

Strenna 2025. Anchored in hope, pilgrims with young people

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INTRODUCTION. ANCHORED IN HOPE, PILGRIMS WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

Dear sisters and brothers belonging to the different Groups of the Salesian Family of Don Bosco,

My warmest greetings to you at the beginning of this new year 2025!

It is with some emotion that I address each and every one of you in this time of grace marked by two important events for the life of the Church and our Family: the Jubilee 2025 year which began solemnly on 24 December last with the opening of the holy door at St Peter's Basilica in the Vatican, and the 150th anniversary of the first missionary expedition at the express wish of our father Don Bosco. This expedition left on 11 November 1875 for Argentina and other countries in the Americas.

These are two important events that find their point of intersection in hope. This is precisely the virtue that Pope Francis identified as a perspective when announcing the Jubilee. Similarly, the missionary experience is a harbinger of hope for everyone: for those who have left (and are leaving) for the missions and for those who have been reached by missionaries.

The year that is given to us is, therefore, rich in ideas for our daily growth in practical terms, so that our humanity becomes fruitful in its attention to others... This will only happen in hearts that place God at the centre, to the point of being able to say, "I have placed you ahead of myself."

I will try to highlight these elements in this commentary, and explore what the Church is invited to experience throughout this year from our charismatic perspective. I will try to emphasise what it is that should guide us, the Family of Don Bosco, towards new horizons.

1. ENCOUNTERING CHRIST OUR HOPE TO RENEW DON BOSCO'S DREAM

The Strenna's title involves the interweaving of two events: the ordinary jubilee of the year 2025 and the 150th anniversary of the first missionary expedition sent by Don Bosco to Argentina.

This concurrence of the two events, which I venture to call "providential", makes 2025 a decidedly extraordinary year for all of us and even more so for the Salesians of Don Bosco. Indeed the 29th General Chapter will be held in February, March and April, leading to the election of the new Rector Major and the new General Council, among other things.

Global and particular events, therefore, that involve us in different ways and that we will seek to experience profoundly and intensely, because it is precisely thanks to these events that we can experience the joy of encountering Christ, and the importance of remaining anchored in hope.

1.1 The Jubilee

"Spes non confundit! Hope does not disappoint!" [\[1\]](#)

This is how Pope Francis presents the Jubilee to us. How wonderful! What a "prophetic" cue!

The Jubilee is a pilgrimage for putting Jesus Christ back at the centre of our lives and the life of the world. Because he is our hope. He is the Hope of the Church and of the whole world!

We are all aware that the world today needs the hope that connects us with Jesus Christ and with our other brothers and sisters. We need the hope that makes us pilgrims, that propels us into motion, and prompts us to start walking.

We are speaking of hope as the rediscovery of God's presence. Pope Francis writes "May hope fill your hearts!", not only warm your hearts, but fill them, fill them to overflowing![\[2\]](#)

1.2 Anniversary of the first Salesian missionary expedition

And this overflowing hope filled the hearts of those who took part in the first Salesian missionary expedition to Argentina 150 years ago.

From Valdocco, Don Bosco throws his heart beyond every border, sending his sons to the other side of the world! He sends them beyond all human security, sends them to carry forward what he had begun, setting out with others, hoping and infusing hope. He simply sends them – and the first (young) confreres leave and head off. Where? Not even they know where! But they rely on hope and obey, because it is God's presence that guides us.

Our current hope also finds new energy in that enthusiastic obedience, and urges us to set out as pilgrims.

That is why this anniversary should be celebrated: because it helps us to recognise a gift (not a personal achievement, but a free gift, from the Lord); it allows us to remember and to gain strength from this memory to face and build the future.

Today, therefore, let us live to make this future possible and

let us do it in the only way we consider great: by sharing our journey of encountering Christ, our only hope, with young people and with all the people in our settings (starting from the poorest and most forgotten).

2. THE JUBILEE: CHRIST OUR HOPE

The Jubilee is journeying together, anchored in Christ our hope. But what does this really mean?

Let me pick up some of the elements of the Bull of indiction for Jubilee 2025 that highlight some of the characteristics of hope.

2.1 Pilgrims, anchored in Christian hope

We are convinced that nothing and no one can separate us from Christ.[\[3\]](#) Because we want to and must remained anchored, clinging to him. We cannot make the journey without our anchor.

The anchor of hope, therefore, is Christ himself who carries the sufferings and wounds of humanity on the cross in the presence of the Father.

The anchor, in fact, is the shape of a cross, which is why it was also depicted in the catacombs to symbolise the belonging of the deceased faithful to Christ the Saviour.

This anchor is already firmly attached to the port of salvation. Our task is to attach our life to it, the rope that binds our ship to the anchor of Christ.

We are sailing on troubled waters and need to anchor ourselves

to something solid. But the task is no longer to cast anchor and fix it to the seabed. The task is to attach our ship to the rope that hangs down from Heaven, so to speak, where the anchor of Christ is firmly fixed. By attaching ourselves to this rope we attach ourselves to the anchor of salvation and make our hope certain.

Hope is certain when the ship of our life is attached to the rope that binds us to the anchor that is fixed in the crucified Christ who is at the right hand of the Father, that is, in the eternal communion of the Father, in the love of the Holy Spirit.[\[4\]](#)

Everything is well expressed in the liturgical prayer for the Solemnity of the Lord's Ascension:

Gladden us with holy joys, almighty God, and make us rejoice with devout thanksgiving, for the Ascension of Christ your Son is our exaltation, and, where the Head has gone before in glory, the Body is called to follow in hope.[\[5\]](#)

Czech writer and politician Vaclav Havel describes hope as a state of mind, a dimension of the soul. It does not depend on prior observation of the world. It is not a prediction.

Byung-Chul Han adds, "Hope is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart that transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons.

"I feel that its deepest roots are in the transcendental... Hope in this deep and powerful sense is not the same as joy that things are going well. We might think that hoping is simply wanting to smile at life because it in turn smiles at you, but no, we have to go deeper, we have to walk that rope that leads us to the anchor.

"Hope is the ability of each of us to work for something because it is right to do so, not because that something will

have guaranteed success. It could be a failure, it could go wrong: we do not hope it goes well, we are not optimistic. We work to make this happen. That is why hope does not equal optimism. Hope is not the belief that something will go well but the certainty that something makes sense regardless of its outcome.

“Doing something because it makes sense: this is the hope that presupposes values and presupposes faith.

“This is what gives hope the strength to live, and gives us the strength to feel something again and again, even in despair.”[\[6\]](#)

But how can you be on a journey while remaining anchored? The anchor weighs you down, holds you back, and pins you down. Where does this journey lead to? It leads to eternity.

2.2 Hope as a journey to Christ, a journey to eternal life

The promise of eternal life, just as it is made to each of us, does not bypass life's journey, it is not a leap upwards, does not propose mounting a rocket that leaves the earth behind and flies off into space, disregarding the road, the dust of the path, nor does it leave the ship adrift mid-ocean without us.

This promise is indeed an anchor that is fixed in the eternal, but to which we remain attached by a rope that steadies the ship as it crosses the ocean. And it is precisely the fact that it is fixed in Heaven that allows the ship not to remain stationary in the middle of the sea, but to move forward through the waves.

If the anchor of Christ were to pin us to the bottom of the sea, we would all stay in place where we are, maybe calm and problem-free, yet stagnant, without travelling or advancing. On the contrary, anchoring life to Heaven guarantees that the

promise that gives rise to our hope does not impede our progress or provide a sense of security in which to shelter and confine ourselves, but rather instils confidence as we walk and proceed along our path. The promise of a sure goal, already reached for us by Christ, makes every step in life firm and decisive.

It is important to understand the Jubilee as a pilgrimage, as an invitation to get moving, to come out of self to go towards Christ.

Jubilee, then, has always been synonymous with a journey. If you really want God, you have to move, you have to walk. Because the desire for God, the longing for God moves you to find him and, at the same time, leads you to find yourself and others.

“Born to never die”.[\[7\]](#)

The title of the life of Servant of God Chiara Corbella Petrillo is beautiful and significant. Yes, because our coming into the world is directed to eternal life. Eternal life is a promise that breaks through the door of death, opening us to being “face to face with God”, forever. Death is a door that closes and at the same time a door that opens to the definitive encounter with God!

We know how keen was Don Bosco’s desire for Heaven, something he joyfully proposed and shared with the young people at the Oratory.

2.3 Characteristics of hope

2.3.1 Hope, continuous, ready, visionary and prophetic tension

Gabriel Marcel,[\[8\]](#) the so-called philosopher of hope, teaches us that hope is found in the weaving of experience now in

progress. Hope means giving credit to some reality as a bearer of the future.

Eric Fromm[\[9\]](#) writes that hope is not passive waiting, but rather a continuous, constant tension. It is like crouched tiger which will jump only when the time is right.

To have hope is to be vigilant at all times for everything that has not yet happened. The virgins who waited for the bridegroom with their lamps lit hoped; Don Bosco hoped in the face of difficulties and knelt down to pray.

Hope is ready at the moment when everything is about to be born.

It is vigilant, attentive, listening, able to guide in creating something new, in giving life to the future on earth.

This is why it is “visionary and prophetic”. It focuses our attention on what is not yet, it helps to give birth to something new.

2.3.2 Hope is our wager on the future

Without hope there is no revolution, no future, there is only a present made of sterile optimism.

Often it is thought that those who hope are optimists while pessimists are essentially their opposite. It is not so. It is important not to confuse hope with optimism. Hope is much more profound because it does not depend on moods, feelings or sentimentality. The essence of **optimism** is innate positivity. The optimist lives in the belief that somehow things will get better. For optimists, time is closure. They do not contemplate the future: everything will go well and that is it.

Paradoxically, even for **pessimists** time is closure: they find themselves trapped in the time as a prison, rejecting

everything without venturing into other possible worlds. The pessimist is as stubborn as the optimist, and both are blind to the possible because the possible is alien to them, they lack the passion for the unprecedented.

Unlike both of them, hope wagers on what can go beyond, on what could be.

And still, the optimist (just like the pessimist), does not act, because every action involves a risk and since they do not want to take this risk they stay put, they do not want to experience failure.

Hope instead goes in search, tries to find a direction, heads towards what it does not know, sets sail for new things. This is the pilgrimage of a Christian.

2.3.3 Hope is not a private matter

We all carry hope in our hearts. It is not possible not to hope, but it is also true that one can delude oneself, considering prospects and ideals that will never come true, that are just illusions and false hopes.

Much of our culture, especially Western culture, is full of false hopes that delude and destroy or can irreparably ruin the lives of individuals and entire societies.

According to positive thinking, it is enough to replace negative thoughts with positive ones to live more happily. Through this simple mechanism, the negative aspects of life are completely omitted and the world appears like an Amazon marketplace that will provide us with anything we want thanks to our positive attitude.

Conclusion: if our willingness to think positively were enough to be happy, then everyone would be solely responsible for their own happiness.

Paradoxically, the cult of positivity isolates people, makes them selfish and destroys empathy, because people are increasingly committed only to themselves and do not care about the suffering of others.

Hope, unlike positive thinking, does not avoid the negativity of life; it does not isolate but unites and reconciles, because the protagonist of hope is not me, focused on my ego, entrenched exclusively on myself. The secret of hope is us.

Therefore, Hope's siblings are Love, Faith, and Transcendence.

3. HOPE, THE FOUNDATION OF MISSION

3.1 Hope is an invitation to responsibility

Hope is a gift and, as such, should be passed on to everyone we meet along the way.

Saint Peter states this clearly: "Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you."[\[10\]](#) He invites us not to be afraid, to act in everyday life, to give our reasons – how much Salesian spirit there is in this word "reasons"! – for hope. This is a responsibility for the Christian. If we are women and men of hope, it shows!

"Giving an account of the hope that is in us" becomes a proclamation of the "good news" of Jesus and his Gospel.

But why is it necessary to respond to anyone who asks us about the hope that is in us? And why do we feel the need to recover hope?

In the Bull of Indiction of the Jubilee, *Spes Non Confundit*, Pope Francis reminds us that “All of us, however, need to recover the joy of living, since men and women, created in the image and likeness of God, cannot rest content with getting along one day at a time, settling for the here and now and seeking fulfilment in material realities alone. This leads to a narrow individualism and the loss of hope; it gives rise to a sadness that lodges in the heart and brings forth fruits of discontent and intolerance.”[\[11\]](#)

An observation that strikes us because it describes all the sadness that is breathed in our societies and our communities. It is a sadness masked by false joy, the one constantly touted, promised, and guaranteed to us by the media, advertisements, politicians’ propaganda, and many false prophets of well-being. Settling for well-being prevents us from opening up to a much greater, much truer, much more eternal good: what Jesus and the apostles call “the salvation of the soul, the salvation of life”; a good for which Jesus invites us not to fear losing our life, material goods, false securities that often collapse in an instant.

It is regarding these kinds of more or less articulated “questions” (including by young people) that it is our task to “give an account”. What do I want for the young people and for all the people I meet along the way? What would I like to ask God for them? How would I like it to change their lives?

There is only one answer: *eternal life*. Not only eternal life as a sublime state that we can reach after death, but eternal life possible here and now, eternal life as Jesus defines it: “And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent”, that is, a defined life, enlightened by communion with Christ and, through him, with the Father.[\[12\]](#)

And we have the task of accompanying the younger generations on this journey towards eternal life, in the educational

activity that distinguishes us. An activity that is a mission for us as the Salesian Family. And what drives our mission? Always Christ, our hope.

This educational mission, in fact, has hope at its core.

Ultimately, God's hope is never hope for itself alone. It is always hope for others: it does not isolate us, it makes us supportive and encourages us to educate each other in truth and love.

3.2 Hope demands courage from the Christian community in evangelization

Courage and hope are an interesting combination. In fact, if it is true that it is impossible not to hope, it is equally true that courage is necessary to hope. Courage comes from having the same outlook as Christ, [\[13\]](#) capable of hoping against all hope, of seeing a solution even where there seems to be no way out. And how "Salesian" this attitude is!

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

It is an attitude that we find in the first missionary expedition.

I find reference to art. 34 of the Constitutions of the Salesians of Don Bosco very useful: it highlights what lies at the heart of our charismatic and apostolic movement. I suggest to each of the groups in our diverse and beautiful Family that they review the same elements that I offer here, by rereading

their respective Constitutions and Statutes.

The article is entitled: Evangelization and catechesis and reads as follows:

"This Society had its beginning in a simple catechism lesson." For us too, evangelizing and catechizing are the fundamental characteristics of our mission.

Like Don Bosco, we are all called to be educators to the faith at every opportunity. Our highest knowledge therefore is to know Jesus Christ, and our greatest delight is to reveal to all people the unfathomable riches of his mystery.

We walk side by side with the young so as to lead them to the risen Lord, and so discover in him and in his gospel the deepest meaning of their own existence, and thus grow into new creatures in Christ.

The Virgin Mary is present in this process as a mother. We make her known and loved as the one who believed, who helps and who infuses hope."

This article represents the beating heart that clearly outlines, including for this Strenna, what the energies and opportunities are as the fulfilment and actualisation of the "global dream" that God inspired in Don Bosco.

If living the Jubilee is first of all making sure that Jesus is and returns to being in first place, then the missionary spirit is the consequence of this recognised primacy which strengthens our hope and translates into that educative and pastoral charity that proclaims the person of Jesus Christ to all. This is the heart of evangelisation and characterises genuine mission.

It is significant to recall some opening words from Benedict XVI's first Encyclical, *Deus caritas est*:

"Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a

lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.”[\[14\]](#)

Therefore, the encounter with Christ is a priority and fundamental, not the “simple” dissemination of a doctrine, but a deep personal experience of God that urges us to communicate him, to make him known and experienced, becoming true “mystagogues” of the lives of young people.

3.3 “*Da mihi animas*”: the “spirit” of mission

Don Bosco always kept a sentence before his eyes that young people could read passing in front of his room, words that particularly struck Dominic Savio: “*Da mihi animas cetera tolle*”.

There is a fundamental balance in this motto that combines the two priorities that guided Don Bosco’s life – and which, significantly, we call the “grace of unity” – that allow us to always safeguard interiority and apostolic action.

If the love of God is lacking in the heart, how can there be true pastoral charity? And at the same time, if apostles were not to discover the face of God in their neighbour, how could they be said to love God?

Don Bosco’s secret is that he personally experienced the unique “movement of charity towards God and towards his brothers and sisters”[\[15\]](#) that characterises the Salesian spirit.

3.3.1 The attitudes of the one who is sent

There are two key dreams in Don Bosco’s life in which the attitudes of the apostle, of the one who is sent, are evident:

the “dream at nine years of age” in which Jesus and Mary ask John, just a child, to make himself humble, strong and energetic, to be obedient and acquire knowledge, asking him to be always kind in order to win over the hearts of young people. He is to always keep Mary as his teacher and guide;

the “dream of the pergola of roses” that indicates the “passion” in Salesian life that requires wearing the “good shoes” of mortification and charity.

3.3.2 Recognise, Rethink and Relaunch

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

Recognising and thanking God.

Recognition makes the fatherly nature of every beautiful accomplishment evident. Without recognition, there is no capacity to accept. All the times we do not recognise a gift in our personal and institutional life, we seriously risk nullifying it and “taking it over”.

Rethinking, because “nothing is forever”.

Fidelity involves the ability to change, through obedience, to a perspective that comes from God and from reading the “signs of the times”. Nothing is forever: from a personal and institutional point of view, true fidelity is the ability to change, recognising what the Lord calls each of us to.

Rethinking, then, becomes a generative act in which faith and life come together; a moment in which to ask ourselves: what do you want to tell us, Lord, with this person, with this situation in the light of the signs of the times that ask me to have the very heart of God in order to interpret them?

Relaunching, starting over every day.

Recognition leads to looking far ahead and welcoming new

challenges, relaunching the mission with hope. Mission is to bring the hope of Christ with clear and conscious awareness, linked to faith, which makes me recognise that what I see and experience “is not mine”.

4. A JUBILEE AND MISSIONARY HOPE THAT TRANSLATES INTO CONCRETE AND DAILY LIFE

4.1 Hope, our strength in daily life that needs to be witnessed to

Saint Thomas Aquinas writes: “*Spes introcit ad caritatem*”, hope prepares and predisposes our life, our humanity, to charity.[\[16\]](#) A charity that is also justice, social action.

Hope needs testimony. We are at the heart of the mission, because the mission is not, in the first instance, to do things but is a testimony, the witness of the one who has gone through an experience and speaks about it. The witness is the bearer of a memory, solicits questions from those who meet him or her, evokes wonder.

The testimony of hope requires a community. It is the work of a collective subject and it is contagious, just as our humanity is contagious, because such testimony is a bond with the Lord.

Hope in the testimony of mission is to be built from generation to generation, between adults and young people: this is the way of the future. Consumerism eats away the future in our culture. The ideology of consumption extinguishes everything in the “here and now”, in the “everything, and immediately”. But you cannot consume the

future, you cannot appropriate what is other than you; you cannot appropriate the other.[\[17\]](#)

In building the future, hope is the ability to make promises and to keep them... such a splendid and rare thing in our world. To promise is to hope, to set in motion, that is why – as mentioned – hope is a journey, it is the very energy of the journey.

4.2 Hope is the art of patience and waiting

Every life, every gift, everything needs time to grow. So too do God's gifts take time to mature. This is why in our present time, where everything is instant, in our hurried "consumption" of time and life, we are called to cultivate the virtues of patience, because hope comes to fruition through patience.[\[18\]](#) In fact, hope and patience are intimately linked.

Hope involves the ability to wait, to wait for growth, as if to say that "one virtue leads to another"!

For hope to become reality, to manifest itself in its full sense, patience is required. Nothing manifests itself miraculously, because everything is subject to the law of time. Patience is the art of the farmer who sows and knows how to wait for the seed sown to grow and bear fruit.

Hope begins in us as waiting, expectation, and it is experienced as consciously lived expectation in our humanity. This waiting, this expectation is a very important dimension of human experience. Human beings know how to wait, are always in a dimension of waiting, because they are creatures who consciously live in time.

Human waiting, expectation, is the true measure of time, a measure that is not numerical or chronological. We have become

accustomed to calculating our waiting time, to saying that we have waited an hour, that the train is five minutes late, that the internet has made us wait fourteen endless seconds before responding to our click, but when we measure it in this way we distort our waiting, turning it into a thing, a phenomenon detached from ourselves and what we are waiting for. It is as if the waiting were something in itself, by itself, without any connection. Instead, waiting – and here is the crucial point – is relationship, a dimension of the mystery of relationship.

Only those who have hope have patience. Only those who have hope become capable of “enduring”, of “supporting from below” the different situations that life presents. Those who endure wait, hope, and manage to endure everything because their effort has the sense of waiting, has the tension of waiting, the loving energy of waiting.

We know that the call to patience and waiting sometimes involves the experience of fatigue, work, pain and death.[\[19\]](#) Well, fatigue, pain and death expose the illusion of having time, the meaning of time, the value of time, the meaning and value of our life. They are negative experiences, but also positive because fatigue, pain and death can be opportunities to rediscover the true meaning of life’s time.

And, once again, “to give an account of the hope that is in us”, becoming the proclamation of the “good news” of Jesus and his Gospel.

5. THE ORIGIN OF OUR HOPE: IN GOD WITH DON BOSCO

Father Egidio Viganò offered the Congregation and the Salesian Family an interesting reflection on the topic of hope, drawing on our very rich tradition and highlighting some specific

characteristics of the Salesian spirit read in the light of this theological virtue. He did this by commenting, in particular for participants at the General Chapter of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, on Don Bosco's dream of the ten diamonds.[\[20\]](#)

Given the depth of the proposed contents, I think it is useful to recall the contribution of the 7th Successor of Don Bosco in reminding us of what we are all called to live, once again from the perspective of hope.

5.1 God is the origin of our hope

5.1.1 Brief reference to the dream

We all know the story of this extraordinary dream that Don Bosco had in San Benigno Canavese on the night of 10 September 1881. Let me briefly recall its structure.[\[21\]](#)

The Dream takes place in three scenes. *In the first scene*, the main character embodies the profile of the Salesian: on the front of his cloak there are five diamonds – three on the chest, representing “Faith”, “Hope” and “Charity”, and two on the shoulders, representing “Work” and “Temperance”; on the back there are five additional diamonds indicating “Obedience”, “Vow of Poverty”, “Reward”, “Vow of Chastity” and “Fasting”.

Fr Rinaldi calls this character with the ten diamonds “The model of the true Salesian”.

In the second scene, the character shows the adulteration of the model: his cloak “had become faded, moth-eaten, in tatters. In place of the diamonds there were gaping holes caused by moths and other insects.”

This very sad and depressing scene shows “the opposite to the true Salesian”, the anti-Salesian.

In the third scene, “a handsome young man dressed in a white cloak woven through with gold and silver thread [...] of imposing and charming mien” appears. He is the bearer of a message. He urges the Salesians to “listen”, to “understand”, to remain “strong and courageous”, to “witness” with their words and with their lives, to “be careful” in the acceptance and formation of the new generations, to make their Congregation grow healthily.

The three dream scenes are lively and provocative; they present us with an agile, personalised and dramatised synthesis of Salesian spirituality. The content of the dream, in Don Bosco’s mind, certainly involves an important frame of reference for our vocational identity.

So then, the character in the dream – as is well known – bears the diamond of hope on the front, which stands for the certainty of help from above in an entirely creative life, i.e. one committed to daily planning of practical activities for salvation, especially of youth. Together with the other symbols linked to the theological virtues, the figure of those who are wise and optimistic stands out for the faith that animates them; of those who are dynamic and creative for the hope that moves them, and who are ever prayerful and good human beings for the charity with which they are imbued.

Corresponding to the diamond of hope, on the back of the figure we find the diamond of “reward”. While hope visibly highlights the Salesian’s energy and activity in building the Kingdom, the constancy of his efforts and the enthusiasm of his commitment based on the certainty of God’s help made present through the mediation and intercession of Christ and Mary, the diamond of “reward” instead underlines a constant conscientious attitude that permeates and animates all ascetic effort, according to Don Bosco’s familiar maxim: “A piece of paradise will make up for everything!” [\[22\]](#)

5.1.2 Don Bosco, a “giant” of hope

The Salesian – Don Bosco said – “is ready to suffer cold and heat, hunger and thirst, weariness and disdain whenever God’s glory and the salvation of souls require it”;[\[23\]](#) the inner support for this demanding ascetic ability is the thought of paradise as a reflection of the good conscience with which he works and lives. “In all we do, our duty, work, troubles or sufferings, we must never forget that... the least thing done for his name’s sake is not left forgotten; it is of faith that in his own good time he will give us rich recompense. At the end of our lives as we stand before his judgement seat he will say, radiant with love: “Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master” (Mt 25:2).[\[24\]](#) “In your work and sorrow never forget we have a great reward stored up for us in heaven.”[\[25\]](#) And when our Father says that the Salesian exhausted by too much work represents a victory *for the whole Congregation*, it seems to suggest a dimension of fraternal communion in the reward, almost a community sense of paradise!

The thought and continuous awareness of paradise is one of the overarching ideas and one of the driving values of Don Bosco’s typical spirituality and also pedagogy. It is like shedding light on and furthering the fundamental instinct of the soul that tends vitally towards its ultimate goal.

In a world prone to secularisation and the gradual loss of a sense of God – especially due to affluence and certain progress – it is important to resist the temptation, for ourselves and for the young people with whom we journey, that prevents us from looking up to Heaven and does not make us feel the need to sustain and nurture a commitment to asceticism lived out in our daily work. A temporal gaze is growing in its place, according to a somewhat elegant kind of horizontalism that believes it can discover the ideal of

everything within human becoming and in the present life. Quite the opposite of hope!

Don Bosco was one of the greats of hope. There are so many elements to prove it. His Salesian spirit is entirely infused with the certainty and industriousness characteristic of this bold dynamism of the Holy Spirit.

Let me pause briefly to recall how Don Bosco was able to translate the energy of hope in his life on two fronts: commitment to personal sanctification and the mission of salvation for others; or rather – and here lies a central characteristic of his spirit – personal sanctification through the salvation of others. We remember the famous formula of the three “S’s”: “Salve, salvando salvati” (a greeting which in today’s language would be something like ‘Hi! By saving others, save yourself’)[\[26\]](#) It is a simple mnemonic, a pedagogical slogan, but it is profound and indicates how the two sides of personal sanctification and the salvation of others are closely linked.

In the “work” and “temperance” pair, the perception is that Don Bosco experienced hope as a practical and daily programme for the tireless work of sanctification and salvation. In contemplation of the mystery of God his faith led him to prefer his ineffable plan of salvation. He saw in Christ the Saviour of humankind and the Lord of history; in his Mother, Mary, the Helper of Christians; in the Church, the great Sacrament of salvation; in his own Christian growth to maturity and in needy youth, the vast field of the “not yet”. Therefore his heart erupted in the cry, “Da mihi animas”, Lord grant that I may save youth, and take the rest away from me! The following of Christ and the youth mission merge, in his spirit, in a single theological burst of energy that constitutes the supporting structure of the whole.

We know well that the dimension of Christian hope combines the perspective of the “already” and the “not yet”: something

present and something in progress that, however, begins to manifest itself from today even if “not yet” fully.

5.1.3 Characteristics of Don Bosco's hope

The certainty of the “already”

When we ask theology what the formal object of hope is, it responds that it is the intimate conviction of the presence of God who helps, aids, and assists; the inner certainty about the power of the Holy Spirit; friendship with the victorious Christ that enables us to say with St Paul, “I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (Phil 4:13).

The first constitutive element of hope is, therefore, the certainty of the “already”. Hope encourages faith to exercise itself in consideration of God's saving presence in human vicissitudes, of the power of the Spirit in the Church and in the world, of Christ's kingship over history, of the baptismal values that have initiated the life of resurrection within us.

The first constitutive element of hope is, therefore, an exercise of faith in the essence of God as merciful and saving Father, in what Jesus Christ has already done for us, in Pentecost as the beginning of the age of the Holy Spirit, in what is already within us through Baptism, the sacraments, life in the Church, the personal call of our vocation.

It is necessary to reflect that faith and hope interchange in us, their dynamics prompt and complement each other and make us live in the creative and transcendent atmosphere of the power of the Holy Spirit.

A clear awareness of the “not yet”

The second constitutive element of hope is the awareness of the “not yet”. It does not seem very difficult to have this; however, hope demands a clear awareness not so much of what is evil and unjust, as of what is lacking in the stature of

Christ in time, and, therefore, of what is unjust and sinful and also of what is immature, partial or stunted in building the Kingdom.

This supposes, as a frame of reference, a clear knowledge of the divine plan of salvation, onto which the critical and discerning capacity of the one who hopes is grafted. Thus any critique by a person of hope is not simply psychological or sociological but transcendent, according to the theological sphere of the “new creature”; it also makes use of the contributions of the human sciences, and far surpasses them.

With the awareness of the “not yet”, those who hope perceive what is evil, what is not yet mature, what is a seed for the Kingdom of God and are committed to the growth of what is good and to fighting sin with the historical perspective of Christ. The ability to discern the “not yet” is always measured by the certainty of the “already”. Therefore, and I would say especially in difficult times, those who hope urge and stir up their faith to discover the signs of God’s presence and the mediations that guide us into the sphere that he has traced out. This is a very important quality today: knowing how to identify seeds to help them sprout and grow.

How can one hope if there is not this capacity for discernment? It is not enough to know how to perceive the full weight of evil. We must also be sensitive to the spring “that shines around us”. So in these times, which we call difficult times (and they really are, comparing them with those with a degree of tranquillity that we experienced earlier), hope helps us to perceive that there is also so much good in the world and that something is growing.

Salvific industriousness

A third constitutive element of hope is its need to be put into action accompanied by a concrete commitment to sanctification, inventiveness and apostolic sacrifice. We must

collaborate with the “already” that is growing. We need to act urgently and fight against evil in ourselves and in others, especially in needy youth.

The discernment of the “already” and the “not yet” needs to be translated into practice in life, opening up to resolutions, plans, revision, inventiveness, patience and constancy. Not everything will turn out “as we hoped”: there will be failures, setbacks, falls, misunderstandings. Christian hope also naturally shares in the darkness of faith.

5.1.4 The “fruits” of Don Bosco’s hope

Some particularly significant fruits for the Salesian spirit of Don Bosco derive from the three constitutive elements of hope which I have just indicated.

Joy

Joy derives from the first constitutive element – the certainty of the “already” – as the most characteristic fruit. All true hope explodes into joy.

The Salesian spirit takes on the joy of hope through an affinity all its own. Even biology suggests some examples. Youth, which is human hope (and thus suggests a certain analogy with the mystery of Christian hope), is eager for joy. And we see Don Bosco translate hope into an atmosphere of joy for the youth to be saved. Dominic Savio, raised at his school, said, “We make holiness consist in being very cheerful.” It is not a superficial cheerfulness typical of the world but an inner joy, a substrate of Christian victory, a vital harmony with hope, which explodes in joy. A joy that ultimately proceeds from the depths of faith and hope.

There is little to do. If we are sad, it is because we are superficial. I understand that there is a Christian sadness: Jesus Christ experienced it. In Gethsemane his soul was saddened to death, he sweated blood. This is certainly another

kind of sadness.

However, the affliction or melancholy through which a Sister gets the impression of not being understood by anyone, that others do not take her into consideration, that they are envious or misunderstand her qualities, etc., is a sadness that must not be fed. This must be contrasted with the depth of hope: God is with me and loves me; what does it matter if others don't consider me so much?

Joy, in the Salesian spirit, is a daily atmosphere; it stems from a faith that hopes and from a hope that believes, in other words from the dynamic quality of the Holy Spirit that proclaims in us the victory that overcomes the world!... Joy is essential if we are to witness to what we believe and hope in.

This is what the Salesian spirit is, first and foremost, and not something reduced to mere observance and mortification. Hope will also lead us to practise mortification, but as flight training and not as prison jabs! So: from hope, so much joy!

The world tries to overcome its limitations and disorientation with a life filled with exciting sensations. It cultivates the promotion and satisfaction of the senses, a spicy film, eroticism, drugs, etc. It is a way of escaping from a fleeting situation that seems to make no sense, to seek something that borders on a "caricature of transcendence".

Patience

Another "fruit" of hope – which comes from the awareness of the "not yet" – is *patience*. Every hope entails an indispensable gift of patience. Patience is a Christian attitude, intrinsically linked with hope in its "not yet" quality with its troubles, its difficulties and its darkness. Believing in the resurrection and working for the victory of faith, while being mortal and immersed in the transient, demands an inner structure of hope that leads to patience.

The most sublime expression of Christian patience was what Jesus experienced especially during his passion and death. It is a fruitful patience, precisely because of the hope that fuels it. Rather than initiative and action, patience involves conscious acceptance and virtuous passivity that endures so that God's plan may be accomplished.

Don Bosco's Salesian spirit often reminds us of patience. In the introduction to the Constitutions, Don Bosco recalls, alluding to Saint Paul, that the pains we must endure in this life do not compare with the reward that awaits us. He used to say, "So take heart! When patience would falter, let hope sustain us!"[\[27\]](#) "the hope of a reward is what buoys up our patience."[\[28\]](#)

Mother Mazzarello also insisted on this. One of her first biographers, Maccone, states that hope always comforted her by supporting her in her sufferings, her infirmities, her doubts, and cheered her up at the hour of death: "Her hope was very alive and active. It seems to me" a Sister testified "that she was animated by hope in everything and that she tried to instil this in others. She urged us to carry the small daily crosses well, and to do everything with great purity of intention."[\[29\]](#)

Hope is the mother of patience and patience is the defence and shield of hope.

Pedagogical sensitivity

From the third constitutive element of hope – "salvific industriousness" – comes another fruit: *pedagogical sensitivity*. It is an initiative of appropriate commitment, both in the context of one's own sanctification (following Christ), and in the context of the salvation of others (mission). It involves practical, measured and constant commitment, translated by Don Bosco into a concrete methodology that involves attention to the following:

prudence (or holy “cunning”): when it comes to initiatives, to solving problems, Don Bosco tries everything without pretending to be perfect but with humble practicality; he often said, “The best is the enemy of the good”.[\[30\]](#)

***Boldness.** Evil is organised, the children of darkness act intelligently. The Gospel tells us that the children of light must be more cunning and courageous. Therefore, to work in the world we must arm ourselves with genuine prudence, that is, with the “auriga virtutum” that makes us agile, timely and penetrating in the application of true fearlessness for the good.*

***Magnanimity.** We must not confine our gaze within the walls of our house. We have been called by the Lord to save the world; we have a more important historical mission than astronauts and scientists do... We are committed to the full liberation of humankind. Our soul must be open to very broad perspectives. Don Bosco wanted us to be “at the forefront of progress” (and when he said this he meant communications media).*

We know the magnanimity of Don Bosco in launching youth into apostolic responsibilities; think, for example, of the first missionaries who left for America. Both the Salesians and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians were little more than boys and girls!

Don Bosco operated within expansive horizons. Neither Valdocco nor Mornese was enough for him; he could not remain only within the confines of Turin, Piedmont, Italy or Europe. His heart beat with the heart of the universal Church, because he felt almost invested with the responsibility of saving all the needy youth of the world. He wanted the Salesians to feel that the most urgent and biggest youth issues of the Church were their own, so they could be available everywhere. And, as he cultivated magnanimity in his plans and initiatives, he was concrete and practical in their implementation, with a sense of gradualness, and modest beginnings.

So magnanimity must always radiate from the face of the Salesian as a mark of sympathy: Salesians must not be narrow-minded without vision, but have greatness of soul because hope abides in their hearts.

Péguy, with his somewhat violent acumen, wrote: “A capitulation is in essence an operation in which one begins to explain instead of implementing. Cowards have always been people of many explanations.” The mysticism of decision and the humble courage of practicality must always radiate from the Salesian face, as a mark of sympathy. Don Bosco was determined in being committed to good, even if he could not begin with the best; he said that his works perhaps began in disorder and then tended towards order!

Hope brings the joy of divine sonship to the face of the Salesian, in addition to deep contemplation, the enthusiasm of gratitude and optimism that stem from “faith”. It also instils the courage to take initiative, the spirit of patience and sacrifice, the wisdom of gradual pedagogy, the visionary ideals of magnanimity, the humility of practicality, the wisdom of cunning, and the smile of joy.

5.2 God’s faithfulness: to the very end

So far we have taken a look at what Don Bosco and our Saints and Blesseds have clearly expressed in their lives. These are things that urge each of us personally and as a Salesian Family to bring forth or – to take up the words of Fr Egidio Viganò – to make shine the hope we are called to “give our reasons” for, especially to young people and, among them, the poorest.

The time has come to “peek” a little beyond what is “immediately visible” and try to understand what lies ahead in our lives and gives us the courage to wait diligently as we

work together for the coming of the “day of the Lord”.

Therefore, and continuing to take up the candid and poignant analysis of the Seventh Successor of Don Bosco, let us focus our attention on the perspective of the “reward”.

The diamond of “reward” is placed with four others on the back of the cloak worn by the character in the dream. It is almost a secret, a force that operates from within, which gives us the impetus and helps us to support and defend the great values seen on the front. It is interesting to note that the diamond of “reward” is placed under the one of “poverty” because it certainly is related to the “privations” linked to it.

On its rays we read the following words: “If the rich reward attracts you, do not be afraid of the many hardships.” “Whoever suffers with me will rejoice with me.” “Whatever we suffer on earth is momentary, the joys of my friends in Heaven are eternal.”

The true Salesian has the vision of the reward in their imagination, in their heart, their desires, their horizons of life , as the fullness of the values proclaimed by the Gospel. This is why “he is always cheerful. He radiates this joy and is able to educate to the happiness of Christian life and a sense of celebration.”[\[31\]](#)

There was a lot of talk about Heaven in Don Bosco’s house and in our Salesian houses. It was a permanent and ever present idea summarised in some famous sayings: “Bread, work and Paradise”[\[32\]](#); “A piece of Paradise will make up for everything”.[\[33\]](#) These were recurrent sayings in Valdocco and Mornese.

Certainly many Daughters of Mary Help of Christians will remember the description Mother Henriette Sorbonne gave of the spirit of Mornese: “Here we are in Paradise, in the house there is an atmosphere of Paradise!”[\[34\]](#) And it certainly

wasn't because of privations or lack of problems. It was like the spontaneous translation, sprung from the heart, of the sign that Don Bosco had put up: "Servite Domino in laetitia" [\[35\]](#).

Dominic Savio had also perceived the same warm and transcendent atmosphere of life: "We make holiness consist in being very cheerful." [\[36\]](#)

In the Lives of Dominic Savio, Francis Besucco and Michael Magone, Don Bosco, even when describing their death throes, sought to stress this ineffable joy, combined with a true yearning for Paradise. Much more than the horror of death, his boys felt the attraction of Easter joy.

The thought of reward is one of the fruits of the presence of the Holy Spirit, that is, of the intensity of faith, hope and charity, all three together, although it is more closely linked to hope. It instils a joy and gladness in the heart that comes from above and are beautifully attuned to the innate tendencies of the human heart. We can see this as we live among boys and girls: young people instinctively understand more clearly that human beings are born for happiness.

But we don't even need to go looking for it among the young. Let's pick up a mirror and look at ourselves: we just have to listen to the beating of our heart. We are born to achieve happiness, we expect it even without confessing it.

The idea of Paradise, always there in Don Bosco's house, is not a utopia for naive deceptions. It is not the carrot that tricks the horse into trotting, but the substantial yearning of our being; and it is above all the reality of the love of God, of the resurrection of Jesus Christ at work in history; it is the living presence of the Holy Spirit that urges us toward the reward.

Don Bosco did not despise any of young people's joys. On the

contrary, he gave rise to them, increased them, developed them. The famous “cheerfulness” which holiness consists of is not only an intimate joy, hidden in the heart as the fruit of grace. This is the root of it. It is also expressed externally, in life, in the playground and in the sense of celebration.

How he prepared for religious solemnities, name days and feast days at the Oratory! He was even busy organising the celebrations for his name day, not for himself but to create an atmosphere of joyful gratitude in the surroundings.

Let’s think about courageous autumn walks: two or three months to prepare them, 15 or 20 days to experience them; then the extended memories and comments: a joy spread out over time. What imagination and courage! From Turin to Becchi, to Genoa, to Mornese, to many towns in Piedmont, with dozens and dozens of young people... Outings, games, the music, singing, theatre: these are substantial elements of the Preventive System which, also as a pedagogical method, embrace an appropriate and dynamic spirituality, the result of a convinced faith, hope, and charity, heavenly values right here on earth.

Heaven was always overlooking the firmament of Valdocco, day and night, with or without clouds. Witnessing to the values of reward today is an urgent prophecy for the world and especially for youth. What has the techno-industrial civilisation brought to the consumer society? A huge possibility of comfort and pleasure, with a consequent heavy sadness.

Among other things, we read in the Constitutions of the Salesians of Don Bosco – but it applies to every Christian – that “the Salesian [is] a sign of the power of the resurrection” and that “in the simplicity and hard work of daily life” he is “an educator who proclaims to the young ‘new heavens and a new earth’, awakening in them hope and the dedication and joy to which it gives rise.” [\[37\]](#)

In Mornese and Valdocco there were neither comforts nor dictatorships and everything breathed spontaneity and joy. Technical progress has facilitated many things today, but the true joy of human beings has not increased. Anguish has grown instead, nausea, a lack of meaning in life has become more acute, something unfortunately that we continue to observe – especially in affluent societies – in the tragic statistics of adolescent and youth suicides.

Today, in addition to the material poverty that still afflicts a very large portion of humanity, it is urgent to find a way to help young people see the meaning of life, the higher ideals, the originality of Jesus Christ.

Happiness, a fundamental human tendency, is sought, but the right path to it is no longer known, and then immense disillusionment grows.

Young people, also due to the lack of significant adults, feel unable to face suffering, duty and constant commitment. The problem of fidelity to ideals and one's own vocation has become crucial. Young people feel unable to accept suffering and sacrifice. They live in an atmosphere in which the separation between love and sacrifice triumphs, so that the pursuit and achievement of wealth alone ends up stifling the ability to love and, therefore, to dream of the future.

Rightly, as we said, the diamond of reward is placed below the one of poverty, as if to indicate that the two complement and support each other. In fact, evangelical poverty entails a concrete and transcendent vision of the whole reality with a realistic perspective also regarding renunciation, suffering, setbacks, privation and pain.

What is the inner energy that allows one to face everything confidently and with a cheerful countenance, without getting discouraged? It is, ultimately, the sense of heaven's presence on earth. This sense proceeds from faith, hope and charity,

which enables us to reread our whole life with the perspective of the Holy Spirit.

The world urgently needs prophets who proclaim the great truth of Paradise with their lives. Not some alienating escape, but an intense and stimulating reality!

Therefore, in the spirit of Don Bosco, there is a constant concern to cultivate familiarity with Paradise, almost as if to constitute the firmament of the mind, the horizon of the Salesian heart: we work and struggle, sure of a reward, looking towards our Homeland, the house of God, the Promised Land.

It should be made clear that the prospect of the reward does not consist, in some reductionist way, in the attainment of a kind of “recompense”, some kind of consolation for a life lived amidst so many sacrifices, so much endurance... None of this! If it were just “recompense,” it would resemble blackmail. But God doesn’t work that way. In his love he can only offer human beings himself. This – as Jesus says – is eternal life: the knowledge of the Father. Where “knowing” means “loving”, becoming fully partakers of God, in continuity with earthly existence lived “in grace”, that is, in love for God and for our brothers and sisters.

We are invited to turn our gaze to Mary in this journey, who appears as daily help, Mother, forerunner and helper. Don Bosco was sure of her presence among us and wanted signs that remind us of it.

He built a Basilica for her, a centre for the animation and dissemination of the Salesian vocation. He wanted her image in our settings; he bound every apostolic initiative to her intercession and commented with emotion on her real and maternal effectiveness. We recall, for example, what he said to the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in the house at Nizza Monferrato: “Our Lady is truly here, here among you! Our

Lady walks in this house and covers it with her mantle.”[\[38\]](#)

In addition to her, we also look for other friends in God’s house. Our Saints and Blesseds, starting with the faces that are most familiar to us and that are part of the so-called “Salesian garden”.

We are not making these choices to divide the great house of God into small private apartments, but rather to feel more easily at home and be able to speak of God, the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, Christ and Mary, creation and history, not with the trepidation of those who have listened to the lofty lesson of a dense, difficult and even inscrutable thinker, but with that sense of familiarity and joyful simplicity with which we converse with those who have been our relatives, our brothers and sisters, our colleagues and our workmates. Some of them we have not met in life, but we feel close to them and they inspire us with particular confidence. Speaking with Saint Joseph, Don Bosco, Mother Mazzarello, Father Rua, Dominic Savio, Laura Vicuña, Father Rinaldi, Bishop Versiglia and Father Caravario; with Sister Teresa Valsè, Sister Eusebia Palomino, etc., really is an “in house”, family conversation.

This is what the diamond of reward suggests to us: to feel at home with God, with Christ, with Mary, with the Saints; to feel their presence in our own house, in a family atmosphere that gives a sense of Paradise to the daily settings of our life.

6. WITH... MARY, HOPE AND MATERNAL PRESENCE

At the end of this commentary we can only but turn our hearts and gaze to the Virgin Mary, as Don Bosco taught us.

Hope requires confidence, the ability to surrender and trust.

In all this we have a guide and a teacher in Mary Most Holy.

She testifies to us that to hope is to trust and surrender, and it is true for this life as well as for eternal life.

On this journey Our Lady takes us by the hand, teaches us how to trust in God, how to give ourselves freely to the love passed on by her Son Jesus.

The direction and the “navigation map” that she presents us with is always the same: “Do whatever he tells you.” [\[39\]](#) An invitation that we take up every day in our lives.

We see the achievement of the reward in Mary.

Maria embodies the attractiveness and concreteness of the Reward in herself:

“on the completion of her earthly sojourn, [she] was taken up body and soul into heavenly glory, and exalted by the Lord as Queen of the universe, that she might be the more fully conformed to her Son, the Lord of lords and the conqueror of sin and death.” [\[40\]](#)

On her lips we can read some beautiful expressions from Saint Paul. Since they are inspired by the Holy Spirit, Mary’s Spouse, they are certainly shared by her.

Here they are:

“It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor

life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."[\[41\]](#)

Dear sisters and brothers, dear young people,

Mary Help of Christians, Don Bosco and all our Saints and Blesseds are close to us in this extraordinary year. May they accompany us in living the demands of the Jubilee at depth, helping us to place the person of Jesus Christ "the Saviour announced in the gospel, who is alive today in the Church and in the world"[\[42\]](#) at the centre of our lives.

May they encourage us, following the example of the first missionaries sent by Don Bosco, to make our lives always and everywhere a free gift for others, especially for the young and among them the poorest.

Finally, a wish: that this year the prayer for peace, for a peaceful humanity, may grow in us. Let us invoke the gift of peace – the biblical *shalom* – which contains all others and finds fulfilment only in hope.

My warmest best wishes,

Father Stefano Martoglio S.D.B.

Vicar of the Rector Major

Rome, 31 December 2024

[\[1\]](#) Francis, *Spes Non Confundit*. Bull of indiction of the Ordinary Jubilee for the Year 2025, Vatican City, 9 May 2024.

[\[2\]](#) *Ibid.*

[\[3\]](#) Cf. *Rom* 8:39.

[4] *Rom 5:3-5*

[5] *Roman Missal*, LEV, Rome 2020³, 240.

[6] BYUNG-CHUL HAN, *El espíritu de la esperanza*, p.18, Herder, Barcelona 2024. The translator, however, has translated here from the Italian text in front of him, with some reference also to the English translation of *The Spirit of Hope*, Polity Press, 2024 (an e-book version).

[7] C. PACCINI – S. TROISI, *Siamo nati e non moriremo mai più. Storia di Chiara Corbella Petrillo*, Porziuncola, Assisi (PG) 2001.

[8] GABRIEL MARCEL, *Philosophie der Hoffnung*, Munich, List 1964.

[9] ERICH FROMM, *La revolución de la esperanza*, Ciudad de México 1970.

[10] *1 Pet 3:15*.

[11] Francis, *Spes Non Confundit*, 9.

[12] *Jn 17:3*.

[13] Cf. *Rom 4:18*.

[14] BENEDICT XVI, *Encyclical Letter Deus Caritas Est*, Vatican City 25 December 2005, 1.

[15] *SDB C. 3*.

[16] THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa theologiae*, II^a-II^{ae} q. 17 a. 8 co.

[17] Cf. E. LEVINAS, *Totalità e infinito. Saggio sull'esteriorità*, Jaca Book, Milano 2023.

[18] For these reflections I drew on the rich reflection of the Abbot General of the Order of Cistercians M. G. LEPORI, *Capitoli dell'Abate Generale OCist al CFM 2024. Sperare in*

Cristo available in several languages at: www.ocist.org

[19] *Cf. Rom, 5:3-5*

[20] E. VIGANÒ, *Un progetto evangelico di vita attiva*, Elle Di Ci, Leumann (TO) 1982, 68-84.

[21] *Cf. E. VIGANÒ, The Salesian according to Don Bosco's dream of the ten diamonds*, in *ASC 300* (1981), 3-37. The complete account can be found in *ASC 300* (1981), 40-44; or in *BM XV*, 147-152.

[22] *BM VIII*, 200.

[23] *SDB C.* 18.

[24] p. braido (ed), *Don Bosco Fondatore "Ai Soci Salesiani" (1875-1885). Introduzione e testi critici*, LAS, Roma 1995, 159 (Don Bosco's 'To the Salesian Confreres' from which this is quoted, is also an appendix to the *SDB Constitutions and Regulations*).

[25] *BM VI*, 249.

[26] *MB VI*, 227.

[27] *BM XII*, 332.

[28] *Ibid*, 331.

[29] F. MACCONO, *Santa Maria Domenica Mazzarello. Confondatrice e prima Superiore Generale delle FMA. Vol. I*, FMA, Torino 1960, 398.

[30] *BM X*, 418.

[31] *SDB C.* 17.

[32] *BM XII*, 443.

[33] *BM VIII*, 200.

[34] Quoted in E. VIGANÒ, *Rediscovering the spirit of Mornese*, in ASC (1981), 62.

[35] Ps 99.

[36] BM V, 228.

[37] SDB C. 63. See also E. VIGANÒ, *"Giving reason for the joy and commitments of hope, bearing witness to the unfathomable riches of Christ"*. Strenna 1994. Rector Major's Commentary, Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, Rome 1993.

[38] G. CAPETTI, *Il cammino dell'Istituto nel corso di un secolo. Vol. I*, FMA, Roma 1972-1976, 122.

[39] Jn 2:5.

[40] LG, 59.

[41] Rom 8:34-39.

[42] SDB C. 196.

Our annual gift

Traditionally, as Salesian Family we receive the Strenna every year; a gift at the beginning of the year, and in these few lines I am keen to look inside this gift to welcome it as it deserves, without losing any of the freshness of the gift.

A gift, because first of all, *strenna* means: I give you a gift! I give you something important to celebrate a new time, a new year. This is how Don Bosco thought of it and gave it to all the young people and adults who were with him.

This gift, the *strenna*, I want to give you for the beginning

of the new year, of a new time.

This is beautiful and important: a new year, a new time is a container containing all its other contents. The year to come is not the same as the ones you have experienced so far. The new year requires a new look to live it to the full; because the new year will not return! Every time is unique because we are different from last year, from the way we were last year.

The *Strenna* is about preparing for this new time, beginning to look inside this new year, highlighting certain things that will be an important part of this year.

The common thread

The gift of time, of life; in life the gift of God and all the other gifts within: people, situations, occasions, human relationships. Within this providential way of seeing the gift of time and life, the *strenna*, a gift that Don Bosco, and after him all his successors have given every year to the whole Salesian Family... is a look at the new year, at this new time, to see it with new eyes.

The *strenna* helps us to see the time to come by focusing on a common thread that guides this new time: the common thread that the *strenna* gives us is Hope. This is also important! The new year will certainly have many things in store, but don't get lost! Start thinking about how important it is... don't throw things to the winds, but collect!

The *strenna* that our Father Angel has put together for us, like a new suit, highlights events that we will all experience, and unites them with a common thread, Hope!

The events that the 2025 *Strenna* highlights are global or particular events that involve us, for us to live them well:

- **The ordinary Jubilee of the year 2025:** a Jubilee is a Church event in the Catholic tradition that the Holy Father gives us. To live the Jubilee is to live this pilgrimage that the Church offers us to put the presence of Christ back at the centre of our lives and the life of the world. The Jubilee that Pope Francis give us has a generative theme: *Spes non confundit!*

Hope does not disappoint! What a wonderful generative theme! If there is one thing the world needs at this difficult time, it is Hope, but not the hope of believing we can do things for ourselves, at the risk of it becoming an illusion. It is the Hope of the re-discovery of the Presence of God. Pope Francis writes: 'Hope fills the heart!' Not only warms the heart, but fills it. Fills it to an overflowing measure!

- **Hope makes us pilgrims.** The Jubilee is a pilgrimage! It sets you on the move internally, otherwise it is not Jubilee. Within this Church event that makes us feel Church we, as a Salesian Congregation and as the Salesian Family have an important anniversary: it takes place in 2025:

- **The 150th anniversary of the first missionary expedition to Argentina.**

In Valdocco, Don Bosco cast his heart beyond all borders: he sent his sons to the other side of the world! He sent them, beyond all human security, sent them when he did not even have what he needed to carry on what he had started.

He just sent them! Hope is obeyed, because Hope drives Faith and sets Charity in motion. He sent them, and the first confreres set out and went to where not even they knew! From there we were all born, from the Hope that sets us on our way and makes us pilgrims.

This anniversary should be celebrated, like every anniversary, because it helps us to recognise the Gift, (it is not your property, it was given to you as a gift) to remember and to give strength for the time to come with the energy of the Mission.

Hope founds the Mission, because Hope is a responsibility that you cannot hide or keep to yourself! Do not keep hidden what has been given to you; acknowledge the giver and hand over with your life what has been given to the next generations! This is the life of the Church, the life of each one of us.

St Peter, with foresight, writes in his first letter: 'always be ready to answer anyone who asks you about the hope that is in you!' (1 Pet 3:15). We must think that answering is not just words; it is life that responds!

With the hope that is in you, live and prepare for this new year to come, a journey with young people, with our brothers and sisters, to renew Don Bosco's Dream and God's Dream.

Our coat of arms

Sul mio labaro brilla una stella (On my standard shines a star) we used to sing once upon a time. On our coat of arms, as well as the star there is a large anchor and a burning heart.

These are some simple images to begin to move our hearts in the direction of the time to come, 'Anchored in hope, pilgrims with youth'. Anchored is a very strong term: the anchor is the salvation of the ship in the storm, firm, strong, rooted in Hope!

Within this generative theme there will be all of our daily life: people, situations, decisions... the 'micro' of each one of us that is welded with the 'macro' of what we will all experience together... handing over to God the gift of this time that is given to us. Because to the Strenna that we will all receive you must add your part; your daily life that you will know how to illuminate with what we have written and will receive, otherwise it is not a Hope, it is not what your life is based on and it does not set you in 'motion', making you a Pilgrim.

We entrust this journey to the Mother of the Lord, Mother of the Church and our Helper; Pilgrim of Hope with us.

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 feels 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 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 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 Zaggiotti 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.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank Fr Luis Timossi, SDB, of the Ongoing Formation Centre in Quito, and Fr Silvio Roggia, SDB, Rector of the Blessed Ceferino Namuncurá Community in Rome, for their notes and suggestions.

[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*,

Omellie Buone notti, v. 9, Ispettorato Centrale Salesiano, 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].

A year of dreams from above

Dear friends: we are on the threshold of a new year, 2024, a very special year because we are commemorating the bicentenary of Don Bosco's dream when he was 9. This dream was much more than a charming episode of a 9-year-old boy; it was like a vision and a premonition of what he was to do in the course of his life.

62 years later, celebrating his first and last Mass in the Basilica of the Sacred Heart in Rome, consecrated two days earlier, Don Bosco burst into tears more than 15 times because, like in a film in rapid succession, he saw all the scenes of his life unfold, realising that he had always been guided by Divine Providence and in particular led by the hand of Her, the Help of Christians, to the point of saying: "She did everything."

That New Year's Eve in 1862

This commemoration leads me to think of a significant New Year's Eve in Don Bosco's life. It was the first of January 1862.

The *Biographical Memoirs* recount that Don Bosco, ill until the day before, announced that he had important news to give to

all those at the Oratory, young and old. "It is impossible to describe the emotion, caused by Don Bosco's promise, which in the meantime stirred up all the youngsters. With what impatience they spent the night from 31 December to 1 January, and the following day! With what anxiety they waited for the evening to hear what the good father would tell them!" recounts Fr Lemoyne. "Finally, after the prayers, the young men waited in profound silence for Don Bosco, who raised his chair and revealed the mystery and said: – the strenna I am giving you is not mine. What would you say if Our Lady herself came in person to say a word to each one of you? If she had prepared for each one a note of her own to show him what he most needed, or what she wanted from him? Well, this is exactly how it is. Our Lady gives each one a gift! I see that some will want to know and will ask: – How did this happen? Did Our Lady write the notes? Did Our Lady herself speak to Don Bosco? Is Don Bosco Our Lady's secretary? – I answer: I tell you nothing more than that. I wrote the notes, but how this came about I cannot say, nor is there anyone who would take it upon themselves to question me, for that would put me in the wrong. Let everyone be content to know that the note came from Our Lady. It is something unique! I have been asking for this grace for several years and I have finally obtained it. Each of you therefore consider the item as if it came from the mouth of the Virgin Mary herself. Come therefore to my room and I will give each of you your own note." Don Bosco could say this because he himself had received from Our Lady, at the age of nine, the message that would mark the whole course of his life.

Then, continuing the narrative of that very evening, the Salesians began to pass by Don Bosco's room to collect their note. Many revealed what it said. The one made out to Fr Bonetti, who wrote the daily chronicle, said: *Increase the number of my children.* The good priest wrote this recommendation in his chronicle and added: "In the meantime, my sweetest Mother, you who have given me such dear advice, give me the means to put it into practice, and see to it that

I truly increase this beautiful number, but that I also be included in it.”

Fr Rua's said: "Have recourse to me with confidence in the needs of your soul."

The next morning, the young men crowded around the door of Don Bosco's room to receive their note. I can easily imagine how Don Bosco knew how to get to the heart of every Salesian and every boy in the Oratory, not with an invention but with the profound conviction of what Our Lady wanted for each one of them, and at the same time he managed to do it in that way in which Don Bosco was always a true master and a true genius: I am referring to the art of personal encounter, dialogue, of the gaze that reaches deep into the heart.

And as I read this, I wondered if it might not happen to us. We sent greeting cards to many people. If Mary had sent a card to the Salesian Congregation and to each one of us, to the beautiful and great Salesian Family, Don Bosco's family, what would she have written?

Walking like Don Bosco

It is nice to imagine it. I assure you that in my imagination there are so many beautiful things that Our Lady could ask of us both personally and as the family of Don Bosco, born to accompany the boys and girls of the world – especially the poorest and neediest – in their process of growth, maturation, transformation...

The mystery of the New Year, which at bottom develops the mystery of Christmas, tells us, "You are not conditioned by the past. You can start afresh today, because there is something new in you. Take the divine Child in your arms, who brings you into contact with all the new that is available, genuine and intact, in your soul. Start again with the little ones, the young ones. Trust the new in you! Every day is the first day."

Perhaps it would be enough to make our own the words Mary says to John Bosco in her dream: "Here is the field of your work. Make yourself humble, strong and energetic." Perhaps a more

“spiritual” advice was expected, but only those who are humble can be kind because they can enjoy the presence of others. Humility is the door of love towards the little ones, the helpless, the wounded by life.

Only people who are solid and strong can walk behind Jesus today in spite of everything. For we want to see the prisoners free, and the oppressed no longer oppressed; a message even the poor can still believe in.

It means listening to the voice of the burning bush that will never be consumed: “I will break your chains and make you walk tall.” Mary wants the Salesians, and all her Family, the beautiful family of Don Bosco of all times to walk like Don Bosco. And for this the best guarantee will always be to have Her as the true Teacher who is above all Mother. A true grace for our family.

This is how the Rectors Major have expressed it throughout our history. As did my predecessor Fr Ziggionti: “I will give you a Teacher under whose discipline you can become wise, and without whom all wisdom becomes foolishness” is the fateful word of the first dream, pronounced by the mysterious character, ‘the Son of She whom your mother has taught you to greet three times a day.’ So, it is Jesus who gives Don Bosco his Mother as his Teacher and infallible guide on the hard path of his entire life. How can we be thankful enough for this extraordinary gift from Heaven to our Family?”.

Happy New Year 2024 with my best wishes for each of you and your families. May it be a beautiful year for all of us and a year of Peace for this still suffering humanity.