of saints who have marked the history of the Church, Saint Monica (331-387) occupies a unique place. Not for spectacular miracles, not for the founding of religious communities, not for significant social or political undertakings. Monica is remembered and venerated primarily as a mother, the mother of Augustine, the restless young man who, thanks to her prayers, her tears, and her testimony of faith, became one of the greatest Fathers of the Church and Doctors of the Catholic faith.

But to limit her figure to the maternal role would be unfair and reductive. Monica is a woman who knew how to live her ordinary life – wife, mother, believer – in an extraordinary way, transfiguring daily life through the power of faith. She is an example of perseverance in prayer, of patience in marriage, of unshakeable hope in the face of her son's deviations.

News of her life comes to us almost exclusively from Augustine's Confessions, a text that is not a chronicle, but a theological and spiritual reading of existence. Yet, in those pages, Augustine draws an unforgettable portrait of his mother; not only a good and pious woman, but an authentic model of Christian faith, a "mother of tears" that become a source of grace.

## Her origins in Tagaste

Monica was born in 331 in Tagaste, a city in Numidia, [Souk Ahras](#) in present-day Algeria. It was a lively centre, marked by the Roman presence and an already rooted Christian community. She came from a well-to-do Christian family; faith was already part of her cultural and spiritual horizon.

Her upbringing was marked by the influence of an austere nurse, who educated her in sobriety and temperance. Saint Augustine would write of her, *"I will not therefore speak of her gifts, but of Your gifts to her, who had not made herself alone, nor educated herself alone. You created her without even her father and mother knowing what daughter they would have; and the rod of your Christ, that is, the discipline of your Only Begotten, in a house of believers, a healthy member of your Church, instructed her in your fear."* (Confessions IX, 8, 17).

In the same *Confessions*, Augustine also recounts a significant episode. Young Monica had developed the habit of drinking small sips of wine from the cellar, until a servant reprimanded her, calling her "drunkard". That reprimand was enough for her to correct herself definitively. This apparently minor anecdote shows her honesty in recognising her sins, allowing herself to be corrected, and growing in virtue.

At the age of 23, Monica was given in marriage to Patricius, a pagan municipal official, known for his choleric character and marital infidelity. Married life was not easy. Living with an impulsive man distant from the Christian faith severely tested her patience.

Yet, Monica never fell into discouragement. With an attitude of meekness and respect, she gradually won her husband's heart. She did not respond harshly to outbursts of anger, nor did she fuel unnecessary conflicts. In time, her constancy bore fruit. Patricius converted and received baptism shortly before he died.

Monica's testimony shows how holiness is not necessarily

expressed in sensational gestures, but in daily fidelity, in the love that slowly transforms difficult situations. In this sense, she is a model for many wives and mothers who live marriages marked by tensions or differences in faith.

### **Monica as a mother**

From the marriage, three children were born: Augustine, Navigius, and a daughter whose name we do not know. Monica poured all her love upon them, but above all her faith. Navigius and her daughter followed a straightforward Christian path; Navigius became a priest; her daughter embarked on the path of consecrated virginity. Augustine, however, soon became the centre of her worries and tears.

Even as a boy, Augustine showed extraordinary intelligence. Monica sent him to study rhetoric in [Carthage](#), eager to ensure him a brilliant future. But along with intellectual progress came temptations: sensuality, worldliness, bad company. Augustine embraced the Manichaean doctrine, convinced he would find rational answers to the problem of evil. Furthermore, he began to live with a woman without marrying her, with whom he had a son, Adeodatus. Her son's deviations led Monica to deny him hospitality in her home. But she did not stop praying for him and offering sacrifices, *"from the bleeding heart of my mother, the sacrifice of her tears was offered to You for me night and day"* (Confessions V, 7,13) and *"she shed more tears than mothers ever shed at the physical death of their children"* (Confessions III, 11,19).

For Monica, it was a deep wound. Her son, whom she had consecrated to Christ in the womb, was going astray. The pain was unspeakable, but she never stopped hoping. Augustine himself would write, *"My mother's heart, struck by such a wound, would never heal, for I cannot adequately express her feelings towards me and how much greater her travail in giving birth to me in spirit was that with which she had given birth to me in the flesh."* (Confessions V, 9,16).

The question naturally arises, why did Monica not have

Augustine baptised immediately after birth?

In reality, although infant baptism was already known and practised, it was not yet a universal practice. Many parents preferred to postpone it until adulthood, considering it a “definitive washing”. They feared that if the baptised person sinned gravely, salvation would be compromised. Furthermore, Patricius still a pagan, had no interest in educating his son in the Christian faith.

Today we clearly see that it was an unfortunate choice, since baptism not only makes us children of God, but also gives us the grace to overcome temptations and sin.

One thing, however, is certain, if he had been baptised as a child, Monica would have spared herself and her son much suffering.

The strongest image of Monica is that of a mother who prays and weeps. The *Confessions* describe her as a tireless woman in interceding with God for her son.

One day, a bishop of Tagaste – according to some, Ambrose himself – reassured her with words that have remained famous, “*Go, the son of so many tears cannot be lost.*” That phrase became Monica’s guiding star, the confirmation that her maternal sorrow was not in vain, but part of a mysterious design of grace.

### **A mother’s tenacity**

Monica’s life was also a pilgrimage in Augustine’s footsteps. When her son decided to secretly leave for Rome, Monica spared no effort. She did not give up the cause as lost, but followed him and sought him until she found him. She reached him in Milan, where Augustine had obtained a chair of rhetoric. Here she found a spiritual guide in Saint Ambrose, Bishop of the city. A deep harmony developed between Monica and Ambrose. She recognised in him the pastor capable of guiding her son, while Ambrose admired her unshakeable faith.

In Milan, Ambrose’s preaching opened new perspectives for Augustine. He gradually abandoned Manichaeism and began to

look at Christianity with new eyes. Monica silently accompanied this process. She did not force the timing; she did not demand immediate conversions, but she prayed and supported him and remained by his side until his conversion.

### **Augustine's conversion**

God seemed not to hear her, but Monica never stopped praying and offering sacrifices for her son. After seventeen years, her pleas were finally answered – and how! Augustine not only became a Christian, but became a priest, bishop, doctor, and father of the Church.

He himself acknowledges it: *“But you, in the depth of Your designs, answered the vital point of her desire, without caring about the momentary object of her request, but taking care to make of me what she always asked You to do.”* (Confessions V, 8,15).

The decisive moment came in 386. Augustine, inwardly tormented, struggled against the passions and resistances of his will. In the famous episode in the garden of Milan, hearing the voice of a child saying *“Tolle, lege”* (“Take up and read”), he opened the Letter to the Romans and read the words that changed his life. *“Clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh”* (Romans 13:14).

It was the beginning of his conversion. Together with his son Adeodatus and some friends, he retired to Cassiciaco to prepare for baptism. Monica was with them, sharing the joy of finally seeing the prayers of so many years answered.

On Easter night in 387, in Milan Cathedral, Ambrose baptised Augustine, Adeodatus, and the other catechumens. Monica's tears of sorrow turned into tears of joy. She continued to serve him, so much so that in Cassiciaco Augustine would say, *“She cared as if she had been mother to all and served us as if she had been daughter to all.”*

### **Ostia: ecstasy and death**

After the baptism, Monica and Augustine prepared to return to Africa. Stopping in [Ostia](#), while waiting for the ship, they experienced a moment of intense spirituality. The *Confessions* narrate the ecstasy of Ostia: mother and son, looking out of a window, contemplated together the beauty of creation and ascended towards God, anticipating the beatitude of heaven.

Monica would say: *"Son, as for me, I no longer find any attraction for this life. I do not know what I am still doing here and why I am here. This world is no longer an object of desire for me. There was only one reason why I wished to remain a little longer in this life, to see you a Catholic Christian before I died. God has answered me beyond all my expectations. He has granted me to see you in His service and freed from earthly aspirations for happiness. What am I doing here?"* (Confessions IX, 10,11). She had reached her earthly goal.

A few days later, Monica fell seriously ill. Feeling the end near, she said to her children: *"My children, bury your mother here; do not worry about where. Only this I ask of you, remember me at the Lord's altar, wherever you may be."* It was the synthesis of her life: the place of burial did not matter to her, but the bond in prayer and the Eucharist.

She died at 56, on 12 November 387, and was buried in Ostia.

In the 6<sup>th</sup> century, her relics were transferred to a hidden crypt in the same [church of Saint Aurea](#). In 1425, the relics were translated to Rome, to the [Basilica of Saint Agostino in Campo Marzio](#), where they are still venerated today.

### **Monica's spiritual profile**

Augustine describes his mother with well-measured words:

*"[...] womanly in appearance, manly in faith, aged in serenity, maternal in love, Christian in piety [...]"*. (Confessions IX, 4, 8).

And again:

*"[...] a chaste and sober widow, assiduous in almsgiving, devout and submissive to Your saints; who did not let a day pass*

*without bringing an offering to Your altar; who twice a day, morning and evening, without fail visited Your church, and not to confabulate vainly and gossip like other old women, but to hear Your words and to make You hear her prayers? Could You have disdained the tears of such a woman, who with them asked You not for gold or silver, nor for fleeting or fickle goods, but for the salvation of her son's soul, You who had made her so by Your grace, refusing her Your help? Certainly not, Lord. Indeed, You were beside her and heard her, working according to the order by which You had predestined to work." (Confessions V, 9,17).*

From this Augustinian testimony, a surprisingly contemporary figure emerges.

She was a woman of prayer; she never ceased to invoke God for the salvation of her loved ones. Her tears become a model of persevering intercession.

She was a faithful wife; in a difficult marriage, she never responded with resentment to her husband's harshness. Her patience and meekness were instruments of evangelisation.

She was a courageous mother. She did not abandon her son in his deviations, but accompanied him with tenacious love, capable of trusting in God's timing.

She was a witness of hope; her life shows that no situation is desperate, if lived in faith.

Monica's message does not belong only to the 4<sup>th</sup> century. It still speaks today, in a context where many families experience tensions, children stray from faith, parents experience the fatigue of waiting.

To parents, she teaches not to give up, to believe that grace works in mysterious ways.

To Christian women, she shows how meekness and fidelity can transform difficult relationships.

To anyone who feels discouraged in prayer, she testifies that God listens, even if the timing does not coincide with ours.

It is no coincidence that many associations and movements have chosen Monica as the patroness of Christian mothers and women

who pray for children far from faith.

### **A simple and extraordinary woman**

The life of Saint Monica is the story of a woman both simple and extraordinary. Simple because lived in the daily life of a family; extraordinary because transfigured by faith. Her tears and prayers shaped a saint and, through him, profoundly influenced the history of the Church.

Her memory, celebrated on 27 August, on the eve of the feast of Saint Augustine, reminds us that holiness often passes through hidden perseverance, silent sacrifice, and hope that does not disappoint.

In Augustine's words, addressed to God for his mother, we find the synthesis of her spiritual legacy: *"I cannot say enough how much my soul owes to her, my God; but you know everything. Repay her with your mercy what she asked of You with so many tears for me"* (Conf., IX, 13).

Saint Monica, through the events of her life, achieved the eternal happiness that she herself defined: *"Happiness undoubtedly consists in reaching the goal and one must have confidence that we can be led to it by a firm faith, a living hope, an ardent charity."* (On Happiness 4,35).

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## **Becoming a sign of hope in eSwatini – Lesotho – South Africa after 130 years**

In the heart of Southern Africa, amidst the natural beauty and social challenges of eSwatini, Lesotho, and South Africa, the Salesians celebrate 130 years of missionary presence. In this time of Jubilee, General Chapter, and historical



anniversaries, the Southern Africa Province shares its signs of hope: fidelity to Don Bosco's charism, educational and pastoral commitment among young people, and the strength of an international community that bears witness to fraternity and resilience. Despite the difficulties, the enthusiasm of young people, the richness of local cultures, and the spirituality of Ubuntu continue to point towards paths of future and communion.

Fraternal greetings from the Salesians of the smallest Vice-Province and the oldest presence in the Africa-Madagascar Region (since 1896, the first 5 confreres were sent by Fr. Rua). This year we thank the 130 SDBs who have worked in our 3 countries and who now intercede for us from heaven. "Small is beautiful"!

In the AFM territory live 65 million people who communicate in 12 official languages, amidst many natural wonders and great underground resources. We are among the few sub-Saharan African Countries where Catholics are a small minority compared to other Christian Churches, with only 5 million faithful.

What are the signs of hope that our young people and society are looking for?

Firstly, we are trying to overcome the infamous world records of the growing gap between rich and poor (100,000 millionaires versus 15 million unemployed young people); the lack of security and increasing violence in daily life; the collapse of the educational system, which has produced a new generation of millions of illiterates, struggling with various addictions (alcohol, drugs...). Furthermore, 30 years after the end of the apartheid regime in 1994, society and the Church are still divided among the various communities in terms of economy, opportunities, and many unhealed wounds. Indeed, the "Rainbow Nation" community is struggling with many "gaps" that can only be "filled" with the values of the Gospel.

What are the signs of hope that the Catholic Church in South Africa is looking for?

Participating in the triennial "Joint Witness" meeting of religious superiors and bishops in 2024, we realised many signs of decline: fewer faithful, lack of priestly and religious vocations, aging, and decreasing number of religious, some dioceses bankrupt, continuous loss/decrease of Catholic institutions (medical care, education, social works or media) due to the sharp decline in committed religious and laity. The Catholic Bishops' Conference (SACBC – which includes Botswana, eSwatini, and South Africa) indicates as a priority, assistance to young people addicted to alcohol and various other substances.

What are the signs of hope that the Salesians of Southern Africa are looking for?

We pray daily for new Salesian vocations, to be able to welcome new missionaries. Indeed, the era of the Anglo-Irish Province (until 1988) has ended, and the Africa Project did not include the southern tip of the continent. After 70 years in eSwatini (Swaziland) and 45 years in Lesotho, we have only 4 local vocations from each Kingdom. Today we have only 5 young confreres and 4 novices in initial formation. However, the smallest Vice-Province in Africa-Madagascar, through its 7 local communities, is responsible for education and pastoral care in 6 large parishes, 18 primary and secondary schools, 3 vocational training centres (TVET), and various social assistance programmes. Our provincial community, with 18 different nationalities among the 35 SDBs living in the 7 communities, is a great gift and a challenge to embrace.

As a minority and fragile Catholic community in Southern Africa

We believe that the only way forward is to build more bridges and communion between religious and dioceses. The weaker we are, the more we strive to work together. As the entire Catholic Church seeks to focus on young people, Don Bosco has

been chosen by the Bishops as the Patron of Youth Ministry, and his Novena is celebrated with fervour in most dioceses and parishes at the beginning of the pastoral year.

As Salesians and Salesian Family, we constantly encourage each other: “work in progress” (constant work)

In the last two years, following the Rector Major’s invitation, we have sought to relaunch our Salesian charism, with the wisdom of a common vision and direction (starting from the annual provincial assembly), with a series of small and simple daily steps in the right direction, and with the wisdom of personal and communal conversion.

We are grateful for the encouragement of Fr. Pascual Chávez for our recent Provincial Chapter of 2024: “You know well that it is more difficult, but not impossible, to ‘re-found’ than to found [the charism], because there are habits, attitudes or behaviours that do not correspond to the spirit of our Holy Founder, Don Bosco, and his Project of Life, and have ‘citizenship rights’ [in the Province]. There is truly a need for a true conversion of every confrere to God, holding the Gospel as the supreme rule of life, and of the entire Province to Don Bosco, assuming the Constitutions as a true project of life.”

Fr. Pascual’s advice and commitment were voted on: “To become more passionate about Jesus and dedicated to young people,” investing in personal conversion (creating a sacred space in our lives, to let Jesus transform it); in communal conversion (investing in systematic monthly ongoing formation according to a theme); and in provincial conversion (promoting the provincial mentality through “One Heart One Soul” – the fruit of our provincial assembly), and with monthly online meetings of the Directors.

On the souvenir image of our Vice-Province of Blessed Michael Rua, next to the faces of all 46 confreres and 4 novices (35 live in our 7 communities, 7 are in formation abroad, and 5

SDBs are awaiting visas, with one at San Callisto-catacombs and one missionary undergoing chemotherapy in Poland). We are also blessed by a growing number of missionary confreres who are sent by the Rector Major or for a specific period from other African Provinces to help us (AFC, ACC, ANN, ATE, MDG, and ZMB). We are very grateful to each of these young confreres. We believe that, with their help, our hope for charismatic relaunch is becoming tangible. Our Vice-Province – the smallest in Africa-Madagascar, almost 40 years after its foundation, still does not have a proper provincial house. Construction began, with the help of the Rector Major, only last year. Here too we say: “work in progress”...

We also want to share our humble signs of hope with all the other 92 Provinces in this precious period of the General Chapter. The AFM has a unique experience of 31 years of local missionary volunteers (involved in the Youth Ministry of the Bosco Youth Centre in Johannesburg since 1994), the “Love Matters” programme for healthy adolescent sexual development since 2001. Our volunteers, in fact, involved for a whole year in the life of our community, are the most precious members of our Mission and of the new groups of the Salesian Family that are slowly growing (VDB, Salesian Cooperators, and Past Pupils of Don Bosco).

Our mother house in Cape Town will celebrate its one hundred and thirtieth (130th) anniversary next year, and thanks to the one hundred and fiftieth (150th) anniversary of the Salesian Missions, we have created, with the help of the China Province, a special “St. Louis Versiglia Memorial Room,” where our Protomartyr spent a day during his return from Italy to China-Macau in May 1917.

Don Bosco ‘Ubuntu’ – synodal journey

“We are here thanks to you!” – Ubuntu is one of Southern African cultures’ contributions to the global community. The word in the Nguni language means, “I am because you are!” (Other possible translations: “I exist because you exist”).

Last year we undertook the “Eco Ubuntu” project (a 3-year environmental awareness project) involving about 15,000 young people from our 7 communities in eSwatini, Lesotho, and South Africa. In addition to the splendid celebration and sharing of the 2024 Youth Synod, our 300 young people [who participated] especially retain Ubuntu in their memories. Their enthusiasm is a source of inspiration. The AFM needs you: We are here thanks to you!

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## **Message from Father Fabio Attard on the Feast of the Rector Major**

*Dear Confreres, dear Collaborators in our Educative Pastoral Communities, dear young people,*

Allow me to share with you this message that comes from the depths of my heart. I communicate it with all the affection, appreciation and esteem I have for each and every one of you as you are engaged in the mission of being educators, pastors and animators of young people on all continents.

We are all aware that the education of young people increasingly requires significant adult figures, people with a solid moral backbone, capable of transmitting hope and vision for their future.

While we are all committed to walking with young people, welcoming them into our homes, offering them educational opportunities of every kind and type, in the variety of environments in which we work, we are also aware of the cultural, social and economic challenges we face.

Alongside these challenges, which are part of every pastoral educational process, since it is always a continuous dialogue with earthly realities, we recognise that, as a consequence of situations of wars and armed conflicts in various parts of the world, the call we are living is becoming more complex and difficult. All this has an effect on the commitment we are carrying out. Yet, it is encouraging to see that despite the difficulties we face, we are determined to continue living our mission with conviction.

In recent months, the message of Pope Francis and now the words of Pope Leo XIV have continually invited the world to face this painful situation, which seems like a spiral that is growing at an alarming rate. We know that wars never bring peace. We are aware, and some of us are experiencing it first-hand, that every armed conflict and every war brings suffering, pain and increases all kinds of poverty. We all know that those who ultimately pay the price for such situations are the displaced, the elderly, children and young people who find themselves without a present and without a future.

For this reason, dear confreres, dear collaborators and young people throughout the world, I would kindly ask you that on the feast of the Rector Major, which is a tradition dating back to the time of Don Bosco, every community around the feast day of the Rector Major celebrate the Holy Eucharist for peace.

It is an invitation to prayer that finds its source in the sacrifice of Christ, crucified and risen. A prayer as a testimony so that no one remains indifferent in a world situation shaken by a growing number of conflicts.

This is our gesture of solidarity with all those, especially Salesians, lay people and young people, who at this particular moment, with great courage and determination, continue to live the Salesian mission in situations marked by war. They are Salesians, lay people and young people who ask for and appreciate the solidarity of the whole Congregation, human solidarity, spiritual solidarity, charismatic

solidarity.

While I and the entire General Council are doing everything possible to be very close to everyone in a concrete way, I believe that at this particular moment, such a sign of closeness and encouragement should be given by the whole Congregation.

To you, our dear brothers and sisters in Myanmar, Ukraine, the Middle East, Ethiopia, East of Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, Haiti and Central America, we want to say loudly that we are with you. We thank you for your witness. We assure you of our human and spiritual closeness.

We continue to pray for the gift of peace. We continue to pray for our confreres, lay people and young people who in very challenging situations continue to hope and pray for peace to emerge. Their example, their self-giving and their belonging to the charism of Don Bosco are a powerful witness for us. They, together with many consecrated persons, priests and committed lay people, are modern martyrs, living witnesses engaged in education and evangelisation who, despite everything, as true shepherds and ministers of evangelical charity, continue to love, believe and hope for a better future.

All of us accept this call to solidarity with all our hearts. Thank you.

*Prot. 25/0243 Rome, 24 June 2025*

*don Fabio ATTARD,*

*Rector Major*

*Foto: shutterstock.com*

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# The Venerable Father Carlo Crespi “witness and pilgrim of hope”

*ather Carlo Crespi, a Salesian missionary in Ecuador, lived his life dedicated to faith and hope. In recent years, in the Shrine of Mary Help of Christians, he consoled the faithful, instilling optimism even in times of crisis. His exemplary practice of the theological virtues, highlighted by the testimony of those who knew him, was also expressed in his commitment to education. By founding schools and institutes, he offered young people new perspectives. His example of resilience and dedication continues to illuminate the spiritual and human path of the community. His legacy endures and inspires generations of believers.*

In the last years of his life, Father Carlo Crespi (Legnano, May 29, 1891 – Cuenca, April 30, 1982), a Salesian missionary in Ecuador, having gradually put aside the academic aspirations of his youth, surrounded himself with essentiality, and his spiritual growth appeared unstoppable. He was seen in the Shrine of Mary Help of Christians spreading devotion to the Virgin, confessing and advising endless lines of faithful, for whom schedules, meals, and even sleep no longer matter. Just as he had done in an exemplary manner throughout his life, he kept his gaze fixed on eternal goods, which now appeared closer than ever.

He had that eschatological hope that is linked to the expectations of man in life and beyond death, significantly influencing his worldview and daily behaviour. According to Saint Paul, hope is an indispensable ingredient for a life that is given, that grows by collaborating with others and developing one's freedom. The future thus becomes a collective task that makes us grow as people. His presence invites us to look to the future with a sense of confidence,



resourcefulness, and connection with others.

This was the hope of the Venerable Father Crespi! A great virtue that, like the arms of a yoke, supports faith and charity: like the transverse arm of the Cross. It is a throne of salvation. It is the support of the healing serpent raised by Moses in the desert; a bridge of the soul to take flight in the light.

The uncommon level reached by Father Crespi in the practice of all the virtues was highlighted, in a concordant manner, by the witnesses heard during the Diocesan Inquiry for the Cause of Beatification, but it also emerges from the careful analysis of the documents and the biographical events regarding Father Carlo Crespi. The exercise of Christian virtues on his part was, according to those who knew him, not only extraordinary, but also constant throughout his long life. People followed him faithfully because in his daily life the exercise of the theological virtues shone through almost naturally, among which hope stood out in a particular way in the many moments of difficulty. He sowed hope in the hearts of people and lived this virtue to the highest degree.

When the "Cornelio Merchan" school was destroyed in a fire, to the people who rushed in tears before the smoking ruins, he, also weeping, manifested a constant and uncommon hope, encouraging everyone: *"Pachilla is no more, but we will build a better one and the children will be happier and more content."* From his lips never came a word of bitterness or sorrow for what had been lost.

At the school of Don Bosco and Mamma Margherita, he lived and witnessed hope in fullness because, trusting in the Lord and hoping in Divine Providence, he carried out great works and services without a budget, even if he never lacked money. He had no time to agitate or despair, his positive attitude gave confidence and hope to others.

Fr. Carlo was often described as a man with a heart rich in optimism and hope in the face of the great sufferings of life, because he was inclined to relativise human events, even the most difficult ones. In the midst of

his people, he was a witness and pilgrim of hope in the journey of life!

In order to understand how and in what areas of the Venerable's life the virtue of hope found concrete expression, the account that Father Carlo Crespi himself makes in a letter sent from Cuenca in 1925 to the Rector Major Fr. Filippo Rinaldi is also quite edifying. In it, accepting his insistent request, he relates an episode he experienced firsthand, when, in consoling a Kivaro woman for the premature loss of her son, he announces the good news of life without end. *"Moved to tears, I approached the venerable daughter of the forest with her hair loose in the wind: I assured her that her son had died well, that before dying he had only the name of his distant mother on his lips, and that he had been buried in a specially made coffin, his soul certainly having been gathered by the great God in Paradise [...]. I was therefore able to exchange some words calmly, casting into that broken heart the sweet balm of faith and Christian hope."*

Practicing the virtue of hope grew parallel to the practice of the other Christian virtues, encouraging them: he was a man rich in faith, hope, and charity.

When the socio-economic situation in Cuenca in the 20th century worsened considerably, creating significant repercussions on the lives of the population, he had the intuition to understand that by forming young people from a human, cultural, and spiritual point of view, he would sow in them the hope for a better life and future, helping to change the fate of the entire society.

Father Crespi, therefore, undertook numerous initiatives in favour of the youth of Cuenca, starting first of all with school education. The Salesian Popular School "Cornelio Merchán"; the Normal Orientalist College for Salesian teachers; the founding of schools of arts and crafts – which later became the *"Técnico Salesiano"* and the Higher Technological Institute, culminating in the Salesian Polytechnic University – confirm the desire of the Servant of God to offer the Cuenca population better and more numerous

prospects for spiritual, human, and professional growth. The young and the poor, considered first of all as children of God destined for eternal beatitude, were therefore reached by Father Crespi through a human and social promotion capable of flowing into a broader dynamic, that of salvation.

All this was carried out by him with few economic means, but abundant hope in the future of young people. He worked actively without losing sight of the ultimate goal of his mission: to attain eternal life. It is precisely in this sense that Father Carlo Crespi understood the theological virtue of hope, and it is through this perspective that his entire priesthood was based.

The reaffirmation of eternal life was undoubtedly one of the central themes addressed in the writings of Father Carlo Crespi. This fact allows us to grasp the evident importance he assigned to the virtue of hope. This fact clearly shows how the practice of this virtue constantly permeated the earthly path of the Servant of God.

Not even illness could extinguish the inexhaustible hope that always animated Father Crespi.

Shortly before ending his earthly existence, Fr. Carlo asked that a Crucifix be placed in his hands. His death occurred on April 30, 1982, at 5:30 p.m. in the Santa Inés Clinic in Cuenca due to bronchopneumonia and a heart attack.

The personal physician of the Venerable Servant of God, who for 25 years and until his death, was a direct witness to the serenity and awareness with which Father Crespi, who had always lived with his gaze turned to Heaven, lived the long-awaited encounter with Jesus.

In the process he testified: *"For me, a special sign is precisely that attitude of having communicated with us in a simply human act, laughing and joking and, when – I say – he saw that the doors of eternity were open and perhaps the Virgin was waiting for him, he silenced us and made us all pray."*

Carlo Riganti

# With Nino Baglieri, Pilgrim of Hope, on the Journey of the Jubilee

*The path of the 2025 Jubilee, dedicated to Hope, finds a shining witness in the story of the Servant of God Nino Baglieri. From the dramatic fall that left him tetraplegic at seventeen to his inner rebirth in 1978, Baglieri moved from the shadow of despair to the light of active faith, transforming his bed of suffering into a throne of joy. His story intertwines the five Jubilee signs – pilgrimage, door, profession of faith, charity, and reconciliation – showing that Christian hope is not escapism but a strength that opens the future and supports every journey.*

## 1. Hoping as Waiting

Hope, according to the online Treccani dictionary, is a feeling of “trustful expectation in the present or future fulfillment of what is desired.” The etymology of the noun “hope” comes from the Latin spes, which in turn derives from the Sanskrit root spa- meaning to stretch toward a goal. In Spanish, “to hope” and “to wait” are both translated with the verb esperar, which combines both meanings in one word: as if one could only wait for what one hopes for. This state of mind allows us to face life and its challenges with courage and a heart always burning with light. Hope is expressed – positively or negatively – in some popular proverbs: “Hope is the last to die,” “While there is life, there is hope,” “He who lives by hope dies in despair.”

Almost gathering this “shared feeling” about hope, but aware of the need to help rediscover hope in its fullest and truest dimension, Pope Francis dedicated the Ordinary Jubilee of 2025 to Hope (*Spes non confundit* [Hope does not disappoint] is the bull of convocation) and already in 2014 said: “The resurrection of Jesus is not the happy ending of a beautiful fairy tale; it is not the happy end of a movie; it is the intervention of God the Father where human hope breaks down. At the moment when everything seems lost, in the moment of pain, when many people feel the need to get down from the cross, that is the moment closest to the resurrection. The night becomes darkest just before the morning begins, before the light begins. In the darkest moment God intervenes and raises up” (cf. Audience of 16 April 2014).

In this context, the story of the **Servant of God Nino Baglieri** (Modica, May 1, 1951 – March 2, 2007) fits perfectly. As a seventeen-year-old bricklayer, he fell from a seventeen-meter-high scaffold due to the sudden collapse of a plank, crashing to the ground and becoming tetraplegic: from that fall on May 6, 1968, he could only move his head and neck, depending on others for life in everything, even the simplest and humblest things. Nino could not even shake a friend’s hand or caress his mother... and saw his dreams vanish. What hope for life did this young man have now? What feelings could he face? What future awaited him? Nino’s first response was despair, total darkness before a search for meaning that found no answer. First a long wandering through hospitals in different Italian regions, then the pity of friends and acquaintances led Nino to rebel and lock himself away in ten long years of loneliness and anger, while the tunnel of life grew ever deeper.

In Greek mythology, Zeus entrusts Pandora with a jar containing all the evils of the world; when opened, men lose immortality and begin a life of suffering. To save them, Pandora reopens the jar and releases *elpis*, hope, which remained at the bottom. It was the only antidote to life’s

troubles. Looking instead to the Giver of all good, we know that “hope does not disappoint” (Rom 5:5). Pope Francis writes in *Spes non confundit*: “In the sign of this hope, the apostle Paul encourages the Christian community in Rome [...] Everyone hopes. In the heart of every person is enclosed hope as desire and expectation of good, even without knowing what tomorrow will bring. The unpredictability of the future, however, gives rise to sometimes opposing feelings: from trust to fear, from serenity to discouragement, from certainty to doubt. We often meet discouraged people who look to the future with skepticism and pessimism, as if nothing could offer them happiness. May the Jubilee be an opportunity for all to revive hope” (ibid., 1).

## **2. From Witness of “Despair” to “Ambassador” of Hope**

Let us return to the story of our Servant of God, Nino Baglieri.

Ten long years had to pass before Nino emerged from the tunnel of despair, the thick darkness cleared, and Light entered. It was the afternoon of March 24, Good Friday 1978, when Father Aldo Modica, with a group of young people, went to Nino’s home, urged by his mother Peppina and some people involved in the Renewal in the Spirit movement, then in its early days in the nearby Salesian parish. Nino writes, “While they invoked the Holy Spirit, I felt a very strange sensation, a great warmth invaded my body, a strong tingling in all my limbs, as if a new strength entered me and something old left. At that moment I said my ‘yes’ to the Lord, accepted my cross, and was reborn to a new life, becoming a new man. Ten years of despair erased in a few moments, because an unknown joy entered my heart. I desired the healing of my body, but the Lord granted me an even greater grace: spiritual healing.”

A new path began for Nino: from “witness of despair” he became a “pilgrim of hope.” No longer isolated in his little room but an “ambassador” of this hope, he shared his experience through a broadcast on a local radio station

and – an even greater grace – God gave him the joy of being able to write with his mouth. Nino confides: “In March 1979 the Lord performed a great miracle for me: I learned to write with my mouth. I started like this; I was with my friends doing homework, I asked for a pencil and a notebook, I began making marks and drawing something, but then I discovered I could write, and so I began to write.” He then began to write his memoirs and correspond with people of all kinds around the world, thousands of letters still preserved today. The regained hope made him creative; now Nino rediscovered the joy of relationships and wanted to become – as much as he could – independent. With a stick he used with his mouth and an elastic band attached to the phone, he dialed numbers to communicate with many sick people, offering them words of comfort. He discovered a new way to face his suffering, which brought him out of isolation and set him on the path to becoming a witness to the Gospel of joy and hope. “Now there is so much joy in my heart, there is no more pain in me, in my heart there is Your love. Thank you, my Lord Jesus, from my bed of pain I want to praise you and with all my heart thank you because you called me to know life, to know true life.”

Nino changed perspective, made a 360° turn – the Lord gave him **conversion** – and placed his trust in that merciful God who, through “misfortune,” called him to work in His vineyard, to be a sign and instrument of salvation and hope. Thus, many who came to console him left comforted, with tears in their eyes. They did not find on that little bed a sad and gloomy man, but a smiling face that radiated – despite many sufferings, including bedsores and respiratory problems – the joy of living; the smile was constant on his face, and Nino felt “useful from the bed of the cross.” Nino Baglieri is the opposite of many people today, constantly searching for the meaning of life, aiming for easy success and the happiness of fleeting and worthless things, living online, consuming life with a click, wanting everything immediately but with sad, dull eyes. Nino apparently had nothing, yet he had peace

and joy in his heart. He did not live isolated but supported by God's love expressed through the embrace and presence of his entire family and more and more people who knew him and connected with him.

### **3. Rekindling Hope**

Building hope means that every time I am not satisfied with my life and I commit to changing it. Every time I do not let negative experiences harden me or make me distrustful. Every time I fall and try to get up, not allowing fears to have the last word. Every time, in a world marked by conflicts, I choose trust and always try again, with everyone. Every time I do not flee from God's dream that tells me, "I want you to be happy," "I want you to have a full life... full even of holiness." The pinnacle of the virtue of hope is indeed a gaze toward Heaven to live well on earth or, as Don Bosco would say, **walking with feet on the ground and heart in Heaven.**

In this furrow of hope, the Jubilee finds fulfillment, which, with its signs, asks us to set out, to cross some frontiers.

*First sign, the pilgrimage:* when moving from one place to another, one is open to the new, to change. Jesus' whole life was "a setting out," a journey of evangelization fulfilled in the gift of life and beyond, with the Resurrection and Ascension.

*Second sign, the door:* in John 10:9 Jesus says, "I am the door; if anyone enters through me, he will be saved; he will come in and go out and find pasture." Passing through the door means being welcomed, being community. The Gospel also speaks of the "narrow door": the Jubilee becomes a path of conversion.

*Third sign, the profession of faith:* expressing belonging to Christ and the Church and declaring it publicly.

*Fourth sign, charity:* charity is the password to heaven; in 1 Peter 4:8 the apostle Peter admonishes, "Keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a



multitude of sins.”

*Fifth sign*, therefore, **reconciliation and Jubilee indulgence**: it is a “favorable time” (cf. 2 Cor 6:2) to experience God’s great mercy and walk paths of rapprochement and forgiveness toward others; to live the prayer of the Our Father where we ask, “forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” It is becoming new creatures.

Even in Nino’s life, there are episodes that connect him – along the “thread” of hope – to these Jubilee dimensions. For example, his repentance for some childhood mischiefs, like when three of them (he recounts), “stole the offerings from the sacristy during Masses, we used them to play foosball. When you meet bad companions, they lead you astray. Then one took the Oratory keys and hid them in my schoolbag in the study; they found the keys, called the parents, gave us two slaps, and kicked us out of school. Shame!” But above all, in Nino’s life there is charity, helping the poor person in physical and moral trial, reaching out to those with psychological struggles, and writing to brothers in prison to testify to them God’s goodness and love. Nino, who before the fall had been a bricklayer, writes, “[I] liked to build with my hands something that would last over time: even now I feel like a bricklayer working in God’s Kingdom, to leave something that lasts, to see the Wonderful Works of God that He accomplishes in our Life.” He confides, “My body seems dead, but my heart keeps beating in my chest. My legs do not move, yet I walk the paths of the world.”

#### **4. Pilgrim Toward Heaven**

Nino, a consecrated Salesian cooperator of the great Salesian Family, ended his earthly “pilgrimage” on Friday, March 2, 2007, at 8:00 a.m., at only 55 years old, having spent 39 years tetraplegic between bed and wheelchair, after asking forgiveness from his family for the hardships his condition caused. He left this world dressed in tracksuit and sneakers, as he expressly requested, to run in the green

flowering meadows and leap like a deer along the streams. We read in his spiritual Testament, "I will never stop thanking you, O Lord, for having called me to You through the Cross on May 6, 1968. A heavy cross for my young strength..." On March 2, life – a continuous gift that begins with parents and is slowly nurtured with wonder and beauty – placed the most important piece for Nino Baglieri: the embrace with his Lord and God, accompanied by the Madonna.

At the news of his passing, a unanimous chorus rose from many quarters: "a saint has died," a man who made his bed of the cross the banner of a full life, a gift for all. Thus, a great witness of hope.

Five years after his death, as provided by the *Normae Servandae in Inquisitionibus ab Episcopis faciendis in Causis Sanctorum* of 1983, the bishop of the Diocese of Noto, at the request of the Postulator General of the Salesian Congregation, after consulting the Sicilian Episcopal Conference and obtaining the *Nihil obstat* from the Holy See, opened the Diocesan Inquiry for the Cause of Beatification and Canonization of the Servant of God Nino Baglieri.

The diocesan process, lasting 12 years, followed two main lines: the work of the Historical Commission, which researched, collected, studied, and presented many sources, especially writings "by" and "about" the Servant of God; and the Ecclesiastical Tribunal, responsible for the Inquiry, which also heard witnesses under oath.

This process concluded on May 5, 2024, in the presence of Monsignor Salvatore Rumeo, current bishop of the Diocese of Noto. A few days later, the procedural acts were delivered to the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints, which opened them on June 21, 2024. At the beginning of 2025, the same Dicastery declared their "Legal Validity," allowing the Roman phase of the Cause to enter full swing.

Now the contribution to the Cause continues also by spreading knowledge of Nino's figure, who at the end of his earthly journey recommended: "Do not leave me doing nothing. I will continue my mission from heaven. I will write to you from

Paradise.”

The journey of hope in his company thus becomes a longing for Heaven, when “we will meet face to face with the infinite beauty of God (cf. 1 Cor 13:12) and will be able to read with joyful admiration the mystery of the universe, which will share with us endless fullness [...]. Meanwhile, we unite to take care of this home entrusted to us, knowing that whatever good is in it will be taken up in the feast of heaven. Together with all creatures, we walk on this earth seeking God [...] We walk singing!” (cf. *Laudato Si'*, 243-244).

*Roberto Chiaramonte*

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## **Don Bosco promoter of “divine mercy”**

*As a very young priest, Don Bosco published a booklet, in tiny format, entitled “Exercise of Devotion to God’s Mercy”.*

### **It all began with the Marchioness Barolo**

The Marchioness Giulia Colbert di Barolo (1785-1864), declared Venerable by Pope Francis on 12 May 2015, personally cultivated a special devotion to divine mercy, so she had the custom of a week of meditations and prayers on the subject introduced to the religious and educational communities she founded near Valdocco. But she was not satisfied. She wanted this practice to spread elsewhere, especially in parishes, among the people. She sought the consent of the Holy See, which not only granted it, but also granted various indulgences for this devotional practice. At this point, it was a question of making a publication suitable for the purpose.

We are now in the summer of 1846, when Don Bosco, having overcome the serious crisis of exhaustion that had brought him to the brink of the grave, had withdrawn to spend time with Mamma Margaret at the Becchi to convalesce and had by then “resigned” from his much appreciated service as chaplain to one of the Barolo works, to the great displeasure of the Marchioness herself. But “his young people” called him to the newly rented Pinardi house.

At this point the famous patriot Silvio Pellico, secretary-librarian to the Marchioness and an admirer and friend of Don Bosco, who had set some of his poems to music, intervened. The Salesian memoirs tell us that Pellico, with a certain boldness, proposed to the Marchioness that she commission Don Bosco to do the publication she was interested in. What did the Marchioness do? She accepted, albeit not too enthusiastically. Who knows? Perhaps she wanted to put him to the test. And Don Bosco, too, accepted.

### **A theme close to his heart**

The theme of God’s mercy was among his spiritual interests, those on which he had been formed in the seminary in Chieri and especially at the Turin *Convitto*. Only two years earlier he had finished attending the lessons of his fellow countryman Saint Joseph Cafasso, just four years older than him, but his spiritual director, whose sermons he followed at retreats for priests, but also the formator for half a dozen other founders, some even saints. Well then, Cafasso, although a child of the religious culture of his time – made up of prescriptions and “doing good to escape divine punishment and deserve Paradise” – did not miss an opportunity in both his teaching and preaching to speak of God’s mercy. And how could he not do so when he was constantly devoted to the Sacrament of Penance and to assisting those condemned to death? All the more so since such indulgent devotion at the time was a pastoral reaction against the rigours of Jansenism that supported the predestination of those who were saved.

So, Don Bosco, as soon as he returned from the

country at the beginning of November, set to work, following the pious practices approved by Rome and spread throughout Piedmont. With the help of a few texts that he could easily find in the Convitto library which he knew well, at the end of the year he published at his own expense a small booklet of 111 pages, tiny format, entitled "[Exercise of devotion to God's Mercy](#)". He immediately gave it to the girls, women and Sisters at the Barolo foundations. It is not documented, but logic and gratitude would have it that he also made a gift of it to the Marchioness Barolo, the promoter of the project: but the same logic and gratitude would have it that the Marchioness did not let herself be outdone in generosity, sending him, perhaps anonymously as on other occasions, a contribution of her own to the expenses.

There is no space here to present the "classic" contents of Don Bosco's booklet of meditations and prayers; we would just like to point out that its basic principle is: "everyone must invoke God's Mercy for himself and for all people, because 'we are all sinners' [...] all in need of forgiveness and grace [...] all called to eternal salvation."

Significant, then, is the fact that at the conclusion of each day of the week Don Bosco, by way of "devotional exercises", assigns a practice of piety: invite others to intervene, forgive those who have offended us, make an immediate mortification to obtain mercy from God for all sinners, give some alms or replace them with the recitation of prayers etc. On the last day, the practice is replaced by a nice invitation, perhaps even alluding the Marchioness Barolo, to say "at least one *Hail Mary* for the person who has promoted this devotion!"

## **Educational practice**

But beyond the writings with edifying and formative purposes, one can ask how Don Bosco in fact educated his youngsters to trust in divine mercy. The answer is not difficult and could be documented in many ways. We will limit ourselves to three vital experiences lived at Valdocco: the

sacraments of Confession and Communion and his figure of a "father full of goodness and love".

## **Confession**

Don Bosco initiated hundreds of young people from Valdocco into adult Christian life. But by what means? Two in particular: Confession and Communion.

Don Bosco, as we know, is one of the great apostles of Confession, and this is first of all because he exercised this ministry to the full, as did, for that matter, his teacher and spiritual director Cafasso mentioned above, and the much admired figure of his almost contemporary the saintly Curé d'Ars (1876-1859). If the latter's life, as has been written, "was spent in the confessional" and if Cafasso was able to offer many hours of the day ("the necessary time") to listen in confession to "bishops, priests, religious, eminent laymen and simple people who flocked to him", Don Bosco could not do the same because of the many occupations in which he was immersed. Nevertheless, he made himself available in the confessional for the young people (and the Salesians) every day that religious services were celebrated at Valdocco or in Salesian houses, or on special occasions.

He had begun to do this as soon as he had finished "learning to be a priest" at the Convitto (1841-1844), when on Sundays he would gather the young men in the wandering oratory over two years, when he went to hear confessions at the Consolata or in the Piedmontese parishes to which he was invited, or when he took advantage of carriage or train journeys to hear confessions from coachmen or passengers. He never stopped doing this until the very end, and when asked not to tire himself out with confessions, he replied that by now it was the only thing he could do for his young people. And what was his sorrow when, due to bureaucratic reasons and misunderstandings, his confession licence was not renewed by the archbishop! The testimonies about Don Bosco as a confessor are innumerable and, in fact, the famous photograph depicting him in the act of confessing a young boy surrounded by so many

others waiting to do so, must have pleased the saint himself, who was maybe behind the idea. It still remains a significant and indelible icon of his figure in the collective imagination.

But beyond his experience as a confessor, Don Bosco was a tireless promoter of the sacrament of Reconciliation. He spoke of its necessity, its importance, the usefulness of receiving it frequently. He pointed out the dangers of a celebration lacking the necessary conditions, and illustrated the classic ways of approaching it fruitfully. He did this through lectures, good nights, witty mottos and little words in the ear, circular letters to the young people at the colleges, personal letters, and by recounting numerous dreams focusing on confession, either well or badly done. In accordance with his intelligent catechetical practice, he told them episodes of conversions of great sinners, and also his own personal experiences in this regard.

Don Bosco, who knew the youthful soul in depth, used love and gratitude to God, whom he presented in his infinite goodness, generosity and mercy in order to lead all young people to sincere repentance. Instead, to shake the coldest and most hardened hearts, he described the likely punishments of sin and impressed them with vivid descriptions of divine judgement and Hell. Even in these cases, however, not satisfied with urging the boys to be sorry for their sins, he tried to bring them to the need for divine mercy, an important provision to anticipate their forgiveness even before sacramental confession. Don Bosco, as usual, did not enter into doctrinal matters. He was only interested in a sincere confession, which therapeutically heals the wound of the past, recomposes the spiritual fabric of the present for a future of a "life of grace".

Don Bosco believed in sin, believed in serious sin, believed in hell and spoke of their existence to readers and listeners. But he was also convinced that God is mercy in person, which is why he has given us the sacrament of Reconciliation. And so he insisted on the conditions for

receiving it well, and above all on the confessor as “father” and “doctor” and not so much as “doctor and judge”: “The confessor knows how much greater than your faults is the mercy of God who grants you forgiveness through his intervention” ([Life of Michael Magone](#), pp. 24-25).

According to Salesian memoirs, he often suggested to his youngsters to invoke divine mercy, not to be discouraged after sin, but to return to confession without fear, trusting in the goodness of the Lord and then making firm resolutions for good.

As an “educator in the youth field” Don Bosco felt the need to insist less on *ex opere operato* and more on *ex opere operantis*, that is, on the dispositions of the penitent. At Valdocco everyone felt invited to make a good confession, all felt the risk of bad confessions and the importance of making a good confession; many of them then felt they were living in a land blessed by the Lord. It was not for nothing that divine mercy had caused a deceased young man to wake up after the funeral shroud had been pulled away so that he could confess his sins (to Don Bosco).

In short, the sacrament of confession, well explained in its specific features and frequently celebrated, was perhaps the most effective means by which the Piedmontese saint led his young people to trust in God’s immense mercy.

## **Communion**

But Communion, the second pillar of Don Bosco’s religious pedagogy, also served its purpose.

Don Bosco is certainly one of the greatest promoters of the sacramental practice of frequent Communion. His doctrine, modelled on the Counter-Reformation way of thinking, gave importance to Communion rather than to the liturgical celebration of the Eucharist, even if there was an evolution in its frequency. In the first twenty years of his priestly life, in the wake of St. Alphonsus, but also of the Council of Trent and before that of Tertullian and St Augustine, he suggested weekly Communion, or several times a



week or even daily depending on the perfection of the dispositions corresponding to the graces of the sacrament. Dominic Savio, who at Valdocco had begun to go to confession and communion every fortnight, then went on to receive it every week, then three times a week, finally, after a year of intense spiritual growth, every day, obviously always following the advice of his confessor, Don Bosco himself.

Later, in the second half of the 1860s, on the basis of his pedagogical experiences and a strong theological current in favour of frequent Communion, which saw the French Bishop de Ségur and the prior of Genoa Fr Giuseppe Frassinetti as leaders, Don Bosco moved on to inviting his young men to receive Communion more often, convinced that it allowed decisive steps in the spiritual life and favoured their growth in the love of God. And in the case of the impossibility of daily Sacramental Communion, he suggested spiritual Communion, perhaps during a visit to the Blessed Sacrament, so much appreciated by St Alphonsus. However, the important thing was to keep the conscience in a state to be able to receive Communion every day: the decision was in a way up to the confessor.

For Don Bosco, every Communion worthily received – the prescribed fasting, state of grace, willingness to detach oneself from sin, a beautiful thanksgiving afterwards – cancels daily faults, strengthens the soul to avoid them in the future, increases confidence in God and in his infinite goodness and mercy; moreover, it is a source of grace to succeed in school and in life, it is help in bearing sufferings and overcoming temptations.

Don Bosco believes that Communion is a necessity for the “good” to keep themselves as such and for the “bad” to become “good”. It is for those who want to become saints, not for the saints, like medicine is given to the sick. Obviously, he knows that its reception alone is not a sure indication of goodness, as there are those who receive it very lukewarmly and out of habit, especially since the very superficiality of young people often does not allow them to understand the full

importance of what they are doing.

With Communion then, one can implore from the Lord particular graces for oneself and for others. Don Bosco's letters are full of requests to his young men to pray and receive Communion according to his intention, so that the Lord may grant him good success in the "affairs" of every order in which he finds himself immersed. And he did the same with all his correspondents, who were invited to approach this sacrament to obtain the graces requested, while he would do the same in the celebration of Holy Mass.

Don Bosco cared so much that his boys grew up nourished by the sacraments, but he also wanted the utmost respect for their freedom. And he left precise instructions to his educators in his treatise on the Preventive System: "Never force young people to attend the holy sacraments but only encourage them, and give them the comfort of taking advantage of them."

At the same time, however, he remained adamant in his conviction that the sacraments are of paramount importance. He wrote peremptorily: "Say what you will about the various systems of education, but I find no sure basis except in the frequency of Confession and Communion" ([The Young Shepherd Boy from the Alps, the Life of Francis Besucco from Argentera](#), 1864. p. 100).

### **Fatherliness and mercy**

God's mercy, at work particularly at the time of the sacraments of Confession and Communion, then found its external expression not only in a Don Bosco "father confessor", but also "father, brother, friend" of the young men in ordinary everyday life. With some exaggeration it could be said that their confidence in Don Bosco was such that many of them hardly made a distinction between Don Bosco "confessor" and Don Bosco "friend" and "brother"; others could sometimes exchange the sacramental accusation with the sincere effusions of a son towards his father; on the other hand Don Bosco's knowledge of the young was such that with sober

questions he inspired them with extreme confidence and not infrequently knew how to make the accusation in their place.

The figure of God the father, merciful and provident, who throughout history has shown his goodness from Adam onwards towards men, righteous or sinners, but all in need of help and the object of paternal care, and in any case all called to salvation in Jesus Christ, is thus modulated and reflected in the goodness of Don Bosco "Father of his young people", who only wants their good, who does not abandon them, always ready to understand them, pity them, forgive them. For many of them, orphans, poor and abandoned, accustomed from an early age to hard daily work, the object of very modest manifestations of tenderness, children of an era in which what prevailed was decisive submission and absolute obedience to any constituted authority, Don Bosco was perhaps the caress never experienced by a father, the "tenderness" of which Pope Francis speaks.

His letter to the young men of the Mirabello house at the end of 1864 is still moving: "Those voices, those cheers, that kissing and shaking hands, that cordial smile, that talking to each other about the soul, that encouraging each other to do good are things that embalm my heart, and for that reason I cannot think about them without feeling moved to tears. I will tell you [...] that you are the apple of my eye" (*Epistolario* II edited by F. Motto II, letter no. 792).

Even more moving is his letter to the young men of Lanzo on 3 January 1876: "Let me tell you and let no-one take offence, you are all thieves; I say it and I repeat it – you have stolen everything from me. When I was at Lanzo, you enchanted me with your benevolence and loving kindness, you bound the faculties of my mind with your pity; I was still left with this poor heart, whose affections you had already stolen from me entirely. Now your letter signed by 200 friendly and dearest hands have taken possession of this whole heart of mine, and nothing remains except a lively desire to love you in the Lord, to do you good and save the souls of all of you" (*Epistolario* III, letter no. 1389).

The loving kindness with which he treated and wanted the Salesians to treat the boys had a divine foundation. He affirmed this by quoting an expression from St. Paul: 'Charity is benign and patient; it suffers all things, but hopes all things, and sustains all troubles'.

Loving kindness was therefore a sign of mercy and divine love that escaped sentimentalism and forms of sensuality because of the theological charity that was its source. Don Bosco communicated this love to individual boys and also to groups of them: "That I bear you much affection, I don't need to tell you, I have given you clear proof of it. That you love me, I do not need to tell you, because you have constantly shown it to me. But on what is this mutual affection of ours founded? [...] So the good of our souls is the foundation of our affection" (Epistolary II, no. 1148). Love of God, the theological *primum*, is thus the foundation of the pedagogical *primum*.

Loving-kindness was also the translation of divine love into truly human love, made up of right sensitivity, amiable cordiality, benevolent and patient affection tending to deep communion of the heart. In short, the effective and affective love that is experienced in a privileged form in the relationship between the educand and the educator, when gestures of friendship and forgiveness on the part of the educator induce the young person, by virtue of the love that guides the educator, to open up to confidence, to feel supported in his effort to surpass himself and to commit himself, to give consent and to adhere in depth to the values that the educator lives personally and proposes to him. The young person understands that this relationship reconstructs and restructures him as a man. The most arduous undertaking of the Preventive System is precisely that of winning the young person's heart, of enjoying his esteem, his trust, of making him a friend. If a young person does not love the educator, he can do very little of the young person and for the young person.

## Works of mercy

We could now continue with the works of mercy, which the Catechism distinguishes between corporal and spiritual works, setting out two groups of seven. It would not be difficult to document both how Don Bosco lived, practised and encouraged the practice of these works of mercy and how by his “being and working” he in fact constituted a sign and visible witness, in deeds and words, of God’s love for mankind. Due to space limitations, we limit ourselves to indicating the possibility of research. It remains, however, that today they seem to be abandoned also because of the false opposition between mercy and justice, as if mercy were not a typical way of expressing that love which, as such, can never contradict justice.

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## With Don Bosco. Always

*It makes a difference whether or not a General Chapter is held in one place or another. Certainly, in Valdocco, in the “cradle of the charism”, we have the opportunity to rediscover the genesis of our history as well as the originality that constitutes the heart of our identity as consecrated persons and apostles of youth.*

In the ancient setting of Valdocco, where everything speaks of our origins, I am almost obligated to recall that December of 1859, when Don Bosco made an incredible decision, unique in history: to found a religious congregation with some young boys.

He had prepared them, but they were still very young. “For a long time I have been thinking of founding a Congregation. Now is the time to get down to business”, Don Bosco explained simply. “Actually, this Congregation is not being born now: it

already existed in that set of Rules that you have always observed by tradition... Now it is a matter of moving forward, of formally establishing the Congregation and of accepting its Rules. But know that only those who, after serious reflection, want to make the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience in due course will be enrolled... I will give you a week to think about it."

There was an unusual silence as they left the meeting. Soon, when they began to speak, it could be seen that Don Bosco had been right to proceed slowly and cautiously. Some muttered under their breath that Don Bosco wanted to make them friars. Cagliero paced the courtyard overwhelmed by conflicting emotions.

But the desire to "stay with Don Bosco" prevailed in the majority. Cagliero came out with the phrase that would become historic: "Friar or not, I'm staying with Don Bosco".

At the "accession conference," held on the evening of December 18, they were 17.

Don Bosco convened the first General Chapter on September 5, 1877, in Lanzo Torinese. There were twenty-three participants, and the Chapter lasted three full days.

Today, for the 29th Chapter, there are 227 capitulars. They have come from all over the world, representing all Salesians. At the opening of the first General Chapter, Don Bosco said to our confreres, "The Divine Saviour says in the Holy Gospel that where two or three are gathered in His name, there He Himself is in the midst of them. We have no other purpose in these gatherings than the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls redeemed by the precious Blood of Jesus Christ." We can therefore be certain that the Lord will be in our midst, and that He will lead things in such a way that everyone feels at ease.

### **An epochal change**

The evangelical expression, "Jesus called those He wanted to be with Him and sent them out to preach" (*Mk* 3:14-15), says that Jesus chooses and calls those He wants. We too are among

these. The Kingdom of God is made present, and those first Twelve are an example and a model for us and for our communities. The Twelve are ordinary people, with strengths and weaknesses. They do not form a community of the pure, nor even a simple group of friends.

They know, as Pope Francis has said, that “We are not living an epoch of change so much as an epochal change”. In Valdocco, these days, there is a climate of great awareness. All the confreres feel that this is a moment of great responsibility. In the life of the majority of the confreres, of the provinces, and of the Congregation, there are many positive things, but this is not enough and cannot serve as “consolation,” because the cry of the world, the great and new poverties, the daily struggle of so many people – not only poor but also simple and hardworking – rises up strongly as a request for help. These are all questions that must provoke and shake us and not leave us at ease.

With the help of the provinces through consultation, we believe we have identified on the one hand the main causes of concern and on the other, the signs of vitality of our Congregation, always expressed with the specific cultural traits of each context.

During the Chapter, we propose to concentrate on what it means for us to truly be Salesians passionate about Jesus Christ, because without this we will offer good services, we will do good to people, we will help, but we will not leave a significant impression.

The mission of Jesus continues and is made visible today in the world also through us, His envoys. We are consecrated to building ample spaces of light for today’s world, to be prophets. We have been consecrated by God and have been called to follow His Beloved Son Jesus, to truly live as if we have been redeemed by God. Therefore, once again, the essential point is all about the Congregation’s fidelity to the Holy Spirit, living, with the spirit of Don Bosco, a Salesian consecrated life centred upon Jesus Christ.

Apostolic vitality, like spiritual vitality, is a commitment

in favour of young people, of children, in the most varied poverties, therefore we cannot stop at offering only educational services. The Lord calls us to educate by evangelising, bringing His presence and accompanying life with opportunities for the future.

We are called to seek new models of presence, new expressions of the Salesian charism in the name of God. This should be done in communion with young people and with the world, through “integral ecology,” in the formation of a digital culture in the worlds inhabited by young people and adults.

Also, there is a strong desire and expectation that this will be a courageous General Chapter, in which things are said, without getting lost in correct, well-packaged phrases, but which do not touch life.

We are not alone in this mission. We know and feel that the Virgin Mary is a model of fidelity.

It is good to return in mind and heart to the day of the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of 1887 when, two months before his death, Don Bosco said to some Salesians who, moved, looked at him and listened: “So far we have walked on what is certain. We cannot err; it is Mary who guides us.”

Mary Help of Christians, Our Lady of Don Bosco, guides us. She is the Mother of us all, and it is she who repeats, as at Cana of Galilee in this hour of the CG29, “Whatever He tells you, do it.”

May our Mother Help of Christians enlighten and guide us, as she did with Don Bosco, to be faithful to the Lord and never to disappoint young people, especially those most in need.

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## Vera Grita, pilgrim of hope

Vera Grita, daughter of Amleto and Maria Anna Zacco della Pirrera, was born in Rome on January 28, 1923, and



was the second of four sisters. She lived and studied in Savona, where she obtained her teaching qualification. At the age of 21, during a sudden air raid on the city (1944), she was overwhelmed and trampled by the fleeing crowd, suffering serious consequences for her body, which remained marked by suffering forever. She went unnoticed in her short earthly life, teaching in the schools of the Ligurian hinterland (Rialto, Erli, Alpicella, Deserto di Varazze), where she earned the esteem and affection of all for her kind and gentle character.

In Savona, at the Salesian parish of Mary Help of Christians, she participated in Mass and was a regular at the Sacrament of Penance. From 1963, her confessor was the Salesian Don Giovanni Bocchi. A Salesian Collaborator since 1967, she realized her calling in the total gift of herself to the Lord, who extraordinarily gave Himself to her, in the depths of her heart, with the "Voice," with the "Word," to communicate to her the Work of the Living Tabernacles. She submitted all her writings to her spiritual director, the Salesian Don Gabriello Zucconi, and kept the secret of that calling in the silence of her heart, guided by the divine Master and the Virgin Mary, who accompanied her along the path of hidden life, of self-denial, and of annihilation of self.

Under the impulse of divine grace and welcoming the mediation of spiritual guides, Vera Grita responded to God's gift by witnessing in her life, marked by the struggle of illness, the encounter with the Risen One and dedicating herself with heroic generosity to the teaching and education of her students, meeting the needs of her family and witnessing a life of evangelical poverty. Centred upon and steadfast in the God who loves and sustains, with great inner firmness, she was made capable of enduring the trials and sufferings of life. Based on such inner solidity, she bore witness to a Christian existence made of patience and constancy in good.

She died on December 22, 1969, at the age of 46, in a small room of the hospital in Pietra Ligure, where she

had spent the last six months of her life in a crescendo of accepted suffering lived in union with Jesus Crucified. "The soul of Vera," wrote Don Borra, Salesian, her first biographer, "with the messages and letters, enters the ranks of those charismatic souls called to enrich the Church with flames of love for God and for Jesus Eucharistic for the expansion of the Kingdom."

### **A life devoid of human hope**

Humanly, Vera's life has been marked since childhood by the loss of a horizon of hope. The loss of her family's economic independence, then the separation from her parents to go to Modica in Sicily to stay with her aunts, and especially the death of her father in 1943, put Vera in front of the consequences of particularly painful human events.

After July 4, 1944, the day of the bombing of Savona that would mark Vera's entire life, her health conditions would also be compromised forever. Therefore, the Servant of God found herself a young girl without any prospects for the future and had to repeatedly revise her plans and give up many desires: from university studies to teaching and, above all, to having her own family with the young man she was seeing.

Despite the sudden end of all her human expectations between the ages of 20 and 21, hope was very present in Vera: both as a human virtue that believes in a possible change and commits to realising it (despite being very ill, she prepared for and won the competition to teach), and especially as a theological virtue – anchored in faith – that infused her with energy and became a tool of consolation for others.

Almost all the witnesses who knew her noted this apparent contradiction between compromised health conditions and the ability to never complain, instead attesting to joy, hope, and courage even in humanly desperate circumstances. Vera became a "bringer of joy."

**A niece says:** «She was always sick and suffering,

but I never saw her discouraged or angry about her condition; she always had a light of hope sustained by great faith. [...] My aunt was often hospitalised, suffering and delicate, but always serene and full of hope for the great Love she had for Jesus».

**Vera's sister Liliana** also drew encouragement, serenity, and hope from their afternoon phone calls, even though the Servant of God was then burdened by numerous health problems and professional constraints: «She instilled in me, she says – trust and hope, making me reflect that God is always close to us and leads us. Her words brought me back into the arms of the Lord, and I found peace».

**Agnese Zannino Tibirosa**, whose testimony is particularly valuable as she spent time with Vera at the “Santa Corona” hospital in her last year of life, attests: «Despite the severe suffering that illness caused her, I never heard her complain about her state. She brought relief and hope to all those she approached, and when she spoke of her future, she did so with enthusiasm and courage».

Until the end, Vera Grita maintained this: even in the last part of her earthly journey, she kept a gaze toward the future, hoping that with treatment, the tuberculoma could be reabsorbed, hoping to be able to take the chair at the Piani di Invrea for the 1969-1970 school year, as well as to dedicate herself, once out of the hospital, to her spiritual mission.

### **Educated in hope by her confessor and in her spiritual journey**

In this sense, the hope attested by Vera is rooted in God and in that sapiential reading of events that her spiritual father Don Gabriello Zucconi and, before him, her confessor Don Giovanni Bocchi taught her. Don Bocchi's ministry – a man of joy and hope – had a positive influence on Vera, whom he welcomed in her condition as a sick person and taught to value the sufferings – not sought – with which she was burdened. Don Bocchi was the first master of hope. It has been said of him: «With always cordial and hope-filled words,

he opened hearts to magnanimity, forgiveness, and transparency in interpersonal relationships; he lived the beatitudes with naturalness and daily fidelity». «Hoping and having the certainty that as it happened to Christ, it will also happen to us: the glorious Resurrection», Don Bocchi carried out through his ministry an announcement of Christian hope, founded on the omnipotence of God and the Resurrection of Christ. Later, from Africa, where he had gone as a missionary, he would say: «I was there because I wanted to bring and give them Jesus Who is Alive and present in the Most Holy Eucharist with all the gifts of His Heart: Peace, Mercy, Joy, Love, Light, Union, Hope, Truth, Eternal Life».

Vera became a provider of hope and joy even in environments marked by physical and moral suffering, by cognitive limitations (as among her small hearing-impaired students) or suboptimal family and social conditions (as in the «heated climate» of Erli).

**Her friend Maria Mattalia** recalls: «I still see Vera's sweet smile, sometimes tired from so much struggle and suffering; remembering her willpower, I try to follow her example of kindness, great faith, hope, and love [...]».

**Antonietta Fazio** – a former janitor at the Casanova school – testified about her: «She was very well-liked by her students, whom she loved so much, especially those with intellectual difficulties [...]. Very religious, she transmitted faith and hope to everyone, even though she herself was suffering very much physically but not morally».

In those contexts, Vera worked to revive the reasons for hope. For example, in the hospital (where the food is not very satisfying), she deprived herself of a special bunch of grapes to leave part of it on the bedside table of all the patients in the ward. She also always took care of her appearance so as to present herself well, orderly, with composure and refinement, thus also contributing to countering the environment of suffering in a clinic, and sometimes the loss of hope in many patients who risk “letting themselves go.”

Through the **Messages of the Work of the Living Tabernacles**, the Lord educated her to a posture of waiting, patience, and trust in Him. Indeed, there are countless exhortations about *waiting for the Bridegroom or the Bridegroom who awaits His bride*:

“Hope in your Jesus always, always.

May He come into our souls, may He come into our homes; may He come with us to share joys and sorrows, labours and hopes.

Let my Love do, and increase your faith, your hope.

Follow me in the dark, in the shadows because you know the «way».

Hope in Me, hope in Jesus!

After the journey of hope and waiting, there will be victory.

To call you to the things of Heaven”.

### **Provider of hope in dying and interceding**

Even in illness and death, Vera Grita witnessed Christian hope.

She knew that when her mission was completed, her life on earth would also end. «This is your task, and when it is finished, you will say goodbye to the earth for Heaven»: therefore, she did not feel as an “owner” of time rather she sought obedience to God’s will.

In the last months, despite being in an increasingly serious condition and being exposed to a worsening clinical situation, the Servant of God attested serenity, peace, and an inner perception of a “fulfilment” of her life.

In the last days, although she was naturally attached to life, Don Giuseppe Formento described her as «already at peace with the Lord». In this spirit, she was able to receive Communion until a few days before her death and

received the Anointing of the Sick on December 18.

When her sister Pina visited her shortly before her death – Vera had been in a coma for about three days – contrary to her usual reserve, she told her that she had seen many things during those days, beautiful things that unfortunately she did not have time to recount. She had learned of the prayers of Padre Pio and the Good Pope for her, and she added – referring to Eternal Life – «You all will come to paradise with me, be sure of it».

**Liliana Grita** also testified that, in the last period, Vera «knew more about Heaven than about earth». From her life, the following assessment was drawn: «She, suffering so much, consoled others, infusing them with hope and she did not hesitate to help them».

Finally, many graces attributed to Vera's interceding mediation concern Christian hope. Vera – even during the Covid-19 Pandemic – helped many to rediscover the reasons for hope and was for them a safeguard, a sister in spirit, a help in the priesthood. She helped a priest who, following a stroke, had forgotten the prayers, unable to articulate them due to his extreme pain and disorientation. She ensured that many returned to pray, asking for the healing of a young father struck by haemorrhage.

**Sister Maria Ilaria Bossi**, Mistress of Novices of the Benedictines of the Most Holy Sacrament of Ghiffa, also notes how Vera – a sister in spirit – is a soul that directs to Heaven and accompanies toward Heaven: «I consider her as a sister on the journey to heaven... Many [...] who recognise themselves in her, and refer to her, in the evangelical journey, in the race toward heaven».

In summary, it is understood how the entire story of Vera Grita has been supported not by human hope, by merely looking to “tomorrow”, hoping it would be better than the present, but by a true theological Hope: «She was serene because faith and hope always sustained her. Christ was at the centre of her life; from Him, she drew strength. [...] She was a serene person because she had in her heart the theological

Hope, not the superficial hope [...], but that which derives only from God, which is a gift and prepares us for the encounter with Him».

In a prayer to Mary of the Work of the Living Tabernacles, one can read: «Lift us [Mary] from the earth so that from here we may live and be for Heaven, for the Kingdom of your Son».

It is also nice to remember that **Don Gabriello** also had to accomplish a pilgrimage in hope through many trials and difficulties, as he writes in a letter to Vera dated March 4, 1968, from Florence: «However, we must always hope. The presence of difficulties does not take away the fact that in the end, what is right, good, and beautiful will all triumph. Peace, order, and joy will return. The man, Son of God, will regain all the glory he had from the beginning. Man will be saved in Jesus and will find in God every good. Then all the beautiful things promised by Jesus come to mind, and the soul in Him finds its peace. Come on: now it is as if we are in combat. The day of victory will come. It is certainty in God».

In the Church of *Santa Corona* in Pietra Ligure, Vera Grita participated in Mass and went to pray during her long periods of hospitalisation. Her testimony of faith in the living presence of Jesus Eucharistic and the Virgin Mary in her short earthly life is a sign of hope and comfort for those in this place of care who will ask for her help and intercession before the Lord to be lifted and freed from suffering.

Vera Grita's journey through daily laborious work also offers a new secular perspective on holiness, becoming an example of conversion, acceptance, and sanctification for the 'poor,' the 'fragile,' the 'sick' who can recognise themselves in her and find hope.

Saint Paul writes, «that the sufferings of the present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us». With «impatience», we await to contemplate

the face of God because «in hope we have been saved» (*Rom* 8:18, 24). Therefore, it is absolutely necessary to hope against all hope, «*Spes contra spem*». Because, as Charles Péguy wrote, Hope is a «irreducible» child. Compared to Faith, which «is a faithful bride», and Charity, which «is a Mother», Hope seems, at first glance, to be worth nothing. And instead, it is exactly the opposite: it will be Hope, writes Péguy, «that came into the world on Christmas Day» and that «bringing the others, will traverse the worlds».

«Write, Vera of Jesus, I will give you light. The flowering tree in spring has borne its fruits. Many trees will have to bloom again in the appropriate season so that the fruits may be abundant... I ask you to accept with faith every trial, every pain for Me. You will see the fruits, the first fruits of the new flowering». (Santa Corona – October 26, 1969 – Feast of Christ the King – Penultimate message).

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## **We are Don Bosco, today**

*“You will complete the work I am starting; I will make the sketch, you will add the colors” (Don Bosco)*

Dear friends and readers, members of the Salesian Family, in this month's greeting in the Salesian Bulletin, I will focus on a very important event that the Salesian Congregation is experiencing: the 29th General Chapter. Every six years, this assembly takes place in the journey of the Salesian Congregation, the most important that the Congregation can experience.

Many things are a part of our lives, and this Jubilee year is giving us many important events. However, I want to focus on this because, even if it seems far from us, it concerns us all.



Don Bosco, our Founder, was aware that not everything would end with him, but that his would surely be just the beginning of a long journey to be undertaken. At the age of sixty, one day in 1875, he said to Don Giulio Barberis, one of his closest collaborators: "You will complete the work I am starting; I am making the sketch, you will add the colors [...] I will make a rough copy of the Congregation and I will leave to those who come after me the task of making it beautiful." With this happy and prophetic expression, Don Bosco was outlining the path that we are all called to take; and the General Chapter of Don Bosco's Salesians is fulfilling this in these times to its fullest in Valdocco.

### **The prophecy of the candy**

Today's world is not that of Don Bosco, but there is a common characteristic. It is a time of profound changes. Complete, balanced, and responsible humanisation in its material and spiritual components was the true goal of Don Bosco. He was concerned with filling the "inner space" of the boys, forming "well-formed minds," "honest citizens." Today, this is more relevant than ever. Today's world needs Don Bosco.

In the beginning, there was a very simple question for everyone: "Do you want an ordinary life or do you want to change the world?" Can we still talk of goals and ideals today? When the river stops flowing, it becomes a swamp. The same is so with human beings.

Don Bosco never stopped moving forward. Today he does so with our feet.

He had a conviction regarding young people: "This most delicate and precious portion of human society, upon which the hopes of a happy future are founded, is not innately perverse... because if it sometimes happens that they are already corrupted at that age, it is rather due to thoughtlessness than to consummate malice. These young people truly need a helping hand that takes care of them, nurtures them, guides them..."

In 1882, in a conference to the Cooperators in Genoa: "By

removing, instructing, and educating young people in danger, it is good for the whole of civil society. If young people are well educated, we will have a better generation over time." It is like saying: only education can change the world.

Don Bosco had an almost frightening capacity for vision. He never says "until now," but always, "from now on."

Guy Avanzini, an eminent university professor, continues to repeat: "The pedagogy of the twenty-first century will be Salesian, or it will not be."

One evening in 1851, from a first-floor window, Don Bosco threw a handful of candies among the boys. There was an outburst of joy, and a boy, seeing him smile from the window, shouted: "Oh Don Bosco, if only you could see all the parts of the world, and in each of them so many oratories!"

Don Bosco fixed his serene gaze in the air and replied: "Who knows if the day will come when the children of the oratory will truly be scattered all over the world."

## **Looking afar**

What is a General Chapter? Why take up room with these lines on a topic that is specifically for the Salesian Congregation? In the constitutions of life of Don Bosco's Salesians, in article 146, the General Chapter is defined as follows:

*"The General Chapter is the principal sign of the Congregation's unity in diversity. It is the fraternal meeting in which Salesians carry out a communal reflection to keep themselves faithful to the Gospel and to their Founder's charism, and sensitive to the needs of time and place.*

*Through the General Chapter, the entire Society, opening itself to the guidance of the Spirit of the Lord, seeks to discern God's will at a specific moment in history for the purpose of rendering the Church better service."*

The General Chapter is therefore not a private matter for the consecrated Salesians, but a very important assembly that concerns all of us, that touches the entire Salesian Family and those who have Don Bosco within them, because at the centre are the people, the mission, the Charism of Don Bosco,

the Church, and each one of us, of you.

At the centre is faithfulness to God and to Don Bosco, in the ability to see the signs of the times and the different places. It is a faithfulness that is a continuous movement, renewal, ability to look afar and, at the same time, keep our feet firmly planted on the ground.

For this reason, about 250 Salesian brothers have gathered from all over the world to pray, think, discuss, and look afar... in faithfulness to Don Bosco.

Also, from the construction of this vision, the new Rector Major, the successor of Don Bosco and his General Council, will be elected.

This is not something outside your life, dear friend who is reading, but within your existence and in your "affection" for Don Bosco. Why do I tell you this? So that you accompany all this with your prayer: the prayer to the Holy Spirit to help all the capitulars to know the will of God for a better service to the Church.

I believe that the GC29, I am sure, will be all this. It will be an experience of God to clean up other parts of the sketch that Don Bosco left us, as has always been done in all the General Chapters in the history of the Congregation, always faithful to his design.

Confident that even today we can continue to be enlightened to be faithful to the Lord Jesus in fidelity to the original charism, with the faces, music, and colours of today.

We are not alone in this mission, and we know and feel that Mary, Mother Help of Christians, the Helper of the Church, a model of fidelity, will support the steps of each one of us.

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# Good, trustworthy and courageous slaves

*In this Jubilee year, in this difficult world, we are invited to stand up, restart, and walk in a new life on our journey as men and believers.*

The prophet Isaiah addresses Jerusalem with these words: «Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you». (Is 60:1). The prophet's invitation—to rise because the light is coming—seems surprising, as it is proclaimed in the aftermath of the harsh exile and the numerous persecutions that the people have experienced.

This invitation resonates today for us who celebrate this Jubilee year. In this difficult world, we too are invited to stand up, restart, and walk in a new life on our journey as people and believers.

All the more now that we have had the grace, yes, because it is a matter of grace, to celebrate in liturgical remembrance the Holiness of John Bosco. Let us not make a habit of it: Don Bosco is a great man of God, brilliant and courageous, an unrelenting apostle because he is a disciple deeply in love with Christ. For us, a father!

In life, having a father is extremely important; in faith, in following Christ, it is the same: having a great father is an invaluable gift. You feel it within you, and his believing experience stirs your life. If this is true for Don Bosco, why can't it be so for me?

This is an existential question that sets us in motion and changes us, in the spirit of the Jubilee, becoming “renewed,” “changed” people. It is the profound meaning of the feast of Don Bosco that we have just celebrated, for all of us: to imitate, not just admire!

In this Jubilee year that we are living, with the

theme of Hope, the presence of God, which accompanies us, Don Bosco is a clear and strong reference!

Speaking of Hope, Don Bosco writes, as I have taken up in this year's Strenna text:

«The Salesian» –Don Bosco said, and speaking of the Salesian, he speaks to each of us who reads – «is ready to suffer cold and heat, hunger and thirst, weariness and disdain whenever God's glory and the salvation of souls require it»; the inner support of this demanding ascetic ability is the thought of paradise as a reflection of the good conscience with which he works and lives. «In all we do, our duty, work, troubles or sufferings, we must never forget that [...] the least thing done for his name's sake is not left forgotten; it is of faith that in his own good time he will give us rich recompense. At the end of our lives as we stand before His judgement seat He will say, radiant with love: "Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master (*Mt 25:21*) ».

«In your work and sorrow never forget we have a great reward stored up for us in heaven». And when our Father says that the Salesian exhausted by too much work represents a victory for the whole Congregation, it seems to suggest a dimension of fraternal communion in the reward, almost a community sense of paradise!

Stand up, Salesians! This is what Don Bosco asks of us.

### **«Rejoice! In saving others, you save yourself»**

Don Bosco was one of the great figures of hope. There are many elements to demonstrate this. His Salesian spirit is permeated by the certainties and industriousness characteristic of this bold dynamism of the Holy Spirit.

Don Bosco was able to translate into his life the energy of hope on two fronts: the commitment to personal sanctification and the mission of salvation for others; or better – and here lies a central characteristic of his

spirit–personal sanctification through the salvation of others. Let us remember the famous formula of the three steps: “Rejoice, in saving others, you save yourself.” It seems like a mnemonic game said so simply, like a pedagogical slogan, but it is profound and indicates how the two aspects of personal sanctification and the salvation of others are closely linked.

Monsignor Erik Varden states: «Here and now, hope manifests itself as a glimmer. That does not mean it is irrelevant. Hope has a blessed contagion that allows it to spread from heart to heart. Totalitarian powers always work to erase hope and induce despair. To educate oneself in hope is to practice freedom. In a poem, Péguy describes hope as the flame of the sanctuary lamp. This flame, he says, “is always a descending border, in the depths of night.” It enables us to see what is now, but also to foresee what could be. To hope is to stake one’s existence on the possibility of becoming. It is an art to be practiced assiduously in the fatalistic and deterministic atmosphere in which we live».

May God grant us the gift to live this Jubilee year in this way!

May we all walk this month with this vision that “shines in the darkness,” with Hope in our hearts, which is the presence of God.

I recommend that, this month, you pray for our Salesian Congregation, which will gather in General Chapter; and accompany us all with your prayer and your thoughts, so that we may be faithful, as Salesians, to what Don Bosco wanted.