

Announcement from the Rector Major at the end of his term of office

To my Salesian Brothers SDB

To my brothers and sisters in the Salesian Family

My dear brothers and sisters: Please accept my fraternal and affectionate greetings on this day when we remember our Father Don Bosco's birth. I am sending you these words a few minutes after solemnly celebrating the liturgical feast of Don Bosco's birth at the Becchi, Colle Don Bosco, where he was born on 16 August 1815. This child was a wonderful instrument of the Spirit of God to give life to the great movement that is the Don Bosco Family.

This morning, in the presence of the Vicar of the Rector Major and many of my Salesian brothers and sisters, the Salesian Family, lay friends of Don Bosco, civil and public service authorities and 375 young people from all over the world who took part in the Youth Synod, I signed my resignation from the service as Rector Major, as established by the Constitutions and Regulations of the Salesians of Don Bosco, given that I have been called by the Holy Father, Pope Francis, to another service.

I would like to communicate to the whole Salesian world, in these words, what has taken place. I would like to express my outlook of faith and hope in the Lord who has guided us, and I wish to express my gratitude for so much good received over these ten and a half years as Rector Major of the Congregation and, in the name of Don Bosco, as Father of the entire Salesian Family.

1. First of all, dear brothers and sisters, in addressing you

I would like to express my deep gratitude to God for these years in which he has blessed our Congregation and the Salesian Family. Over a decade we have certainly experienced very different events and situations, especially in a Congregation that is present in 136 nations; I think I can say that we have approached everything from a perspective of faith, with great hope and determination, always for the good of the mission and in fidelity to the charism we have received.

2. I am grateful to the Lord for the fact that over these years I have not lacked, nor have we lacked, the serenity and strength that comes from him. For how true is what the risen Lord says to St Paul: "My grace is sufficient for you" (2 Cor 12:9). This is how I have experienced, and this is how we as the General Council have experienced our service of animation and government. In particular, I would like to thank the two General Councils that have accompanied me over these ten and a half years for their loyalty to our common project, for their dedication and their service.

3. At the end of this period at the head of the Salesian Congregation, I express particular thanks to the Vicar of the Rector Major, Fr Stefano Martoglio, who takes up his service at the head of the Congregation with total dedication and generosity. In the coming months there will be much work and great responsibility, but his personality, his fraternal approach, his ability and optimism, with the help of the General Council and guided by the Lord, will facilitate the journey that remains until the 29th General Chapter.

4. I express my deep gratitude to all my Salesian confreres around the world. I have always felt welcomed, loved and fraternally accepted, and I have found collaboration and generosity. It is true that the Salesians of Don Bosco love and care for the Rector Major as they would for Don Bosco himself, as he asked of us in his spiritual testament. Thank you for your generosity.

5. I would also like to express my gratitude to the Salesian Family spread throughout the world: to our sisters the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, to the Salesian Cooperators, to the Association of Mary Help of Christians (ADMA) – all founded by Don Bosco – and so on up to the 32 groups that today make up this great charismatic tree. These were years of growth and blessing. Thank you to all the people who, through faith in the Lord, have made all this possible.

6. And over these ten years of my service of animation and government, during which I have been able to visit 120 of the countries in which the Congregation and the Salesian Family are present, I have received the great gift of meeting young people around the world: little ones, teenagers, young adults, boys and girls of every nation. I was able to “see with my own eyes, feel with my heart”, first-hand, how “the educational miracles that heal and transform lives” continue to happen every day in many Salesian presences and in our family. And I was able to meet thousands and thousands of young people from all continents and cultures. They were one of my profoundest joys.

7. And I have one last thank you to make. Throughout these years, I have always felt encouraged and supported by the unconditional love of my biological family. For nine of these years my parents, now with God, accompanied me lovingly, serenely, and with their prayers, always telling me not to worry about them. They and all the rest of my family have always been there for me, supporting me with their presence and representing a safe haven to reach so that I never forget my humble origins.

8. Let me conclude by referring to what I said on 25 March 2014 when the then Rector Major, Fr Pascual Chavez, asked me, on behalf of the 27th General Chapter which had elected me in the voting, whether I would accept the service of Rector Major.

I remember that in my poor Italian of that time I said, not without deep emotion, that “trusting in the Grace of the Lord and in faith, with the certainty that I will always be supported by my Salesian confreres, and because I truly love the young people whom I carry in my Salesian heart, I accept what is asked of me.” Today, with these words of thanks, I can tell you that everything I had hoped for has come true with God’s grace.

My final words are addressed to our Father Don Bosco and the Help of Christians. There is no doubt that Don Bosco has watched over and supported his Congregation and his Family over these years. And I have no doubt that in all this time what he himself had assured us has been achieved: “She did everything”. This was the case with Don Bosco. This has been the case in the recent years to which I refer, and this will undoubtedly continue to be the case. To her, our Mother and Help of Christians, we entrust ourselves.

From the bottom of my heart, thank you and greetings from this brother of yours who is and always will be a Salesian of Don Bosco. With all my affection,

Ángel Fernández Cardinale Artime

Prot. 24/0427

Colle Don Bosco, 16 August 2024

Let us also add the office termination act.

I, the undersigned, Ángel Fernández Cardinale Artime, Rector Major of the Society of St Francis de Sales,

– whereas in the Consistory of 30 September 2023 the Holy Father Francis created and proclaimed me Cardinal of the Deaconry of Santa Maria Ausiliatrice in Via Tuscolana; whereas on 5 March 2024 he assigned me the titular see of Ursona, with the dignity of archbishop, and whereas on 20 April 2024 I received Episcopal Ordination in the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome;

– considering that the religious elevated to the Episcopate is subject only to the Roman Pontiff (can. 705);

– taking into account that, in accordance with can. 184 §1 CIC “*An ecclesiastical office is lost by the lapse of a predetermined time*” and that, by decree of 19 April 2024, the Holy Father ordered “*by exception and only for this case*” the continuation of my service as Rector Major after episcopal ordination, until 16 August 2024,

hereby

I DECLARE

that, since the time established by the aforementioned decree has expired, **from today's date I have ceased to hold the office of Rector Major of the Society of St Francis de Sales.**

In accordance with art. 143 of the Constitutions, the Vicar, Father Stefano Martoglio, will simultaneously take over the governance of the Society *ad interim*, until the election of the Rector Major that will take place during the 29th General Chapter convened in Turin from 16 February to 12 April 2025.

Ángel Fernández Cardinale Arttime

Prot. 24/0406

Rome, 16 August 2024

On wings of hope. Message from the Vicar of the Rector

Major

With great simplicity, quietly and in total continuity, remaining in my service as Vicar over the next few months I will support the Rector Major by leading the Congregation to a General Chapter, the 29th, in February 2025.

Dear readers of the Salesian Bulletin, I am writing these lines with trepidation because, having been a reader of the Salesian Bulletin since I was a child in my family, I now find myself on a different page having to write the first article, the one reserved for the Rector Major.

I do so gladly, because this honour allows me to give thanks to God for our Fr Ángel, now Cardinal of the Holy Roman Church, who has just finished 10 years of valuable service to the Congregation and the Salesian Family, following his election at the 27th General Chapter in 2014.

10 years after that day, he is now fully at the service of the Holy Father for everything Pope Francis will entrust him with. We carry him in our hearts and accompany him with grateful prayer, for the good he has done for us, because time does not diminish but strengthens gratitude. His personal story is an historic event for him, but also for all of us. His leaving, in canonical terms, for an even greater service to the Church, is a remaining always with us and among us.

In total continuity

And now as a Congregation, and by extension as the Salesian Family, how do we move forward?

Very simply, quietly and in total continuity. The Vicar of the Rector Major, according to the Salesian Constitutions, also has the task of substituting for the Rector Major in case of need. And it will be thus until the next General Chapter.

The Salesian Constitutions put it in a more comprehensive and articulate way, but the fundamental concept is this: remaining in my service as Vicar in the coming months

I will deputise for the Rector Major by taking the Congregation to General Chapter, the 29th in February 2025.

This is a demanding task for which I immediately ask for your prayers and invocation to the Holy Spirit to be faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ, with the heart of Don Bosco.

My name is Stefano (Stephen)

Before moving on to the important things, a few words to introduce myself: my name is Stefano, I was born in Turin to a family typical of our part of the world: the son of a Salesian past pupil father, who wanted to send me to the same school where he had been in his day, and of a mother, a teacher, also a past pupil of a Catholic school. From them I received life and the life of a simple and concrete faith. That is how my sister and I grew up. There are just two of us.

My parents are already in heaven, in God's hands, and they will be smiling broadly when they see the things that happen to their son... they will surely comment: *dun Bosch tenje nà man sla testa!* (Don Bosco keep a hand on his head!) Keep him steady!

In Salesian terms I have always been part of the Salesian Province of Piedmont-Valle d'Aosta, until I was asked at GC27 to coordinate the Mediterranean Region (all the Salesian places around the Mediterranean Sea, on the three continents bordering it... but also including Portugal and some areas of Eastern Europe). A wonderful Salesian experience which transformed me, making me international in the way I see and feel things. GC28 took the second step, asking me to become Vicar of the Rector Major, and here we are! 10 years at Fr Ángel's side, learning during these years to feel the heart of the world, for a Congregation that is truly spread all over the earth.

The near future

The service of these coming months, until February 2025, is therefore to accompany the Congregation to the next

General Chapter to be held in Turin Valdocco from 16 February 2025.

Dear friends, the General Chapter is the highest and most important moment in the life of the Congregation, when the representatives of all the Provinces of the Congregation gather together (we are talking about more than 250 confreres) essentially for three things: to get to know each other, to pray and to reflect in order to “think about the present and the future of the Congregation” and to elect the next Rector Major and his entire Council. A very important moment, therefore, which our Fr Ángel addressed in his reflection on the theme “Passionate about Jesus Christ and dedicated to the young”. This theme that the Rector Major has chosen for the Congregation will be articulated in three different and complementary aspects: the centrality of Christ in our personal life, religious consecration; the dimension of our community vocation, in the fraternity and shared responsibility with the laity to whom the mission is entrusted; the institutional aspects of our Congregation, the evaluation of animation and governance in accompanying the Congregation. Three aspects for a single generative theme.

Our Congregation is in great need of this General Chapter, which comes after so many events that have touched us all. It is enough to recall that the last General Chapter was celebrated close to the Pandemic.

Building Hope

To celebrate a General Chapter is to celebrate Hope, to build Hope through the institutional and personal decisions that allow Don Bosco’s “dream” to continue, to give it a present and a future. Each person is called to be a dream, in the heart of God, a dream that is realised.

In the Salesian tradition there are those beautiful words that Don Bosco said to Fr Rua, called back to Valdocco to act in Don Bosco’s stead:

“You were Don Bosco at Mirabello. Now you will be so here, at the Oratory.”

This is what really counts: “Being Don Bosco today” and it is the greatest gift we can give to this world.

Salesian holiness

The Holy Spirit unceasingly continues the hidden work in souls, leading them to holiness. Not a few members of the Salesian Family have led lives worthy of the title of Christian: consecrated men and women, lay people, young people, have lived their lives in faith, bringing God’s grace to their neighbours. It is up to the General Postulation of the Salesians of Don Bosco to study their lives and writings and propose to the Church that it recognise their holiness.

A few days ago, the new headquarters for the Postulation was opened. We hope that the new facilities will be an opportunity for a renewed commitment to the causes of canonisation, not only on the part of those who work directly on the causes, but also for all those who can make a contribution. Let us be guided in this by the Postulator General for the Causes of Saints, Fr Pierluigi Cameroni.

It is necessary to express deep gratitude and praise to God for the holiness already recognized in the Salesian Family of Don Bosco and for that in the process of being recognized. The outcome of a Cause of Beatification and Canonization is an event of extraordinary importance and ecclesial value. In fact, it is a matter of discerning the reputation of holiness of a baptized person, who has lived the Gospel Beatitudes to a heroic degree or who has given his life for Christ.

From Don Bosco to the present day, there is evidence of a tradition of holiness to which attention should be given, because it is the incarnation of the charism that originated from him and was expressed in a plurality of states of life

and forms. These are men and women, young people and adults, consecrated persons and lay people, bishops and missionaries who, in historical, cultural and social contexts of different times and space, have made the Salesian charism shine with a singular light, representing a patrimony that plays an effective role in the life and community of believers and for people of good will.

The commitment to spread the knowledge, imitation and intercession of the members of our family who are candidates for holiness

Tips for promoting a Cause.

– Encourage **prayer through the intercession** of the Blessed, Venerable Servant of God, through images (also relics *ex-indumentis*), brochures, books... to be spread in families, parishes, religious houses, spirituality centers, hospitals to ask for the grace of miracles and favors through the intercession of the Blessed, Venerable Servant of God.

– The diffusion of the **novena** Blessed, Venerable Servant of God, invoking his intercession in various cases of material and spiritual need, is particularly effective.

Two formative elements are emphasized: the value of insistent and trusting prayer and that of community prayer. Let us recall the biblical episode of Naam the Syrian (2 Kings 5:1-14), where we see several elements: the signalling of the man of God by a maiden, the injunction to bathe seven times in the Jordan, the indignant and resentful refusal, the wisdom and insistence of Naam's servants,

Naam's obedience, the obtaining not only of physical healing but of salvation. Let us also recall the description of the first community of Jerusalem, when it is stated: "All these persevered and with one accord in prayer, together with some of the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brethren" (Acts 1:14).

- It is advisable, **every month, on the day of the date of death** of the Blessed (Venerable) Servant of God, to take care of a moment of prayer and commemoration.
- Publish quarterly or quarterly a **Sheet** that informs about the journey of the Cause, particular anniversaries and events, testimonies, thank you... to emphasize that the Cause is alive and accompanied.
- Organize a Commemorative Day **once a year**, highlighting particular aspects or anniversaries of the figure of the Blessed, (Venerable) Servant of God, involving groups that are particularly “interested” in his or her witness (e.g. priests, religious, young people, families, doctors, missionaries...).
- Collect and document the **graces and favors** that are attributed to the Blessed, (Venerable) Servant of God. It is useful to have a notebook in which to write down and report the graces asked for and those received, as a testimony to the reputation of both holiness and signs. In particular, if it is a matter of healings and/or alleged miracles, it is important to urgently collect all **medical documentation** that proves the case and evidence attesting to intercession.
- To set up a **committee** that undertakes to promote this Cause also in view of the Beatification and Canonization. The members of this Committee should be persons particularly sensitive to the promotion of the Cause: representatives of the diocese and parish of origin, leaders of groups and associations, doctors (for the study of alleged miracles), historians, theologians and experts in spirituality...
- Promote knowledge through the **writing of biography, critical editions of writings and other multimedia productions**.
- Periodically present the figure of the Blessed, (Venerable) Servant of God **in the Parish Bulletin and in the diocesan newspaper, in the Salesian Bulletin**.

- Have a **website or a link** dedicated to the Blessed, (Venerable) Servant of God with his/her life, data and news relating to the Cause of Beatification and Canonization, request for prayers, notification of graces...
- Review and tidy up the **environments** where he/she has lived. Organize an **exhibition space**. Develop a **spiritual itinerary in his footsteps**, enhancing places (birthplace, church, living environments...) and signs.
- To organize an **archive** with all the catalogued and computerized documentation relating to the Blessed, (Venerable) Servant of God.
- To create an **economic fund** to support both the expenses of the Postulation of the Cause and the work of promotion and animation of the Cause itself.
- To promote **works of charity and education** in the name of the Blessed, (Venerable) Servant of God, through projects, twinnings...

Pay special attention to alleged miracles!

- To take care of our “theological” gaze to grasp the miracles that take place every day in our lives and around us.
- To pray and to have others pray for the various cases that arise and to ask that through the intercession of a Servant of God or Venerable or Blessed, the Lord intervene with his grace and work not only a miracle objectively concerning bodily health, but also a true and sincere conversion.
- To make people better understand what a “demonstrable” miracle is and what it is used for in a Cause of canonization, showing not only the scientific, medical but also the theological aspect.
- Appoint a person in charge to communicate and report graces and alleged miracles. Following a Cause to certify a miracle is a very great commitment for a promoter who must demonstrate

true love for the Servant of God.

- To raise awareness that we must have more faith in the intercession of our saints.
- Communicate when we ask for a grace to unite in prayer. Don't get tired of praying.
- Follow better and personally the people to whom you give the material (novenas, holy cards, etc.) and also carefully choose the places where to do it.
- It is important to sensitize the faithful to continuous prayer sustained by great faith and always ready to accept God's will. We can learn by looking at the lives and sufferings of our Saints.
- In addition to prayers, it is important to be close to families who have great problems and to give them some relics.
- In the case of an alleged miracle, it is necessary to proceed rigorously by using a scientific methodology in collecting evidence, testimonies, medical opinions, etc., and possibly by ordering all the information in chronological sequence.

A miracle is composed of two essential elements: the scientific and the theological. The second, however, presupposes the first.

You need to prepare

1. A brief and accurate report on the particular circumstances of the case; This consists in a chronological case of all the elements of the prodigious fact, both those concerning the scientific and the theological elements. The chronological case involves: generality of the healed; symptoms of the disease, chronology of medical-scientific events; indication of the decisive hours of recovery, clarification of the diagnosis and prognosis of the case, highlighting all the research performed. Outline the therapy followed, explain the mode of healing, i.e. when the last observation was made before healing, the completeness of the healing, presented in

great detail, and the permanence of the healing.

2. A list of texts that can contribute to the search for the truth of the case (healed, relatives, doctors, nurses, people who have prayed...).

3. All documents related to the case. Medical, clinical, and instrumental documents (e.g., medical records, medical reports, laboratory tests, and instrumental investigations) are required for alleged miraculous healings.

Initial discernment before initiating a cause

First of all, it is necessary, on the part of the Provincial and his Council or of the Superior or Head of a group, to investigate and document with the greatest diligence about the *fama sanctitatis et signorum* of the candidate and the relevance of the Cause, in order to verify the truth of the facts and the consequent formation of a reasoned moral certainty. Moreover, it is essential that the Cause in question affects a significant and significant portion of the People of God and is not the intention of only some group, if not even of some person. All this involves a more motivated and documented initial discernment, to avoid dispersion of energies, forces, times and resources.

It is then essential to identify the right person (Vice Postulator) who takes the Cause to heart and has the time and opportunity to follow it in all its stages.

It should also be remembered that starting and continuing a Cause requires a considerable investment of resources in terms of people and financial contributions.

Conclusion

Sanctity recognized, or in the process of being recognized, on the one hand is already the realization of evangelical radicalism and fidelity to Don Bosco's apostolic project, to which we look as a spiritual and pastoral resource; on the

other hand, it is a provocation to live one's vocation faithfully in order to be available to bear witness to love to the extreme. Our Saints, Blesseds, Venerables and Servants of God are the authentic incarnation of the Salesian charism *and of the Constitutions or Regulations* of our Institutes and Groups in the most diverse times and situations, overcoming that worldliness and spiritual superficiality that undermine our credibility and fruitfulness at the root. The saints are true mystics of the primacy of God in the generous gift of self, prophets of evangelical fraternity, servants of their brothers and sisters with creativity.

The path of holiness is a journey to be made together, in the company of the saints. Holiness is experienced together and attained together. The saints are always in company: where there is one, we always find many others. The sanctity of daily life makes communion flourish and is a "relational" generator. Holiness is nourished by relationships, by confidence, by communion. Truly, as the Church's liturgy makes us pray in the preface of the saints: "In their lives you offer us an example, in intercession a help, in the communion of grace a bond of fraternal love. Comforted by their testimony, let us face the good fight of faith, to share the same crown of glory beyond death."

**Mother Rosetta Marchese:
deeply Salesian educator
because rooted in Christ**

Mother Rosetta Marchese, Daughter of Mary Help of Christians, was Superior General from 1981 to 1984. She received many

graces from Providence that sustained her on her path of service to the Congregation and led her to make an offering of herself for the salvation of souls, an offering that God appreciated.

The Servant of God Mother Rosetta Marchese was born in Aosta on 20 October 1922 to Giovanni and Giovanna Stuardi. She is the eldest of three daughters: she, Anna and Maria Luisa. She was born in a nice house in the suburbs. Rosetta attended nursery school and the first three primary classes at the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. From 1928 to 1938 (from the age of 6 to 16) she was a regular and active attendee at the Oratory and a member of Catholic Action. The Salesian environment was lively, serene and it was there that her vocation blossomed.

At the age of almost 16, on 15 October 1938, Rosetta entered the Mother Mazzarello House in Turin as an aspirant. On 31 January 1939 she was admitted to the Postulancy. She was a simple, joyful young woman of prayer and sacrifice. On 6 August she entered the Novitiate. On her small table in the study it is written: 'He who spares himself does not love, loves himself'. On 5 August 1941 she made her first profession. She applied to her superiors to leave as a missionary, but due to the raging war she did not receive a positive response. Immediately after her profession, Sr Rosetta was sent to Turin and Vercelli to prepare for her baccalaureate and to assist the schoolgirls.

At the age of 21, from 1943 to 1947, she was a student at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan at Castel Fogliani (Piacenza). From 1947 – the year she made her perpetual profession – to 1957 she was destined for the Mother Mazzarello Missionary House in Turin as a teacher, assistant to the educande, in charge of the oratory and of the former pupils.

In 1957 (at 37) she left Turin to go to Caltagirone in Sicily as headmistress and remained there until 1961. Her meeting with Bishop Monsignor Francesco Fasola,

Servant of God, was fundamental and helped to bring out latent intuitions and graces from her soul. On the day he took possession of the diocese of Caltagirone (22 January 1961), she sensed the holiness of the Bishop who would guide her spiritually for 23 years, until his death. Her relationship with Bishop Fasola threw further light on the mystery of the priesthood, so much so that on 2 August 1961 Sr Rosetta offered herself for the holiness of the bishop and later for the Church, for the holiness of priests and for religious souls. In the meantime, she supported many sisters as a teacher of the interior life through spiritual accompaniment and correspondence. From 1961 to 1965 Sr Rosetta was superior at the Gesù Nazareno Institute in Via Dalmazia in Rome. Her service coincided with the celebration of the Second Vatican Council.

From 1965 until 1971 Mother Angela Vespa, Superior General of the FMA, entrusted Sister Rosetta with the large Roman Province of St Cecilia. From 1971 to 1973 she was superior at Lecco Olate. Then she was entrusted with the government of another large Province, the Lombard Mary Immaculate Province. At General Chapter 16, on 17 October 1975, she was elected Visiting Councillor.

From 1975 to 1981 she visited the Provinces of Belgium, Sicily, Zaire (now Democratic Republic of Congo), France, Germany and Piedmont. In 1981, on the centenary of the death of Mother Mazzarello who offered her life for the Institute, from 7 to 10 October, Mother Rosetta had a mysterious experience in the founding house of the Institute in Mornese. A voice in the village parish and in the Cofounder's room told her: "Accept, accept!" On 24 October 1981, at General Chapter 27, she was unanimously elected Mother General.

In Turin, on 24 May 1982, a high fever was the first symptom of the illness that would consume her: severe leukaemia. In her notebooks and epistolary she notes that she offers her life for the holiness of the Institute, priests and young people. They all mobilised with unceasing prayer and

also the willingness to give blood for transfusions. Sister Ancilla Modesto relates that the Sisters in Portugal ask Sister Lucy of Fatima if she can implore healing from Our Lady. Sister Lucy of Fatima had a Salesian nephew, Father Valihno, who, on 14 January 1983, went to visit the Mother at Gemelli, bringing the statue of Our Lady of Fatima and a message from Sister Lucy: "The offering was pleasing to God." In her last days, she confided to her vicar, Mother Leton Maria Pilar, that in that little room in Mornese she had intuited her election as Mother General and her death for the holiness of the sisters and priests. In fact, Mother Rosetta was born to Heaven on 8 March 1984 at the age of 61.

The figure that emerges by interweaving her personal notebooks (1962-1982), her epistolary (1961-1983) with Bishop Francesco Fasola (also a Servant of God), together with some other letters, is that of a profoundly mystical woman, an authentic Salesian educator, fully part of the socio-ecclesial context of Council and post-Council Italy.

Aware of the complex reality of her time and open to the gift of grace, with her experience of God, she gives, in a certain way, "confirmation" of the great truths of the Catholic faith on the Eucharist, Our Lady and the Church, which were called into question in the widespread de-Christianisation typical of the Italian twenty-year period 1958-1978 and in particular in the 1968 crisis with its prolonged reverberations. Her life became a call to the essential and unchanging in the fluctuating and complex experiences of her time, in a special way for the Church, for priests, for her Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, and for the laity of the Salesian Family.

Mother Rosetta has a specific mission: to draw a "reparative and affirmative" line with respect to the truths of faith impoverished by the de-Christianised culture and to re-present them with strength and beauty.

Faced with materialism and the de-Christianisation of culture, Mother Rosetta had a strong and vivid experience

of the Trinity. She perceived the first Trinitarian reminders from the earliest years of her religious life (1944 in Castelfogliani; 1951 in Turin at Mother Mazzarello House; 1959 in Caltagirone), as she herself recounts in detail:

"I have in front of me the stages of this path traced out by Him: the Exercises for triennial vows, when reading and meditating on the Gospel of St. John, I was all caught up in the sentiments of Jesus towards the Heavenly Father and it was the beginning of my slow work of removing myself from myself to throw myself into the Heart of Jesus, seen in this way. Then around the age of ten years of profession, Jesus' words to Philip: 'he who sees me, sees the Father', opened me up to the Mystery of the Trinity and Jesus led me into the joy of Their presence in me, but very imperfectly experienced and understood by me. Then six years ago, Our Lady opened me wide to the Holy Spirit and then the Mystery of the Trinity became more and more familiar to me. On 24 July '65, while saying the Gloria during Holy Mass at the expression 'Son of the Father', I felt how all the Father's tenderness poured out on my soul and from that moment on Jesus gave me a more intimate participation in his feelings for the Heavenly Father. Since then, every day my invocation to the Holy Spirit has always been this and I think I can say that I have always lived with this unique passion to identify myself with Jesus in his love for the Heavenly Father!" (Marquis Rosetta, Typewritten text).

Faced with the crisis among priests and the faithful over faith in the Eucharist, Mother Rosetta lived an intense Eucharistic life from which she drew strength and light for even complex daily living.

"Now, we say many things, but I am convinced that only one would turn the Congregation upside down: to be able to nail the sisters ten minutes every day before the Tabernacle in silent prayer of contemplation and union with His Will. All problems would be solved there. Let us begin by

being faithful so that they may all get there" (Mother Rosetta Marchese, Letter to Sister Elvira Casapollo, Mornese 19 August 1978).

From 1979 until her death she experienced the mystical phenomenon of the Eucharistic indwelling, or the Real Presence of Jesus, as a permanent and continuous Presence within herself after Communion. Mother Rosetta carried within herself a burning Eucharistic furnace into which she immersed her sisters, young people and lay people:

"It seems to me now that my task is to continuously take all souls and immerse them in the fire of love that is the Heart of Jesus which I carry within me. I would like to be able to repeat it to him a thousand times a day, always... and then I let myself get caught up in the work and the difficulties it entails; but this continual testing of my weakness does me good and increases my confidence; the smaller and more miserable I am, the easier it is to lose myself in the Heart of Jesus" (Mother Rosetta Marchese, Letter to Bishop Fasola Francesco, Feast of the Archangels 1980).

Faced with the crisis of a Mariology threatened by secularism and unattractive to the people of God, Jesus gave Mother Rosetta a lively filial relationship with the Virgin Mary, woman of the *Fiat* and the *Magnificat*, and gave her a living experience of Our Lady's gaze. With this intensity she proposed to the young people and lay people of the Salesian Family her love for Mary Help of Christians. In fact, she writes:

"At the beginning of the spiritual exercises, almost suddenly, I felt as if penetrated by an interior gaze of Our Lady and as if subjugated and taken by this gaze [...] I glimpsed how my presence in Mary, remaining in Her, abandoned to her, like Jesus after the Incarnation, would be the surest way to let the Spirit in Jesus act freely (I don't know if I am expressing myself well)" (Mother Rosetta Marchese, Letter

to Fr Giuseppe Groppo, Rome 4 May 1963).

As the crisis of the institutions (church and society) worsened, Mother Rosetta experienced the whole Council and post-Council experience *cum Ecclesiae* and invoked the constant presence of the Spirit upon it. On the day the Council opened, following the event on television, she wrote to Bishop Fasola describing it as a new Pentecost:

"I felt the greatness and holiness of the Church of God, so alive and palpitating; it seemed to me that I was almost sensitively experiencing the presence of Mary and the Holy Spirit in that immense holy cenacle"(Mother Rosetta, Letter to Bishop Francesco Fasola, Rome, 13 October 1962).

Faced with an activism that renders the apostolate among youth sterile, she pointed to the secret of the grace of unity: living the duty of the present moment in union with God, rooted in a relationship with Christ her spouse.

"Behold, dear Sister, in this way you begin contemplation and action: when your action is done only for him, seeking his glory, doing the best you can with the children to find a good moment to talk about him; when you approach the parents with the sole thought of saying a word to help them better educate their children; when, after school, you assist these children with the intention of making them feel the goodness, the affection, the care of the Lord who sends you to replacetheir parents who cannot follow them; when you try to be good and patient with your sisters despite work and tiredness; all this is seeking God and union with Him! You can then say that truly the Lord reigns in your life, and there is unity between action and contemplation." (Letter from Sister Marchese Rosetta to Sister Boni Maria Rosa, Rome, 21 January 1980).

"The Holy Trinity in me, me in the heart of the Blessed Trinity, through all the love of the Holy Spirit; possessed by Jesus as a bride; lost in him in praise of the

Father." (Mother Rosetta Marchese, Notebook, 10 November 1967).

Faced with an often formal and detached style of government, typical of the pre-conciliar period, she chose the 'mysticism of governing':

"To serve souls, I must move in the Peace of God; in Jesus to intuit them, love them, discover the Father's will for them, in the Holy Spirit. Remain immersed in Jesus, to breathe in the Holy Spirit and stay with peace and love beside each soul: everything else is immensely secondary." (Mother Rosetta Marchese, Notebook, 1 December 1971).

Her testimony and Salesian spirituality, so fascinating and prophetic, sheds light on our life of faith, our relationship with the Lord Jesus, and reinvigorates our apostolate among the youth with a new beauty and depth. She encourages the sisters:

"Do everything to save souls and let no effort seem too great when you think that it serves to save souls, especially youthful souls." (Report of the extraordinary visitation of Mother Rosetta Marchese, Munich, 20-24 November 1978, 3/3).

Truly Mother Rosetta Marchese is a complete Salesian in whom the *"Da mihi animas cetera tolle"* of Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello among youth, especially girls, is rooted in a deep inner fire, in a profound union with God.

Sr. Francesca Caggiano
Vice-postulator

Mary Help of Christians, from here to the world

Friends, readers of the Salesian Bulletin, my affectionate and warm greeting at this Easter time. In a troubled world, shaken by wars and no small amount of violence, we continue to declare, announce and proclaim that Jesus is the Lord, raised by the Father and who IS ALIVE. And we badly need his presence in hearts ready to welcome him.

At the same time, I could see the content of this month's Bulletin, always rich and full of Salesian life. I am grateful to those who produce it. And as I read the pages, before writing my greeting, I came across the presentation of so many Salesian places around the world where Mary Help of Christians has arrived.

I must confess that when I found myself in Valdocco, inside the magnificent Basilica of Mary Help of Christians, in this holy place where everything speaks of the presence of God, of the maternal protection of our Mother and Don Bosco, I could not imagine how the announcement of Mary Help of Christians to Don Bosco had come true, saying that from here, from this Marian church, her glory would spread throughout the world. And so it did.

In my service over these ten years as Rector Major I have met hundreds of Salesian presences around the world where our Mother was present. And once again I would like to tell you about my latest experience. It was during my last visit to the Salesian presences among the Xavante people that I was able to "touch with my own hands" the Providence of God and the good that continues to be done and that we continue to do among all of us.

I was able to visit several villages and towns in the State of Mato Grosso. I was in San Marcos, the village of Fatima, Sangradouro, and around these three large centres we visited others, including the place where the first settlement took

place with the Xavante people, a people that was afflicted by disease and in danger of extinction, and that thanks to the help of those missionaries, to their medicines and to dozens of years of loving presence among them, it has been possible to reach the situation today with more than 23,000 members of the Xavante people. This is Providence, the proclamation of the Gospel and at the same time a journey with a people and their culture, preserved today as never before.

I had the opportunity to speak with several civil authorities. I was grateful for all that we can do together for the good of this people and others. And at the same time I took the liberty of reminding them, simply but with honesty and legitimate pride, that those who have accompanied this people for 130 years, as the Church has done in this case through the sons and daughters of Don Bosco, are worthy of a respectful gaze, and of listening to his word.

We have done all we can to join the voices calling for land for these settlers. The defence of their land and the faith lived with these peoples (in this case with the Boi-Bororo) was the cause of the martyrdom of Salesian Rodolfo Lunkenbein and Indian Simao in Meruri.

Driving hundreds of kilometres of road, I was happy to see so many signs announcing: "Territorio de Reserva Indígena" (Territory of Indigenous Reserve). And I thought this was the best guarantee of peace and prosperity for these people.

And what does what I am describing have to do with Mary Help of Christians? Simply everything, because it is hard to imagine a century of Salesian presence (sdb and fma) among the indigenous Xavantes without them passing on the love for the mother of our Lord, and our mother.

The Help of Christians in the jungle

In San Marcos, all or most of the villagers, together with our guests, ended the day of our arrival with a procession and the rosary. The image of the Virgin was illuminated in the middle of the night in the middle of the

jungle. Elderly people, adults, young people and many mothers carrying sleeping children in a basket on their shoulders were on pilgrimage. We made several stops in different parts of the village. No doubt our Mother at that moment, and no doubt at many other times, was passing through the village of San Marcos and blessing her indigenous sons and daughters.

I cannot know if Don Bosco dreamed this scene of the Virgin in the middle of the Xavante village. But there is no doubt that in his heart was this desire, with this people and with many others, whether in Patagonia, whether in the Amazon, whether on the river Paraguay...

And that desire and that missionary dream has been fulfilled in Amazonia for 130 years. As I wrote in the commentary to the Strenna, the feminine-maternal-Marian dimension is perhaps one of the most challenging dimensions of Don Bosco's dream. It is Jesus himself who gives him a teacher, who is his Mother, and that "he must ask her for his name"; John must work "with her children", and it will be "She" who will take care of the continuity of the dream in life, who will take him by the hand until the end of his days, until the moment when he will truly understand everything.

There is an enormous intentionality in wanting to say that in the Salesian charism on behalf of the poorest, most deprived and neglected children, the dimension of treating them with "gentleness", meekness and charity, as well as the "Marian" dimension, are essential elements for those who want to live this charism. Without Mary of Nazareth we would be talking about another charism, not the Salesian charism, not about the sons and daughters of Don Bosco.

On this feast of Mary Help of Christians, on 24 May, at different times Mary Help of Christians will be present in the hearts of her sons and daughters all over the world, be it in Taiwan or East Timor, be it in India, or Nairobi (Kenya), be it in Valdocco, be it in Amazonia or in the small village of San Marcos, which is nothing to the world but is a whole world to this people who have come to know Mary Help of Christians.

Happy Mary's month. Happy Feast of Mary Help of Christians to all, from Valdocco to the whole world.

Letter from Rector Major Cardinal Ángel Fernández Artime

For the attention of my Salesian confreres, for the attention of our dear Salesian Family

My dear Salesian confreres, my dear brothers and sisters in the Salesian Family throughout the world: please accept my warm and affectionate greetings, especially at this time.

The reasons for my writing to you today, right on the eve of my Episcopal Ordination, at the nomination of the Holy Father Pope Francis, is to officially and definitively pass on to you my personal situation with regard to our Congregation and the Salesian Family.

Some time ago, Pope Francis expressed to me his wish that my Episcopal Ordination would take place during this Easter season together with our Salesian confrere Archbishop-elect Giordano Piccinotti, and that I could continue my service until the appropriate date. So, trusting always in the Lord, who is the only guarantor of our lives, the following is definitive:

1. The Holy Father has prepared a document for me with the 'deroga' (an Italian term meaning "an exception to what is legislated", in which he authorises me to continue for a further period as Rector Major, after having received episcopal consecration). This document containing the Holy

Father's authorisation has already reached us and is in the archives of the Congregation.

2. In agreement with Pope Francis, I will conclude my service as Rector major towards the evening of 16 August this year, 2024, following the celebration of the 209th anniversary of the birth of our father at Colle Don Bosco. On the same day we will celebrate the closing of the Youth Synod' with the young people, a Synod in which 370 young people from all over the world will have participated on the occasion of the bicentenary of the dream at 9 years of age, an event for Don Bosco that was a dream-vision and a programme for life that has come down to us.

On that afternoon, in a simple act, I will sign my letter of renunciation in accordance with Article 128 of our Constitutions, and I will hand over this document to the Vicar of the Rector Major Father Stefano Martoglio who, according to Article 143, will assume the government of our Congregation 'ad interim' until the election of the Rector Major at GC29 to be held in Valdocco (Turin) from 16 February 2025.

3. Certainly from now on, but particularly from that date onwards, I will be attending to the service that the Holy Father will indicate to me.

I wish to thank the Lord, together with all of you, my dear brothers and sisters, for how blessed we have been over these last ten years, both as a Salesian Congregation and as the Family of Don Bosco. The Lord has assisted us in his Spirit and our Mother the Help of Christians has never let go of our hand. And we are certain that this will continue to be the case in the future because "She has done everything".

My final word at this moment is addressed to Don Bosco who will undoubtedly continue to look after his Congregation and his precious Family.

With true affection and united in the Lord,

Cardinal Ángel FERNÁNDEZ ARTIME, sdb
Rector Major
Society of St Francis de Sales
Rome, 19 April 2024
Prot. 24/0160

Servant of God Akash Bashir

On 25 February, we celebrated the feast of our Salesian protomartyrs, Bishop Aloysius Versiglia and Father Callistus Caravario. Martyrdom, since the time of the first Christian community, has always been a clear sign of our faith, similar to Jesus' sacrifice on the cross for our salvation. Currently, in our Salesian Congregation, we are dealing with the cause of martyrdom of Akash Bashir, a young Salesian former pupil from Pakistan, who gave his life for the salvation of his parish community at the age of 20. The diocesan investigation phase for the beatification process ended on 15 March, the anniversary of his martyrdom.

Pakistan is one of the most extremist Muslim countries in the world. The Islamic Republic of Pakistan emerged after World War II, with independence from India in 1947. However, Christians were already present in this region thanks to Dominican and Franciscan missionaries. Currently, Christians in Pakistan make up about 1.6% of the total population (Catholics and Anglicans), or about 4 million people. Religious minorities face daily discrimination, marginalisation, lack of equal opportunities in employment and education, and religious discrimination and sometimes persecution persist, making religious freedom a critical issue.

Despite the challenges, Christian communities in Pakistan demonstrate resilience and hope. Churches and

Christian organisations play a key role in providing support and promoting interreligious unity, and the Salesians have contributed significantly with their presence.

Akash Bashir's life began in a small village near Afghanistan, in a family of five children, he being the third. Akash, born during the summer on 22 June 1994, faced extreme weather and survived with difficulty. Despite the difficulties of the adverse climate, family poverty and poor nutrition, these challenges helped shape his character.

Akash's dream of serving in the army was thwarted by educational and financial insecurity. The Bashir family decided to migrate eastwards, to the Punjab, to the city of Lahore, close to the border with India, specifically to the Christian district of Youhanabad, where the Salesians run a boarding school, a primary school and a technical school. In September 2010, Akash Bashir entered the Salesian Don Bosco Technical and Youth Centre.

In a difficult political-religious context, Akash volunteered as a security guard in Youhanabad Parish in December 2014. His role as a security guard at St John's Parish consisted of guarding the entrance to the courtyard and controlling the worshippers at the entrance gate, as the churches are protected by a wall with only one entrance door. On 15 March 2015, during the celebration of Mass, Akash was on duty.

That day was the Fourth Sunday of Lent ("Laetare" Sunday) celebrated by 1200-1500 faithful attending the Mass, presided over by Father Francis Gulzar, the parish priest. At 11.09 a.m., a first terrorist attack hit the Anglican community less than 500 metres from the Catholic church. A minute later, at 11.10 a.m., a second detonation took place right at the entrance to the courtyard of the Catholic Parish, where Akash Bashir, as a volunteer security guard, was on duty.

His Eminence, Cardinal Ángel Fernández, the Rector Major of the Salesians, in the introduction to his biography describes Akash's martyrdom in these words:

"On 15 March 2015, while Holy Mass was being celebrated in St John's parish, the group of security guards made up of young volunteers, of which Akash Bashir was a member, faithfully guarded the entrance. Something unusual happened that day. Akash noticed that a person with explosives under his clothes was trying to enter the church. He restrained him, spoke to him and tried to stop him from continuing, but realising that he could not hold him back he hugged him tightly saying, "I will die, but I will not let you enter the church." So the young man and the suicide bomber died together. Our young man offered his life saving thundreds of people, boys, girls, mothers, teenagers and grown men who were praying inside the church at that moment. Akash was 20 years old."

After the explosion, four people lay dying on the ground: the man with the explosives, a vegetable vendor, a six-year-old girl and Akash Bashir. His sacrifice prevented the death toll from being much higher. The Gospel proclaimed that day recalled Jesus' words to Nicodemus: "For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God" (John 3: 20-21). Akash sealed these words with his blood as a young Christian.

On 18 March, the Archbishop of Lahore presided over an ecumenical funeral celebration for Akash and the Anglican Christians, attended by 7,000-10,000 faithful. Afterwards, the body was transferred to the Youhanabad cemetery, where it was buried in a tomb built by Akash's father.

The life of Akash Bashir is a powerful testimony to the early Christian communities surrounded by philosophies, adverse cultures and persecution. The communities of the Acts of the Apostles were also minorities, but with strong faith and unlimited courage, similar to the Christians in Pakistan.

The shining example of Salesian Past Pupil Akash Bashir continues to inspire the world. He lived the words of

Jesus: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13).

On 15 March 2022, the diocesan enquiry officially began, marking a significant step towards the possible beatification of the first Pakistani citizen. The conclusion of the diocesan enquiry on 15 March 2024 marks a fundamental milestone on the path to beatification and canonisation.

I finish by recalling again the words of His Eminence, Card. Ángel Fernández on Akash Bashir:

"To be a saint today is possible! And it is undoubtedly the most obvious charismatic sign of the Salesian educational system. In a special way, Akash is the flag, the sign, the voice of so many Christians who are attacked, persecuted, humiliated and martyred in non-Catholic countries. Akash is the voice of so many courageous young people who manage to give their lives for the faith despite the difficulties of life, poverty, religious extremism, indifference, social inequality and discrimination. The life and martyrdom of this young Pakistani, only 20 years old, makes us recognise the power of God's Holy Spirit, alive, present in the least expected places, in the humble, in the persecuted, in the young, in God's little ones. His Cause for Beatification is for us a sign of hope and an example of youthful holiness unto martyrdom."

*Fr Gabriel de Jesús CRUZ TREJO, sdb
vice-postulator of the cause of Akash Bashir*

The childhood of a future

saint: Saint Francis de Sales

Francis was born on 21 August 1567 at the Château de Sales, in Thorens, near Annecy in Savoy, in a landscape of mountains and country valleys.

Francis' father was a loyal, chivalrous, generous and at the same time emotional and impulsive man. By virtue of his wisdom and sense of fairness, he was often chosen as an arbitrator in disputes and trials. He was also very welcoming towards the poor in the neighbourhood, to the point that he would give his soup to a poor man rather than send him begging. Of his mother Frances, St Joan de Chantal drew this admirable portrait:

She was one of the most remarkable ladies of her time. She was gifted with a noble and generous soul, but pure, innocent and simple, like a true mother and nurturer of the poor. She was modest, humble and good-natured with everyone, very quiet in her home; she governed her family wisely, concerned to make them live in the fear of God.

At the birth of Francis, her eldest son, she was only fifteen years old, while her husband was over forty. This age difference was not uncommon at the time, especially among nobles, as marriage was considered first and foremost as an alliance between two families in order to have children and enlarge their lands and titles. Sentiment counted for little in those days, which did not prevent this apparently ill-combined union from turning out to be solid and happy.

Motherhood announced itself as particularly difficult. The mother-to-be prayed before the Holy Shroud, then kept in Chambéry, the capital of Savoy. Francis came into the world two months before his natural due date and, fearing for his survival, was quickly baptised.

On Francis, the eldest son, were pinned all the hopes of his father, who envisaged a prestigious career for him in the service of his country. This project would be a

source of difficulty throughout his youth, marked by a tension between obedience to his father and his own particular vocation.

The first six years (1567-1573)

When little Francis was born, his young mother was unable to breastfeed him, so she turned to a peasant girl from the village. Three months later, his godmother, his maternal grandmother took care of him for some time.

"My mother and I", he would one day write, "are one". Indeed, the child "is not yet able to use his will, nor can he love anything but the breast and face of his dear mother." It is a model of abandonment to God's will:

He does not think at all of wanting to be on one side or the other and desires nothing more than to be in the arms of his mother, with whom he thinks he forms one; nor does he care at all to conform his own will to that of his mother, because he does not perceive it, nor does he care to have it, and he lets his mother move, do and decide what she thinks is good for him.

Francis de Sales also stated that children do not laugh before the fortieth day. Only after forty days do they laugh, that is, they are comforted, because, as Virgil says, "only then do they begin to know their mother."

Little Francis was not weaned until November 1569, when he was two years and three months old. At that age, he had already begun to walk and talk. Learning to walk happens progressively and it often happens that children fall to the ground, which is not at all serious, because "while they feel their mother holding them by the sleeves, they walk briskly and wander here and there, without being surprised by the tumbles that their insecure legs make them take." Sometimes it is the father who observes his child, still weak and uncertain as he takes his first steps, and says to him: "take your time, my child"; if he then falls, he encourages him by saying, "he has taken a leap, he is wise, don't cry"; then he approaches

him and gives him his hand.

On the other hand, learning to walk as well as to speak happens by imitation. It is 'by dint of hearing the mother and babbling with her' that the child learns to speak the same language.

Childhood adventures and games

Childhood is the time of discovery and exploration. The little Savoyard observed the nature around him and was enraptured by it. In Sales, on the mountain slope to the east, everything is grandiose, imposing, austere; but along the valley, on the contrary, everything is verdant, fertile and pleasant. At the castle of Brens, in the Chablais, where he probably made several stays between the ages of three and five, little Francis could admire the splendour of Lake Geneva. At Annecy, the lake surrounded by hills and mountains never left him indifferent, as the numerous literary images of navigation show. It is easy to see that Francis de Sales was not a man born in the city.

The world of animals, at that time still very much found in castles, towns and even cities, is an enchantment and a source of instruction for the child. Few authors have spoken of it as abundantly as he did. Much of his (often legendary) information he drew from his readings; however, personal observation must have counted for quite a bit, for instance when he writes that "dawn makes the cock crow; the morning star gladdens the sick, invites the birds to sing."

Little Francis considered at length and admired the work of the bees, observed and listened attentively to the swallows, the doves, the hen and the frogs. How many times did he have to witness the feeding of pigeons in the castle courtyard!

Above all, the child needs to manifest his desire to grow up through play, which is also the school of living together and a way of taking possession of his surroundings. Did Francis rock on wooden horses? In any case, he recounts in one of his sermons that "children swing on wooden horses, call

them horses, neigh for them, run, jump, amuse themselves with this childish amusement." And here is a personal recollection from his childhood: "When we were children, with what care we assembled pieces of tiles, of wood, of mud to build little houses and tiny buildings! And if someone destroyed them we felt lost and cried."

But discovering the world around us does not always happen without risk and learning to walk holds surprises. Fear is sometimes a good counsellor, especially when there is a real risk. If children see a barking dog, "they immediately start screaming and do not stop until they are close to their mother. In her arms they feel safe and as long as they shake her hand they think no one can hurt them." Sometimes, however, the danger is imaginary. Little Francis was afraid of the dark, and here is how he was cured of his fear of the dark: "Little by little, I endeavoured to go alone, with my heart armed only with trust in God, to places where my imagination frightened me; in the end, I became so refreshed that I considered the darkness and solitude of the night delightful, because of this presence of God, which in such solitude becomes even more desirable."

Family upbringing

The first education fell to the mother. An exceptional intimacy was established between the young mother and her first-born son. It was said that she was inclined to cuddle her son, who, moreover, looked a lot like her. She preferred to see him dressed as a pageboy rather than in a play costume. His mother took care of his religious upbringing, and, anxious to teach him her "little creed", took him with her to the parish church in Thorens.

For her part, the child experienced all the affection of which he was the object, and the child's first word would be this: "My God and my mother, they love me so much." "The love of mothers towards their children is always more tender than that of fathers", Francis de Sales would write, because in his view, "it costs them more." According to

a witness, it was he who sometimes consoled his mother in her moments of melancholy by telling her, "Let us turn to the good Lord, my good mother, and he will help us."

From his father he began to learn a "just and reasonable spirit." He made him understand the reason for what was asked of him, teaching him to be responsible for his acts, to never lie, to avoid games of chance, but not those of dexterity and intelligence. He was certainly very pleased with the answer his son gave him when he suddenly asked him what he was thinking about: "My father, I think of God and of being a good man."

To strengthen his character, his father imposed on him a manly lifestyle, the avoidance of bodily comforts, but also open-air games with his cousins Amé, Louis and Gaspard. Above all, Francis spent his childhood and youth with them, at play and at boarding school. He learned to ride horses and handle hunting weapons. He was also given boys from the village as companions, but carefully chosen.

A usually wise and quiet boy, Francis nevertheless manifested surprising fits of rage in certain circumstances. On the occasion of a Protestant's visit to the family castle, he gave vent to his animosity against the chickens, whom he started clubbing, shouting at the top of his voice: "Up! Up! At the heretics!" It would take time and effort to convert to 'Salesian gentleness'.

Entering school

At the age of six or seven, the child reaches the use of reason. For the Church, he or she now has the ability to discern good and evil, and, for humanists, can begin to attend primary school. This is the age at which children in noble families usually pass from the hands of women to those of men, from mother to father, from governess to guardian or tutor. The age of reason also marked, for a small minority of children, entry into a school or boarding school. Now Francis showed remarkable dispositions to study, indeed such impatience that he begged to be sent to school without delay.

In October 1573, Francis was sent to the boarding school in La Roche, in the company of his cousins Amé, Louis et Gaspard. At the tender age of six, Francis was then separated from his family. He stayed there for two years to do his "little grammar school". The children housed in the town, placed under the supervision of a particular pedagogue, mingled during the day in the mass of three hundred pupils attending the boarding school. A servant of the family took special care of Francis, who was the youngest.

According to what we know of the schools of the time, the children began to read and write, using syllabaries and the first elements of grammar, to recite prayers and selected texts by heart, to learn the rudiments of Latin grammar, the declensions and conjugations of verbs. The commitment to memory, still very much dependent on the didactic method in use, was concentrated above all on religious texts, but emphasis was already placed on the quality of diction, a characteristic trait of humanist education. In terms of moral education, which then occupied an important place in the humanist education of students, it borrowed its models more from pagan antiquity than from Christian authors.

From the very beginning of his studies at the college at La Roche, Francis behaved as an excellent pupil. But this first contact with the scholastic world may have left him with some less pleasant memories, as he himself told a friend. Had it never happened to him to unintentionally miss school and be "in the situation in which good pupils sometimes find themselves who, having arrived late, have cut certain lessons short"?

They would certainly like to return to the compulsory timetable and win back the benevolence of their professors; but oscillating between fear and hope, they cannot decide at what time to appear before the irritated professor; should they avoid his current anger by sacrificing the hoped-for forgiveness, or obtain his forgiveness by exposing themselves

to the risk of being punished? In such hesitation, the child's spirit must struggle to discern what is most advantageous to him.

Two years later, still with his cousins, there he was at the boarding school [college] in Annecy, where Francis would study for three years. With his cousins, he stayed in the city with a lady, whom he called his aunt. After the two years of grammar school at La Roche, he entered the third year of classical studies and made rapid progress. Among the exercises used at the college were declamations. The boy excelled in them, "because he had a noble bearing, a fine physique, an attractive face and an excellent voice."

It seems that discipline was traditional and severe, and we know that a regent behaved like a real chastiser. But Francis' conduct left nothing to be desired; one day he himself would ask to be chastised in place of his cousin Gaspard who cried in fear.

The most important religious event for a child was First Communion, the sacrament by which "we are united and joined to divine goodness and receive the true life of our souls." As he would later say about communion, he had prepared "his little heart to be the dwelling place of Him" who wanted to "possess" it whole. On the same day he received the sacrament of confirmation, the sacrament by which we are united with God "like the soldier with his captain." On that occasion, his parents gave him Fr Jean Déage as his tutor, a gruff, even choleric man, but totally devoted to his pupil, whom he would accompany throughout his education.

On the threshold of adolescence

The years of Francis' childhood and boyhood in Savoy would leave an indelible mark on him, but they would also arouse in his soul the first seeds of a particular vocation. Committed to giving others a good example with discretion, he intervened with his companions with appropriate initiatives. Still very young, he liked to gather them

together to teach them the catechism lesson he was learning. After the games, he would sometimes take them to the church in Thorens, where they had become children of God. On holiday days, he would take them with him for walks in the woods and by the river to sing and pray.

But his intellectual training was only just beginning. At the end of three years at the boarding school in Annecy, he knew everything that Savoy could teach him. His father decided to send him to Paris, the capital of knowledge, to make him a "scholar". But to which college should he send such a gifted son? His choice was first the college at Navarre attended by the nobility. But Francis cleverly intervened with the help of his mother. At his son's insistence, his father finally agreed to send him to the Jesuit Fathers' college in Clermont.

Significantly, before leaving, Francis asked to receive the tonsure, a practice still permitted at the time for boys destined for an ecclesiastical career, which, however, must not have pleased his father, who did not wish an ecclesiastical vocation for his eldest son.

Having reached the threshold of adolescence, the boy began a new stage in his life. "Childhood is beautiful" he would one day write, "but to always want to be a child is to make a wrong choice, because a child of a hundred is despised. To begin to learn is very praiseworthy, but he who begins with the intention of never perfecting himself would be acting against reason." After receiving in Savoy the seeds of these "manifold gifts of nature and grace", Francis would find in Paris great opportunities to cultivate and develop them.

Laura Vicuña: a daughter who “begets” her mother

Stories of wounded families

We are used to imagining the family as a harmonious reality, characterised by the co-presence of several generations and by the guiding role of parents who set the norm and of children who – when they learn this – are guided by them in life’s experiences. Nonetheless, families often find themselves beset by dramas and misunderstandings, or marked by wounds that attack their optimal configuration and give them a distorted and false image.

The history of Salesian holiness also has stories of wounded families: families where at least one of the parental figures is missing, or the presence of the mother and father becomes, for different reasons (physical, psychic, moral and spiritual), penalising for their children, now on their way to the honours of the altars. Don Bosco himself, who had experienced the premature death of his father and the estrangement from the family by the prudent wish of Mamma Margaret, wanted – and this is no coincidence – the Salesian work to be particularly dedicated to “poor and abandoned youth” and did not hesitate to reach out to the young people formed in his oratory with an intense vocational pastoral (demonstrating that no wound from the past is an obstacle to a full human and Christian life). It is therefore natural that Salesian holiness itself, which draws on the lives of many of Don Bosco’s young people later consecrated through him to the cause of the Gospel, bears within itself – as a logical consequence – traces of wounded families.

Of these boys and girls who grew up in contact with Salesian works, we present Blessed Laura Vicuña, born in Chile in 1891, fatherless and whose mother began a cohabitation in Argentina with the wealthy landowner Manuel Mora; Laura, therefore, hurt by her mother’s situation of

moral irregularity, was ready to offer her life for her.

A short but intense life

Born in Santiago de Chile on 5 April 1891, and baptised on the following 24 May, Laura was the eldest daughter of José D. Vicuña, a fallen nobleman who had married Mercedes Pino, the daughter of modest farmers. Three years later a little sister, Julia Amanda, arrived, but soon her father died, after suffering a political defeat that undermined his health and compromised, along with the family's financial support, also his honour. Deprived of any "protection and prospect of a future", the mother landed in Argentina, where she resorted to the guardianship of the landowner Manuel Mora: a man "of proud and haughty character" who "did not hide his hatred and contempt for anyone who opposed his plans." A man, in short, who guaranteed protection only on the surface, but was actually used to taking what he wanted by force if necessary, exploiting people. In the meantime, he paid for the studies for Laura and her sister at the boarding school run by the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. Their mother – who was under Mora's psychological influence – lived with him without finding the strength to break the bond. However, when Mora began to show signs of unhealthy interest in Laura herself, and especially when the latter embarked on the path of preparation for her First Communion, she suddenly realised the gravity of the situation. Unlike her mother – who justified one evil (cohabitation) in view of a good (her daughters' education at boarding school) – Laura understood that this was a morally illegitimate argument, which put her mother's soul in grave danger. At this time, Laura also wanted to become a Sister of Mary Help of Christians herself: but her request was rejected because she was the daughter of a "public concubine". And it is at this point that a change took place in Laura (received into the boarding school when "impulsiveness, ease of resentment, irritability, impatience and wanting to be seen" still dominated in her) that only Grace, combined with her own

commitment, could bring about: she asked God for her mother's conversion, offering herself for her. At that moment, Laura could move neither "forwards" (entering the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians) nor "backwards" (returning to her mother and Mora). With a gesture then charged with the creativity typical of saints, Laura embarked on the only road still accessible to her: one of height and depth. In her First Communion resolutions she had noted:

I resolve to do all I know and can to [...] make reparation for the offences that you, Lord, receive every day from people, especially from people in my family; my God, give me a life of love, mortification and sacrifice.

The intention in an "Act of Offering" was now finalised, which includes the sacrifice of her very life. Her confessor, recognising that the inspiration was from God, but ignorant of the consequences, agreed, and confirmed that Laura was "aware of the offering she has just made". She spent the last two years in silence, cheerfulness and with a smile. And yet, the gaze she cast on the world – as confirmed by a photographic portrait, very different from the familiar hagiographic stylisation – also speaks of the painful awareness and pain that she felt. In a situation where she lacked both the "freedom from" (conditioning, obstacles, hardships) and the "freedom to" do many things, this pre-teen testified to the "freedom for" of total self-giving.

Laura did not despise, but loved life: her own and her mother's. For this she offered herself. On 13 April 1902, Good Shepherd Sunday, she asked herself, "If He gives life... what is stopping me from giving mine for Mum?" Dying, she added. "Mum, I am dying, I myself have asked Jesus... for almost two years I have been offering Him my life for you..., to obtain the grace of your return!"

These are words devoid of regret and reproach, but loaded with great strength, great hope and great faith. Laura had learnt to accept her mother for what she was. Indeed, she

offered herself to give her what she alone could not achieve. When Laura died, her mother converted. Laurita de los Andes, the daughter, had thus helped to generate her mother in the life of faith and grace.

Strenna 2024. “The dream that makes you dream”

A heart that transforms “wolves” into “lambs”

During my service as Rector Major I have been able to see that the Strenna is one of the most beautiful gifts that Don Bosco and his successors offer the entire Salesian Family every year. It helps us on our journey together and spreads out to reach the most faraway places, while at the same time leaving the freedom to individual ones to accept, integrate and value what is proposed for the journey of all the individual educative and pastoral communities.

In this 2024 we will celebrate the second centenary of the “dream-vision young John had between the ages of nine and ten at his home at the Becchi”[\[1\]](#) in 1824: *the dream at nine years of age*.

I believe that the bicentennial anniversary of the dream that “affected Don Bosco’s whole way of living and thinking. And in particular, his way of sensing the presence of God in each one’s life and in the history of the world”[\[2\]](#) deserves to be placed at the centre of the Strenna, which will guide the educative and pastoral year of the entire Salesian Family. It can be taken up and further explored in the evangelising mission, educational interventions and in the social promotion activities carried out by our Family’s groups everywhere

around the world, a Family which finds its inspirational father in Don Bosco.

“I would like to recall here the ‘dream at nine years of age’. In fact, it seems to me that this page of autobiography provides a simple, but at the same time prophetic presentation, of the spirit and mission of Don Bosco. In it the field of work entrusted to him is described: the young; the aim of his apostolate was pointed out: to make them grow as individuals through education; a method of education that would be effective was offered him: the Preventive System; the context in which all that he did, and today all that we do, was presented: the marvellous plan of God who, first of all and more than anything else, loves the young.”[\[3\]](#) This is what Fr Pascual Chávez Villanueva, Rector Major Emeritus, wrote by way of conclusion to the commentary on Strenna 2012, offered to the Salesian Family for the first year of the three-year period in preparation for the bicentenary (year 2015) of Don Bosco’s birth.

This text is a beautiful summary that presents the essence of what the dream at nine years of age is in its simplicity and as a prophecy, in its charismatic and educational value. It is an emblematic dream. And throughout this year we will try to bring it even closer to the heart and life of the entire Family of Don Bosco. It is a dream, a “very famous dream-vision that would become and still is an important pillar, almost a founding myth, in the Salesian Family’s soaring imagination”,[\[4\]](#) which, of course, needs to be contextualised and given critical attention – something that Don Bosco himself did and that our experts in Salesian history have done – in order to offer a reading and provide an up-to-date, vital and existential interpretation. Undoubtedly it is a dream that Don Bosco kept in his mind and heart throughout his life, as he himself declares, “It was at that age I had a dream. All my life this remained deeply impressed on my mind.”[\[5\]](#) It is, therefore, a dream that stayed with him and has been part of

the journey of the Salesian Congregation until today. And undoubtedly it reaches our entire Salesian family.

In the words of Fr Rinaldi, referring to the first centenary of the dream, we read, "Its content is in fact of such importance, that on this centenary anniversary, we must make it our strict duty to understand it more profoundly through more regular meditation on every detail, and to put it generously into practice if we want to deserve our name as true sons of Don Bosco and perfect Salesians."[\[6\]](#) And now we are intensely experiencing the extraordinary event of this second centenary that will undoubtedly see many events throughout the Salesian world. Let the expression of all this arrive at its most celebratory, festive and also profound moment in the hopeful revision of our lives, making courageous proposals to young people to help them dream "big", assured of the presence of the Lord Jesus, and "hand in hand" with the Teacher, the Lady, our Mother.

1. "I HAD A DREAM...": A VERY SPECIAL DREAM

Just like that, two hundred years ago the very young John Bosco had a dream that would "mark" him throughout his life; a dream that would leave an indelible mark on him, whose meaning Don Bosco fully understood only at the end of his life. Here, then, is the dream told by Don Bosco himself according to the critical edition of Antonio da Silva Ferreira from which we depart only through two small variants.[\[7\]](#)

[Initial frame] It was at that age that I had a dream. All my life this remained deeply impressed on my mind.

[Vision of the boys and John's intervention] In this dream I seemed to be very near my home in a very large yard. A crowd of children were playing there. Some were laughing, some were playing games, and quite a few were swearing. When I heard these evil words, I jumped immediately amongst them and tried to stop them by using my words and my fists.

[Appearance of the dignified man] At that moment a dignified man appeared, a nobly-dressed adult. He wore a white cloak and his face shone so that I could not look directly at him. He called me by name, told me to take charge of these children, and added these words: "You will have to win these friends of yours not by blows but by gentleness and love. Start straight away to teach them the ugliness of sin and the value of virtue." Confused and frightened, I replied that I was a poor, ignorant child. I was unable to talk to these youngsters about religion. At that moment the kids stopped their fighting, shouting and swearing; they gathered round the man who was speaking.

[Conversation regarding this character's identity] Hardly knowing what I was saying, I asked, "Who are you, ordering me to do the impossible?" "Precisely because it seems impossible to you, you must make it possible through obedience and the acquisition of knowledge." "Where, by what means, can I acquire knowledge?" "I will give you a teacher. Under her guidance you can become wise. Without her, all wisdom is foolishness." "But who are you that speak so?" "I am the son of the woman whom your mother has taught you to greet three times a day." "My mother tells me not to mix with people I don't know unless I have her permission. So tell me your name." "Ask my mother what my name is."

[Appearance of the stately-looking woman] At that moment, I saw a lady of stately appearance standing beside him. She was wearing a mantle that sparkled all over as though covered with bright stars. Seeing from my questions and answers that I was more confused than ever, she beckoned me to approach her. She took me kindly by the hand and said, "Look" Glancing round, I realised that the youngsters had all apparently run away. A large number of goats, dogs, cats, bears and other animals had taken their place. "This is the field of your work. Make yourself humble, strong, and energetic. And what you will see happening to these animals in a moment is what you must do for

my children." I looked round again, and where before I had seen wild animals, I now saw gentle lambs. They were all jumping and bleating as if to welcome that man and lady. At that point, still dreaming, I began crying. I begged the lady to speak so that I could understand her, because I did not know what all this could mean. She then placed her hand on my head and said, "In good time you will understand everything."

[*Final frame*] With that, a noise woke me up and everything disappeared. I was totally bewildered. My hands seemed to be sore from the blows I had given, and my face hurt from those I had received. The memory of the man and the lady, and things said and heard, so occupied my mind that I could not get any more sleep that night. I wasted no time in telling all about my dream. I spoke first to my brothers, who laughed at the whole thing, and then to my mother and grandmother. Each one gave his or her own interpretation. My brother Joseph said, "You're going to become a keeper of goats, sheep and other animals." My mother commented, "Who knows, but you may become a priest." Anthony merely grunted, "Perhaps you'll become a robber chief." But my grandmother, though she could not read or write, knew enough theology, and made the final judgement saying, "Pay no attention to dreams." I agreed with my grandmother. However, I was unable to cast that dream out of my mind. The things I shall have to say later will give some meaning to all this. I kept quiet about these things, and my relatives paid little attention to them. But when I went to Rome in 1858 to speak to the Pope about the Salesian Congregation, he asked me to tell him everything that had even the suggestion of the supernatural about it. It was only then, for the first time, that I said anything about this dream which I had when I was nine or ten years old. The Pope ordered me to write out the dream in all its detail and to leave it as an encouragement to the sons of that Congregation whose formation was the reason for that visit to Rome.

The same dream would reoccur several times in Don Bosco's

life, and he himself, who recounted that first event in his own handwriting in the *Memoirs*, the bicentenary of which we are now celebrating, on several occasions recounts what he dreams of again so many years later. In fact, the dream he had when he was nine was not an isolated dream, but belongs to a long and complementary sequence of dreamlike episodes that accompanied Don Bosco's life. He himself connects and integrates three fundamental dreams: the one in 1824 (at the Becchi), the one in 1844 (at the Convitto, the Church's pastoral centre) and the one in 1845 (when working with the Marchioness Barolo), finding some elements of continuity and others that are new. We can always recognise the thread of that first frame and scene in the field at the Becchi in the dreams, but with new details, reactions, messages tied to the stages of life that Don Bosco at the height of his mission, no longer the little nine-year-old John, was experiencing.

On another occasion, many years later, Don Bosco himself told Fr Barberis about it in 1875, when he was already sixty years old. At that time Don Bosco had seen the birth of the Salesian Congregation (18 December 1859), the Archconfraternity of Mary Help of Christians (18 April 1869), the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (5 August 1872) and the Pious Society of Salesian Cooperators – according to the original name given by Don Bosco – approved on 9 May 1876.

When this dream presents itself for the last time, Don Bosco is, as I have already said, a mature man: he has experienced many situations, he has faced and overcome numerous difficulties, he has seen for himself what the Grace and Love of the Virgin Mary have worked in his boys; he has seen many miracles of Providence and he has suffered not a little. "In good time you will understand everything" the first dream had told him, prophetically and in 1887 at the Mass of consecration of the church dedicated to the Sacred Heart in Rome, he heard that voice echo in his ears and wept with joy, wept at contemplating the wonderful effects of his invincible

faith.”[\[8\]](#)

2. A DREAM WHICH ALL THE RECTORS MAJOR HAVE MADE REFERENCE TO

I am particularly impressed by the fact that all the Rectors Major, with the exception of Fr Rua from whom I could not find any quotation, have referred to ***the dream***, to this dream of Don Bosco that has marked our Congregation and the Salesian Family. I am availing myself at this moment of some magnificent research work carried out by Bro. Marco Bay[\[9\]](#).

Fr Paul Albera, Don Bosco’s second successor, referring to the Oratory at Valdocco as Don Bosco’s Oratory, the first and for many years only work, refers to the dream as the mysterious dream in which Providence entrusts him with the mission:

“The first, and for many years only work of D. Bosco was the festive Oratory, his festive Oratory, as he had already glimpsed it in the mysterious *dream he had when he was nine years old* and in the subsequent ones that progressively enlightened his mind regarding the Work of Providence entrusted to him.”[\[10\]](#)

Fr Philip Rinaldi, Don Bosco’s third successor, is the one who has the opportunity of experiencing the first centenary of this dream and tries to ensure that the entire Congregation is imbued with the grace of experiencing this event. And hence he encourages people as follows:

“In my circular letter on the Jubilee of our Constitutions I have already mentioned to you, my dear sons, the centenary of Don Bosco’s first dream, inviting you to meditate on this dream and to practise it (...) Let us reread together, my dear confreres, the pages written by our Ven. Father for our instruction, in obedience to the Vicar of Jesus Christ; yes, let us reread it with great veneration, and fix it in our minds word for word, these pages which evangelically describe to us the supernatural origin, the intimate nature and the specific form of our vocation. The more you read, the more it

becomes new and bright.”[\[11\]](#)

And in this same letter he has the confreres understand that, just as with Don Bosco’s dream at nine years of age he was called to a mission, so we too, under the guidance of the Virgin, have been called, with the benevolent guidance of the Virgin herself who takes us by the hand, shows us our field of work and encourages us in a thousand ways to acquire the gifts of humility, strength and health. We understand perfectly how the commanding invitation to be strong, humble and energetic is applied to us. The invitation that the Lady of Dream gave to the young John Bosco.

We too have been ordered to acquire the means necessary to put this method into practice, that is, obedience and knowledge, under the guidance of the Virgin; which we have done (or are doing) during the years of our religious and priestly formation. During all these happy years the Blessed Virgin took us, too, kindly by the hand and, pointing out our future field of work, encouraged us in every way to acquire humility, fortitude and health, which are the qualities strictly necessary for every true son of Don Bosco. Finally, we too will be shown countless numbers of young people, at first completely ignorant of the things of God, and perhaps already unhappy victims of evil, running enlightened, healed and joyful to celebrate Jesus and the Blessed Virgin Mary.[\[12\]](#)

And, almost as an encouragement to celebrate this bicentenary in a great and significant way, let me take up the Salesian Bulletin at the time of Fr Rinaldi, which tells of the celebration in Rome that took place in his presence:

“Because of a dream” wrote the *Corriere d’Italia* on 2 May last. “Because of the ideal beauty of a dream – yesterday in the large courtyard of the Opere di Don Bosco in Rome, thousands of yearning and applauding souls crowded together, with Cardinal Cagliero, the venerable Missionary, and Don Bosco’s own Successor, Fr Rinaldi, and the Minister of P. I

[Public Instruction], Pietro Fedele, to pay the moving homage of all the powers of the spirit to the incomparable Master who, in the luminous humility of the Faith, had followed the radiant paths of that sublime dream (...) A lively crowd of young people, boys and girls, Don Bosco's pupils; a large crowd of people from all walks of life – professionals, teachers, soldiers, priests – all gathered in the name of the gentle Master.”

“A hundred years ago (another Holy Year, why forget?) Don Bosco as a boy dreamed a sweet and mysterious dream; he saw, first, a group of street-kids quarrelling among themselves, swearing and cursing, and he tried to call them to order with his stick; then he saw a Lady and a Man leading him to another group of beasts, this time of dogs and cats, also quarrelling, barking and smirking – but at a mysterious sign from the Two, they turned into flocks of peaceful lambs.”

“A hundred years later that dream is a reality – splendid, vibrant, grand; – it is a miraculous story that already involves the destiny of millions of people in Schools, in Missions, in life, in prayer, in hope; all who have greeted and still greet Don Bosco, the greatest and holiest teacher of life that the Church and Italy have given to the world in our century.” [\[13\]](#)

And **Fr Peter Ricaldone**, fourth successor of Don Bosco, sees the seedling of the festive Oratory and the entire Salesian Work in the dream that young John had when he was nine. Many more steps would follow, says Fr Ricaldone, many stations along a pilgrimage, before arriving at Pinardi, in his home town.

There is no doubt that we must trace the first seedling of the festive Oratory and of the entire Salesian Work, as I said just now, back to the prophetic dream that young John had at the age of nine. Since when the Woman of stately appearance told the little shepherd of the Becchi: “This is the field of your work: make yourself humble, strong and energetic. And

what you see happening to these animals in a moment, is what you must do for my children.”

The Becchi, Moncucco, Castelnuovo, Chieri, are other steps: but young John Bosco had hardly set out; he was walking towards a much more distant goal. 8 December 1841 is, more than a point of arrival, another starting point. He must go on new pilgrimages before arriving at the Pinardi shed, in Valdocco, his promised land. To return to the first image, the tender seedling has finally found the soil it belongs in; from now on we will see it strengthen and extend beyond all human prediction.[\[14\]](#)

Fr Ricaldone even believes that Don Bosco’s love and zeal for vocations also originated from his dream at nine years of age:

Don Bosco’s love and zeal for vocations has its first origin in the prophetic dream he had at the age of nine, reproduced in different but substantially uniform ways over the space of almost twenty years (...) In fact, after that dream, the desire to study to become a priest and dedicate himself to the salvation of young people increased in John.[\[15\]](#)

Fr Renato Ziggiotti, Don Bosco’s fifth successor, stresses in a very particular way the great gift that the Teacher was for Don Bosco. In fact, it is the Lord who gives the gift of his Mother to young John, above all as a guide. It is expressed this way:

“I will give you a teacher. Under her guidance you can become wise. Without her all wisdom is foolishness.” These are the prophetic words of the first dream, pronounced by the mysterious character, “the son of the woman whom your mother has taught you to greet three times a day.” It is therefore Jesus who gives Don Bosco his Mother as his Teacher and infallible guide along the hard journey of his entire life. How can we give sufficient thanks for this extraordinary gift that was given by Heaven to our Family?[\[16\]](#)

And she, the Mother, the Madonna, the Lady of the dream would be everything for Don Bosco. This certainty was very strong and all-encompassing in Fr Ziggiotti and is what led him to ask every Salesian:

Our Lady, to whom he was consecrated by his mother at birth, who illuminated his future in the *dream at nine years of age* and then returned to comfort and advise him in a thousand ways in dreams, in the prophetic spirit, in the interior vision of the state of souls, in miracles and countless graces, which he worked by invoking her; Our Lady is everything for Don Bosco; and the Salesian who wants to acquire the spirit of the Founder must imitate him in this devotion.[\[17\]](#)

And **Fr Luigi Ricceri**, Don Bosco's sixth successor, has some magnificent expressions regarding the significance of the dream at nine years of age. Fr Ricceri emphasises how important this dream was for Don Bosco to the point of remaining impressed in his heart and mind forever, and how through this, he felt called by God:

The dream at nine years of age. It is the dream – Don Bosco writes in his “Memoirs” – that “all my life... remained deeply impressed on my mind” (MO, 34).

The indelible impression of this dream-vision is due to the fact that it was like a sudden light that clarified the meaning of his young life and traced his path. Like little Samuel, Don Bosco feels called and sent by God in view of a mission: to save young people in all places, in all times: those of Christian countries and the “multitude” of those who in non-Christian regions are still waiting for the great advent of the Lord.[\[18\]](#)

This is the dream, Fr Ricceri says, in which Don Bosco, still without full lucidity due to his young age, intuitively grasps the great value of living to save souls, and this conviction takes shape in his life, in his mind, in his spirit, increasingly as a gift of grace. And it is through this decisive event in his

life that Don Bosco had the *first great insight into what the preventive system would be in the future*. “You will have to win these friends of yours not by blows but by gentleness and love” Don Bosco writes in his narration of the event, hearing it from the Lady’s lips. So much so that in the future we can talk about a precious relationship between Don Bosco and the Mother of the Lord. This is how Fr Ricceri expresses himself so beautifully:

Starting from this dream, the relationship between Don Bosco and the Mother of Jesus is strengthened, that permanent collaboration that characterises the life of the future apostle.[\[19\]](#)

Fr Egidio Viganò, Don Bosco’s seventh successor, offers us other no less inspiring reflections. I am happy to see this magnificent line of continuity from all the Rectors Major in reading, meditating and interpreting the dream par excellence, drawing out ideas that are helpful even for our current times. Fr Viganò confirms, like other successors of Don Bosco before him, that Mary is the true inspiration, Teacher and guide of John, our Father Don Bosco’s vocation.

It is of special interest, I think, that in the famous dream when he was only nine – a dream many times repeated and one to which Don Bosco attached great importance in his life – in his faith awareness, Mary appeared as an important personage directly in a mission project for his life, a woman showing a particular pastoral preoccupation for the young; in fact she appeared “as a shepherdess”. And we should take note that it is not John who chooses Mary; it is Mary who takes the initiative in the choice; at the request of her Son, she will be the inspirer and guide of his vocation.[\[20\]](#)

The wonderful experience John had allowed him to establish a very personal relationship with Mary – the Lady of the dream – and it is for this reason that Don Bosco would experience intimately, throughout his life and on many occasions, the

very special and great affection on the part of Mary. It is a very special relationship with the Virgin Mary.

Also **Fr Juan Edmundo Vecchi**, Don Bosco's eighth successor, notes that convinced as Don Bosco was that he was sent to the young, everything must be focused on that one sacred purpose, the young, and he must devote all his energies to them. Such is the thread of the story that Don Bosco makes of his life in the *Memoirs of the Oratory* starting from the *first dream*: "The Lord sent me to look after boys, therefore I must cut down on other work and keep myself fit for them", [\[21\]](#) always convinced that he was an instrument of the Lord and that his whole life was marked by this call and mission among the young. Another great expert on Don Bosco confirms this: "The faith of being the Lord's instrument for a very singular mission was profound and firm in him. This was the basis in him of the characteristic religious attitude of the biblical servant, the prophet who cannot escape the divine will." [\[22\]](#)

Finally, **Fr Pascual Chávez**, Don Bosco's ninth successor, offers one that moves me among a large number of texts. It is a hymn to the mother figure of Mamma Margaret who, with the grace of God, was able to accompany young John by interpreting and intuiting how, in the dream he had when he was nine, the Lord and the Virgin Mary were calling her son to a very special vocation. One could speak of Mamma Margaret, Fr Pascual says, as a true "Salesian" educator.

It was this educative skill that enabled Mamma Margaret to identify the particular potentialities hidden in her children, bring them to light, develop them, and return them almost visibly to their own hands. This was the case especially with John, her most outstanding offspring. How impressive it is to see in Mamma Margaret the clear sense and awareness of her "maternal responsibility" in the constant Christian guidance of her children, while always leaving them autonomous about their vocation in life, right up until her death!

If young John's dream at the age of nine revealed many things

to him about his future, it did so primarily for Mamma Margaret; it was she who first hazarded the interpretation: "Perhaps you will become a priest!" And some years later, when she realised that their home environment was a negative one for John because of the hostility of his stepbrother Anthony, she made the sacrifice of sending him to work as a farm-hand in the Moglia farm at Moncucco. A mother who deprives herself of her youngest son to send him to work at a place far from home makes a great sacrifice, but she did it not only to avoid a rift in the family but also to set John on the road revealed to both of them in the dream (...) Divine Providence gave her the grace to be a "Salesian educator".[\[23\]](#)

3. THE PROPHETIC DREAM: a precious jewel in the charism of Don Bosco's Family

In the previous points we read how Fr Philip Rinaldi invited the confreres, and certainly at that time the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, the Salesian Cooperators, the Devotees of Mary Help of Christians and I imagine also the Past Pupils, to read the dream, to understand it, to internalise it and to feel its echo in their heart. I have no doubt about that. Certainly there has been a unanimous view in everything that has been written – be it historical research, historical-critical studies, reflections on Salesian spirituality or educative and pastoral interpretations – in recognising that this dream is much more than a simple dream. In fact, it contains so many charismatic elements that I dare to call it *a precious jewel of our charism* and a real road map for *Don Bosco's Family*.

You could really say that nothing is missing from it and there is nothing superfluous. That is what I want to refer to now.

Looking at the dream

Where to look right now? In the first instance, at the **dream itself**, since it contains an extraordinary charismatic wealth. As I have already said, there is not a word too many and certainly nothing missing. The effort Don Bosco made in

writing it down, to convey to us the fact that it is not just **“a” dream, but that we must see it as “the” dream** that would mark his entire life, is more than evident – even though at the time, as a child, he could not have imagined it. In fact, “Don Bosco, almost sixty years old – he felt old then and was so for the time – had to pose the problem of giving a historical-spiritual foundation to his Congregation by recalling the providential origins that justified it. What could be better than ‘telling the story’ to his sons of the cradle of the ‘Congregation of the Oratories’ in its genesis, development, purpose and method, as an institution willed by God as an instrument for the salvation of youth in new times?” [\[24\]](#) Indeed, the *Memoirs of the Oratory*, in which Don Bosco tells the story of his dream, are nothing more than the dream unfolded in his life story, in the Oratory and in the Congregation. This is why he also says in the introduction to his manuscript:

Therefore I am now putting in writing those confidential details that may somehow serve as a light or to be use to the work which Divine Province has entrusted to the Society of St Francis de Sales.” [\[25\]](#) And “Now, what purpose can this chronicle serve? It will be a record to help people overcome problems that may come in the future by learning from the past. It will serve to make known how God himself has always been our guide. It will give my sons some entertainment to be able to read about their father’s adventures. Doubtless they will be read much more avidly when I have been called by God to render my account, when I am no longer among them.” [\[26\]](#)

The story told in the *Memoirs of the Oratory* (and of the dream at nine years of age which is part of that) has been of such importance that it has involved its study, for their whole lives, by significant Salesian experts, seizing upon different perspectives over the years. A rich and noteworthy example, for example, comes from the various emphases that the great scholar of Salesian pedagogy, Fr Pietro Braido, made over

several decades. It would be “an edifying story left by a founder to the members of his Society of apostles and educators who had to perpetuate his work and style, following his directives, guidelines and lessons” (1965); or “a history of the oratory that is more ‘theological’ and pedagogical than real, perhaps the ‘theoretical’ animation document that Don Bosco most long pondered and desired” (1989); “perhaps the richest book of contents and preventive guidelines” that Don Bosco wrote: “a manual of pedagogy and spirituality ‘told’ from a clear oratorian perspective” (1999); or even a writing in which “the parable and the message” come before and “above history”, to illustrate God’s action in human affairs, and thus, rejoicing and recreating, “to comfort and confirm the disciples” from a clear “oratorian” perspective (1999).[\[27\]](#)

One of the precious stones of this jewel to which I am referring, is the one that allows those of us who enter the dream with a Salesian heart, whatever our Christian and Salesian journey or in the Family of Don Bosco, to be questioned in our heart: are we ready to learn, are we willing to be surprised by God who accompanies our life, as he guided the life of Don Bosco, and to feel like sons and daughters before that immense fatherhood that emanates from the figure of our father? Because:

If we do not become a **BELIEVER** and if we are not convinced that God works in history, in the history of Don Bosco and in each one’s personal history, we will understand little or nothing of the *Memoirs of the Oratory* and the dream, and it will simply be a “beautiful story”.

If we do not become **SONS or DAUGHTERS**, we will not be able to attune ourselves to the fatherhood that Don Bosco intends to communicate through the *Memoirs of the Oratory*.

If we do not become **DISCIPLES**, ready to learn, we will not truly enter into the spirit of the *Memoirs of the Oratory* and of the dream.

It seems to me that these three initial dispositions (faith,

being children of, and discipleship) are “essential keys” to understand and take on, for ourselves, what Don Bosco has narrated and left us as a spiritual legacy. What took place in his life, and marked and enlightened him forever, Don Bosco wanted to be a legacy that would profoundly help his Salesians and all of us who, by grace, feel and are part of his Family.

Young people, key characters in the dream...

From the first moment of the dream, the “Oratorian mission” entrusted to young John Bosco is evident, even if he does not know how to carry it out or how to express it. As we can see, the scene is full of youngsters, who are absolutely real in young John’s dream.

Therefore, it seems to me possible to state that **the young** are the central characters in the dream, and that even if they do not utter a word, everything revolves around them. In addition, the “heavenly” characters themselves and young John Bosco are there thanks to them and for them. The whole dream, then, is about them and for them: for the youngsters. If we exclude the young people from this dream, nothing significant for our mission would remain.

But what is interesting is that they are not like a photograph that fixes an image within an instance. These youngsters are in perpetual motion and activity: both when they are being aggressive (like wolves), when they cannot stand each other, and when, after being transformed in the way that the Lady of the Dream asks of young John, they become youngsters (like lambs) who are calm, friendly and warm. The most important thing that happens in the dream and that Don Bosco himself learns and, afterwards, all his followers, is discovering that the *transformation process* is always possible. It is an “Easter” movement – let me call it that – of conversion and transformation, of wolves into lambs, and lambs into what, in today’s language, we would call a youth community that celebrates Jesus and Mary. It certainly seems to me an essential and central element of the dream.

...where there is a clear vocational call

"This is the field of your work. Make yourself humble, strong, and energetic. And what you will see happening to these animals in a moment is what you must do for my children." [\[28\]](#) What happens in the dream is above all a *call*, an invitation, a vocation that seems impossible, unachievable. Young John Bosco wakes up tired, he has even been crying; and when the call comes from God (the dignified-looking character in the dream is Jesus), the direction that such a call can take is unpredictable and disconcerting.

This call is something very special in the dream; it is of a *unique richness*. I say this because it would seem that, due to his age, lack of a father, almost total lack of resources, poverty, internal family problems, quarrels with his half-brother Anthony, difficulties in accessing school because of the distance and the need to work in the fields, there is no possible future for John other than to stay there cultivating the fields and looking after the animals. Even to us it might seem like an unrealisable dream, far away, perhaps destined for someone else, but not for him. It is the same interpretation that young John's relatives also give of the dream, as confirmed by his grandmother's words: "Pay n attention to dreams". [\[29\]](#)

However, it is precisely this difficult situation that makes Don Bosco (at this time young John) very human, in need of help, but also strong and enthusiastic. His willpower, character, temperament, fortitude and the determination of his mother, Mamma Margaret, a deep faith on the part of both his mother and John himself, make all this possible. The dream would always be there, but he would discover it through life: *I understood how, little by little, everything came true...* There is no magic, it is not a "fairy" dream, there is no predestination, but a life full of meaning, demands, sacrifices, but also of faith and hope that urges us to discover and live it every day.

In the dream, a very respectable man appears, of dignified appearance, who speaks to John, questions him, puts him in the hands of his Mother, the Lady. There is definitely a sending on mission. A mission as educator and pastor wherein a method is also pointed out: gentleness and love. Here is an example of his vocational response:

John, faithful from an early age to divine inspiration, begins to work in the field assigned to him by Providence. He has not yet reached the age of ten and is already an apostle among his compatriots in the village of Murialdo. Is it not a Festive Oratory, even in embryo, sketched out, that young John began in 1825, using means compatible with his age and his education?

Endowed with a prodigious memory, a lover of books, regularly listening to sermons, he treasures everything, instructions, facts, examples, to repeat them to his small audience, instilling with admirable effectiveness the love of virtue in those who rush to admire the skill of his games and to hear his childish but warm words. [\[30\]](#)

And she, Mary, will forever mark young John's dream and Don Bosco's life

We are coming to the central moment of the dream: the Lady's motherly mediation (linked to the mystery of the name). For John Bosco, his mother and the Mother of the one he greets three times a day, it will be a place of humanity in which to rest, in which to find safety and refuge in the most difficult moments.

"I will give you a teacher. Under her guidance you can become wise. Without her, all wisdom is foolishness." In fact, it is she who tells him both the field where he will have to work and the method to be used: "This is the field of your work. Make yourself humble, strong and energetic." Mary is called upon from the very beginning for the birth of a new charism, as it is precisely her speciality to carry and give birth: for this reason, when it comes to a Founder who must receive from

the Holy Spirit the original light of the charism, the Lord disposes that it is his own mother, the Virgin of Pentecost and immaculate model of the Church, who is to be his Teacher. She alone, the “full of grace”, understands all charisms from within, as someone who knows all languages and speaks them as if they were her own.[\[31\]](#) It is as if the Man of the dream said to the very young John Bosco: “From now on, be in agreement with her.”

“Let us note at once, here, that it is not John who chooses Mary, but that it is Mary who presents herself with the initiative of the choice: She, at the request of her Son, will be the Inspirer and Teacher of his vocation.”[\[32\]](#)

This **feminine-maternal-Marian dimension** is perhaps one of the most challenging dimensions of the dream. When we look at this serenely, this aspect turns into something beautiful. It is Jesus himself who gives him a teacher, his Mother, and that he must “ask my Mother what my name is”; John must work “with her children”, and it is “She” who will see to the continuity of the dream in life, who will take him by the hand until the end of his days, until the moment when he will truly understand everything.

There is an enormous intentionality in wanting to say that in the Salesian charism on behalf of the poorest youngsters, those most deprived, most lacking in affection, the dimension of treating them with “kindly”, with gentleness and love, as well as the “Marian” dimension, *are indispensable elements* for those who want to live this charism. Our Lady has to do with formation in the “wisdom of the charism”. And that is why it is difficult to understand that in the Salesian charism there can be someone (person, group or institution) who leaves the Marian presence in the background. Without Mary of Nazareth we would be talking about another charism, not the Salesian charism, nor about the sons and daughters of Don Bosco. Fr Ziggionti says it beautifully in this research we have done on the comments of the Rectors Major on the dream:

I would like to persuade all the Salesians of this very important fact, which illuminates the whole life of the Saint with heavenly light and therefore gives an indisputable value to everything he did and said in his life: Our Lady, to whom he was consecrated by his Mother at birth, who shed light on his future in the *dream at nine years of age* and then returned to comfort and advise him in a thousand ways in dreams, in the prophetic spirit, in his inner vision of the state of souls, in miracles and countless graces, which he worked by invoking her; Our Lady is everything for Don Bosco; and the Salesian who wants to acquire the spirit of the Founder must imitate him in this devotion. [\[33\]](#)

Docile to the Spirit, trusting in Providence

There is certainly much to learn. Becoming humble, strong and energetic means preparing for what lies ahead. John Bosco must be obedient, docile to the Master's wisdom. He will have to learn to see and discover the processes of transformation; to understand that the route, the journey made with these young people leads to life, and to the encounter with the Lord of the dream and with his mother; leads to Jesus and Mary. John Bosco discovered all this.

At stake is obedience to God, docility to the Spirit. Just as Mary is the one who "lets things happen", who lets what God has thought and dreamed happen to her, to the point of proclaiming that "fiat" to God, that the *Lord has done great things in me*, so also the Salesian, the Daughter of Mary Help of Christians, every Salesian Cooperator, every devotee of Mary help of Christians, every member of our Salesian Family which is the Family of Don Bosco, will have to learn to do precisely this style of *docility to the Spirit*. I add that I would like this style to become flesh and life at all stages of initial and ongoing formation in every group, congregation and Salesian institution. And let us not forget that the "formators", the "formandi", should be, we should be, the first to "let ourselves be formed" by the Spirit, like Mary.

The dream offers, like no other element, like no other reality, what I believe can be described as “*inalienable*” clues to the DNA of the charism. It is these clues or “principles” that can help us read, discern, and act in tune with creative fidelity.

And let us not forget that this is a community task, we must carry it out together, “synodally” – we could say today in line with recent synodal work – as a Salesian Family.

Accompanying Don Bosco in reflecting on his dream at nine years of age means also emphasising his abandonment to Providence, placing us, like him, in the “in good time you will understand everything”. The dream itself was, for Don Bosco, an act of Providence. This is the radical conviction, the fundamental choice of life, “the essence of Don Bosco’s soul”, the central point, the deepest and most intimate part of him. There is no doubt that the abandonment to Divine Providence, as he had learned from his mother, was decisive for our father and must be for us the guarantee of the continuity of Salesian spirituality. It is abandonment to God, trust in God, because the God that Don Bosco learned to love is a reliable God. He really acts in history, and he has done so in the history of the Oratory, to the point that Don Bosco went so far as to say to the Salesian Rectors on 2 February 1876:

The other Congregations and Religious Orders had in their beginnings some inspiration, some vision, some supernatural fact which gave impetus to the foundation and ensured its establishment; but mostly it stopped at one or a few of these facts. Here, however, things are quite different among us. It can be said that there is nothing that has not been known before. No step was taken by the Congregation without some supernatural fact advising it; no change or refinement or enlargement that was not preceded by a command from the Lord.. For example, we could have written down all the things that happened to us before they happened and written them down

minutely and accurately.[\[34\]](#)

However, “not by blows”. The art of kindness and educative patience

The dream not only speaks of a past, but also of a present, of a today that is extremely current. The “not by blows” that Our Lady says to young John in the dream challenges us even today, and makes it more necessary than ever to reflect on our Salesian way of educating young people, because the discourse of hatred and violence continues to increase. Our world is becoming increasingly violent and we, educators and evangelisers of the young, must be an alternative to what so distressed young John in his dream and which hurts us so much today. As the Rector Major Fr Pascual Chávez once stated in the Strenna for 2012,[\[35\]](#) we will undoubtedly have to “face the wolves” that seek to devour the flock: indifference, ethical relativism, consumerism that destroys the value of things and experiences, false ideologies, and other things that really impact on us and are real violence.

I believe that this message is as relevant today as it was when young John (our future Don Bosco, father and teacher) received it.

The “not by blows” is an “absolute no”. It is very clear, and it is the only correction – we could almost say reproach – that John Bosco receives in the dream. And first of all it is for us a certainty, the great certainty that the path of force and violence does not lead in the right direction of the charism. The “blows” of the dream can take a thousand forms today; in fact, I have been interested in reading, reflecting and specifying many of the more or less subtle forms of violence that surround us and that must be banned from our educative and pastoral horizon and our charismatic universe.

“Not by blows” means consciously fighting every kind of violence, without any justification:

Physical violence that harms the body (pushing, kicking, slapping, squeezing or immobilising, throwing things).

Psychological and verbal violence that damages self-esteem. The kind of violence that insults and disqualifies, that isolates, that monitors and controls without respect. The violence and psychological abuse that makes some people feel they never give enough of themselves; the violence that makes people see themselves as always being different and wrong, even immature for thinking what they honestly think; the violence and abuse by those who are only interested in others when they want to profit from them.

Emotional-sexual violence that injures the body, the heart and the most intimate affections; that leaves indelible signs of pain and can manifest itself verbally or in writing, with looks or signs that denote obscenity, harassment, bullying and even abuse.

Economic violence whereby money that is yours or used to do good is withheld, embezzled, stolen.

Violence is also cyber-violence, “cyberbullying” with harassment carried out through the internet, websites, blogs, with text or email messages, or videos.

Violence that arises from social exclusion that sees people, students, adolescents excluded, or publicly humiliated, without any respect.

Violence characterised by mistreatment, by verbs such as threatening, manipulating, devaluing, rejecting, denying, questioning, humiliating, insulting, disqualifying, mocking, showing indifference.

There is no doubt that we charismatically possess the antidote for these life-threatening situations. It is about Don Bosco’s pastoral genius: “ Recalling, on the other hand, that Mary’s intervention in John Bosco’s first dream was what initially

configured that ‘apostolic genius’ that characterises us in the Church, I invite you to focus our reflection together on the project that characterises our pastoral genius: the Preventive System.”[\[36\]](#)

SHE, the Lady: Teacher and Mother

The Lady of Dream presents herself as Teacher and Mother. She is the mother of both: of the dignified Man of the dream and of young John himself; a mother – let me paraphrase – who, taking him by the hand, says to him:

“Look”: how important it is for us to know how to look, and how serious it is when we cannot “see” young people in their reality, for who they are; when we cannot see what is most authentic in them, and what is most tragic and painful in them and in their lives. **“Look”** is the first word we hear from “the woman of stately appearance, wearing a mantle that sparkled all over, as though covered with bright stars.”

Without wanting to “interpret” a single verb too much, it seems to me that there is a “preventive” sign of what would in fact be the path that our father would have to follow, made above all of *experiential* learning. We think how much the eyes matter in Don Bosco’s life... It is what he sees, when he arrives in Turin – or rather what Cafasso helps him to see – that gives birth to our mission. It is from *how he sees* every boy (we recall the first encounters in the biographies he writes): there is the introduction that is like a miracle that is followed by everything else, both for Savio, for Magone, for Cagliero, for Rua... In the museum in Chieri there is a sculpture that represents the eyes and gazes of Don Bosco, placed next to his altar in 1988. There is something unique in his gaze and that “look” spoken said by the Lady is no less original and unique.

It is precisely around “looking” that one can find an explicit reference to a word as fundamental to us as *assistance*. And we all know how essential it is.

My attention, however, does not stray very far from the dream field at the Becchi, because in fact, without young John realising it, he will be formed through *experience*: he will learn from life, especially in moments of extreme difficulty and fatigue.

Look leads the individual to decentralise, to grasp something that goes beyond their horizon and exceeds their imagination and that becomes an invitation, challenge, provocation, appeal and guide. Because it asks for a full and total involvement through which John will work for his boys. This also shows the importance *of the environment* in all of Salesian pedagogy.

It takes nothing away from the essential care of interiority and silence. We are called to raise our gaze, both when we fix it on the mystery of God, and when we pass by the man who “was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers” (Lk 10:30). And it is what always characterised the person of Don Bosco, from childhood to the end of his life.

“Learn”: become humble, strong and energetic, because you need simplicity in the face of so much arrogance; strength in the face of so many things you have to face in life; and that kind of energy that is resilience, or the ability not to be discouraged, not to “drop your arms” when you seem unable to do something.

It is interesting that what makes young John “meek” (humble, strong, energetic) are the *events* (experience) that Providence (Mary) places along his journey. For example, when some time after the dream, in February 1828 (and he was only twelve years old) his mother Margaret was forced to send him away from home because of the squabbles with Anthony. In the evening, John arrives at the Moglia farmhouse, where he is welcomed more out of pity than because of a real need – it was not in winter when they would have been looking for cowherds. In any case, the farmhouse is quite far away but at the same

time quite close to Moncucco where there is one of the best parish priests that the diocese of Turin had, Fr Francesco Cottino (about whom, until now, our Salesian literature still says very little). John met with him every Sunday. For John it is the first “one on one”, the first meeting with a real guide. So a season that could only be sad and dark becomes a very important opportunity for his journey. We also know that on 3 November 1829, Uncle Michael would bring him back to the family, to the Becchi. And that on 5 November John would meet Fr Calosso returning from the Buttigliera mission.

I therefore consider it very important to strongly underline the incredible direction-accompaniment of Providence. John corresponds to it by engaging freely. However, events and people who follow each other at the right time are the architects of that “humble, strong and energetic” so essential for the mission that in the meantime matures more and more in him.

Evident, therefore, is a *primacy of Grace*, which applies above all to us if we are able to let ourselves be formed and which thus becomes fruitful for the mission. To the point that there are no longer limits or difficulties such as to prevent growth towards that fullness of life that is holiness, whatever the context, even the most challenging.

Obviously, all this does not exempt us from putting all our efforts into improving situations and overcoming injustices. In fact, Don Bosco would “ally” himself with Providence without limiting his efforts, the meetings, the drafting of employment contracts to defend and protect the young apprentices invited to the first oratory. And above all, Don Bosco *does not limit their reaching for the sky!* Indicating that there is always “one more”, a high goal to strive for.

A similar lesson was suggested by Saint Mother Teresa of Calcutta with her “useless” work for the dying of Calcutta. Among other things, on a poster he had written by hand and

hung in his room at the beginning of his new life for the poorest of the poor, he had written these words in black and white: "Da mihi animas cetera tolle".

"And be patient", that is, let us give time for everything and let God be God.

4. A DREAM THAT MAKES US DREAM

Dear members of the Salesian Family, I cannot conclude my commentary on the Strenna without expressing for the young people and for us, the many dreams that I carry in my heart. They can be identified with the desire to continue growing in charismatic fidelity; or with the yearning and serene provocation in the face of changes that are difficult for us, with resistances that can stifle the living fire of our charism. Or encouragement to seek to translate Don Bosco's dream into reality but two hundred years after!

I share them with you, in the hope that anyone who reads me, in any part of the vast Salesian world, can feel that something of what is written here is also destined for him or her. These seem to me to be some concrete elements for making this dream at nine years of age come true:

Don Bosco showed us throughout his life that only authentic relationships transform and save. Pope Francis tells us the same thing: "it is not enough to have structures, if authentic relationships are not developed within them; it is actually the quality of these relationships that evangelises."[\[37\]](#) That is why I express the wish that every house of our Salesian Family around the world be or become a truly educational space, a space of respectful relationships, a space that helps to grow in a healthy way. In this we can and must make a difference, because authentic relationships are at the origin of our charism, at the origin of the encounter with Bartholomew Garelli, at the origin of Don Bosco's own vocation.

Every choice made by Don Bosco was part of a larger project: God's plan for him. Therefore, no choice was superficial or trivial for Don Bosco. His dream was not an anecdote of his life, or a simple event, but a vocational response, a choice, a path, a life program that took shape as it was lived. I dream, therefore, that every Salesian, every member of Don Bosco's Family feels, by vocation and choice, that they are uncomfortable and experience first hand the pain, weariness and fatigue of so many families and so many young people who struggle every day to survive, or to live with a little more dignity. And may none of us be reduced to being passive or indifferent spectators in the face of the pain and anguish of so many young people.

"The primordial dream, the creative dream of God our Father, precedes and accompanies the life of all his children." [\[38\]](#) *Our God has a dream for each of us, for each of our young people, a project thought up, "designed" for us by God himself. The secret of everyone's much-desired happiness will be precisely to discover the correspondence and the encounter between these two dreams: ours and God's. And then understanding what God's dream is for each of us means, first of all, realising that the Lord has given us life because he loves us, beyond what we are, including our limits. We must believe, then, that our God wants to do great things in each of us! We are all precious, we have great value because, without each of us, something will be missing from the world and the Church. In fact, there will be people that only I can love, words that only I can say, moments that only I can share.*

And without dreams there is no life. For human beings, for all of us, dreaming means projecting oneself, having an ideal, a meaning in life. The worst poverty of young people is preventing them from dreaming, depriving them of their dreams or imposing invented dreams on them. Each of us is a dream of God. It is important to find out what is mine, what dream God

has for me. And we must try to develop it, to achieve it, because it is about our happiness and that of our brothers and sisters.

We remember how Don Bosco wept with emotion and joy when, on 16 May 1887, he saw the dream that defined his life, his vocation, his mission “come true”.

God *does great things with “simple tools”* and speaks to us in many ways, even in the depths of our heart, through the feelings that move within us, through the Word of God received with faith, deepened with patience, internalised with love, followed with trust. Let us help ourselves and our boys, girls and young adults to listen to their hearts, to decipher their inner movements, to give voice to what is stirring within them and within us, to recognise which signs or “dreams” reveal the voice of God and which ones, on the other hand, are the result of wrong choices.

“The trials and frailties of young people help us to be better, their questions challenge us, and their doubts cause us to reflect on the quality of our faith. Their criticisms are also necessary for us, because often it is through them that we hear the voice of the Lord asking us for conversion of heart and renewal of structures.” [\[39\]](#) An authentic educator knows how to discover with intelligence and patience what every young person carries within themselves, and as such will act with understanding and affection, trying to make himself loved. [\[40\]](#) I dream and wish to meet every day, in every Salesian house around the Salesian world, Salesians and lay people who believe in the miracle that Salesian education and evangelisation have the power to achieve.

To live humanly is to “become”, it is to realise oneself: It is to enjoy the results of the patient processes with which God works and intervenes in our lives. How I long for our educational passion to resemble that of Don Bosco, “the father of Salesian loving-kindness”, so that in all our presences in the world, boys and girls may encounter not only trained

professionals, but true educators, brothers and sisters, friends, fathers and mothers.

Don Bosco, “street priest” *ante litteram* [before the term existed], was literally consumed in this undertaking. The Salesians (and those who are inspired by Don Bosco) are indeed “children of a dreamer of the future”, but of a future that is built on trust in God and in everyday life, immersing themselves and working in the lives of young people, amid the hardships and uncertainties of every day.[\[41\]](#) And that is why the encounter *with the Lord of Life*, helping each young person to discover their dream, the dream of God in each one, and supporting them in their journey to make it come true, is the most precious gift that we can offer young people. How much I want this to be done in all our houses.

While Don Bosco’s heart beat at all times, we are “convinced that each young person carries in his heart the desire for God” and “are called to offer opportunities for encounter with Jesus, the source of life and joy for every young person.”[\[42\]](#) Don Bosco could not tolerate that in his houses his sons and daughters did not propose an encounter with Jesus to boys, girls, adolescents and young adults – even in the freedom with which we educate to faith today in the most diverse contexts. Today, too, we are called to make him known, to discover how he fascinates each individual and to help young people of other religions to be good believers starting from their own faith and ideals. I dream that this will become a reality in all Salesian houses around the world.

“Everywhere Salesian Work must aim at the poorest and most needy young people in society, and must employ the thousand means with them that are inspired by preventive love. Don Bosco wept when he saw so much youth growing up corrupt and unbelieving; and he wished he could have extended his care – watching over, admonishing, instructing, in a word, preventing – to all the youth of the world (...) That is why in accepting new foundations he gave preference to those places where the

youth were ruined by neglect.”[\[43\]](#) I really dream of one day seeing the entire Salesian Congregation with the same dedication that Don Bosco had towards his poorest children. I dream of seeing each of my confreres joyfully giving their lives in favour of the least. In many cases this is already the case. I dream that each of our houses is filled with that “smell of sheep” to which Pope Francis refers today for every call to an apostolic vocation. And I also wish this for our entire Salesian Family: no one should feel excluded from this call.

“John’s life before his priestly ordination is truly a masterpiece of preparation for his vocation.”[\[44\]](#) Speaking to young people about their vocation, Pope Francis says: “I am a mission on this Earth; that is the reason why I am here in this world. It follows that every form of pastoral activity, formation and spirituality should be seen in the light of our Christian vocation.”[\[45\]](#) As Don Bosco always did, I consider it a duty for us to help every young person, in all our proposals, to discover what God expects of them, to have ideals that make them “fly high”, to give the best of themselves, to desire to live life as gift of self.

Mary shines out for being a mother and carer. When, as a very young girl, she received the angel’s announcement, she did not refrain from asking questions. When she accepted and said “yes”, she staked everything, risked everything, on this. When her cousin needed her, she put her plans and needs aside and left, without delay. When the pain of her Son impacted on her, she was the strong woman who sustained him and accompanied him to the end. She, who is Mother and Teacher, looks at the world of young people who seek her, even if there is so much noise and darkness along the way; she speaks in silence and keeps the light of hope lit.[\[46\]](#) I really dream that in fidelity to Don Bosco we will make our boys, girls and young adults fall in love with that Mother no less than he did, because “Our Lady is everything for Don Bosco; and the Salesian who wants

to acquire the spirit of the Founder must imitate him in this devotion.”[\[47\]](#)

5. FROM THE DREAM AT NINE YEARS OF AGE TO THE ALTAR OF TEARS

I have come to the end of this commentary. I could add more, but I believe that what I have written can reach everyone’s heart That would be great news.

I simply want to invite you to take a minute internalising and contemplating this text from the *Biographical Memoirs* that describes in a few lines what Don Bosco felt, shedding copious tears, before the altar of Mary Help of Christians in the Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Jesus a few days after its consecration.

In those moments Don Bosco saw and heard the voices of his mother Margaret, the comments of his brothers and grandmother who evaluated the dream, even questioning it. Right there, at that moment, sixty-two years later, he understood everything, just as the Teacher had foretold.

This narrative moves me every time and it is for this reason that I invite you to read it again and to meditate on it personally. Once again.

No less than fifteen times after he had started the Holy Sacrifice the *Biographical Memoirs* tells us, Don Bosco had to stop, overcome

by powerful emotion, which caused him to shed tears. From time to time, Father Charles Viglietti, who was assisting him, had to divert his attention so that he could continue.

(When he was asked) the cause of such emotion, he replied: “There appeared before my eyes the scene when at the age of ten I dreamt about the Congregation I could actually see and hear my mother and brothers, as they argued about the dream...

At that time Our Lady had said, ‘In due time you will understand everything.’ Since that day, sixty-two years of hardships, sacrifices, and struggles have passed by. All of a

sudden, an unexpected flash of lightning, had revealed to him in the building of the Church of the Sacred Heart in Rome, the crowning point of the mission so mysteriously outlined for him on the very threshold of life.[\[48\]](#)

I truly believe that Mary Help of Christians continues to be a true Mother and Teacher for our entire Family. I am convinced that the prophetic words of the first dream spoken by the Lord Jesus and Mary continue to be a reality in all places where the charism of our Father, a gift of the Spirit, has taken root. And I am sure that in every house, beyond our efforts and our efforts, we can apply what Don Bosco said about the Sanctuary at Valdocco:

Every brick is a grace of Mary Help of Christians; we have done nothing without her direct intervention; she has built her own house and it is a wonder in our eyes.

May She, the Immaculate and Help of Christians, continue to lead us all by the hand. Amen.

Valdocco, Turin, 8 December 2023

Fr Ángel Card. Fernández Artime, S.D.B.

Rector Major

[\[1\]](#) F. MOTTO, *Il sogno dei nove anni. Redazione, storia, criteri di lettura*, in «Note di pastorale giovanile» 5 (2020), 6.

[\[2\]](#) P. STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica. 1. Vita e opere*, LAS, Roma 1979, 31ff.

[\[3\]](#) P. CHÁVEZ V., *Let us make the young our life's mission by coming to know and imitate Don Bosco*, in AGC 412 (2012), 35-36.

[\[4\]](#) F. MOTTO, *op. cit.*, 6.

[5] J. BOSCO, *Memoirs of the Oratory of St Francis de Sales from 1815 to 1855*, in ISTITUTO STORICO SALESIANO, *Salesian Sources 1. Don Bosco and his work*, LAS, Rome 2014, 1329.

[6] Cf. F. RINALDI, Circular Letter published in ASC Year V – N. 26 (24 October 1924), 312-317.

[7] G. Bosco, *Memorie dell'oratorio di san Francesco di Sales dal 1815 al 1855*, in Istituto Storico Salesiano, (saggio introduttivo e note storiche a cura di A. da Silva Ferreira), "Fonti", serie prima, 4, March 1991. Cf. A. Bozzolo, *Il sogno dei nove anni, 3.1 Struttura narrativa e movimento onirico* in A. Bozzolo (a cura di), *I sogni di Don Bosco. Esperienza spirituale e sapienza educativa*, LAS-Roma, 2017, p. 235. note: an English translation of this is available at <http://sdl.sdb.org:9393/greenstone3/library/collection/dbdonbos/document/HASH3f428469cbc5458e999f74?>

[8] R. ZIGGIOTTI (ed. Marco Bay), *Tenaci, audaci e amorevoli. Lettere circolari ai salesiani di don Renato Ziggiotti*, LAS, Roma 2015, 575.

[9] Salesian Brother Marco Bay has been a professor at the Pontifical Salesian University in Rome and is currently director of the Salesian Central Archives in Rome (UPS). He generously placed in my hands the research he had carried out on the references that the previous Rectors Major had made on the dream at nine years of age.

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[10] P. ALBERA, Direzione Generale delle Opere Salesiane, *Lettere Circolari di don Paolo Albera ai salesiani*, Torino 1965, 123; 315; 339.

[11] F. RINALDI, Lettera circolare pubblicata in ACS Anno V –

N. 26 (24 October 1924), 312-317.

[12] *Ibidem*.

[13] *La commemorazione di un "sogno"*, in BS Anno XLIX, 6 (June 1925), 147.

[14] P. RICALDONE, Anno XVII. 24 March 1936 N. 74.

[15] P. RICALDONE, *op. cit.*, N. 78.

[16] R. ZIGGIOTTI, *op. cit.*, 129.

[17] R. ZIGGIOTTI, *op. cit.*, 264.

[18] L. RICCERI, *La parola del Rettor Maggiore. Conferenze, Omelie Buone notti*, v. 9, Ispettorica Centrale Salesiana, Torino 1978, 27.

[19] *Ibid*, 28.

[20] E. VIGANÒ, *Lettere circolari di don Egidio Viganò ai salesiani*, vol. 1, Roma, Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco, 1996, 10.

[21] BM VII, 171-172. Quoted in J. E. VECCHI, *Educatori appassionati esperti e consacrati per i giovani. Lettere circolari ai Salesiani di don Juan E. Vecchi*. Introduction, key words and indexes by Marco Bay, LAS, Roma 2013, 380.

[22] P. STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica*. Vol. II, p. 32. Quoted in J. E. VECCHI, *op. cit.*, 381.

[23] P. CHÁVEZ VILLANUEVA, *Lettere circolari ai salesiani (2002-2014)*. Introduction and indexes by Marco Bay. Presentation by Fr Ángel Fernández Arttime, Roma, LAS, 2021, p. 450.

[24] F. MOTTO, *op. cit.* 8.

[25] *Ibid*, 10.

[26] J. BOSCO, *Memoirs of the Oratory*, quoted in F. MOTTO, *op. cit.*, 9.

[27] F. MOTTO, *op. cit.*, 10.

[28] Quoted in P. RICALDONE, Anno XVII. 24 March 1936 N. 74.

[29] J. BOSCO, *op. cit.*, 1177.

[30] P. RICALDONE, Anno XX Novembre–Dicembre 1939 N. 96

[31] A. BOZZOLO (ED), *Il Sogno dei nove anni*. Questioni ermeneutiche e lettura teologica, LAS, Roma 2017, 264. Cf. fn 7 re availability of this in English.

[32] E. VIGANÒ, *Lettere circolari di don Egidio Viganò ai salesiani*, vol. 1, 1996, Roma, Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco, 1996, p. 10.

[33] R. ZIGGIOTTI, *op. cit.*, 264.

[34] F. MOTTO, *op. cit.*, 7.

[35] Cf. P. CHÁVEZ, “Let us make the young our life’s mission by coming to know and imitate Don Bosco”. *First year of preparation for the bicentenary of his birth. Strenna 2012*, in AGC 412 (2012), 3-39.

[36] E. VIGANÒ, *Lettere circolari di don Egidio Viganò ai salesiani*, vol. 1, 1996, Roma, Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco, 1996, p. 31.

[37] SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Young people, faith and vocational discernment*. Final Document. Elledici, Torino, 2018, n°128.

[38] FRANCIS, *Christus vivit. Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation to Young People and All the People of God*, LEV, Vatican City 2019, no 194.

[39] SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Young people... op. cit.*, no. 116.

[40] Cf. XXIII Capitolo Generale Salesiano, *Educare ai giovani nella fede*, CCS, Madrid, 1990, n° 99. [GC23, no. 90]

[41] Cf. F. MOTTO, *op. cit.* 14.

[42] R. SALA, *Il sogno dei nove anni. Redazione, storia, criteri di lettura*, in «Note di pastorale giovanile» 5 (2020), 21.

[43] F. RINALDI, *Il sac. Filippo Rinaldi ai Cooperatori ed alle Cooperatrici Salesiane. Un'altra data memoranda*, in BS Anno XLIX, 1 (Gennaio 1925), 6.

[44] E. VIGANÒ, *Lettere circolari di don Egidio Viganò ai salesiani*, vol. 2, 1996, Roma, Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco, 1996, p. 589.

[45] FRANCIS, *Christus vivit*, no. 254.

[46] Cf. FRANCIS, *op. cit.*, 43-48, 298.

[47] R. ZIGGIOTTI, *op. cit.*, 264.

[48] BM XVIII, 288 [Taken from the English New Rochelle translation].