

A JOURNEY IN FIDELITY

Circulars of Mother Ersilia Canta
Superior General from 1969 to 1981

edited by Sr. LINA DALCERRI

INSTITUTE OF THE DAUGHTERS OF MARY HELP OF CHRISTIANS
ROME 1987

Original Title

Cammino di fedeltà

Circolari di Madre Ersilia Canta
Superiora generale dal 1969 al 1981

a cura di Sr. Lina Dalcerci

Roma 1985

Translated by Sr. Margaret Lynch, FMA

PRESENTATION

Dearest Sisters,

The joy presenting the collection of dear Mother Ersilia Canta's Circulars has been reserved to me.

Our unforgettable Mother Rosetta set this work in motion at a special meeting at Mornese when she expressed the desire that the precious Salesian spiritual heritage which the circulars contain be collected, and prepared for publication.

Sr. Lina Dalcerci, with true Salesian sensitivity and intuitive penetration, has grouped the circulars into various chapters, bringing into relief the unified and dynamic aspect of the path followed by the Institute in the intervening years between the XVth and XVIIth General Chapters, which were called upon to re-formulate the Constitutions in a definitive way.

Mother Ersilia's words, inspired by vigilant attention to Church directives and the appeals of youth, beat the rhythm of that renewal to which the Council invited religious Institutes. It was an arduous road at times, but accompanied by enthusiasm due to the sharing of values and goals, and the communion of ideals and affection.

The Circulars present the FMA in her essential and characteristic aspects, they lead to unity of our vocation and lay down lines of vocational maturation sought by means of uninterrupted dedication to God in the apostolic service of youth.

It is interesting to pursue the programme of study and assimilation of our vocational values in the Church and to perceive the presence of the Holy Spirit, who helps us to live today with a new awareness of the design and constituents of the Salesian Charism.

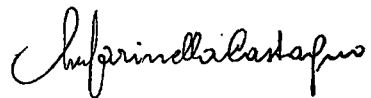
If, Mother Ersilia exhorts us, we seriously and decisively commit ourselves to live in the Holy Spirit, interior communion with God, in an atmosphere of recollection will become habitual; the capacity for constructive dialogue will increase as will the assimilation of the Preventive System. "Thus, with an animating presence, we shall follow the rhythm of progress in the environment and time in which we live".

The full response that we all wish to give to her appeal will be the best and most effective way of thanking Mother Ersilia for the light and strength of her word and, above all, for her life of complete and continuous dedication for the good of the Institute.

May Our Lady, Virgin of Hope, who has followed every step of our Institute's path of Fidelity, make us, like her "ausiliatrici" among the girls, especially in this year dedicated to youth.

Rome, December 17, 1984

Your affectionate Mother



INITIALS AND ABBREVIATIONS

SACRED SCRIPTURE

<i>Dan</i>	<i>Daniel</i>
<i>Ger</i>	<i>Jeremiah</i>
<i>Is</i>	<i>Isaiah</i>
<i>2 Mac</i>	<i>Second book of Macabees</i>
<i>2 Kings</i>	<i>Second book of Kings</i>
<i>Psal</i>	<i>Psalms</i>
<i>Sir</i>	<i>Sirach</i>
<i>Ap</i>	<i>Apocalypse</i>
<i>Acts</i>	<i>Acts of the Apostles</i>
<i>Col</i>	<i>Letter of St. Paul to the Colossians</i>
<i>1 Cor</i>	<i>Ist letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians</i>
<i>Heb</i>	<i>Letter to the Hebrews</i>
<i>Eph</i>	<i>Letter of St. Paul to the Ephesians</i>
<i>Phil</i>	<i>Letter of St. Paul to the Philippians</i>
<i>Gal</i>	<i>Letter of St. Paul to the Galatians</i>
<i>Jams</i>	<i>Letter of St. James</i>
<i>Jn</i>	<i>Gospel of St John</i>
<i>1 Jn</i>	<i>First letter of St. John</i>
<i>Lk</i>	<i>Gospel of St. Luke</i>
<i>Mk</i>	<i>Gospel of St. Mark</i>
<i>Mt</i>	<i>Gospel of St. Matthew</i>
<i>1 Pt</i>	<i>Ist letter of St. Peter</i>
<i>Rm</i>	<i>Letter of St Paul to the Romans</i>
<i>1 Ts</i>	<i>Ist letter of St. Paul to the Thessalonians</i>

SALESIAN TEXTS

- C 1969* *Constitutions of the Institute of the FMA*
C 1975 *Constitutions of the Institute of the FMA*
M-R *Manual-Regulations of the FMA*
C SDB *Constitutions of the Salesian Society*
DB L *Letter of Don Bosco*
MM L *Letter of Mother Mazzarello*
MB *Biographical Memoirs of Don Bosco (19 volumes)*
Cron *Cronistoria of the Institute of the FMA (5 volumes)*

CHURCH DOCUMENTS

- AA* *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, Decree of Vatican Council II
Dom. C. *The Lord's Supper*, Letter of Pope John Paul II to Bishops, 1980
EN *Evangelii nuntiandi*, Apostolic Exhortation of Paul VI, 1975
ES *Ecclesiae Sanctae*, Motu Proprio of Paul VI, 1966
ET *Evangelica Testificatio*, Apostolic Exhortation of Paul VI, 1971
GE *Gravissimum Educationis*, Declaration of Vatican Council II
GS *Gaudium et Spes*, Constitution of Vatican Council II
LG *Lumen Gentium*, Constitution of Vatican Council II
MC *Marialis cultus*, Apostolic Exhortation of Paul VI, 1974
MF *Mysterium Fidei*, Encyclical letter of Paul VI, 1965
MR *Mutuae relationes*, Directive notes SCRIS - Sacred Congregation
 Bishops, 1978
OT *Optatam totius*, Decree of Vatican Council II
Paen *Paenitemini*, Apostolic Constitution of Paul VI, 1966
PC *Perfectae caritatis*, Decree of Vatican Council II
PO *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, Decree of Vatican Council II
Rdc *The Renewal of Catechesis*, Basic Document of CEI, 1970

INTRODUCTION

Mother Ersilia's experience of government wasn't improvised; it matured through a gradual, enriching apprenticeship.

In fact, we see her pass from the role of simple sister, with specific tasks of teaching and assistance, first to that of Superior, in the difficult period of World War II, then, to that of provincial in the two complex provinces of Venice and Lombardy. In 1965 Mother Angela Vespa called her to be a member of the General Council; in 1967 she replaced Mother Carolina Novasconi as Vicar General and supported Mother Angela in not a few delicate situations, with that wisdom and discretion which always distinguished her.

The General Chapter of 1969 elected her Superior General at one of the most critical moments of the Institute's history, when — like all forms of religious life — it was tried by the sensible decline in vocations and the ferment for renewal, not always balanced or restrained, even if demanded by the times, and Vatican II's expectations of the Church.

She governed the Institute for twelve consecutive years (1969-1981), since she was re-elected unanimously by the General Chapter of 1975.

In her government she knew how to harmonise a balanced openness to the demands of the times and various cultures with a solid fidelity to the charism, the spirit and sound traditions of the Institute.

This is clearly reflected in her circulars.

She considered them one of her most compelling tasks, as an

effective means of fostering unity in the Institute and of giving potential to its vitality in fidelity to the charism.

1. **Criteria followed in the collection**

Excluded from this collection are those circulars in which Mother Ersilia annually presented the Rector Major's comment on the "Strenna", along with those of a prevalently organizational character — preparation for the celebration of events of singular importance, such as centenaries, or directives regarding general Chapters, with specific juridic norms for the same.

Instead, ample space is given to those which throw light on the identity of the FMA and the plan and scope of our vocation in the Church, constituting, one might say, the magisterium of the Institute.

There are 103 circulars presented here; all of them have a precise formative aim. Since almost all are gathered with a basic unified structure, around a specific subject, the idea of grouping them into Chapters according to themes and logical development was considered appropriate.

This resulted in 13 chapters which present the fundamental aspects of the Salesian Religious life in the light of the charism which always specifies them. Preceded by a short introductory reading which gives the key to and summary of the content and underlines the bond that links them, they offer a guide to the essence of the teaching.

2. **Style and structure of the circulars**

The style in Mother Ersilia's circulars is simple and straightforward, within reach of all, because her preoccupation was to get through to every *FMA*. It is, besides, fresh and dignified, with an input of modern expression, which, inserted into today's language, makes the over-all effect very acceptable.

Mother never assumes the dogmatic tone of a lesson, but rather that of a simple familiar conversation, a dialogue, a proposal

which denotes an openness and respect of the person, a persuasive art sustained by convincing argument.

She often presents a series of questions, well contrived and compelling, which might be considered a directive for an assessment on the subject proposed for general reflection.

She speaks as sister to sister and vivifies her word with the warmth, force and persuasion of one who lives what she says, who firmly believes in values and does not limit herself to transmitting simple teaching, but communicates real life experiences.

Mother considers the Circulars as an effective means of promoting unity and communion in the Institute. For this reason she introduces her monthly message with family news items (which are omitted as having no direct bearing on the collection) and always concludes with maternal expressions of encouragement, trust and good wishes. Always down to earth, she knows how to artfully fit in principles with practice and frequently makes use of experiences transmitted by the Sisters and the girls. Sometimes she even builds the circular around such experiences so as to bring about a sharing of Salesian values, which leads to greater enthusiasm in living out one's vocation among the girls.

3. Fundamental themes

The circulars are presented with a special intrinsic structure, which reflects a clear, precise, unified line.

There are basic directives and indications which show in perspective the Salesian religious life in its characteristic aspects, according to the charism of Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello. They do not, however, constitute a real systematic treatise.

Sometimes linked with particular circumstances — like the celebration of a centenary, or the recurrence of some ecclesial events, or even to proposals issuing from the world of culture, they focus on themes which might, in themselves, be points of departure or arrival. In the collection therefore, an effort has been made to link in a logical sequence, thus avoiding a purely chronological presentation.

The collection opens with the circulars that treat of the **Institute in the design of God**.

They constitute an invitation to contemplate this immense design and in consequence to stimulate the re-discovery of the Institute, its specific mission in the Church, and to revive today in Community "the spirit of Mornese".

From the second group of circulars the care with which the **ecclesial dimension** of our life has been brought to light, sacred heritage of the strong, "active love" of Don Bosco for the Church. The invitation to be in the Institute, "a part of the Church", an authentic "daughter of the Church", committed to living its mission enthusiastically, is a pressing one.

In this ecclesial perspective, the figure of **Mary, Mother** of the Church and of the Institute is presented. Mother Ersilia, who likes to describe the history of the Institute as "the story of her wonderful maternal interventions", urges us to act in such a way that Mary may continue to play her privileged role in the Institute. She helps us, besides, to feel her presence in our lives as Mother, Teacher and Guide, as did Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello.

In Mary's light **Mother Mazzarello** is presented as the incarnation of a special charism in the Church.

Mother frequently recalls her teachings and example. But in the centenary of her death her word takes on a particularly incisive thrust. She wishes to make her live again in a new way, focusing on her role of Mother and co-foundress and seeing in the mystery the parable of the grain of wheat that fell to the ground and died to be multiplied a thousandfold.

One of the most cherished subjects of the circulars is that of the **Formation of the FMA**.

Mother Ersilia, who points to Mother Mazzarello as the "ideal" FMA stimulates all to the obligation of continuing one's own formation every day. She omits nothing. Using feminine qualities as a lever, she directs all to a process of interior unification which enables each one to allow herself be transfigured by grace, so as to be among youth as "an expression of the foreseeing love of the Father".

The unity of the **FMA** vocation, so effectively stressed by the XVIth General Chapter, is strongly felt. It surfaces, in fact through the various circulars like a precious filigree. Therefore, it wasn't difficult to group quite a number of the circulars according to the unifying line of renewed constitutions.

Mother feels and wishes all to sense in the **religious Vows** a particular overflowing of the love of Christ, "scope and measure of our life".

She lingers particularly on chastity, which has priority in our specific Salesian Vocation, constituting its charismatic distinction. Poverty and obedience are presented as a participation in the Paschal Mystery.

As the root and foundation of all our consecrated life, **prayer** occupies a prominent place in the circulars. It is given a primacy over all activities. It is, in fact, the "law of life in the Spirit". As an interior source of personal, communitarian, and apostolic life, it must be nourished by an increasing knowledge of God, and by constant exercise of His presence, after the example of Mary, the "pray-er" par excellence.

One of the pillars of Salesian life is **living in Community**. Mother considers it in the light of the Trinitarian Community and in the perspective of the Holy Family of Nazareth.

She wishes to see an "updated" Community, vigilant and attentive to the needs of the times and the expectations of the Church, inspired by the permanent values that the Community of the early days knew how to realise, and distinguished by those specific qualities that constitute the "spirit of Mornese".

Special attention is reserved for the **elderly and sick Sisters**, considered as particularly effective "Ausiliatrici" in the mission of the Institute and almost "a driving power" of the Congregation.

The **educative-apostolic features** are shown as unmistakable characteristics of our consecrated life. This, in fact, is fully realised, with Mary's help, only in the total gift of ourselves to the girls, after the example of Jesus, the good Shepherd.

A distinctive note of our being for the girls is assistance, lived with the zeal of the *da mihi animas*, in the spirit of the preventive System.

A fundamental theme which vitally touches the Institute and is, at the same time, the crown of its pastoral action is that of **vocations**. Mother does not hide the noticeable fall in vocations as evidenced by various statistics, and she sets out the problem in clear, precise lines. She directs every **FMA** toward an ever deeper knowledge of her own vocation. She invites all to an attentive analysis of the situation, so as to detect the internal and external causes of the phenomenon experienced today in many institutes. Above all, she encourages the Communities to live the atmosphere of sanctity of Mornese.

In a limited but significant number of circulars she treats of the **service of authority**. She presents it as "a service of love", as a directive and support in the journey of vocational maturity of every sister and Community, according to the spirit of the Preventive System, in openness to the local Church and in caring for the needs of youth.

A particular reference to the **Rule**, the "Gospel" is translated in terms of specific consecration to God. Mother emphasizes the significance of the value of this "book of life" and urges all to that fidelity which becomes concrete in the daily offering of self to God for the salvation of the girls, and is a practical expression of authentic love.

THE INSTITUTE OF THE FMA IN THE PLAN OF GOD

The centenary celebrations (1872-1972) present an occasion for urging the Sisters to become ever more aware of the special design of God in the foundation of the Institute.

In fact, the celebrations are based on three fundamental ideas:

- 1. To thank God for the gift of the Salesian charism to the Church and for the innumerable benefits granted to the Institute in the course of these hundred years;*
- 2. To re-discover the specific aim of the Institute and its original spirit;*
- 3. To renew the Congregation in this spirit, under the guidance of the maxim that is proposed as slogan and synthesis of programme: After a hundred years there must be a rebirth!*

Mother exhorts all to appreciate with gratitude the direct, maternal intervention of Mary in the history of the Institute and to know ever better the instruments God used to foster and develop its budding virtues and strengthen its charism.

Awareness of God's design for the Institute

Main idea:
to rediscover
the aim and the
spirit of the
Institute

The central idea that should animate and guide us in these centenary celebrations is **“the re-discovery of the aim and spirit of the Institute”**, to renew ourselves in it individually and communally, so as to *respond fully to the design God has for our Congregation, for His glory, for our sanctification, for the good of the Church.*

The Provincials will study the best way of doing this:

1. on fixed days to study the *Constitutions*, the *Manual*, the *Scheme of spirituality*, the *Preventive System* especially in relation to their application to the youth of our times;
2. in definite reunions, review what general Chapter XV disposed and how it has been carried out;
3. propose for the conferences of retreat day the theology of the religious life, or study in depth and comment on the *Apostolic Exhortation* of Paul VI on the renewal of religious life;
4. renew in all the sisters the commitment to reading attentively the monthly *circulars* and the *Notiziario*, so as to better follow the life of the Congregation;
5. to read at table throughout the year the life of Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello (some chapters on their moral life may be read in chapel for spiritual reading);
6. see to it that the pupils do not leave our schools without knowing the lives of our saints and possibly have it passed on to their parents and families.

(Cir. n. 542 - September 24 1971)

In many places there has been a great upsurge of prayer and initiatives in preparation for the centenary of the Institute. It is a spiritual upsurge which is a promise of and a prelude to an energetic and active response to the call for renewal.

"At a hundred years one must be born again"

The Provinces of Brazil have launched a slogan '**At a hundred years one must be born again**', a slogan which, I believe, could become the order of the day and a synthesised programme for the whole Institute.

To be re-born? How? By returning to our beginnings¹ when one could sense the breath of the Holy Spirit. The Congregation was born through the power of this Holy spirit. The charism of the Founder "is the fruit of this Holy Spirit who is always at work within the Church".² Now, "that which is born of the Spirit is spirit",³ and is not "an impulse born of flesh and blood".⁴ Hence it is in the Holy Spirit, in His truth and in His charity that we want to be born again.

Therefore, before everything else, let us rouse ourselves to an awareness of the true origin of our Institute which was not governed by the simple will of man and by more or less casual historical circumstances, but was truly rooted in the supernatural.

To be "reborn" means above all to renew in ourselves the strong conviction that the Congregation is God's plan realised through the hands of Mary. It is giving God the primacy in our personal life and in the life of our works.

¹ Cf PC 2.

² ET 11.

³ Jn 3, 6.

⁴ ET 11.

To be reborn means to deepen in ourselves the study and experience of God in order to become missionaries of supernatural security and of true joy, for our young people.

(Cir. n. 543 - October 24 1971)

Marian
character of
our Institute

Our Congregation is a Marian Congregation, par excellence: We are named after Our Lady, Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, dedicated to her, by our Founder don Bosco, to be a *living monument of gratitude* to such a Mother.

Our first obligation of gratitude to the Lord and to our Lady is to be ever more aware of this Marian character of our Congregation and to search for its motivations in the history of the Institute. From this more enlightened awareness of being the prolongation of Mary's mission in the Church will be born the consequent commitment of giving a new and more theologically motivated impulse to the cult of Mary Help of Christians in our houses.

A design realised by the maternal hand of Mary

Enlightenment
from on high

Let us read in the Chronicles of our Institute the account of one of the famous dream-visions which lit up the pathway of our holy Father and Founder, St. John Bosco with a light that was certainly not terrestrial. The precise date is not known but it must have been between 1860 and 1862. Don Bosco relates how he found himself among a crowd of girls who were creating an uproar in the street. As soon as they saw him, they asked for help. Don Bosco tried to shake them off, but at that moment there appeared the well-known '*Lady*' who was the inspiration, teacher and guide of all his undertakings.

She commanded him, "Look after them, they are my children!".

Monument of
gratitude

In another dream of 1862 he tells the Marchioness di Barolo who claimed the apostolate among girls as her right, that he, too, wished to occupy himself with work among girls. This idea, which was against his natural inclination but was inspired from on high, matured in his mind as a way of expressing his grateful love for our Lady. Not satisfied with building the magnificent Basilica of Mary Help of Christians in Turin, he decided to erect a **living monument** of souls consecrated to her; to them he would pass on the mandate of the dream-vision, to take care of young girls.

Maria
Mazzarello,
our Lady's
Instrument

It was our Lady herself who prepared the instrument for the great work, — Mary Mazzarello who was born but a short distance from a chapel dedicated to Mary Help of Christians and grew up in the exceptionally marian atmosphere of the Children of Mary Immaculate in Mornese.

She was spurred on by a supernatural instinct to work for the good of young girls in a manner which was in keeping with that of Don Bosco. Because of an unfortunate illness which destroyed her physical energy and rendered her unsuited to work in the fields, she dedicated herself completely to this mission. The providential meeting with Don Bosco, whom she considered a saint, transformed her apostolic activity into a true vocation which became effective in those ways with which we are all familiar, and which are also a revelation of that Divine Providence which directs the works of God toward their fulfillment.

A marian
feast marks
the foundation of
the Institute

That fulfillment was accomplished on August 5th, 1872 with the religious profession of the first Daughters of Mary Help of Christians which marked the historical beginning of the Institute. This be-

ginning was marked by an especially significant marian feast, the dedication of Mary's greatest temple, as if in confirmation of the dedication of the spiritual temple of our Institute.

All phases
marked by the
intervention
of Mary

Mother Clelia wrote in one of her articles, "Every step in the Institute's rapid development is marked by the presence of Mary through a co-incidence of details and dates which is really touching".⁵

Even the death of the holy co-foundress is bright with Mary's light. It took place in our Lady's month, on May 14th, 1881, and this intensely marian soul entered the joys of eternal life singing the praises of Mary: 'Chi ama Maria contenta sarà'.

Having helped him with other supernatural signs, in the consolidation of the '*living Monument*', the Blessed Virgin wished to provide a new, consoling vision for her apostle. On the occasion of his last visit to the house of Nizza Monferrato, on August 23rd, 1885, Don Bosco, worn out and scarcely able to walk, said to the assembled superiors in a voice that trembled with emotion: "Our Lady loves you very much. And she is here in your midst!". He was unable to continue. Don Bonetti, who accompanied him, tried to complete his thought. But the Saint three times corrected his interpretation to reaffirm what he saw: "Our Lady is pleased with you... she is really here among... she is walking in this house and covering it with her mantle..." This gesture is in truth an actual taking possession of our Institute by Mary, and is, as it were, the charism (?) of its Marian character.

Our Lady is
here in your
midst

We are then, a Congregation willed by God and guided by Our Lady. Let our deeper understanding of

⁵ GENGHINI Clelia, *L'aiuto di Maria nella fondazione dell'Istituto della FMA*, in *L'Ausiliatrice della Chiesa e del Papa* (Torino, SEI) 155.

Mary's maternal
presence in
the Institute

this bring us to ever new discoveries of the motherly presence of Mary in our Institute from its beginning and at every step of its development. This presence of Mary is a singular confirmation and extension of that which our Lady, as "Mother of God assures to the whole Church, uniting it ever more closely to Christ, Mediator and Redeemer".⁶

It is, in fact, through Mary that the Daughter of Mary Help of Christians is led to draw from divine and infinite riches for her interior life, which is nourished by Holy Scripture, Church Doctrine and sacred liturgy and for her apostolic life which is realised by self-giving and sacrifice.

The root of
our rebirth

To be reborn means to renew our conviction that the Congregation is God's plan realised by Mary. It is only this **living in God**, this enlightened, strong operative faith, that can form the basis of our **rebirth**.

Instruments for the implementation of God's design

Chosen
Instruments

Much encouragement in the fulfillment of this promise 'to be born again' can be found in the power of example, in the secure guidance and in the richness of counsel bestowed so copiously by God on the Institute during these hundred years. In order to realise His plan He selected sound instruments and it is our duty to pause in veneration and gratitude before these illustrious figures.

The torch of the
Institute goes
from hand
to hand

God's divine plan was entrusted, in the first place, to the holy and humble co-foundress, Saint Mary Mazzarello, who stamped it with its original charismatic seal. This divine plan unfolded and developed step by step through the loving dedication of *Mother*

⁶ Cf *LG* 63.

Catherine Daghero for over forty years; through the strong, vigorous personality of *Mother Luisa Vaschetti*; through the simplicity of life and clarity of vision of *Mother Linda Lucotti* who guarded it and kept it true to its original design, and through the wisdom of *Mother Angela Vespa* who, alert to the 'signs of the times', was able to appraise the needs of today's world. But we shall speak of these at some other time.

Representative
Salesian Figures
at the start
of the Institute

Now it is my pleasure to remind myself and all of you of the precious help received from the Salesian Superiors right from the beginning of our Institute, and to take a quick look at some representative figures who were at its side from the start. In the first place, we have the **General Directors** who were given us by our holy Founder and Father 'to be his other self in guiding and encouraging us in the spirit and purpose of the Institute.

1. FATHER JOHN CAGLIERO (1838-1926), who later became Bishop and Cardinal. He was ardently attached to Don Bosco and filled with zeal for the salvation of souls. His words inflamed all with his own burning love for the glory of God. He cared for the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians with true fatherly affection and continued to take an active interest in the Institute even from America and right up to the time of his death.

2. FATHER JOHN BONETTI (1838-1891), a writer inflamed with indomitable zeal for the triumph of truth, the honour of the Church and the salvation of souls. He was a very zealous director of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, forgetful of self and solicitous for their welfare. He was a much sought after confessor who, according to Don Francesca, seemed to reflect Don Bosco in bringing comfort and peace to souls.

3. FATHER JOHN MARENCO (1853-1921), who became Bishop of Massa-Carrara and later Apostolic Inter-nuncio in Central America. He was outstanding for his reserve and gentleness of manner, and for his intense activity and good-heartedness. He directed the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians wisely, prudently and with greathearted yet refined goodness. He did much good for the Institute and merited the filial affection and deep gratitude given him.

4. FATHER CLEMENT BETTO (1855-1919), was endowed with great prudence and loved to work away from the lime-light. Don Bosco assigned to him the direction of the House at Nizza Monferrato and Don Rua made him Director General of the Institute. He was impregnated with the spirit of Don Bosco and did much to deepen and keep this spirit alive. When he died, Don Albera eulogised him thusly: "God alone can measure the good he did during his long apostolate among the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. I can, however, certify that it was immense, and was performed with untiring zeal, exquisite gentleness and complete self-sacrifice".

5. Nor can we forget DON GIACOMO COSTAMAGNA (1846-1921), who, although never Director General, gave such vigorous impetus to the House at Mornese during the earliest years of the Institute. He took great care of the religious perfection of the sisters, directed the teachers in running the school and, being a capable musician, took charge of the singing. He led the first missionary Daughters of Mary Help of Christians to America and there, as Rector, Provincial and finally Bishop, he continued to take special interest in the Institute, giving it all the help possible to increase its number and develop its missionary activities.

If these were the voice of Don Bosco for us, **the**

Successors
of Don Bosco

Successors of the holy Founder were the personification of his fatherliness and the authoritative interpreters of his true spirit.

1. **FATHER MICHAEL RUA** (from 1888 to 1910). Besides his personal care, he offered that of his collaborators: Father Cerruti to help in the scholastic field; Father Sala and Father Rocca on the economic side; Father Francesia, Father Bretto and others on the spiritual plane. He never spared himself in answering either by letter or "a viva voce" the numerous queries of the Sisters, in giving wise directives to Superiors and in encouraging all through his circular letters.

To Mother Daghero who visited him on the eve of his death (5th April 1910) he gave one last recommendation: "Preserve the spirit of Don Bosco and God will bless you".

2. **FATHER PAUL ALBERA** (from 1910 to 1921), became the first Apostolic Delegate for the Institute (Decree 19th June 1917) and directed that the Salesian Provincials should represent him in the provinces of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. He was distinguished for his deep piety and wrote the preface to the 1920 edition of the *prayer book*. In his first conference after the Decree, given at Nizza on August 7th, 1917, he said, "May the spirit of our venerated Founder and Father unite us more and more and increase our love for the Sacred Heart of Jesus so that this heart may be the furnace from which we draw fire to inflame the whole world with the love of God..."

Let us then forge ahead together in prayer and work so that with our minds and hearts united in Don Bosco we may be helped to attain the end he had in view for the Salesians and Daughters of Mary Help of Christians".

3. **FATHER PHILIP RINALDI** (from 1922 to 1931) took an extraordinary interest in the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. Before he became Rector Major

he gave part of his precious time to the Oratory of Mary Help of Christians in Turin. Under his guidance, its numbers increased, vocations from its ranks multiplied and many modern and pleasant recreational, social, and apostolic initiatives were provided. Among these rose the 'Zelatrici' (Apostles) of Mary Help of Christians developed today within the Secular Institute of Don Bosco Volunteers.

As Rector Major he inculcated the life of union with God through his circulars and New-year messages, gave impetus to the Missionary apostolate and to Houses of Formation and supervised the preparation and development of plans for the Golden Jubilee Celebrations of the Institute in 1922.

4. FATHER PETER RICALDONE (from 1932 to 1951) was renowned for his wise direction during the war period. He stood by the side of the Institute during its great trials and also during its joys (Mother Mazzarello's Beatification in 1938 and Canonization in 1951).

In 1935 he gave a Vicar to the Institute in the person of Don Segala so that its development might be followed more closely.

From him came the suggestion of transporting the sacred remains of Mother Mazzarello to Turin and of providing the great honour of a chapel dedicated to the Saint in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians.

In a full session of the eleventh General Chapter in 1947 he launched the project of the Institute of Pedagogy and Catechetics to cater to the apostolic and Salesian formation of young sisters, and in 1951, just before his death, he encouraged the Superior General, Mother Linda Lucotti, in her work for the concrete realization of the Institute of Pedagogy in Turin.

5. FATHER RENATO ZIGGIOTTI (from 1952 to 1965), showed his interest in the Institute with his ever-

ready fatherly encouragement, New Year messages and conferences. During his numerous journeys, he never failed to visit any houses of the Institute in the vicinity, especially those in mission lands, speaking words of encouragement, enlightenment and stimulation.

6. FATHER LUIGI RICCERI has directed the Salesian Congregation since 1965, and following the tradition of his predecessors in fidelity to our common Father Don Bosco, continues to give us his enlightened and fatherly assistance.

The words of his homily given on May 31st, 1968, are especially welcome and encouraging at the opening of the Centenary year:

“You are another temple close to that of Mary Help of Christians; a temple built with selected, living stones... each of these shining stones bears a name, reflects a countenance, encloses a heart: that of a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians, predestined to sing in time and eternity a hymn of thanksgiving to the Virgin, Mother of the Church and Mother of Don Bosco’s work: the Mother of your Institute”.

Close to the outstanding Salesian Superiors who have been at our side during those hundred years come others whom we remember with deep gratitude: that long line of Salesians who have ministered to us under every sky, with preaching and spiritual assistance whether daily or at retreats, on feasts and at courses, and who have by their generous self-sacrificing zeal helped us to preserve the spirit of Mornese.

This spirit was incarnated in that vast army of 5150 sisters who have preceded us into eternity during these hundred years. It is an army with one ideal supported by virile faith and a generosity which knew heroism in self-giving to God, the Church and the Institute.

The courageous
pioneers of the
Missionary
Expeditions

In the front rank are valiant pioneers like *Mother Angela Vallese*, leader of the first band of sisters who carried the banner to Patagonia, a real mission country; *Sister Rosa Kiste*, pioneer among the Bororos of Matto Grosso; *Mother Annetta Masera*, in the Brazilian Mission fields of Rio Negro and Amazonia; *Mother Anetta Vergano*, who opened up the mission fields in Palestine and the Middle East; *Sister Palmira Parri*, who led the first group to China where the work was continued and developed throughout the vicissitudes of war and persecution by *Mother Elena Bottini*.

Sisters who
marked the
Institute as
educative

And, side by side with these and all generous missionaries, stand the no less generous apostles in the field of education. These stand themselves before us as those who understood and became living examples of the Preventive System of our Father: *Mother Emilia Mosca* who, it can be said, gave an educational aspect to our Institute; *Mother Marina Coppa* who followed her lead; *Mother Maddalena Morano* who stamped her educational activities with the seal of sanctity, and a legion of others from every land who made the '*Da mihi animas*' of Don Bosco their own.

Sisters who
sacrificed
themselves for
the good of the
Institute

And at the root of all this good lies the heroic offering of those generous souls who knew how to imitate themselves in the totality of their adhesion to God's will: *Sister Vittorina Heptia*, a Belgian, († 1934) consumed her short life in total immobility; *Sister Clementina Hacher*, an Italian, († 1936) a gifted music teacher whose body became like the bow of a violin with which she made rich melody for God; *Sister Maria Rudzinska*, a Pole, († 1946) who knew the blessedness of persecution for love of Christ and died, a victim of maltreatment suffered during deportation; *Sister Anna Zitek*, a Yugoslav († 1947) who embraced the cross of Christ as a regal gift.

Numerous
living stones
of Mary's
Monument

But the number of those named is insignificant in comparison with the thousands upon thousands of other Sisters who generously and tirelessly fulfilled their daily duty in cheerful hidden silence because their hearts were fixed on God, from whom all joy proceeds. Truly, living stones of the living Monument of Mary!

They were Sisters who, coming first from Italy, then from every part of the world, brought a wealth of personal qualities and virtues, a patrimony of diverse cultures which enriched the Institute and the Church. Before this wonderful panorama of names and lives our resolution '*to be born again*' urges us to seek a deeper knowledge of the many Salesian biographies that we may better appreciate the great wealth of our family inheritance.

On the pathway
of our Sisters'
fidelity

Hence, the subject of our personal and community reflections this month could be research into the essential lineaments of these exemplary sisters' personalities. The powerful faith in their convictions was grafted upon solid, human virtues, such as loyalty, fortitude, kindness, generosity, patience, perseverance etc. Their sense of the realities of life went hand in hand with hope of life eternal, and charity was the soul of all their actions and self-dedication.

For us, then, *to be born again* means that we must verify in ourselves the possession of these solid natural and supernatural virtues.

May Mary, our Help, be near to enlighten us and spur us on to generosity as we journey along the path traversed by all those who answered the call and persevered to the end.

(Cir. n. 544 - November 24 1971)

Our mission in the Church

Inserted in
the salvific
mission of
the Church

The Congregation exists in order to carry out God's well-defined purpose. It inserts itself into the salvific mission of the Church in order to bear the Gospel tidings to young girls, especially the poorest and most needy among them, and, moreover, faithful to the spirit of the Founder, it is meant to promote the human and christian advancement of these same young people through educational works, basing this "...not only on human and rational principles but above all on supernatural principles drawn from sources of the Word and of the Grace of God, fully aware that God alone educates and saves efficaciously".⁷

Create an
atmosphere of
a supernatural
certainty

Following from this, as the *Scheme of Spirituality* tells us, comes the obligation for each one of us to "penetrate, enjoy and live" the Word of God in order to radiate it "spontaneously through conversations, through writing and through teaching, thus creating in souls an upright conscience and in the house an atmosphere of supernatural security, from which springs that diffusive joy which is the best fruit of theological hope".⁸

Apostolic
communities
inspired by
"Da mihi animas"

This is the way in which every one of our communities must respond to the pattern outlined for us in our constitutions (art. 61), that each may become "a true apostolic community participating in the solicitude of the Church that 'the splendour of God which brightens the Face of Christ may shine upon all men'" And the response will be the greater according to the measure in which all the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians live their holy Founder's motto; *Da mihi animas cetera tolle*, and carry out faithfully "according to the method suggested to

⁷ *Schema sulla spiritualità e l'apostolato della FMA*, 1970, 43.

⁸ *Schema* 49.

Don Bosco by our Lady, "the Teacher without whose guidance all wisdom becomes foolishness".⁹

Catechetical
mission

Article 113 of the Manual (1969) clearly determines this specific purpose laying emphasis on the catechetical mission which started and characterised all Don Bosco's work. The articles which follow (114-117) outline the method for positive fulfillment, while article 118, following the directives of Vatican Council II, invites us to insert our apostolic activity into *the global pastoral plan* so that it may increasingly correspond to the expectations of the Church. Let us re-read these articles and make them the subject of an accurate personal and community examination.

The Congregation exists in the Church, therefore, for the sole purpose of carrying out the *da mihi animas* which was the anxiety and passion of the lives of Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello as well as of those of many of our Sisters.

This solicitude for the salvation of youth was the only motive and was at the heart of all the apostolic, educative work of our Saint. His biographer affirms: "For Don Bosco, the supreme aim of education was to make his boys good and to save them".¹⁰ We have this on the Saint's own words, when he says: "You are the apple of my eye. My affection for you is based on the desire I have that you should save your souls which were redeemed by the Precious Blood of Jesus Christ, and you love me because I seek to guide you along the path that leads to eternal salvation".¹¹

Mother
Mazzarello
all for youth

Don Maccono writes of our own St. Mary Mazzarello, "Mother Mazzarello constantly lived these two loves:

⁹ C 1969 62.

¹⁰ Cf MB X 769.

¹¹ MB X 769.

love of God and her own sanctification and love of the young".¹² He continues: "She was not taken in by externals, such as a pretty face, nobility of birth or expensive apparel, but looked within and saw in both rich and poor the image of God, an immortal soul redeemed by the Precious Blood of our Lord. Hence, she considered no sacrifice too great, no suffering which would make the girls more pleasing to God and train them in the constant practice of virtue too much".¹³

We know from the lives of our holy Founders that they literally spent every ounce of their energy for this cause and under the impulse of the Holy Spirit, they founded the Congregation for this purpose.

Missionaries of supernatural certainties

The salvation of souls is the only reason for the numerous houses of the Institute, both in civilized countries and in those still awaiting the Gospel tidings. The Daughters of Mary Help of Christians have been faithful to their salvific mission wherever they have presented themselves as missionaries of the *supernatural realities* in the past hundred years.

But today, in a world which is becoming more and more secularised because of a greater awareness of earthly values, and which, sad to say, is even ourselves, is it still possible to fulfill our mission? Not only is it possible, but there is a real need for our mission in today's world: There is a need for the just acknowledgement of earthly values and the need of saving religious values, including the values of the religious life.

Religious life in a secularized world

Has the religious life meaning in a secularised world? It will cease to have meaning only if it takes to the path of secularization itself,... by free-

¹² MACCONO F., *Santa Maria D. Mazzarello* II (Torino, FMA 1960) 102.

¹³ *Do* 102-103.

ing itself of all that is sacred: prayer, the witness of the vows in order to become merely a service for the world. Only if religious life is radically different, can it still speak to the secularised world. If it lives the Gospel to the full, if it gives first place to seeking God and His kingdom, religious life still has meaning today and, over and above this, it still has a great, urgent mission to fulfill!

For many people who, with distorted vision, see only earthly panoramas and are locked in the prison of mental anguish by tormenting questions, the religious by her presence, by her words and by her actions affirms the supremacy of God and is a witness to His goodness.

Together with the advance and spread of secularization the world's craving for solutions to the problems which assail mankind intensifies. Hearts become unconsciously yet increasingly aware of a sense of emptiness, and there is, consequently, a greater thirst for God. This can also be seen in the growing interest our girls show in religious problems. When asked to choose topics for conversation, the spontaneous answers are: speak to us about God; about the faith; teach us the meaning of the Mass. . .

Teach the girls
the mystery of
the Church

And since the Church alone can give definite answers to the problems disturbing the human mind, it is our mission as Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, to give young people a greater understanding of the Church in order to bring them to the joy of its salvific mission.

Our Saints were authentic children of the Church, working with all their strength with her and for her. Don Bosco used to say, "the glory of the Church is our glory; the salvation of souls is our concern".

In this secularized world in which we live, the

formula the Church offers is — according to Paul VI — “the foundation and crown of human life, of the knowledge and behaviour of men. It is the light, the support, the end and the blessedness of our existence on earth; it is the first and the last word, the alpha and omega of the world”.

After considering what has been said above, the Constitutions, the Manual and the Scheme of Spirituality can offer us ample material for personal and community reflection during this month. Thus we shall be encouraged to live the “*Da mihi animas*” in the Church with renewed zeal and fervour.

(Cir. n. 545 - December 24 1971)

Chapter II

ECCLESIAL DIMENSION OF OUR SALESIAN LIFE

The deep love for the Church, unrelinquishable heritage left us by our holy Founder, is highlighted in several precious circulars. They show what our presence in the Church and our participation in its mystery and mission should be.

Our vocation, in fact, is "all here in this total oblation to the Church" in the foot-steps of Don Bosco who, to it consecrated his person and his work, living entirely in the Church, with the Church, for the Church and giving to his institutions a definite and precise ecclesial dimension.

Ecclesial reality of the Institute

In the guidelines given — the fruit of months of study and hard work and of extensive consultation, an effort has been made to provide ecclesial and salesian elements that can give a deeper knowledge of our identity as Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. Some basic questions can help in this awareness.

Basic questions

- Who am I, as a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians, in my deepest reality and what is my place in the Church?
- What is the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and what is its mission in the Church?
- What identifying sign did the Holy Spirit inspire Don Bosco to give us?

We would have needed volumes to set down these constitutive elements, so what could be done? We had to be satisfied with giving a synthesis, trusting in your good will to delve into it, in the warm and intelligent work the provincials and their collaborators undertake to give you in a clear, detailed but simple presentation. Above all, we place our confidence in Divine Wisdom, which takes up its abode in the intelligence and will of humble, sincere people, helping them to penetrate God's thought and encouraging them to act courageously and achieve what he wants.

You now have at hand an outline of a synthesis in which you will find the fundamental ideas which will guide us in becoming ever more aware of our identity and of verifying that these ideas are expressed clearly in the text of the Constitutions.

Study of the
constitutions
and the conciliar
documents

For two six-year periods we have used the texts given us by past Chapters *ad experimentum*. Now,

in obedience to Vatican II,¹ our Constitutions must be set down in definite form and presented to the Holy See for approval. Thus, they will be the fundamental rule for our lives and the lives of the young people who share our vocation as Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

All of this has probably been said in the various meetings you have already had, so you will realise just how important it is to integrate the points raised in the guidelines by a careful reading of the documents cited in the margin, which should become, at this time our *daily reading*, especially the constitution *Lumen Gentium*.

I am not going to repeat in this circular what the provincials offer as an aid to your reading and reflection, but I do ask you to pay attention to the questions that should give food for thought, that form an appendix to the guidelines.

Tackle your study seriously and slowly, spending time on the fundamental idea, beginning with the first: **the ecclesial reality of the Institute.**

When you meet together, exchange ideas that are a mutual enrichment, do not lose yourselves in useless details.

During these months, through the circulars, I shall try to keep to the same themes, helping you to interiorise the work you are doing.

The Rector Major, Fr. Egidio Viganò, gave the gift of his word first to the Provincials of Italy and then to the Provincials of Europe, gathered here in Rome. He stressed "that throughout history, prayer is the power" because it helps us to penetrate God's plan in bringing about salvation, and allows us a share in his own power.

He added that the best preparation for the Chapter, which is a charismatic event, is to be in harmony

In harmony
with
the Holy Spirit

¹ Cf *ES* II 3, 6.

with the Holy Spirit, who is the main agent. Taking his word to heart, let us first try to read the text of our own personal lives in the light of the Holy Spirit, so that we can see more clearly what God's thought really is as we review the text of our Constitutions.

The first fundamental idea that the guideline puts before us is: *'Our Institute is an ecclesial reality and participates in the salvific action of Christ, our Redeemer'*. If this idea is to penetrate my spirit and become the motivation of my life, I must pray the Holy Spirit on my knees to help me to understand what the Church is in God's mind, and to enlighten me interiorly concerning the relative documents. Then we shall clarify more and more for ourselves the idea that the Church is a communion with God and with our brothers in Christ and the Sacrament of salvation for the whole human race.

Ecclesial sense
of our life

When we let ourselves be taken up even in a little way by the divine light, a whole world is thrown open to our spirit, whose tremendous beauty and inexhaustible richness we cannot even imagine.

The Church is not only a mystery for us to meditate upon, she is also a life that we are called to share in. God calls us to be *'Church'* and lets us be identified with her: "You are the Body of Christ and its members, each with your own part to play".²

I am *'Church'*, my Sisters and the pupils are *'Church'*, Every person I meet is a member of the Body of Christ, of the Church.

Thus, to discover the mystery of the Church and bring it into our lives, leads to a decisive turning-point in our relations with God and with our brothers.

² I Cor 12, 27.

The mystery of the Church therefore, has an essentially practical aim: to enter the details of our every-day life.

God has assigned me a precise place in his Church, with a definite mission to accomplish.

The mystery of the Church, therefore, has an essentially True sanctity is not, therefore, that which I merely imagine it to be, but rather that which God has chosen for me and that mission which He wants me to carry out in the Church.

Importance or value is not given to my being or occupations by external circumstances but by the tremendous reality that no matter what my culture or my activity, if I am inserted in the Church, I share in the very life of Christ Himself. I am, as Sr. Elizabeth of the Trinity puts it, "an extension of His humanity".

How one lives
in the Church
and
for the Church

Who is, therefore, the greatest person, the most fulfilled? The one who becomes more a part of Christ and co-operates with Him for the good of all the members.

A dear Sister who worked in the kitchen, cleaning vegetables, understood this well. She said happily: "The more leaves there are to clean, the more sinners I ask the Lord to convert". And another, who was portress, said: "Even though I am tired, I always try to smile, because everyone who comes to the door is a member of Christ's Body".

Another Sister realised the serious consequences of her behaviour: "If I do not forgive, or if I condemn, I fail in love for Jesus in His members". Another made this meaningful remark: "The newspaper has become a source of spiritual meditation for me on the whole world. It stimulates me to pray, to make reparation and to love more".

These are expressions that echo the words of St. Paul: "Rejoice with those who are joyful, weep with

those who are sorrowful”³ and “when any man has scruples, I have scruples with him. Who is scandalized, and I am not indignant?”⁴

And Matthew gravely stresses the final judgement: “Every time you did these things to the least of my brothers, you did it to me” and “every time you did not do it, you did not do it to Me”.⁵

At the very central moment of the Mass, we pray the Holy Spirit to unite us in one body and one spirit and it is the Eucharist that consolidates the deep bonds that in the Church unite us to Christ and among ourselves.

I come out of Church, but I must be of one body and one spirit with the Sisters I meet and with the pupils; I must help them to understand their own dignity as members of Christ and help them to live coherently. Do I work, suffer, pray? I am always with the Church. To live like this gives breadth and meaning to the whole of our spiritual life.

My consecration, my vows, my permanent formation, my educative work? The aim of all is to insert me more fully in the Church, to make the Body of Christ grow.

What if I change house? Change the people with whom I work? I am always equally in the Church, a member of Christ, and in the Church I fulfill my mission with the other members of Christ and I also achieve it, even better perhaps, when God lets me share in the passion of Christ.

If I feel that I am the Church, I overcome discouragement more easily and I cannot close myself up

³ *Rm* 12, 15.

⁴ *2 Cor* 25, 40-45.

⁵ *Mt* 25, 40-45.

in isolation or individualism, because with a vital movement the Holy Spirit continually draws me to a total service of God and of the Church.

Ecclesial
sense of our
mission

“By saving others, save yourself”, said Don Bosco and so formulated a precise and concise ecclesial programme to be carried out not only with the young people, but in our communities, with everyone.

The Rector Major affirms that *the sequela Christi* is the spark and source of the fire of love that burned in the hearts of Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello.

Our Constitutions tell us that even today, the Holy Spirit calls us, gathers us and consecrates us so that He may send us forth in the Church to proclaim the Gospel.⁶ We achieve all of this to the extent that we assimilate the idea of the Church, of her mystery, of our place and mission in her.

I have taken time on these reflections, but it was necessary because this is the fundamental idea on which the various points of the outline are based. If this idea is grasped well, assimilated, lived, the other ideas that flow from it, like streams from their source, will be understood and lived more easily.

To obtain this grace, let us turn confidently, as daughters, to our Mother, the Help of Christians. During this Advent she invites us to live the mystery of the Incarnation in all its historical and spiritual power.

Ecclesial
symbolism
of a picture

A brief reflection: the picture of Mary Help of Christians in the Basilica is the most vivid representation of the title “*Mother of the Church*”. In picture form it is the summary of what the Council said about Mary in Chapter VIII of *Lumen Gentium*. Mary, partner in the plan of salvation, sees us all

⁶ Cf C 1975 5.

inserted in the Church, Christ's mystical Body.

The history of the Church and of our Institute are the history of her continual, motherly intervention. My religious profession as Daughter of Mary Help of Christians, calls me to share in the universal motherhood of Mary most holy.

All of this is expressed in the picture in which Don Bosco gives us a clear catechesis on the mystery of the Church and on the place of our Institute in the Church's salvific mission.

St. Teresa said: "I am a daughter of the Church". Can we not say: "With Mary, I am Mother of the Church"? I leave to you to deduce the tremendous but exciting practical consequences this has for our spiritual, community and apostolic lives.

I conclude with a question: Is there a reproduction of the picture in the Basilica in every house? It would be painful if Don Bosco should not find it and if we could not read in it and teach the marvellous catechesis it contains on the Church. Let us try to have it in every community. Meditating on the mystery of the Church before this picture with the love our saints had, we shall be helped to find the essential point on which to base our review of our religious lives and we shall see how and to what extent the Constitutions express it.

(*Cir.* n. 632 - December 24 1979)

Vital insertion in the Church

There is a real movement towards interiority present in our Institute. Let us bless our Lady who, taking us by the hand, she shows us in the light of the Holy Spirit, the interior depth of our souls. She revives in us the taste for silence and recollection in order to meditate on and treasure, as she did, the words and example of Jesus. She teaches us to look

on Him as the supreme Model to whom we must conform our way of thinking, speaking and acting.

But how has Jesus secured for us the right interpretation of His words and His life? In his *Storia Ecclesiastica* Pt. II pag. 261), Don Bosco writes: "After Jesus had preached His doctrine by word of mouth, He ascended into heaven without either writing a book Himself or dictating one. Why is this? It is to teach us that He had deposited His doctrine with the Apostles, that is, with the Church".⁷

The Church is, then, one of the greatest gifts Jesus has given us. It is His masterpiece, His voice, His prolongation in time and, according to *Lumen Gentium*, the "sacrament or sign and instrument of intimate union with God" and therefore, of our sanctification.

We draw our holiness from the Church

We draw our holiness from the Church. This holiness develops in the Church and for the Church. The verification of our Commitment to holiness, therefore, coincides with the verification of our knowledge of the Church, the practical love we bear her and our vital insertion in her.

It is impossible to develop this important topic in these few pages, so I limit myself to a few reflections and indications. However, every community will have at its disposal, the Conciliar Documents and those of the Sovereign Pontiffs and Episcopal Conferences. It will have in its library a Church-History which presents the Church in its paschal mystery of death and resurrection throughout the ages.

How can we love Mother Church if we do not know her mystery, if we ignore her history, her history

⁷ *The edited and un-edited works of Don Bosco recently published and reviewed according to the original editions, and surviving manuscripts, of Pius Salesian, vol. I part II, Storia ecclesiastica (Turin).*

and her glorious service in the spiritual, social and cultural fields?

Every house receives the daily or weekly *Osservatore Romano* which carries the voice of the Church today. It is available to everyone. Is it read with the interest of children listening to their mother? Do we share in all the events that affect her whether they be happy or sad?

The minds and hearts of all of us are still overflowing with gratitude because of what we read of the Fifth Synod which proved to us how real the presence of the Holy spirit is in the Church.

I also recommend to you the magnificent publication, *In Ecclesia*, offered by the Salesian Pontifical University in homage to Paul VI on his 80th birthday. This publication brings to light some basic aspects of the reality of the Church and its Supreme Pastor, of Christianity and the Christian in the Church.

True concept
of the Church

It is especially important today to have an exact knowledge of Church History. Superiors should regard this as a primary duty in the spiritual animation of the Community.

Unfortunately, we have to acknowledge that there are many distorted images of the Church today clearly bent on blocking her influence for good. When her moral norms are not belittled they are twisted; her beneficent initiatives are ignored or undermined; efforts are even made to destroy her from within, using mass media especially for this purpose.

It is not difficult for a state of confusion concerning the true concept of the Church to be created even in religious circles as well as a subsequent lessening of esteem for and solidarity with the Magisterium.

I do not believe that I am very far from the truth in thinking that some religious do not walk the

path of holiness with alacrity, because they are wanting in humble, enlightened love for the Church. This is the love that made Don Bosco say:

“The glory of the Church is our glory!”⁸

“I work for the Church and intend that the Salesians should do so till their last breath.”⁹

“The greatest fatigue is as nothing when it concerns the Church and the Pope.”¹⁰

We cannot possibly understand Don Bosco unless we have a strong love for the Church, nor can we understand the obligations and import of our religious vows, because our Salesian spirit is but an expression of the ecclesial spirit.

Don Bosco
and the Church

It was just because Don Bosco had studied the Church deeply and loved it that he mobilized an army for its mission, and the Congregations he founded are the practical way by which he expressed his love: “The only aim that we proposed to ourselves was the glory of God and the salvation of souls. Who knows but that the Lord wishes to use our Society to do good in His Church! ...We fight (with the Pope) for the cause of the Church which is the cause of God”.¹¹

Articles 10, 69, 77, 109, 118 of the Manual remind us of this happy reality. They give us practical guidelines for youth pastoral and are thus a stimulus to us in preparing the pupils for the vast areas the Church today opens up to the ministry of women. If we do not give our young people a lively, well-grounded and vigorous sense of the Church, their ideas will remain only marginal and they will never yearn for the expansion of God’s Kingdom.

Let us imitate Don Bosco who explained the life and

⁸ MB XVII 491.

⁹ MB XIV 229.

¹⁰ MB V 577.

¹¹ MB VII 163-164.

doctrine of the Church, always having in view union with the Pope: "Salvation cannot be found except in union with Peter on whom there rests the immovable foundation of the Church". "He who is with Peter is with God and walks in the light; he who is not with Peter is against God and will fall into darkness".

"Let us love the Roman Pontiffs and make no distinction between the times and the places in which they speak. When they counsel us, and still more when they express a wish, it should be as a command for us".

"The word of the Pope must be our rule in everything and for everything".

The Pope's presence and the bishops united with him render the presence of the Risen Christ effective among us in all places and at all times.

In Rome every Wednesday we assist with emotion and ever-increasing wonder at the meeting of the Pope with people. They come from all over the world in ever-increasing numbers. Representatives of various religions come, attracted to the Holy Father by a mysterious force which makes them reverent before his person.

Paul VI has made of these "Roman Wednesdays a true, organic magisterium in which he presents the deeper Christian values and the fundamental attitude of human society".

Let us transmit
the word of
the Pope

If much of the press ignores the voice of the Pope and does not transmit it to the people, let us, after having personally pondered it, exert ourselves to see to it that his speeches are broadcast widely. As to the means, love will make us creative. A good opportunity is offered to us in the annual feast of the Pope (Manual 44).¹²

Dear Sr. Caterina Pesci comes to my mind at this

¹² Cf *M-R* 1975 44.

point. She was defined as: "A life for the Church and the Pope". I remember her contribution of indefatigable teaching in the Institute of Pedagogy and Religious Sciences where a great number of our Sisters were guided by her in the deepening of their knowledge of Church History. At the same time she infused into them her great love for the Church and the Pope.

Her zeal for the Church and the Pope was not limited to the lecturer's platform, but extended to all catechetical and dramatic activities. Many of her masterly stage productions could be of interest now or could, perhaps, inspire others of the same nature on the life and mystery of the Church. Sr. Caterina Pesci was in perfect harmony with Don Bosco.

We read with emotion that just seventy years ago, in its last session on 25th September 1907, our General Chapter "declared solemnly, almost to the extent of making a vow before the Blessed Sacrament", fidelity to the Constitutions and "homage and adherence to every wish of the Holy Father and to the spirit of the Founder in which we wish to live and die".

After Mother Daghero's signature there follow the signatures of all the chapter members. These were all women of indomitable faith and fervent zeal who, because of their ecclesial and Salesian fidelity laid the solid foundations of our Institute.

Article 100 of our Constitutions states positively that the Pope is our Supreme Pastor and Superior, 'Church') make us understand how real is our insertion in the salvific mission of the Church.

ertion in the salvific mission of the Church.

Nothing in our lives as Christians and religious is extraneous to the Church.

"My dearest daughters, you are consecrated to the good of the whole Church. No other motive drew

you to give your life to Christ through the hands of Mary save that of serving souls, serving the Church, the whole Church... Your vocation is just this, complete oblation for the Church". Thus spoke Paul VI on the feast of the Presentation, 1974. Discovering one's religious vocation under this aspect is taking on, with all the interior and exterior activities, the role the Church has assigned to us, according to our charism, beginning with the concrete field of the local Church.

Glancing through the pages of the Directory of our Houses, it becomes evident, especially in some provinces, that 80-90% of them are in direct collaboration with the parishes; others collaborate in indirect ways.

The precious little book by the Salesian Provincial, Father Angelo Viganò, *'I religiosi nella pastorale e nell'organico della diocesi'* "is a valid contribution to a more complete fulfillment of enlightened, active and fruitful ecclesial communion".

We have a serious responsibility in this regard. All of us: young, mature, elderly and sick, form part of the army Don Bosco has placed at the service of the Church for the spread of God's kingdom.

By our life, our prayer, our action and even by our behaviour alone, we can either illumine the Church or envelop it in darkness.

Next month we hope to be able to ponder together over the mystery of the Church in her intimate riches of grace and communion. But for the present let us ask ourselves:

- Do I know the history and life of the Church well? Do I talk about it to the children?

Is my love for the Church, the Pope and the Bishops enlightened and operative according to the charism?

- Do I spread the knowledge of the Catholic Press,

point out parish and diocesan dispositions and the programmes of Vatican Radio?

- Do I fill my daily life with the great events of the Church (in these days, for example, the Synod) and do I share with the girls in its joys and sorrows?

- Do my life, my mission, my very presence in various places concur to give those who approach me a brilliant image of the Church?

- A century ago, on November 9th, 1877, Pius IX said to our first missionaries: "Be like the great basins of the fountains, that receive water and dispense it to all. Basins, that is, of virtue and knowledge for the advantage of others".

After exactly a hundred years the present Pontiff gave an unforgettable audience, also on November 9th. This event is amply reported in the 'Notiziario'. Among other things he said to us:

"All you have accomplished in the past hundred years is written in the book of the memory of God. But this missionary fervour must never weaken in you. May it grow, inflame and expand more and more in line with the wish of Christ, "I have come to cast fire on the earth...". Have you this fire?".

The unanimous 'Yes' that rose from our hearts re-stated a firm will to feed this fire still more. Our Holy Father's blessing descending upon us gave us renewed strength to keep the flame of apostolic zeal ever alive.

(*Cir. n. 608 - November 24 1977*)

Love - enlightened, strong, active - for the Church

The last circular in which we were encouraged to make ourselves persons capable of responsibility,

concluded by pointing out the special responsibility that we have in the Church and in society to be bearers of the message of God entrusted to Don Bosco for the good of others.

A great spiritual heritage

We have the responsibility of guarding jealously and of developing a great spiritual heritage. If we carry out this task we shall enrich the Church, but if we neglect it, we shall be responsible for its impoverishment.

It could happen that, thinking we know Don Bosco and his spirit and method well, we do not make efforts to deepen our understanding of his authentic message. Thus, we run the risk of making an inaccurate and superficial interpretation.

Let us repeat with Mother Mazzarello: "Don Bosco is a saint and knows what Mary Hep of Christians wants from us!", and imitating her humility let us study at Don Bosco's school in order to learn what the Holy Spirit worked in him and how he responded to the divine plan by spending his whole life for the coming of God's kingdom.

The saints should be studied with a prayerful mind since all that was worked in them is a gift of the Holy Spirit. We shall then understand Don Bosco as the saint of great evangelical potential and pastoral richness, all of which he used for the good of young people; above all, we shall see in him a devoted son of the Church and of the Pope.

Love of Don Bosco for the Church

He proved his love for God by making a deep study of the Church in the mystery of its beginnings, in its salvific mission, its institutions, and its historical services. He spoke of the Church in accents vibrating with love and he wrote, preached and worked in order to make it known and loved and to defend it from attack.

All his thoughts, words and actions had the exaltation of the Church in view. He rejoiced in its joys

and its glory and suffered with it in its tribulations. He sought in every way he could to assuage its wounds and compensate for its losses.¹³

With what emotion and zeal would he have read the Conciliar Constitution, *Lumen Gentium* and that of the mission of the Church in the contemporary world, *Gaudium et Spes*, both of which reveal the wideness and depth of the mystery of the Church! With what filial devotion would he have listened to the catechetical instructions so often given by the Holy Father in his weekly discourses, and how eagerly he would have shared this wisdom with his sons! In fact, we know that for years the lives of the Popes and the history of the Church were the themes of his Sunday sermons.

An enlightened,
strong and
active love
for the Church

It is not then, stretching the point to declare that the message left us by Don Bosco as a heritage is **a message of an enlightened, strong, active love for the Church.**

But is his specific message not for the young?

During the last General Chapter, the preacher, His Excellency, Mons. Antonio Maria Javierre, stated: "Rather than have carved on his tomb, the words '*Delexit Ecclesiam*' there could have been inscribed the cover of Don Bosco's preventive System".

Don Bosco loved the young because he saw in them the delicate and tender members of Christ's mystical Body, and therefore he used every possible means to make the life of Christ grow in them.

Don Bosco loved young people and he expended his life to provide them with bread, work instruction but above all, in filling their hearts with the riches of the Church's salvation, the Word of God, prayer, sacramental life and the power of faith and hope for active charity.

¹³ Cf *MB* II 273.

He made use of all valid, human means offered by the Church, fully aware that only God can educate and save effectively.

The message that we have inherited from Don Bosco is an ecclesial message. In order to carry it to young people effectively every fibre of our being, we must be able to say with St. Teresa; "I am a daughter of the Church"! I know and love the Church and am completely consecrated to its interests. St. Teresa believed in the close ties which bind souls to Christ and to one another in the Church. She felt in her heart the wounds inflicted on the Church and wept over the moral misery of so many souls.

Ecclesial
dimension of our
Salesian life

In the great love which pervaded her exterior and interior life, did not Mother Mazzarello also show herself committed to serve the Church and its members?

Last June there died at Banpong the pioneer of the Thaiandese mission, Sr. Maria Baldo. Among the most attractive of her characteristics was her great love for the Church and the Popes and, when failing sight made it impossible for her to read, she asked others to read *the Osservatore Romano* to her, as well as anything else related to the Church and to the Pope. Thus, she nourished her strong ecclesial life. She worked and suffered and was completely consumed for the spread of the Kingdom of God in Thailand. She understood Don Bosco's spirit in its very essence and discovered the vigorous root from which he drew life for the whole Salesian Pastoral action and effectiveness for its system of education.

I would like to quote some articles from the Constitutions and the Manual as witness to our living in the Church, with the Church and for the Church, but a single glance at the analytical index sufficed to place before me such an abundance of

Quotations that I could not possibly transcribe them all. They could be a fruitful subject for your personal meditation and for conferences, goodnights etc...

Convinced of the ecclesial dimension of the Salesian life, our vows and our educative message, let us read again in the light of this conviction the instructive report of Don Bosco's charism which our very Reverend Superior, Don Egidio Viganò gave during the Chapter, and which the provincial passed on to all the houses. Let us also read again the full and rich reports given on charism by the 5th Commission and the report of the 6th Commission on the Preventive System. They are filled with ecclesial enlightenment.

Think again
about our charism
and our Salesian
Pedagogy

It is very important for us today, to think again in the light of Vatican II, about our CHARISM and our Salesian Pedagogy in the Church to ensure that they may be carried out in the Church and for the Church, accepting in their entirety all its organization and all the means of salvation instituted in her, in union with Christ who rules her through the Supreme Pontiff, and the Bishops in union with him.¹⁴

And when our educative action is developed among non-catholic peoples we must appreciate what is good and true in them and help them to live with an upright conscience as we prepare them indirectly to accept the Gospel.¹⁵

Is God not calling us today to a revision of the ecclesial programme of our educative action?

- Are we not giving more importance to the instruments of the Salesian message than to its ecclesial content?

¹⁴ Cf LC 14.

¹⁵ Cf LG 16.

- Has there not infiltrated here and there, perhaps without our noticing it, a secular naturalist vision of education, and the realities of young people, where the ever-present God awaits our collaboration in order to accomplish his work of salvation?
- Is it not God's will that we make provision for a course of formation in the Church today, which will be more ecclesial, and more helpful for our young people?

What the Church
expects from us

Cardinal Gabriele Maria Garrone, in a conference given on January 27th 1973 at the closure of the *Salesian Spirituality Week* replied as follows to the question: "What does the Church think the great Family of Don Bosco should do?": "Faced with the young people of today, the Salesian Family as a united body, must readily assume all its spiritual heritage and renew it integrally so that it may be rendered fruitful in the reality of today". He added: "In the eyes of the Church Don Bosco's Great Salesian Family represents a whole series of values drawn from the Fountains of Grace and rich with immense hope!

... The Church knows that the power which engendered the miracle of Turin and 'Casa Pinardi' is still intact in the heart of Don Bosco's Family... This power is alive. It is the Holy Spirit infused into a spirit which is explicit and most powerful, and what grace accomplished once, it can accomplish again...!"

These authoritative words are echoed in those of Mons. Antonio Maria Javierre: "A decisive renewal is imperative. A renewal that, discovering the immense powers of our charism, projects it with fresh impetus on the Church and the world".

It is a matter of rooting ourselves with renewed fervour in the foundation Don Bosco wanted in our educative action: *Religion*, presented in the light of and under the practical and authentic forms

of theology and psychology, putting into action "the stupendous values of human reason in reference to the Incarnate word: to remind ourselves of that 'loving-kindness' that is urgently demanded by the Preventive System".

Therefore, in fidelity to our charism, it is necessary to re-discover, re-launch and put into action our Salesian pedagogy, which, in the first place is *the pedagogy of evangelical catechesis*.

The whole work of our father was initiated and founded on catechesis. History has recorded this in the meeting with Bartholomew Garelli for whom Don Bosco used the most simple and most elementary catechesis on the sign of the cross, in the Church of St. Francis of Assisi in Turin. This catechesis continued with assiduity and dedication throughout his entire life with truly apostolic zeal. This, in fact, was the mandate he received in his dream as a nine-year old: "Set to work at once to teach them the ugliness of sin and the beauty of virtue".¹⁶

What do these words mean if they are not a mandate to catechise? Don Bosco understood the meaning and started immediately to comply with the order received from on high. He did not consider his work to be anything but "simple catechism".¹⁷

Catechesis
primordial aspect
of our mission

The example and statements of our Father place squarely before us the primordial and essential aspect of our mission, namely, catechesis.

Of course, catechesis is to be carried out according to the needs of the times and of the young people of today and also according to the many possibilities and helps offered by didactics and modern technology, but let us not forget the recommendation

¹⁶ MB 124.

¹⁷ MB IX 61.

given by our Saint, with such trepidation on her death-bed: "*Catechism must be catechism!*"! A recommendation such as this could sound simplistic to our ears, but for the great lesson underlying it: that our catechesis must be essentially a transmission of the truths of faith that will lead the young to form a deep and convinced mentality of faith, Schools, oratories, youth-centres and the missions are only means for evangelizing souls and leading them to Christ through catechesis.

On this basis of evangelization, Don Bosco's pedagogy becomes, and already is a *pedagogy of grace and eternal values*.

"In Don Bosco everything is of value if it is illuminated by this prodigious flame and, on the contrary, everything relapses into darkness if we suppress the diffusion centre of light which is Grace"¹⁸ Don Bosco had only one preoccupation, which was to preserve and increase grace in the young and lead them to sanctity through the sacraments and the light of eternal truths.

Eternal truths
and Sacraments

God is at the centre of the Preventive System, and therefore, the whole of Don Bosco's educative action is based, according to his own words, on confession and communion; "Remember that the principal method of education is making good confessions and communions"¹⁹.

He gave no sermon or goodnight, nor did he approach a boy without at least one reference to the eternal truth and the means of grace: confession, communion and prayer.

Confession, especially, was for him the pivot of education. This compares with and coincides in a very

¹⁸ PAVANETTI Edoardo, *Il Sistema Preventivo*, Quaderni FMA n. 17. 16-17.

¹⁹ MB IV 555.

real and efficacious sense, with modern psychology, which states that nothing can be built up until the child is interiorly calm and free from all distress or moral burdens. These means of grace pursued constantly with enlightened pedagogical knowledge, with discretion and freedom are those which caused so many young saints to blossom in the first Oratory of Valdocco.

Now grace, "this precious treasure casket of eternal values", was defended by Don Bosco through assistance, was protected by confidence, was preserved and enriched with cheerfulness".²⁰

Grace is the source of true joy, and therefore, cheerfulness is another element of the Preventive System. Our Father sowed the seeds of God's grace in hearts and there resulted an effusion of cheerfulness that was a radiation of God's presence in souls". Therefore, in Don Bosco's system cheerfulness is innate with his conception of life, education and even holiness itself. Proof of this comes from the lips of his holy pupil, St. Dominic Savio: "We make holiness consist in being cheerful".

Don Pavanetti says: "Living together to be cheerful and to become holy; I think these words best sum up Don Bosco's idea and the results he expected for the boys".

Living together is the deep meaning of that other element of the Preventive System: assistance.

Assistance
vital part of the
Preventive System

Assistance, seen as *living together*, that is a vital active sharing in the complete lives of the young people is the "typically Salesian characteristic" and vitally important as part of the Preventive System".²¹ If we do not *live with*, we cannot *forestall* in the authentic sense of Don Bosco's concept.

²⁰ PAVANETTI, *Il Sistema* 19.

²¹ *Do* 55.

It is not only a matter of preserving from harm or, as Don Bosco used to say, "of making it impossible for the pupils to commit faults". This is certainly fundamental, but it is a purely negative aspect. There is another aspect not less important and certainly very positive. It is that of making use and strengthening the good qualities of the young, of advising and encouraging them; of witnessing by one's own life to the manner of facing up to various situations; of sharing joys and sorrows with the young people and understanding the difficulties and problems besetting their path, in order to help them solve these problems and overcome difficulties.

But it is a question, of '*an affectionate living together*', not a diffident, suspicious watchfulness with no respect for persons. It is easy today to advance the concept that the assistance Don Bosco wanted would impede formation to responsibility. This is certainly untrue. Everything depends on the manner in which we enter into the spirit of Salesian assistance and put it into operation.

This theme was treated in a masterly manner at the '*European Convention on the Preventive System*', by the Reverend Superior, Father Giovenale Dho. He emphatically confirmed the relevance and formative value of assistance. Here are his words: "presence or assistance is an expression of love, of authentic, loving charity. Its significance, the meaning of the external elements of 'the educator's presence' is twisted, when in evaluating them, this essential dimension is put aside. This presence is a loving presence among the young..." a *religious presence* "which makes the educators 'bearers of the love of Christ to the young'.²²

²² DHO Giovenale, *L'assistenza come « presenza » e rapporto personale*, in A.A.V.V., *Il Sistema educativo di Don Bosco*

Educative
Presence
personal, friendly,
and stimulating

Therefore, this presence cannot be other than an *educative presence* and hence 'personal' and friendly, stimulating and guiding the young to maturity"²³ This is the reason for its perennial relevance, a relevance recognised and re-affirmed in the recent Congress concerning the whole of the Preventive System, while allowing for certain adaptations.

The Reverend Rector Major, Don Luigi Ricceri, added his authority in his concluding speech: "Dear friends, let all of us who are members of the salesian family keep ourselves vitally and organically bonded to the original charism of Don Bosco. If we place ourselves in complete syntony with his spirit which, it is useful to repeat, is essentially one of supernatural faith and charity and therefore, deeply human, the Preventive System will become the necessary logical expression of the life we lead, and we shall not allow ourselves to be influenced by illusions which do not bear God's seal, and therefore cannot be in line with Salesian life or mission".

Let us strive, therefore, to make a still deeper study of Don Bosco and his educative message, to live it and fulfill it so that we may respond to our *charism* and intimately participate in the redeeming mission of Christ in the Church.

(Cir. n. 594 - July-August 24 1976)

tra pedagogia antica e nuova (Torino-Leumann, LDC 1974)
118, 120.

²³ As above 108.

Chapter III

ROLE OF MARY IN THE INSTITUTE

The Marian theme occurs frequently in Mother Ersilia's circulars and always with new emphasis.

Mary, Mother of the Church and of the Institute, must again find her original and specific place in the spirituality of our Congregation.

Our Lady, "exemplary type of the feminine condition" and powerful "Ausiliatrice" (helper), must enter our houses with new efficacy.

We shall thus be able to open ourselves up to that ecclesial and missionary prospective which is vital insertion into the mystery of Christ and participation in the spiritual maternity of Mary, which makes us "helpers" with her for the girls.

Mary Most Holy “eminent type of the feminine condition” (MC 36)

Among the secrets of the Holy Spirit, one of the most fruitful in light and sanctification is surely the knowledge and love of the Holy Virgin, His Immaculate Spouse, “His Sanctuary” and His “dwelling place”.¹

St. Louis Grignon di Monfort tells us actually, that Mary is “a secret of the Holy Spirit” and is the shortest, easiest, surest and most perfect way to go to Jesus and reach perfection. In short, he anticipated all that is contained in Chapter VIII of *Lumen Gentium* about our Lady.

Whoever, therefore, cultivates and develops in his heart this filial, active love for the Blessed Virgin, has a well-founded guarantee of salvation. By God’s will, in fact, Mary has become the channel of divine grace and of all the gifts of God to men, because “God loved her and did great things for her; “He loved her for His own sake and for our sake too; He gave her to Himself and He also gave her to us”.² Mary’s many-sided mission to the People of God is a supernatural reality which operates and bears fruit within the body of the Church”.³ If we establish an intimate rapport with our Lady, we are sure to be pervaded by her sanctifying action.

Don Bosco, having made a long experience of it, declares: “One who by himself does little, with Mary, does much”; and St. Mary Mazzarello: “Have great confidence in our Lady, she will help you in everything”.

¹ MC 26.

² MC 56.

³ MC 57.

Marian
character of our
spirituality

Our Holy Father, Paul VI, in the memorable audience of July 1972 reminded us: "You have the privilege of belonging to a religious family which belongs entirely to Mary and owes all to Mary" and he exclaimed: "Oh, how we wish that this distinctive Marian character should be preserved among you in all its original freshness"!

Article 59 of the Constitutions gives us the lines of our Marian spirituality, the essence of which lies in the contemplation of the real holiness of Mary and of her mission to reproduce it in us and to make it come to life in our girls. In our Lady, in fact, we find the ideal of all the evangelical values in their most perfect incarnation.

Mary, while living in the simplicity of the little house of Nazareth, embraces, the whole world, with a fullness of intention, thus coming to the level of the divine plan of salvation.

The
highest ideal
of woman

Ready and free in her "*fiat*", disposed without reserve to do the divine will, recollected guardian of the Word of God, attentive to the needs of the brethren, strong in faith and in sacrifice, in continuous maternal mission, Mary is truly the Highest ideal of womanhood: the "*Woman*" par excellence, and the "*perfect Christian*".

Next year, 1975, will be, through the initiative of UNESCO, "*Woman's Year*". Let us begin from now to prepare it in our houses, putting, as centre of our initiative, the presentation, study, and imitation of our Lady, as the "outstanding type of womanhood" who sums up in herself the most characteristic situations in the life of woman, "because she was Virgin, Spouse and Mother".⁴

Looking at her and bringing our youth to her we can be penetrated by her grace, absorb her

⁴ MC 36.

spirit, because our Lady is not only for us an ideal to be contemplated, but the mould which models and transforms us. We ask it every morning in the Act of Consecration by which we offer ourselves “*entirely*” to her: “Teach us to imitate your virtues, particularly your charity, humility and purity, so that we may represent you before the world”. Let us, therefore, belong entirely to Mary and testify individually and in Community our Consecration to her.

(Cir. n. 576 - September 24 1974)

Mary our “guide and Teacher”

The Pentecostal atmosphere of this month of May reminds us of that great devotee of Mary, St. Grignon de Monfort, who said: “When the Holy Spirit finds our Lady in a soul, He flies to it, enters it fully and communicates himself to it abundantly”.⁵

We have prepared for Pentecost, fervently imploring and waiting for the Divine Spirit. Now we are in company with our Lady who draws down on us, as in the Cenacle, the fulness of the effusion of the Holy Spirit. But to be sure of obtaining this singular grace, our Lady must play a large part in our spiritual life, in our apostolic work, in our Communities and in our activities. In short, she must hold the same place as she held in the soul, life and apostolic work of our Founders.

The life and apostolate of Don Bosco unfolded entirely in the light of Mary, from the dream he had

Mary's place
in our Lives

⁵ GRIGNON DE MONFORT, *Treatise on True devotion to the Blessed Virgin* (Roma, a cura delle Figlie della Sapienza 1942) 16.

at the age of nine⁶ to the Mass he offered here in Rome in the Basilica of the Sacred Heart⁷ and right through to his holy death. Through that early prophetic dream God had given him a "teacher" whose faithful pupil he always remained. This is why he could affirm: "Our Lady is our guide, our teacher and our Mother".⁸ This is why he could tell his sons: "Nothing should be done in the Oratory except in the name of Mary!"⁹

Indeed, *in the name of Mary* he began and ended all his apostolic work and was deeply moved when he told his sons. "Only in heaven will we discover to our utter astonishment, what our Lady has done for us".¹⁰

His devotion rested on the solid theological foundation of our Lady's mediation which he explained in his own simple way: "All God's gifts come to us through Mary... Remember that! It is well-nigh impossible to go to Jesus except through Mary, so entrust all your interests to her, especially your soul".¹¹

With these words Don Bosco gives us two directives for our apostolate which must aim at bringing souls to Mary so as to bring them more surely to Jesus.

St. Mary Mazzarello also, stands before us, a completely Marian soul, enveloped in the light of our Lady from childhood to death. When Pope Pius XI was proclaiming the heroicity of her virtues, he said: "There is something great in a life that

⁶ Cf DON BOSCO, *Memorie dell'Oratorio di San F. di Sales*, (Torino, SEI 1946).

⁷ Cf MB XVIII 340-341.

⁸ MB VII 676.

⁹ MB V 439.

¹⁰ MB X 1078.

¹¹ MB VII 676.

develops and unfolds under the guidance of such a mother".¹²

Indeed, Our Lady was for her the living incarnation of the ideal of sanctity which she always kept before her eyes. She held this ideal up to the sisters and girls as well so that they could feel our Lady's attraction, love her and strive to imitate her. However, she wanted them to see our Lady first and foremost as a Mother towards whom she aroused the most filial confidence: "*Have great confidence in our Lady, she will help you in everything*".¹³

History of the
Institute
the story
of Mary's
maternal
Interventions

The history of our Institute, now almost 100 years old, may be identified with the history of our Lady's maternal intervention in response to the prayers of her many daughters. It is precisely at times in our history when we have shown the greatest, liveliest and most filial trust in our Lady that the most outstanding favours and richest results have been achieved.

I am thinking just now of the heroic missionary, Sr Maria Troncatti, who died last August 25th in a plane crash. Her wonderful life is interwoven with prodigious examples of our Lady's intervention associated with the boundless confidence she had in Mary. I shall mention only the miracle which opened the way to our mission among the Kivari. The group of missionaries advanced across the grasslands and reached the town of Mendez. There they found their path blocked. Two hostile tribes had quarrelled a few days previously and the daughter of the Chief in charge of the zone was

¹² PIUS XI., *Discourse on the heroicity of Mother Mazzarello's Virtues*, May, 3rd 1936, in *Quaderni FMA* (Torino, FMA 1962) n. 1, 7.

¹³ *MM L* 20, 3.

shot in the chest. She had survived the shooting but was, of course, critically ill.

When the missionaries with their convoy came in sight, the Kivari, who were armed and fierce-looking, leaped out of the bush. The chief, who was carrying his wounded child, threatened them: "If you cure her you can pass, if not we will kill you!". Mons. Comin who was in charge of the missionaries, gave orders to Sr. Maria Troncatti: "Operate on the child in the name of Mary Help of Christians! We shall be praying". Sr. Mary was a nurse and a member of the Red Cross, but she was not a surgeon or doctor. However, invoking Mary Help of Christians, she operated and extracted a bullet, using only a penknife and some iodine. Thus, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians gained entrance to Macas. The Kivari, however, kept their distance. Sr. Maria turned again to our Lady and prayed: "Mary Help of Christians, send us at least one little Kivara girl!". This is precisely what happened. A little Kivara girl arrived, guided surely by our Lady, the first seed of the marvellous development of that difficult mission. So Don Bosco's prophecy was fulfilled: "Have confidence in our Lady and you will see miracles happening".

Our Lady is still keeping her maternal, powerful, hand on her Institute — *the living monument*' of Don Bosco's gratitude to Mary Help of Christians — she is still working miracles today.

(Cir. n. 528 - May 24 1970)

Marian dimension of our spirituality

Mary in the
history of
the Institute

It awakens great hope in me to hear from many Sisters how the pre-capitular studies have helped them to understand better not only the part played

by our Lady in the foundation of the Institute, but above all, in the religious formation of each one of us. Some Sisters have expressed the wish that this role should be more clearly brought to light in the Constitutions so that it might be more clearly evident that in the Church we are an outstandingly Marian Institute.

Our Lady is truly a vital operative presence at the origin of the Institute, is always present and actively operative in all its history.

We can give concrete examples of this. Mary is a most powerful Mother who guides and protects us; she is the enlightened teacher, who teaches us wisdom, Mother of Christ and of the Church, she continues from heaven her maternal work, cooperating in the birth and development of the divine life in each one of us, as *Lumen Gentium* authoritatively confirms for us: "This maternity of Mary in the order of grace will last for ever without interruption... For, taken up into heaven, she did not lay aside this saving role, but with her manifold acts of intercession continues to win for us the gifts of eternal salvation. By her maternal charity, Mary cares for the brethren of her Son, who are still journeying on earth... until they are led to their happy fatherland".¹⁴

Perfect disciple at the school of Christ, she trains us to listen attentively to His word, to cherish it, and she obtains for us the wisdom to transmit it efficaciously in the Christian education of youth.

Obedient, chaste and poor in the most perfect way, she is the exemplary religious, and as someone has concisely expressed it, *religious mother and mother of religious*.

Her maternal heart, capable of that unlimited love

¹⁴ LG 62.

created in her by the Holy Spirit, can make us participants in her universal maternity.

If we wish, therefore, to work effectively for the future of the Congregation, we must give to Mary the place which is her due in our charism and learn at her school.

The Marian dimension characterizes our spirituality

The Rector Major, Don Egidio Viganò, reminds us that "devotion to Mary Help of Christians is an integrating factor in our Salesian Life in the Church because it forms part of her totality".

It would be senseless, harmful, in fact, to try to separate our spirituality from devotion to Mary Help of Christians, just as it would be absurd to try to separate Don Bosco from the Madonna. Devotion to Mary Help of Christians is an inescapable element in our charism.

Without a healthy vitality in the Marian dimension, our spirituality would feel the effects in vigour and fruitfulness".¹⁵

These authoritative assertions lead us to the conclusion that to be itself, our Institute must be truly Marian.

We often stop to consider the painful drop in vocations, and we ask ourselves: why were vocations so numerous yesterday and not today? Leaving aside the causes which do not depend on us, let us ask ourselves a counter question. Is there, today, in all of our communities that Marian atmosphere that obtained yesterday, and thank God still obtains in many places the growth and blossoming of vocations? Are we still working along the Marian lines given us by Don Bosco?

Care of vocations was one of the most obvious expressions of our Founder's devotion to Mary.

¹⁵ VIGANÒ Egidio, *Maria rinnova la famiglia salesiana di Don Bosco* (Roma, FMA 1978) 28-29.

Don Bosco, as we have already said, lived out in practice the motto of John Paul II: "*Totus tuus, Maria*". He did nothing without Mary. In her he lived and breathed. The Salesians, the young boys of the Valdocco Oratory were enveloped in a Marian atmosphere, which entirely pervaded them. They felt our Lady as a living person in their midst, and they turned to her as to a Mother in their material and spiritual needs.

Looking at her not only did they avoid sin, but they consecrated themselves entirely to her pure heart, giving her everything, body and soul, life and death.

This consecration is the root from which many intrepid vocations developed.

Teachers of
Marian life

It is touching to read the biographies of Salesians and FMA who overcame difficulties of every kind, established colossal works, accomplished immense good, walking as Don Bosco did, hand in hand with the Madonna.

Mother Mazzarello's gesture in putting the keys at Mary's feet every evening is edifying and very significant. It acknowledged her to be the real superior of the house.

How admirable to see Don Balzola, pioneer in the Matto Grosso Mission, write a letter on the 24th of every month to Mary!

The servant of God, Don Rinaldi, gives us food for meditation, when, in the serious preoccupations of his office as Rector Major, he confided, as a child would to his mother, his difficulties to the Blessed Virgin in little notes which he placed under her statue.

I am reading in the book "*Scritti di Vita e di Spiritualità Salesiana*", by Mons. Costamagna (a cura di Don E. Valentini, LAS Roma) the circular on Mary help of Christians, which he wrote to all the

Salesians in Latin America. They are pages aglow with the Marian fire that burned in Valdocco and Mornese.

He who wished to have on his episcopal coat of arms the motto: "*Tota ratio spei Maria*, has truly words aflame with love when speaking of her: "I am a son of Don Bosco. He was my teacher for thirty years. Could I possibly fail to imitate, at least in part, his love and zeal for Mary Help of Christians? Oh, no...! Every son of Don Bosco should be, like him, an apostle of Mary help of Christians".¹⁶

Having quoted Don Bosco's affirmation: "All the marvels that came from my hands bear the imprint of Heaven's Queen; all, all is the work of Mary". Don Costamagna concludes: "Oh dear Don Bosco, he who could imitate you even from afar, in your love for and confidence in our Lady Help of Christians would surely see what miracles are!".¹⁷

We are very conscious that we need miracles even today, for the Church, for society, for families, for youth and for our communities. The Bishops exhort us to the urgency of educating consciences, our own and others, and to feel responsible for the grave events that sadden many countries.

Mary Is Mother
and teacher
even today

Who will be our teacher and Mother in this co-responsibility and in this serious formative obligation? Mary Help of Christians, the Madonna of difficult times.

Is it not she, in the earthly situation in which she lived, who left us the example of those virtues which build the peace of individuals and the whole of humanity?

¹⁶ VALENTINI Eugenio (a cura), *Scritti di vita e spiritualità salesiana di Mons. Costamagna* (Roma, LAS 1979) 139.

¹⁷ *Ibidem* 144.

Is it not she who, incarnating her maternity on an educative basis, encourages and directs us as she did little John Bosco, when he was bewildered and unable to assume the mission confided to him?

Let us have the faith and confidence of our Father, who even today declares to us: "Before God, I emphatically say: "It is sufficient for a boy to enter one of our houses for the Madonna to take him immediately under her special care and protection".¹⁸

Let us take comfort from our Saint's words left us as a testament in her last conference. She invited all to feel Mary present and active in the history of the Institute and in our personal life and to always live under her maternal gaze".¹⁹

(Cir. n. 636 - April 24 1980)

Identity of our name: Daughters of Mary help of Christians

We can say that the heart of the XVIth General Chapter is the loving, deep study of our identity as FMA.

Who are we? What characteristics did Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello give us?

What place have we in the Church, and what field of work has she confided to us?

In the marvellous garden of the Church we admire the merits of many religious institutes and thank God for what He has given to them: we glorify Him and cooperate in the ecclesial community in the measure in which we are ourselves, that is, in the measure in which we live our own identity of Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

¹⁸ MB XVII 114.

¹⁹ Cf Cron III 299.

“It serves the best interests of the Church for religious to have their own special character and purpose”.²⁰

Allow me today to treat of the identity of our name: Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. In the Church we are “Women consecrated for apostolate” who profess to have Mary Help of Christians as Mother, and who therefore, reflect her likeness in their lives.

Like Mother, like Daughter.

Article 2 of the Constitutions affirms: We wish, with Mary and like Mary, to follow Christ more closely”.

It is a programme which gives a marian character to our whole life.

Rediscover our
Mother
Mary Help of
Christians

Our very name imposes on us as first capitular duty, to rediscover our Mother, Mary most Holy, in her intimate life, in the plan of redemption, in the life of the Church and in our own life.

In a clarification, rich in content and orientation, given in the course of the Chapter, Fr. Paul Natali reminded us that:

“Mary is the creature who received most from and gave most to Jesus. He confided to Mary the building up, along with us, of our personal response to His plan of redemption.

It is impossible to do it in any other way, or by other means. Why?

Because the Lord has willed it so.

Our Lady becomes, therefore, a living structure of necessary mediation.

The ultimate and absolute source is always Christ, but our Lady has been chosen as indirect Source”.

²⁰ PC 2b.

Meaning of our
daily
consecration
to Mary

This brings as consequence our Consecration to her "Consecration to Mary", Don Natali explains, "means understanding who she is in our lives".

To consecrate ourselves is to entrust ourselves, to give ourselves to her: to ask her to obtain for us the light of the Holy Spirit, to orientate our liberty, to cure our poverty, to help us free ourselves from evil in such a way that from our being new, creative energies will be released in us for the Kingdom and for our brothers.

We entrust ourselves to her so that our consecration to God may be possible, authentic and real, more and more so every day".

An attentive meditation of these words leads us to a logical consequence: we will not have the light to understand that path of renewal which the Capitular documents propose for the good of the Church and the Institute, if we do not live in Mary.

St. Mary Mazzarello in her first consecration to Mary Immaculate in 1857 made the promise of "avoiding even the smallest deliberate venial sin and of giving herself in charity to her neighbour". Thus, all her life had the dimension of love.

In the last conference of 1880 speaking to the Sisters of her experiences over the years, which frequently made her refer to Mornese as "*Mary's House*", she left this maternal souvenir: "**Let us always act as if the Madonna were present with us, because she really is, even though we do not see her**".

She thus traced the quickest and most secure way of living our consecration to our Lady.

Source of
spiritual
transformations

If this act of entrustment is made with great love it will be the source of spiritual transformations. We will notice that our Lady will enter with a new power into our houses and from within the individual members and the community will effect those conversions she alone can obtain, because no one,

more than she, participates in the power of the Holy Spirit. "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you".²¹

It is Mary who will give us a new dimension of love for the Church and for the Institute which is a cell of the Church. In the magazine "*Madre Nostra*", a comment on our "*Consecration Prayer*" is given in which its ecclesial dimension is clearly set out.

Consecrated to our Lady as her daughters, we are joyfully conscious that we are personally inserted in the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ and participate with all our life in the universal maternity of Mary.

"Love for the Church is translated into love for Mary and vice versa, because one cannot exist without the other... We cannot speak of Church if Mary, the Mother of the Lord, and His brothers is not present".²²

Missionary
perspective of
consecration to
Mary

In this Holy Year, centenary of the Salesian Missions, our Lady will help us to understand our consecration to her in a *particularly missionary perspective*. She will have us bless God for the touching spectacle of thousands and thousands of pilgrims whom "a secret attraction of the Spirit leads this year to the centre of Christianity to rediscover, with Christ, the evangelic al form of life", to use the words of Paul VI.

She will have us participate fervently in the solemn Centennial commemoration of the departure of the first Salesian Missionaries, which will take place in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians on November 11th.

²¹ Cf *Lk* I, 35.

²² *MC* 28.

Above all, our Lady will make us feel that the crowds of praying pilgrims in the Roman basilicas, the hut-dwellers in the forests, and those who dwell in skyscrapers in the big cities, the Sisters in our community, the girls of the oratory or school, the poor, the rich, the honest man or the delinquent, the stranger whom we meet on the street or any person of the diverse social conditions which the history of every day and every nation registers, all are bound to me, and I have a personal responsibility for all in prayer, in the accomplishment of my duty, in acceptance of the will of God, in the love I cultivate in my heart for God and my neighbour.

No act of my life can be separated from the life of all the world: where I am, the church is present, and so is all humanity, because in Christ I am united to all.

In the Chronicles of the Institute we read that during the war, in 1859-1860, the news of so much suffering, of so many victims offered occasion to Mary Mazzarello to concentrate ever more attentively on the little virtues of every day unobserved, perhaps, but precious in the eyes of God.²³

In the measure in which my every action grows in rectitude and love, I bring about growth in the community, in the Church, in the world.

Consecration to Mary, the first Missionary, gives a missionary sense to all our life, through which there will no longer be "big" things and "small", but everything will become great in the measure in which love enters into it.

Some points for our personal reflection

- Am I conscious that *Mary is an active presence in my life* and that I acquire my identity as Daugh-

²³ Cf *Cron* I 85-87.

ter of Mary Help of Christians in the measure in which, consecrating myself to her, I faithfully follow in her footsteps and make her known to all who approach me in my mission?

- Do I give my life a *Missionary dimension* as Mary did in the measure in which, like Mary, I come away from my egoism, and participating in her universal motherhood, know how to transform in silent and generous offering the daily sacrifices, especially those called for by the duties of my state?

(Cir. n. 584 - September 24 1975)

Rebirth with Mary

I have recently returned from my journeys in Chile and Argentina and find it impossible not to tell you about the deep emotion I experienced when visiting these countries shown by a merciful God to Don Bosco as the field of labour destined for his sons and daughters: lands blessed and sanctified by the heroism of many of our Sisters and by many holy Salesians.

Our Lady-guide
and support
of the first
missionaries

The first steps of our generous missionaries were, in truth, directed by our Lady herself, thus confirming Don Bosco's words to the departing pioneer Missionaries, "Place no limit to your trust in the Virgin, Help of Christians, and you will see what miracles are!". This is the only way of explaining the wonders which took place in those lands, where our sisters, joyful amidst unspeakable sacrifices, created oases of Marian devotion wherever they went.

The harvest of this great virtue and generous dedications is now being reaped in the numerous, successful works for youth where the Sisters are still dedicating themselves with zeal and love today.

It was a unique joy for me to meet all the dear sisters working in the countries I visited, but I found special pleasure in meeting those Sisters linked with the beginnings, those who knew the courageous pioneers of the real missions, such as Mother Vallese, and who shared the heroic sacrifices of those times. It was a happiness also, to meet sisters trained by the great superiors, such as Mother Luisa Vaschetti, Mother Maddalena Promis, and Mother Elvira Rizzi who all gave such impetus to the works and impressed such an unmistakably religious character on all the Sisters.

Rebirth with
Mary to progress
and persevere

The wealth of holy impressions and the fundamental lessons derived from this experience is a further impetus to rebirth at the beginning of our second century: *To be re-born with Mary in order to progress and persevere.* There is the evidence, dear sisters, that this rebirth with Mary has already started.

I have been turning over in my mind what you have said and written to me and have found much satisfaction in preparing an edifying and stimulating anthology from these statements. I quote some of them here. Thus, this circular will be your own composition and will serve as a preparation for the solemn renewal of our consecration to Mary Help of Christians, which we intend to make on May 24th with whole-hearted sincerity.

Here then, are some expressions which reveal a close relationship with Mary most holy, and which testify to her motherly interventions in our lives and in the lives of those entrusted to us.

Experiences of
marian life

Our Lady's voice has been heard by some Sisters through reflection and meditation, opening up new horizons, calling souls onward to greater intimacy with her and to a more active participation in her life.

I transcribe some expressions.

"I have always prayed to our Lady, but I found it difficult to speak familiarly with her. When I received the Magazine *'Our Mother'* I reflected seriously on the title, and my eyes often rested on the gentle countenance of Mary Help of Christians which is depicted on the cover. I meditated on the various articles, rather than read them and immediately great confidence welled up in my heart. I now feel able to speak to our Lady as I would to my mother".

"I was struck, one day, by those words of the Gospel: *'Mary kept all these things in her heart'*. Little by little I learned to observe silence better and to think back more often on the morning meditation. I now enjoy more inward peace and I think I am becoming better".

"I meditated for some time on the life of Mary at Nazareth and pondered deeply over her poverty. Wishing to imitate her, I made several detachments and I now find I have more place for God in my soul. Sixty years of my life have already gone and no sensible devotion remains, but my thoughts turn often to our Lady and she has become my guide in all I do".

"Other Sisters have experienced her spiritual nearness, her tangible, motherly care and her help in difficulties and trying times. They look to her as to an encouraging, living model on which to base all they do and they experience a need to turn to her more often in childlike, trustful prayer.

"*'Remember, our Lady is now your Mother'*. These are the words my saintly mother addressed to me on her death-bed and I have never forgotten them. They have become still more meaningful for me during this centenary year and I assure you that

I can do nothing without first raising my eyes to my heavenly Mother”.

“Dear Mother, I am following your advice: every morning I entrust my community and myself to our Lady and every evening I balance the day’s accounts at her feet. I am still a very inexperienced superior, but I find great help in this Marian arrangement of my day”.

“The thought that our Lady was a cook has given me great love for kitchen work. I do it very willingly. The more tired I feel the happier I am as I go to bed at night, and I say to our Lord, ‘I have given you all I could today and I thank you for letting me pass another day in your service’ ”.

“I have learned through experience that it is better to say a ‘Hail Mary’ than to grumble about difficulties. Many are the problems I have solved in this way and how great is the peace I enjoy!”.

“My success in overcoming the sense of distrust and insecurity I felt is due to our Lady. I repeated many times, ‘Help of Christians, help me too’ ”.

“I have had to undergo very painful medical treatment. With our Lady’s medal firmly held in my hand, I experienced strength that most certainly was not my own”.

“Mary help of Christians helped me in a difficulty I experienced with a certain person. No matter what I tried it seemed impossible to set up a cordial relationship with her. Then, every time I met her I said as fervently as I could, ‘Mary help of Christians, Pray for us’”. One month passed and yet another. Then one day quite unexpectedly, that person cordially sought my help. After a very friendly conversation our interpersonal relationship became, and still remains truly friendly and fraternal”.

Some Sisters, through deepening their interior contact with Mary, have established a continuous colloquy of reparation and love with her and have thus discovered the true meaning of their vocation. "I have bound myself to say a complete rosary every day during the centenary year with the intention of making reparation for the lack of prayer in the world".

"I have acquired the habit of giving our Lady an account of my day every evening. What a lot of good this practice has done me!".

"Through the attentive reading of the *Centenary 'Numero Unico'* I have made a rediscovery of my vocation as Daughter of Mary Help of Christians because I now have the conviction and realise with deep emotion that our Lady has always accompanied our Institute step by step along its path".

Power of
attraction
and
transformation

Yet still others have learned and are still learning from experience that our Lady is truly their Help of Christians in the apostolate, and they realise the greatness of her power in attracting and transforming souls.

"The suggestion of making a study of the presence of Mary was received enthusiastically by the Oratory girls of our house. The happiest result of all was the revival of the Children of Mary Sodality".

"I would never have believed that the Rosary still had such an attraction for the girls. I resolved to help them to appreciate its value, and now it is the girls themselves who look up the Gospel passages relating the Mysteries. It is they who assign the intentions which are so beautiful that the time passes very quickly. If, for some reason, the rosary is not said at the usual time, it is the girls themselves who ask when it is to be recited".

"When I visit the native villages, I often experience the power of the medal of Mary Help of Christians.

I offer it with faith asking Our Lady to act. What wonderful conversions have resulted from this!”.

“It can be stated that all the pupils leaving the school, even the non catholics, carry away with them a great love for our Lay. It is very touching to see the pagan past-pupils, now become mothers, bringing their babies to our chapel in order to offer them to our Lady”.

Knowledgeable
preparation of
our renewed
consecration
to Mary

These declarations are a real comfort and, as I have already said, should spur us on to an intense and more conscientious preparation for the renewal of our consecration to Our Lady on May 24th. This must be considered the focal point of our Centenary Year.

When I proposed this to you in last September’s circular letter I said we shall, in this manner, reaffirm the total donation of ourselves to Jesus through Mary. It will not be just an occasion for reciting a formula with greater solemnity, but a probing of the depths of its significance, an increasing of our awareness of the obligations it imposes and an integrating of them into our lives. We say this act of consecration daily and, perhaps through force of habit, it has become just a casual performance. Let us now take it as a subject for attentive meditation that we may enter thoroughly into the sentiments we profess, the promises we make and the resolutions we formulate.

In the first place, we say that we consecrate ourselves entirely to our Lady. Let us now probe the meaning of this consecration to its very depths. Pope Pius XII puts this very clearly in one of his discourses. He says in his discourse of January 25th 1945: “Consecration to the Mother of God is a complete and total gift of self for time and for eternity; it is not just a mere form, a mere sentiment, but a gift which is real and effective, and is fulfilled in an intensely Christian and Marian life,

in an apostolate in which the soul becomes Mary's minister, her visible hands on earth, in a super-abundant interior life which spreads the floodwaters of solid devotion, worship, charity and zeal over all external work".

The invocations which follow are expressions of our full awareness that *we belong to the Church*. We enlarge our hearts and our prayer reaches the furthestmost ends of the earth in order to bring all into the unity of the one, holy Church; to raise up apostolic souls for the expansion of the kingdom of Jesus Christ.

But, above all, let our line of action be found in those words which bind us to *be witnesses to her in the world*, we may attain to the complete that fulfillment of our consecration.

The concluding words call us to repeat our pledge of fidelity through the renewal of our religious consecration, secure in the knowledge that we belong to an Institute she has clearly "willed and blessed".

Thus, the consecration of May 24th will mean an increase in our awareness of the *Marian Spirituality* of our Institute to which article 59 of the Constitutions calls us. It will help us to live our consecration by modelling ourselves on our Mother, the Help of Christians, as article 9 expects us to do.

In this way the much-desired rebirth of the whole Institute *in Mary and with Mary* will certainly be verified.

(Cir. n. 549 - April 24 1972)

Relaunching of the devotion to Mary Help of Christians

Renewed
commitment to
marian devotion

Dear Sisters, if we wish the intense study carried out on our Constitutions to bring about in our communities the practical realization of the spirit

desired by our lady,²⁴ let us renew our commitment to the relaunching of the devotion to Mary Help of Christians, entrusted to us by the Rector Major. The approaching month of Our Lady Help of Christians is a happy opportunity to re-read in community his circular: *Mary renews the Salesian Family of Don Bosco*, and to linger, in particular, on those pages which deal in a concrete way with the Marian re-launching.

In the special number of *Madre Nostra* (December 1978) you have expressed worthwhile proposals which I hope will be carried out little by little.

In fact, I read with pleasure in the various provincial bulletins of many beautiful initiatives.

- Correspondence courses on our Lady at scriptural and theological levels are held continuously.
- In preparation for our Lady's feasts it is proposed to make her the centre of interest and of imitation for all the educational environment.
- Young people and their families are invited to participate in Marian assemblies and exhibits.
- Books, pamphlets, pictures of Mary Help of Christians are distributed.
- The recitation of the Rosary and of the prayer "O Mary, most powerful Virgin... is encouraged".
- The Marian Associations are revitalised in a new style.
- The most committed girls are helped to consecrate themselves to Mary.

Plan of marian
animation

Then I have the joy of telling you that the Rector Major will present in the next number of the *Atti del Consiglio Superiore*, a plan of animation for

²⁴ Cf CAPETTI G., *Il cammino dell'Istituto nel corso di un secolo I* (Roma, FMA 1972) 122-127.

the Salesian Family, studied by the Marian Academy and by a group of participants at the week of Marian spirituality in January '78.

The programme of the plan is vast and extends to all our pupils.

In this also we have to recognise a challenge of the Holy Spirit for us: for the good success of the Chapter we must confide filially and intensely in the maternal intervention of Mary most holy.

I hope to be able to send you the text of *the plan of Marian animation*. in the near future. Until such time as we can read, study and implement it, let us intensify our personal renewal in devotion to Mary Help of Christians from the first morning when we recite our consecration.

It is not a simple prayer, it is a giving of our whole being to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. And Mary brings us to Jesus, she communicates to us her love for Him, for souls and she helps us to live, no longer according to the flesh, but in the Spirit.

It is the programme which the Holy Father pronounced with such warmth in his discourse to thousands of religious in the Basilica of Mary help of Christians during his recent visit to Turin.

“May the Virgin Mary be the admirable model of your lives as consecrated souls... So perfect was Mary, that her life alone is a rule for all”.

And he concluded: “Leaving you this souvenir under the eyes of Our Lady help of Christians, I repeat my word of encouragement for your worthy apostolate and also my Easter wishes, hoping that the grace of your vocation will produce abundant fruit of spiritual life in the Church”.²⁵

²⁵ JOHN PAUL II, *Discourse to Religious*. Turin April, 13-14 1980.

These words and the others pronounced by His Holiness on the memorable 13th of April in Turin, and which you will surely have read in the papers, will serve to encourage us in our marian relaunching, until it finds expression in a life lived in Mary, with Mary and for Mary.

(Cir. n. 636 - April 24 1980)

You will have read in the *Notiziario* the well-prepared homily given by Father Egidio Viganò, the Rector Major, on his first visit to the Generalate.

He said that the Congregation was born and grew because our Lady willed it and it will be renewed in the measure in which our Lady again takes the place given her by our charism. He then concluded by asking us as first gift from the FMA — *to take on the responsibility of revitalising and implementing devotion to Mary Help of Christians, in collaboration with all the Salesian Family.*²⁶

Responsibility of
the Institute -
to revive the
marian devotion

Could he have given us a more acceptable, more desirable, more assuring task for our spiritual renewal?

Prayer, study, initiatives and helps of every kind will be necessary for *the relaunching of this dear devotion* in the communities, in families and in the parishes.

We are all called to this blessed mission of *living and causing to live intensely the marian character of our Institute*, willed by Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello.

(Cir. n. 611 - February 24 1978)

The Rector Major has made us the precious gift of his first circular which concentrates entirely on devotion to Mary help of Christians.

²⁶ *Notiziario*, Feb. 1978.

Perfectly in tune with Don Bosco, the Rector Major tells us that she who, in former times was the 'foundress' and support of the Congregation, must today return to take her place in our religious family through a vital and active renewal of "the Marian dimension of our vocation".

This is the task that we, Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, took upon ourselves in the presence of the assembled XXI General Chapter, following a direct invitation by the Rector Major. We should, therefore, be deeply grateful to him for giving us such authentic help in carrying out what we are already supposed to do.

Let us then welcome his circular as if it came from Don Bosco himself.

A stimulating
circular

It does, in fact, bring to us the profound motivations that led Don Bosco to the choice of Mary help of Christians and the ecclesial and apostolic projects with which he lived and propagated this devotion.

Let us study it attentively in profound meditation and earnest prayer in order "to secure the foundations of our faith, and the doctrinal implications and personal attitude that derives from it".

Besides, the Rector Major tells us to use it as a stimulant to an 'active undertaking' that will bring about the translation of our marian devotion into a 'really personal ecclesial undertaking' as it was for Don Bosco. Thus we shall become increasingly aware that it is an 'indispensable element of our charism that permeates its character and vitalises all its components'.²⁷

How could I conclude otherwise than with the exhortation, "Let us take our Lady home"?
Let us take her, above all, to the home of our hearts,

²⁷ VIGANÒ, *Maria rinnova* 29.

“then we shall indeed become ‘favourite disciples’, because we shall then pay better attention to our baptismal sonship and experience in a more factual way the beneficial effects of the motherhood of Mary”.²⁸

(Cir. n. 615 - June 3 1978)

Marian tradition of the Institute

Renew our marian
mission in the
Church

Is our devotion to our Lady and our apostolate in spreading this devotion still marked by the enthusiasm and fervour of our predecessors in the Institute? The best homage we could give our Lady Help of Christians on her feast-day is an active, positive renewal of our marian outlook and mission in the Church, as entrusted to our Institute by Don Bosco.

The Council has spurred us on to this renewal. Chapter 8 of *Lumen Gentium* gives us the solid dogmatic foundations of Marian devotion. This excellent chapter develops the close relationship of our Lady with the Mystery of Christ and the Church. It shows her function in the economy of salvation and in the formation of the Church. It shows our Lady in the glory of her virginity and divine motherhood as a type and model of the Church itself. It explains the nature, foundation and spirit of the devotion due to her, presenting her, in short, as a pledge of certain hope and consolation in our pilgrimage towards our heavenly homeland.

The decree *Apostolicam Actuositatem* says: “People should pay her every honour and entrust their lives and apostolate to her maternal care”.²⁹

²⁸ VIGANÒ, *Maria rinnova* 5.

²⁹ AA 4.

In discussing this devotion, *Lumen Gentium* brings out how the Church has always "rightly honoured our Lady with special devotion". It urges us to hold "in great esteem the practices of piety towards her, recommended through the centuries by the teaching body of the Church".³⁰

Salesian tradition offers us ample means for fostering devotion to our Lady. **The first and most important of these is to create in and around us a deeply Marian atmosphere which will reflect the Marian Spirituality of our Institute**³¹ so that our Lady will shine forth in our communities as "*The Model*" to which we must all conform.

Other effective means are the following:

- Let us prepare for her feasts with filial devotion and celebrate them with special solemnity and in a variety of ways.
- Let us give the 24th of the month the traditional note of fervour.
- Let us make our Lady known either through special instructions or through the lives of saints particularly devoted to her.
- Let us make known the rich inheritance of Marian piety in the Institute and the sometimes miraculous intervention of our Lady.
- Let us revive the lovely traditions so much recommended and practised by Don Bosco: displaying a picture of Mary Help of Christians everywhere and distributing pictures and medals of her.
- Let us get the children to crown their devotion to her by a consecration to her which will be a renewed baptismal consecration through Mary, Mother of divine Grace.

³⁰ *LG* 66-67.

³¹ *Cf C 1969* 59.

- Let us put Don Bosco's programme into practice: "Everything with our Lady, nothing without her".

The house which renews itself most in fervent devotion to Mary Help of Christians will certainly be the house most renewed in the atmosphere of piety, union, serenity, generosity and zeal.

May our Lady thus honoured continue to live "*in our midst*" as she used to live at Nizza, according to the testimony of our Saint.

(Cir. n. 528 - May 24 1970)

The holy
rosary

Among the testimonies of our belonging to Mary and of our love for her, one of the most beautiful and most frequently recommended by the Church and by our saints is the recitation of the holy rosary. When we recite the rosary together, we perform a community act which testifies to the marian character of our Institute. The community which unites in meditating the mysteries of salvation and in contemplation of the person of Mary, associated with Christ in His salvific work, lives in a climate of intense spirituality, illuminated and fortified by the maternal presence of the Holy Virgin.

"Blessed those houses", Don Bosco said, "in which the rosary resounds". Blessed are those communities in which the attentive and devout recitation of the rosary becomes a communion of minds, which immerse themselves together in the depth of the mysteries of God, and in a harmonious agreement of hearts which gives expression to a filial prayer to our Lady.

The rosary will become the sweet chain which links hearts together and binds them to God. If we understand the beauty and importance of the rosary, we shall recite it with great spiritual relish and we shall know how to infuse this relish in the hearts of our girls.

Authentic quotations and examples on the devotion of the Rosary

Allow me to cite authoritative words and examples about "this salutary devotion".³²

— Our Father, Don Bosco, "never permitted a dispensation from a community recitation of the rosary for any reason. It was for him an indispensable exercise of piety for a good life; the daily bread to keep oneself strong and fit".³³ He "held that the rosary is a weapon which gave victory not only to individuals, but also to the Church".³⁴

— Mother Mazarello has left nothing written on the rosary, but her very outstanding example is not wanting: the recitation of the rosary accompanied her work in the fields of Valponasca; measured her steps in the long journey to the parish church; sanctified family life; consecrated the days of the workroom and founded in unity the fervent community of Mornese.

— Mother Linda insisted in her circulars: "Let us be apostles of the rosary among the girls! Oh, if we could succeed in giving new life to the holy custom of saying the family rosary!"³⁵

Mother Angela drew our attention to the riches and value of it: "The rosary not only unites us with God, ever present, but raises us to the contemplation of His mysteries".³⁶

— Reverend Fr. Ziggotti, in his precious stenna for the Centenary of the apparitions of Lourdes in 1958 wrote: "The rosary is our daily conversation with Mary. The rosary is one of the most suitable prayers to accustom the boys and the faithful to pray meditatively and to meditate while praying orally".³⁷

³² MC 55.

³³ MB I 90.

³⁴ MB VII 240.

³⁵ Mother Linda LUCOTTI, Cir. September 24th 1952.

³⁶ Mother Angela VESPA, *Circular* September 24th 1967.

³⁷ Don ZIGGIOTTI Renato, ACS February 11th 1958.

— The present Superior and Father, don Luigi Ricceri asked: “And the rosary? I know it is contested, but let us remember: it is a simple prayer, christian and salesian. It is a prayer that suits everybody: the simple woman, the theologian and the scientist. It is the prayer of Don Bosco, of Pope John, of Professor Medi”.³⁸

— From Pope John XXIII we quote the following statement, confirmed by the example of his life: “All that is fruitful and striking in the life of the Church is gathered together in the rosary”. For many years he recited, not just a third part of the rosary, but all fifteen mysteries.³⁹

— The present Holy Father, in his *Apostolic Exhortation, Marialis cultus*, is not afraid to assert: “After the celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours... the rosary is, without doubt one of the best and most efficacious prayers in common”.⁴⁰

“It has been emphasised tha the rosary is, as it were, a branch sprung from the ancient trunk of the christian Liturgy, the *Psalter* whereby the humble were associated in the Church's hymn of praise and universal intercession”.⁴¹

“To recite the rosary is to see develop before our eyes the film of the story of humanity and of the plan of God, seen in company with Mary, and with her eyes. Meditating on Mary's availability without reserve, on the totality of her consent, on her total participation in the divine plan, the recitation of the rosary infuses a sense of security.

The rosary is a means chosen by our Lady herself to lead each of us to discover ever better the design

³⁸ Don RICCERI Luigi, in *La parola del Rettor Maggiore*, III 13.

³⁹ Cf JOHN XXIII, General Audience, October 13th 1960.

⁴⁰ MC 54.

⁴¹ MC 48.

of God and to cooperate with docility”.

Whoever finds it foolish to pursue the Aves of the rosary shows that he does not know what it means to love truly”.

— The recitation of the Ave Maria is like the background of music that helps towards the contemplation of the mystery and makes it easier for the soul to dedicate itself solely to Christ our Lord”.

Quotations and examples could be multiplied endlessly. You yourselves can find many others. All help to enlighten us on the beauty and value of the rosary, so much recommended by our Lady herself at Lourdes and Fatima.

Let us, therefore, take up with renewed faith and greater love the recitation of the rosary during the month of October, as a powerful means for promoting union in our communities, growth in grace and efficacy of apostolate.

In the magnificent fresco of Michelangelo on the Last Judgement, in the Sistine Chapel, one sees a sinner being drawn up towards eternal salvation by a little rosary beads, little but powerful.

Let us also attach ourselves, dear Sisters, to the holy rosary so that it may sustain us in dangers, may draw us ever higher towards that sanctity which shines in all its fulness in our heavenly Mother.

(Cir. n. 576 - September 24 1974)

Don Bosco's words. “I wouldn't mind giving up many other important things but not this” (the recitation of the rosary),⁴² find an echo in a letter published recently in a booklet '*Tua Madre*' in which the words of Lucy of Fatima are quoted.

Intensify
devotion to Mary

⁴² MB III 294.

Here is what she writes: "The decline of the world is doubtlessly due to the decay of the spirit of prayer. Our Lady could foresee that this would happen and that is why she insisted so much on the recitation of the rosary. The rosary, after the Blessed Sacrament, is the best means of preserving and increasing faith in souls. This is why the devil has launched his campaign against it with the disastrous consequences we can see".

Lucy goes on to develop her statement and brings out how the opening invocation of the rosary and the Gloria Patri "put us in contact with the Blessed Trinity". She concludes from this that "the rosary could be called a Trinitarian rather than a Marian prayer", and all the more so because the Hail Mary itself is a prayer addressed to God and contains the first revelation made by Him to men concerning the mystery of the Trinity". In short, everything is directed to God through Mary's union with Him" and the results of their work, she concludes: "The rosary is the most powerful defence-weapon in the field of battle".⁴³

Let us take up this holy *weapon* so strongly recommended by our holy Founder. Let us use it in defence of faith and purity and as a sure means of victory against all the dangers and difficulties we meet with.

(Cir. n. 538 - April 24 1971)

Heart of our marian devotion - Mary Help of Christians

In my last circular I dealt with "the virtue of Mary",⁴⁴ as Don Bosco appropriately called it —

⁴³ Lucy of Fatima, *Letter*, in 'Tua Madre' (Turin 1971).

⁴⁴ *MB XVIII*, 24.

purity. To make this virtue flourish, as we resolved in ourselves, our children and our houses, I have only to talk to you about her who personifies it, namely, our heavenly Mother the Help of Christians.

On the 17th of October 1884, Don Bosco felt himself growing weak and wrote to his secretary, Don Berto: "Let us never forget that it won't be long now before you and I will have to answer to God for our actions".⁴⁵ Fired by this thought, he began several times to draft his last will and testament for his sons. Among these precious pages, all to be found in Volume 17 of the Biographical Memoirs, there is one with '*special advice for all*'. The second of these warm, fatherly recommendations reads as follows: "Our Lady will certainly continue to protect our Congregation and Salesian works if we continue to have confidence in her and continue to foster devotion to her.

To promote the devotion to Mary Help of Christians

Her feast-days, especially the big ones, her novenas, tridiums and the month dedicated to her should always be warmly spoken of in public and private. Use should be made of leaflets, books, medals and pictures. We should publish or just tell about the favours and blessings which our heavenly benefactress is granting all the time to suffering mankind".⁴⁶

When his eyes were already looking into eternity, Don Bosco saw in a clear light how much our Lady had done and still wanted to do for his works. He understood even better the priceless gift which God had given him and his sons, beginning with the dream he had when he was nine. Here the Mysterious Person had pointed to the Blessed Virgin as his guide and help, saying: "I will give you a teacher under whose direction you

⁴⁵ MB XVII 256.

⁴⁶ MB XVII 261.

can become wise and without whom all wisdom becomes foolishness".⁴⁷

His heart was touched by the tangible, continuous protection of Our Lady and he wrote the following consoling and re-assuring words: "Our Lady *will certainly continue* to protect our Congregation and the Salesian works.

"*Will continue*". In Don Bosco's memory there passes as in a film all the times our Lady had figured in his life and works and in the lives of his sons. Looking above all at the progress of the Congregation he could not help exclaiming: "Through her (the Help of Christians) our Congregation exists and prospers!".⁴⁸

Prodigious
Intervention of
Mary in Don
Bosco's Life

Deeply moved, Don Bosco said in a goodnight on September 1867: "Every day, my dear boys, we see what marvels are worked through the intercession of our Lady help of Christians. A few days ago a cripple on crutches came into my room and went away carrying them on his shoulder. One incident followed another: a demoniac was delivered from the devil through the intercession of our Lady on the feast of her nativity.⁴⁹ A man whose arm had been paralysed for a year, immediately recovered its use and wrote with his own hand: "Mary Help of Christians, help me!"⁵⁰ A boy, Peter Racca, entered the Oratory in 1860 but could not study because of his slow understanding and poor memory. He prayed to our Lady with faith and one night became conscious of her re-assuring presence beside him. From the on, his memory was remarkably good and he could keep up with his studies without any trouble".⁵¹

⁴⁷ MB I 124.

⁴⁸ MB XII 578.

⁴⁹ Cf MB VIII 937-939.

⁵⁰ MB VIII 796.

⁵¹ Cf MB VI 770-771.

Hence, Don Bosco could confirm: "Here we are fortunate enough to have Mary Help of Christians ready to protect us. Every day she grants many graces including material ones... However, her most outstanding favours are the unknown ones. Numerous people have been able to settle their spiritual affairs through the intercession of our Lady!"⁵²

Don Bosco attributed everything to our Lady. He kept repeating that all the success of the Oratory and the Congregation was due to Mary's goodness.⁵³

This is what our Lady meant to Don Bosco and we are consoled by the promise:

"Our Lady will continue to protect us if we do not lessen our trust in her".

Saint Mary Mazarello possessed trust of this sort and we read in Maccono's life of the Saint: "Her devotion to Mary Help of Christians knew no bounds. She considered her the inspirer and fountress of the Congregation! She loved her and begged her to be the real mother of her daughters and the real Superior General of the Institute. She prayed unceasingly to her to protect her and free her and her daughters from the danger of offending God and that all of them might live in poverty, humility and purity like our Lady".⁵⁴ She looked on her as the Superior of the Institute and "every evening placed the key of the house at her feet". At Nizza as at Mornese, our Lady was honoured by all the Sisters every day but especially on her feasts. The feast of Mary Help of Christians was kept with great solemnity, the local people also joining in.⁵⁵

This filial confidence in Mary has been handed

The confidence
of our Saint
and of our
first Sisters
in Mary

⁵² MB XIII 407-409.

⁵³ MB V 155.

⁵⁴ MACCONO, *Santa I* 309-310.

⁵⁵ Cf *above* 313-314.

down from one generation of sisters to the next. The century of our Institute's history bears witness to this. Indeed, we might describe our history as an unbroken chain of favours, graces and miracles obtained from our heavenly Mother.

Extraordinary
protection of
the Blessed
Virgin

Looking through the biographies of our deceased Sisters or at the *Notiziario* we find constant proof of gratitude for the tangible help given by our Lady to fulfill one's vocation in the Institute, to solve doubts and overcome difficulties through persevering fidelity in the religious life.

There are also outstanding graces showing the extraordinary at times miraculous, protection, of our Lady. I am hoping to give you a collection of these to mark the centenary we are just beginning. For the moment I shall choose a few samples:

— In India, a missionary Sister visiting the villages with a girl was crossing the forest and suddenly became aware of a tiger just a few steps from her. Gripping her rosary-beads tightly in her hand she entrusted herself to our Lady. The tiger stopped, then step by step withdrew into the forest.

— On the Rio Negro, the boat in which a Sister was travelling was wrecked and she found herself thrown on a rock, chin deep in water, and at the point of being rushed onwards towards a waterfall. Calling on Mary Help of Christians for aid, she was saved beyond all expectation.⁵⁶

— In Peru, unknown to the passengers, the plane in which the provincial was travelling burst into flames just before landing. The Superior and a group of pupils who were waiting to meet her at the airport saw the plane on fire. In great dismay they called on Mary Help of Christians with

⁵⁶ Cf *Notiziario*, February 1960.

faith. They could see that once the plane landed the fire would spread to every part. But thanks to their prayers, just the opposite happened; the flames died out and the passengers emerged from the charred plane quite unharmed.⁵⁷

FMA
distinguished in
the devotion to
Mary Help of
Christians

How many of our Sisters showed themselves true Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, fostering in themselves and in souls a sincere and profound devotion to our heavenly Mother! I shall quote only a few of the many that are really outstanding.

Sr. Mary Appendino was a real apostle of devotion to Mary Help of Christians. Hundreds of pupils, oratorians, parents and friends could testify to the wonderful example she gave.

Thanks to her, the village of Diano d'Alba merited the name of '*The Region of Mary Help of Christians*'. Every house there was consecrated to the Help of Christians and her picture hung in the place of honour. Almost every family had a daughter a nun, while a large number of boys, imbued with this devotion began studying for the priesthood.

Sr. Amalia Telesio, who died in Bordighera in 1903, showed outstanding devotion to our Lady and kept her feasts so fervently and devoutly that the whole community benefitted.

Sr. Antonietta Zipper who died in Mexico in 1904, had great love for the title 'Help of Christians' and used to give great importance to it, using all her initiative to make her pupils understand its true meaning: "If we are the daughters big or small, of the Help of Christians, we must be a help to one another just as she helped others; let us always be a help to one another and to everyone". This is just what she herself did: she was a helper

⁵⁷ Cf *Notiziario*, October 1967.

of the Help of Christians, especially for the salvations of souls.

And what a beautiful death crowned the life of these true Daughters of Mary Help of Christians! It fills us with joy and emotion to read about their death. Let me quote Sr, Cecilia Marco who died at Luvinato (Varese) in 1954. She exclaimed on her deathbed: "How lovely it is to die after having loved our Lady dearly and having made her loved by young and old alike!" I should like to tell everyone to love our Lady, because instead of being afraid when they are dying, they will experience great tranquility and peace!".

She left this souvenir to the Sister her bedside: "Love our Lady dearly; begin to love her at once... I have loved her since childhood and how happy I am about it! I am really happy with nothing to disturb me. How lovely it is to die like this! I am longing for heaven!".

Grow In
confidence
in Mary

Let us continue along the bright path of these Sisters who understood deeply the Marian nature of their vocation. If we do so, the consoling prophetic words of our Father will come true for us too: "Our Lady will continue to protect us if we continue to have confidence in her and promote devotion to her".

Don Bosco repeats these words to us today from heaven with greater fire and urgency, now that he can see the truth of what he claimed on earth: "Only in heaven will we understand what our Lady has done for us",⁵⁸ so from heaven he invites us to deepen our knowledge of Mary in order to increase our confidence in her. He invites us to "Promote devotion to her with filial fervour and to tell people

⁵⁸ MB X 1078.

publicly and in private of the favours she has granted”.

This is just the right time to take up Don Bosco's challenge: it is the month of Mary Help of Christians and the times we live in are full of difficulties. What Don Bosco said of his own day is just as true today under different aspects and in other forms: “Times are so distressing that we really do need our Lady to help us keep and defend the Christian faith”.⁵⁹

(*Cir.* n. 538 - April 24 1971)

⁵⁹ *MB* VII 134.

Chapter IV

SAINT MARIA D. MAZZARELLO MOTHER AND COFOUNDERESS

Reminders of Mother Mazzarello are found frequently in the circulars of Mother Ersilia, who feels deeply the urgency of maintaining and strengthening fidelity to the spirit of the origins in the Institute.

The centenary of the Institute and still more the centenary of the death of the Cofoundress present worthwhile cues for the underlining and study of her specific part in the charism of foundation and the originality of her contribution to the translation into the feminine of the salesian spirit of Valdocco.

Above all Mother wishes to direct all the FMA TOWARDS THIS SPECIFIC "model" of salesian sanctity in an attitude of contemplation which should become fidelity.

Mother Mazzarello, type of our Institute

Through one of those circumstances that Pius XI would have called *the elegance of divine providence*, the preparation for the centenary of the death of Saint Mary Mazzarello has been authoritatively opened by the Holy Father, John Paul II, who in his recent visit to Turin, in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians where the mortal remains of our Saint lie, set things in motion by uttering these inspired words: ... Precisely this sacred place, in which we are gathered today, brings back to our memory the figure of a daughter of this strong and generous region, namely, St. Maria Domenica Mazzarello, who, with Don Bosco founded the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

From a very young age she wished to live the religious life in the world, setting up at the same time a little workshop to teach girls dressmaking, in order to protect them and guide them in the path of Christian living.

Her biographers tell us that at the same time she could hardly read or write, but that she spoke of things concerning virtue in such a clear and persuasive way that she seemed inspired by the Holy Spirit.

She lived in humility, mortification and serenity the gift of herself to God, carrying out her "*motherhood of love*" towards thousands of girls.¹

Christ's Vicar himself has invited us to place before ourselves the figure of our holy Mother and Cofoundress so as to study her and model ourselves on her.

¹ JOHN PAUL II, *to religious*, Turin, April 13th 1980.

Mother and
co-foundress

First and foremost, let us have before us what she was and is in our Institute. Article I of the Constitutions clearly states it: "St. Mary Mazzarello, who shared in a particular way and with creative fidelity in the charism of foundation, became Mother and co-foundress of the Institute".²

This is truly the position which is her due and the basic angle from which we must view her if we are to keep her always before us as '*model*', *type*, *foundation* of our specific identity as FMA.

Mother Mazzarello is the fertile root of the tree of feminine Salesianity, not only sharing in the charism of foundation, but being herself endowed with an outstanding gift of the Holy Spirit for the new foundation.

We, Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, have been built on her, modelled on her and guided by her at our very origins.

The greatness of our saint undoubtedly rests on her having known how to grasp and penetrate in its entirety the divine plan entrusted to Don Bosco by the Holy Spirit for the foundation of our Institute, and in her having actuated it fully in humility and simplicity. However, it also lies in the way she furthered the direct action of the Holy Spirit by means of those outstanding gifts which were granted her in view of the mission to which she was called, namely, that of being, along with Don Bosco, the foundress of the Institute willed by our Lady.

The title of *co-foundress*, therefore, is the one which gives her greatest prominence, because it denotes the position which is uniquely and specifically hers.

In fact, Mother Mazzarello is not just the '*cornerstone*' and the '*first Superior*' of the Institute, but

² C 1975.

she who, in virtue of a special gift of the Holy Spirit, integrates, completes, enriches, and, I would say, gives a specifically feminine sense to Don Bosco's charismatic action in founding our Institute. Moreover, the title has been accorded her directly and authoritatively by the Church. It was the Congregation for the Causes of Saints which, examining in depth her heroic virtues, became aware of the divine action of the Holy Spirit in her and brought it into focus in *the decree on the miracles*, affirming that she was 'worthy, not only of governing the Institute, but of being considered its *Cofoundress* and the collaborator of Don Bosco'.

By so doing, the Sacred Congregation recognised in Mother Mazzarello not only Don Bosco's faithful '*disciple*' that is to say, one who shared in the Founder's charism, but it noted in her a grace of the Holy Spirit, proper to her alone, that is her own specific *charism*, bestowed upon her in view of the mission to which she was destined by providence.

At the beginning of our Institute, in fact, our saint carried out not only the task of leading the new religious family and of governing it, but above all of transfusing into it her own supernatural inspiration. As the Rector Major put it so well, "In order to assume the Salesian vocation in the way which is proper to women, Mary Mazzarello brought to bear all her wisdom and love, her intuition and ability to interpret, typical of feminine inventiveness. It is then something of a creation".³

Mother Mazzarello was not, therefore, a merely passive and receptive instrument in the hands of Don Bosco when he founded the Institute, for although she acted in complete harmony with the charism

³ VIGANÒ, *Non secondo la carne, ma nello Spirito* (Roma, FMA 1978) 106-107.

of the Founder, she operated under the impetus of the Holy Spirit.

Her "creative fidelity" to the charism of foundation of which the Constitutions speak, brought her to communicate that interior richness, fruit of her particular charism, from which exploded *the spirit of Mornese*, so characteristic of our religious family.

Specific
creativity of
Mother
Mazzarello

The Rector Major continues: "Don Bosco did not personally create the spirit of Mornese, although it can't be explained without him. It was Mother Mazzarello with all her companions who built it up, We are dealing here with an *active*, creative and constructive translation: a directly womanly work. With Mother Mazzarello a feminine feature is unveiled within Salesianity. First of all, because she is a woman and then because in that plan of God which gave birth to the spirit of Mornese, she was endowed with gifts, capacities and inclinations which all centre on this task".⁴

Aside from this, Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello were two souls charismatically attuned to each other by the Holy Spirit. In fact, at a distance and without yet knowing each other, they were already on the same wave length both in the depth and simplicity of their concept of holiness and in their specific apostolic mission. It was precisely this that led Don Caviglia to state: "Truly the soul of Mother Mazzarello was instinctively Salesian".⁵ This *spiritual instinct* is created by the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

This accord is revealed right from Don Bosco's first encounter with young Mary Mazzarello in 1864. By merely seeing and listening to him, Mary intuitively

⁴ VIGANÒ, *Non secondo la carne, ma nello spirito*.

⁵ CAVIGLIA Alberto, *Santa Maria Mazzarello*, ristampa, (Torino, FMA 1957) 16.

understands "Don Bosco is a saint, I sense it".⁶ A definitive intuition, as though God had sent her her own saint, made to measure, "the saint for her".

She realised that she must grow in the Salesian way of Don Bosco which gave meaning to all the spiritual and apostolic yearnings throbbing in her heart".⁷

When the moment arrived for the foundation of the Institute, Don Bosco found in our saint the co-operator fit for putting the divine plan into effect, and by virtue of the same Spirit, Mother Mazzarello saw in him the fulfilment of all that her soul longed for.

She embraced the Founder's project in its entirety, realised his ideas and his method, bringing about that spiritual grafting which was to give life to the features characteristic of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary help of Christians.

Conform
ourselves to
Mother
Mazzarello

Our Saint thus stands before us as she whom we must *resemble* if we are to correspond fully to our FMA vocation and attain to true sanctity and identity.

The document: '*Mutuae Relationes*' tells us: "The charism of the Founders appears as an experience of the Spirit transmitted to their followers to be lived by them, to be preserved, deepened and constantly developed in harmony with the Body of Christ continually in a process of growth".⁸

The earlier document: "*Evangelico Testificatio*" had expressed it in these words: "The Council rightly insists on the obligation of religious to be faithful to the spirit of their founders, to their evangelical

⁶ Cron I 150.

⁷ VIGANÒ, *Non secondo...* 107.

⁸ MR 11.

intentions, and to the example of their sanctity... The charism of religious life... is the fruit of the Spirit, who is always at work within the Church".⁹

We are not authentic FMA, therefore, nor shall we ever be, if we do not reproduce in ourselves the spiritual features of our saint, if we do not assimilate the spirit that emanates from her charism.

And where shall we find it? Where shall we discover the fundamental lines of her spiritual personality? From the books which portray or study her: *Maccono*, *The Cronistoria*, *The Letters*, *Non secondo la Carne ma nello Spirito*, *A Soul Led by the Holy Spirit*. Do we know them? Do we read and meditate on them? It would be an unforgivable deficiency on our part were we not to draw from these sources.

The basics of the spirituality created by our saint can also be found in those marvellous, concise pictures of *the spirit of Mornese* which have been left by Mother Petronilla, which we find in Maccono's biographical sketch of her; Mother Enrichetta's, which appears in her biography and which the Rector Major also recorded and commented upon in his above-mentioned book and that can be found also in *Quaderno 16*, and finally the one related in Volume XII of the *Biographical Memoirs*.

At the exercise for a happy death of February here in the Generalate, Rev. Father Carlo Colli suggested that Don Bosco himself drew a pen-portrait of our saint a few years after her death when he wrote, in the letter of 1886, that passage in which he describes the 'type of Sisters that the *Institute needs*'. In commenting on it he underlined the spiritual experience of Mother Mazzarello who had characteristically exemplified those virtues.

May Mary Help of Christians, whom we are honour-

⁹ ET 11.

ing and celebrating with all our renewed fervour, help us to see in the fullness of light, our holy Mother Co-foundress, and teach us to become more like her who was her worthy daughter.

(Cir. n. 637 - May 24 1980)

Holy after the manner of Don Bosco

Last month we sought to deepen our understanding of the significance of the particular mission entrusted by God to Mother Mazzarello, **Mother and Cofoundress**.

In doing so we have begun to gather some of the features peculiar to her person. Our first Sisters managed to reproduce these features in themselves, together with that characteristic spirit of Mornese that blossomed in holiness among the Sisters and the girls even when it was transplanted beyond the seas.

The Community of Junin de los Andes is proof of this. To understand how Laura Vicuna found the environment which helped her to grow in virtue to the point of heroism, we have to study the Mornesian atmosphere pervading the community. And it is precisely while reflecting on how much the spirit of Mother Mazzarello was transmitted to this heroic pupil, that I should like all of you to make her more and more known to our pupils and encourage them to invoke and imitate her.

Laura is one of the most splendid fruits of the spirit of Mornese. Why don't we vie with one another in praying to Mother Mazzarello that the forthcoming centenary of her death may shed new light on the cause of our young servant of God? Our holy Mother will certainly hear us in the measure in which we, like the first Sisters, manage to revive her spirit in us and in our environments.

Holy after the
fashion of
Don Bosco

The careful study of the figure of Mother Mazzarello leads us to see her in the linear simplicity and concreteness of a spiritual realism within the grasp of all. It is the spirituality reflected on, lived and taught by Don Bosco, after the school of St. Francis de Sales, which aims at sanctifying every expression of life because, according to St. Paul, nothing can or should be foreign to the glory of God: "Whatever you are about, in word and action alike, invoke always the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, offering your thanks to God the Father through him".¹⁰

Caviglia writes in fact, "Mary Mazzarello needs to be considered and studied as one of the most typical and genuine expressions of feminine holiness such as Don Bosco believed necessary for the present moment.

The whole meaning and value, all the most precious and effective reality of Mother Mazzarello lies precisely in this intention of being holy after the manner of Don Bosco and of teaching her daughters to become saints according to Don Bosco's formula".¹¹

And what is this formula? It is Caviglia again who tells us: "to show that through the most ordinary forms of life one can reach perfection".¹²

This is a holiness, therefore, which is simple, openly sincere and without airs. In practice, it is the heroism of every day embraced with love, of the duty of every moment carried out with exactitude, of "situations" and facts accepted from this viewpoint of faith.

It's an *ordinary holiness*, as Caviglia says, lived out "without seeming to be such and certainly without

¹⁰ Col 3, 17.

¹¹ CAVIGLIA Alberto, *L'eredità spirituale di Suor Maria Mazzarello*.

¹² Cf Do 5-6.

knowing it or thinking it such... completely made up of duty, love and reserve".¹³

It is holiness that belongs to *every day*, every hour and every moment, "workaday" holiness which gives supernatural value to ordinary things. It is a holiness built on work, conscientious diligence, the good use of time, family-like obedience and uncomplicated poverty.

It is the holiness which Vatican II highlighted so well in *Lumen Gentium*; "... all Christians, in the conditions, duties and circumstances of their life and through all these, will sanctify themselves more and more if they receive all things with faith from the hand of the heavenly Father and co-operate with the divine will, thus showing forth in that temporal service the love with which God has loved the world".

Our Saint sought, lived and taught this way of holiness. "Her values are hidden and enveloped in a cloak of simplicity and naturalness which comes specially ordained by God in this choice soul to show that through the most ordinary forms of life, one can reach perfection.

The glory of this good Servant of God lies outside and above mere theory; it is woven of daily realities that enfold higher ones".¹⁴

Witness and
teachings of
her life

This is borne out by the life, which right from the beginning of her youth, developed along the lines set out in this programme: "to perform the ordinary actions of life in an extraordinary way; to be very punctual in all her duties and to do the common things uncommonly well; to do them with the greatest perfection possible because she wanted to please God in everything and realised that noth-

¹³ Cf *Do* 5-6.

¹⁴ CAVIGLIA, *L'eredità spirituale* 5-6.

ing was too common to offer to Him if it was done well".¹⁵

Piety itself is conceived of in the same realistic vein: "True piety consists in performing all our duties at the right time and in the right place and solely for the love of God".¹⁶

This deeply realistic sense of life makes one aware and watchful of the passing moment and of the things one does. The Saint's letters are a continual reminder of this down-to-earth vigilance: "Time passes quickly and if we do not want to find ourselves with empty hands at the hour of death, we must hasten to lay the foundation of solid virtue. It is not words which will take us to heaven, but deeds.

Make a courageous start, therefore, and let us all practise virtue in order to please Jesus and for no other motive. When all is said and done, most of the fuss we make is about imaginary things.

One who truly loves Jesus gets on well with everyone".¹⁷

She writes to Sr. Giovanna Borgna: "Take courage, my dear Sr. Giovanna, let us do some good while we have time. This life passes quickly and at the point of death we shall be happy for the mortifications, struggles and resistance we have made against our self-love and our self will...".¹⁸

And to the Sisters of Villa Colon and Las Piedras she states: "You tell me that from now on you do not wish to be Sisters in name only but in deed. Well done! That is very good! Let us continue to forge ahead like that. Remember that time passes in

¹⁵ MACCONO, *Santa* I 50.

¹⁶ *Do* II 57.

¹⁷ *MM L* 49,6.

¹⁸ *MM L* 25, 5.

America just as it does in Italy and we shall soon reach the hour in which our destiny shall be decided. We shall be happy then if we have been true Sisters, for Jesus will receive us as a bridegroom receives His bride".¹⁹

In her realism St. Mary Mazzarello was not one to be surprised by human weakness or fragility or by the limitations inherent in everybody.

Writing to Mother Vallese about a young Superior, she remarks: "You must not be taken aback; convince yourself that there will always be defects. We must correct and remedy whatever we can but with great calm, leaving everything in the hands of God.

And then, don't pay too much attention to trifles; sometimes in the effort to keep track of so many small things, matters of importance are let pass. In saying this, I do not mean we must not take care of little failings; no, that's not what I mean at all.

Always correct and point out things, but in your heart sympathize and be kind to everyone. You see, if you want to succeed, you have to study each one's temperament and know how to take them; and you must inspire confidence".²⁰

Realistic view
of community
life

This active sense of realism also gives her a balanced and positive vision of community life and enables her to pick out the attitudes that could ruin it: "You see, sometimes our imagination causes us to see things as very black, whereas they are completely white. This causes coldness towards our superiors and little by little we lose the trust we had in them. And then, what happens? We are ill at ease and make things hard for the poor superior.

¹⁹ *MM L* 40,3.

²⁰ *MM L* 22,2.

With a little humility everything will right itself! Give me this consolation soon, my dear daughters; love one another with true charity; love your Superior; think of her as if she were our Lady and treat her with respect".²¹

Community life, in fact, is one of the pivots of religious life. The Pope stressed it in his talk to religious brothers both of clerical and lay Institutes on January 12th, 1980, "I wish to indicate another condition for the authenticity of your witness and for its full apostolic efficacy: to offer your cordial and responsible adherence to Community life. Living in a religious community is a concrete expression of love for others, and is a secret of serene and harmonious personal maturation. Acceptance of one's brother with his qualities and limitations, the effort to co-ordinate one's own initiatives with decisions matured together, the self-criticism imposed by continuous confrontation with the valuations and points of view of others, become not only a very effective training ground of human and christian virtues, but also a precious opportunity for constant verification of the earnestness with which one endeavours to put into practice in life the obligations assumed in the religious profession".

Union of hearts, perfect understanding and mutual forbearance which are the keys to fraternal communion, are the points most recommended by our holy Mother: "What is more important is that you get along with each other, both in one house and the other; always help each other like sisters. Keep in touch with the superiors by writing to each other. In this way things will always go well".²²

²¹ *MM L 49, 2.*

²² *MM L 63,4.*

Evangelical style
of holiness

Within this context of the everyday succession of events our Saint was sustained and borne along by the inner strength of her love, thus exemplifying in herself, the typical form of her holiness, workaday holiness, the usual, made holy.

The Holy Father also recalled this evangelical style of holiness in a comment on a passage from St. Matthew:²³ "And calling to himself a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, 'Truly, I say to you, unless you become like little children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven'".

... "The child is happy with little things; some small achievements, good results which one merited, a word of praise will make a child exult for joy. To enter the kingdom of heaven one must have great, universal sentiments. But one must also know how to be happy with little things, with the tasks commanded by obedience, with the will of God as it is expressed in a fleeting moment, with the daily joys offered by providence. One must make of every work, no matter how hidden or modest, a masterpiece of love and perfection".²⁴

This evangelical style is the true Salesian style of sanctity.

(Cir. n. 638 - June 24 1980)

Supernatural strength of our Saint: the Eucharist and the Madonna

The heroism of a life lived constantly in and for God in great as well as small things, such as we have admired in our Saint, cannot be without an interior dynamism to drive and sustain it.

²³ Mt 18, 2-3.

²⁴ JOHN PAUL II P.P., *Discourse to Clarisse and Basiliane Brothers*, Albano, 14th August 1979.

Now, Mother Mazzarello's life can be explained by the two-fold supernatural source of energy which invests, possesses and moves her right from her youth: the Holy Eucharist and our Lady.

Right from her childhood Mother Mazzarello was inwardly drawn towards Jesus in the Eucharist and Mary who became the two magnetic poles of her life.

Her eucharistic
ardour

Holy Mass and Holy Communion were the light of all her days. She could not and didn't know how to live without this daily nourishment.

We all know of her daily sacrifices to get to the parish church from the distant Valponasca, defying time, season and inclement weather. Her love was greater than any obstacle.

Today the window of the Valponasca is a symbol and a witness to us all of the ardour of her Eucharistic devotion; even there, from afar she adored and contemplated Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. Maccono affirms this in his well documented biography, showing how the heart of young Mary Mazzarello was always united with Jesus in the Tabernacle, even in the midst of work: "While she dug, hoed and cut the grass or pruned the vines, every now and then she would look up at the church... greeting Jesus, a prisoner in the Host for love of us".²⁵

As a religious she intensified her Eucharistic love which was manifested also externally in her attitude of profound adoration that caught one's attention and of which Don Costamagna left this significant testimony: "What faith she had in the real presence of our Lord Jesus Christ! It seemed that she could see our Lord, not only with the eyes

²⁵ MACCONO, *Santa* I 39-40.

of faith, but also with her bodily eyes".²⁶

The Sisters admired it and were edified by it. Near her they seemed to sense the very presence of our Eucharistic Lord. Mother Enrichetta Sorbone attests to this for everyone: "I still seem to see her deeply recollected in church, receiving Communion with such fervour, almost like a seraph of love! In the course of the day, when meeting the Sisters in the workroom or other places where they were working, it seemed that she still carried Jesus in her heart, to give Him to her daughters and to the girls: we felt the presence of Jesus when Mother passed by".²⁷ Jesus was really the centre of our Saint's life: He was the centre of her activity just as in our own day Pope John Paul II wishes Him to be for all religious: "Centre your life in the Eucharist; in the Eucharist you celebrate his death and resurrection and receive from Him the Bread of Life. And it is in the Eucharist especially that you are united to the One who is the object of all your love".

And he exhorts: "Jesus must always be first in your lives. His person must be at the centre of your activities, the activities of every day. No other person and no activity can take precedence over Him, because all your life has been consecrated to Him".²⁸

The letters of our Saint overflow with love of Jesus: "Jesus must be the source of all our strength! With Jesus burdens become light, hard work agreeable and sorrow is turned into joy".²⁹ "When you are tired or troubled and place all

²⁶ MACCONO, *Lo spirito e le virtù di S. Maria D. Mazzarello* (Torino FMA 1958) 39.

²⁷ *Do* 83.

²⁸ JOHN PAUL II P.P., *Discourse to Religious*, Washington, Oct. 7th 1979.

²⁹ *MM L* 37, 12.

your worries in the Heart of Jesus, there you will find relief and comfort".³⁰

Thus the mystery of the Eucharist lived out in its fullness as sacrifice, communion and presence formed the entire motive force of her life and work.

In line with
the thought
of the
Church

Our Saint had understood well what today is authoritatively affirmed by our Holy Father in his recent letter on Eucharistic devotion: *The Lord's Supper*: "Eucharistic worship constitutes the soul of all Christian life. In fact, Christian life is expressed in the fulfilling of the greatest commandment, that is to say in the love of God and neighbour, and this love finds its source in the Blessed Sacrament, which is commonly called the Sacrament of love. (...) A living fruit of this worship is the perfecting of the image of God that we bear within us. As we thus become adorers of the Father 'in spirit and truth' we mature in ever fuller union with Christ, we are ever more united to Him, and if one may use the expression — we are ever more in harmony with Him".³¹

Since this *letter*, which is so dense, so full of principles regarding Eucharistic devotion and worship, was followed shortly after by the Instruction of the Sacred Congregation for the Sacraments *Inaestimabile donum* let us make it a sacred duty to read it attentively and to follow its directives faithfully spurred on by our Saint's Eucharistic zeal and by her respect and submission to every teaching of the Church. Liturgical norms can only be given us by the Church; they should not be interpreted nor applied arbitrarily, as is very clearly stated in the above-mentioned 'Instruction'. Let us be careful, therefore, to keep all its prescriptions

³⁰ *MM L* 65, 3.

³¹ *Dom.* C 5.

in mind with the aim of “celebrating with dignity and fervour” that Eucharistic worship which is the centre and summit of the Church’s liturgy and at the same time one of the most outstanding characteristics of our spirituality, as borne out by the life and teaching of our Saint.

In the mystery
of Mary

St. Mary Mazzarello, such a lover of the Eucharist, understood that the way to penetrate more deeply into this great mystery was Mary, the woman chosen by God to give Him to humanity.

We always find our Lady near Mary Mazzarello from her childhood to her death. She bears our Lady’s name but above all she bears her in her heart, in prayer, in the contemplation of her virtues. She is the ideal that she has constantly before her eyes.

Her good mother had introduced her to this singular and profound Marian devotion. Later, her spiritual director, Don Pestarino, formed in Mornese the *Pious Union of the Daughters of Mary Immaculate*” and even though only seventeen, Mary was among the first five members.

This association bound her totally to Mary most holy with her whole being.

Throughout her youth, she was drawn to and guided with an ever-increasing fervor of love for Mary Immaculate to follow the path of purity, eucharistic piety and the apostolate.

The Help of
Christians
specifies her
vocation

As a religious, Mother Mazzarello grasped the sense of her vocation as a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians. She wasn’t content only to bear the title, but she set herself the task of making our Lady known and loved, of spreading her devotion but above all by striving to resemble her so as to be her true daughter.

Cardinal Cagliero states: “Her devotion to Mary Help of Christians was limitless. She saw her as

the inspirer and Foundress of the Congregation; she loved her and asked her to be the true mother of her daughters and the Superior General of the Institute”.

For this reason every night she performed the highly significant gesture of placing the keys of the house at our Lady’s feet, thus showing that she wished to give herself and her daughters to her and confirming their complete dependance on her.

In her letters, conferences and good nights, especially those in preparation for some Marian feast, she never hesitated to make some fervent exhortations to the Sisters: “We are approaching the feast of the Immaculate Conception. Our holy Rule wishes us to celebrate it with great solemnity and, besides, for us who are Daughters of Mary, it should be one of the greatest feasts. We must plant beautiful flowers in our hearts so that we may have a lovely bouquet to present to our dearest mother Mary. In these days that still remain, we must really strive to practise all the virtues, but especially obedience and mortification”.³²

In the girls, too, she inculcated a true devotion to Mary: “Have great devotion to the Blessed Virgin, our most tender Mother. Imitate her virtues, especially her humility, purity and self-effacement. If you do this you will be happy in life and at the hour of death”.³³

Mary leads us to sanctity

Mary most holy took our Saint in hand and guided her on the path to sanctity. This is the Blessed Virgin’s mission as our great Pope Paul VI stated in *Marialis Cultus*: “Devotion to the Mother of the Lord becomes for the faithful an opportunity for growing in divine grace (...) it is impossible

³² MM L 24,7.

³³ MM L 44,3.

to honour her who is 'full of grace' without thereby honouring in oneself the state of grace, which is friendship with God, communion with Him, the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit.

It is this divine grace which takes possession of the whole man and conforms him to the image of the Son of God. The Catholic Church, endowed with centuries of experience recognises in devotion to the Blessed Virgin a powerful aid for man as he strives for fulfilment".³⁴

Having arrived at this 'fulfilment', Mary Mazzarello, 'the exemplary Child of Mary', as Pius XI called her in the proclamation of the heroicity of her virtues, died reaffirming the power of Mary: "Whoever trusts Mary will not be confounded and sealed her life with the hymn: "He who loves Mary will be happy".³⁵

Having recalled these distinctive characteristics of the sanctity of Mother Mazzarello, let us try to give a profoundly eucharistic and marian character to our personal and community life so as to follow faithfully in the footsteps of our Mother as we have proposed to do.

(Cir. n. 639 - July-August 1980)

Masterpiece of simplicity and humility

Evangelical
simplicity and
humility

Don Cojazzi has written these words: Mother Mazzarello possessed and cultivated a human quality that is very rare indeed, namely **simplicity**. This gift is not humility alone, but the humility that ignores itself, that sees everything in the light of God; therefore, it sees clearly.

³⁴ MC 57.

³⁵ MACCONO, *Santa* II 363.

It is the childhood of the heart, retained and reacquired, the childhood that the Gospel lays down as the essential, in fact, the only condition for our entry into the kingdom of heaven: "Unless you become like little children..."

The keen eye of Pius XI perceived this simplicity in Mother Mazzarello and expressed it in chemical terms: "A simplicity proper to substances consisting of one element only, as for example, pure gold: simple but rich in singular characteristics, qualities and gifts".

This simplicity is exercised in living one's life, step by step, as it is traced out by the situations and circumstances that arise; behind which for those who have faith, one sees the hand of God, guiding one according to his plan of sanctification.

Mother Mazzarello's life was just such a one, lived under the banner of simplicity, which made her upright, straightforward, uncomplicated and without alloy.

The theologian, Cannonero, in the commemoration already referred to, describes her thus: "She was *simple with herself* because she paid no heed to complicated methods of spirituality; she was *simple with others*; loyal, sincere and open in her dealings with them, without dissimulation or beating about the bush; she was *simple with God*, preferring to speak to Him in plain words and going straight to Him by the sure way of confidence and love".

Mother Mazzarello was naturally simple; in her, simplicity was not so much an acquired virtue as a gift. Pope Pius XI in his discourse, leaves us in no doubt about this: "...that is why, at first, glance, and from then on, this great Servant of God presents herself with all the marks of humble simplicity it is possible to find, marks seldom found in the measure she had. She was a simple soul,

an extremely simple soul, but rich in remarkable privileges, qualities and gifts".³⁶

School of
simplicity

Her teaching of spirituality was not marked by long discourses: "Of whom are you thinking?", she would ask on meeting her daughters. "For whom are you working?" "Have you done anything that was not for Jesus?" "What time is it?", to which we hear the echo of her famous reply: "It is time to love God".

It is, as one can see, a simple down to earth asceticism. Her letters are written in the same style. "You must grow in simplicity, not seeking satisfaction in either the creatures or things of this world. Think only of doing you duty well for love of Jesus, don't think of anything else".³⁷

"Keep up your spirits; don't worry so much because you cannot correct your defects all at once; but when the Lord makes you aware of them go on fighting them, little by little, never making peace with them. You do your part and in due time you will overcome them. Take courage then, and have great confidence in God... and you will see that all will be well".³⁸

The sanctity preached by your Saint was the one she practised herself under the banner of simplicity: "A practical style of sanctity, well suited to modern times, a style that conceals the heroism of its virtues, that is according to the spiritual heritage of Don Bosco. It is a style in which the supernatural works in the depths of the soul by virtue of a superior grace, in liberty of spirit, in the uninterrupted presence of God, in the love that is concerned with our neighbour, in a burning desire for

³⁶ PIUS XI P.P., *Discourse*, May 3rd, 1936, in *Quaderni FMA*, n. 1,7.

³⁷ *MM L 21,4*.

³⁸ *MM L 14*.

Jesus to reign in all hearts, in mortification and hidden sacrifice, in the unalterable perseverance of an exceptional spiritual alacrity".³⁹

Great values in the guise of simplicity.

A masterpiece
of humility

With simplicity she combined **great humility**. Pope Pius XI placed great emphasis on this in his discourse: "Humility is truly the characteristic virtue of the Venerable Sister. Hers was a great humility... that moves us to ask ourselves what our Blessed Lord sees in a humble soul, a soul truly and deeply humble; precisely on account of such humility one could almost say that He is charmed with it to the point of performing wonderful miracles in favour of such a soul, and further miracles through her. What then does God see? He sees in the humble soul a light, a strength, a portrayal before which he cannot resist, for He sees represented in exquisite beauty and form the likeness of His only begotten Son".

As Superior she guided her community excellently, but the Sisters affirm: "She looked upon herself as the last and least of all... of less consequence than a postulant".⁴⁰

She did her share of housework, invariably choosing the heaviest and least attractive jobs. We know how often and in how many ways she begged Don Bosco and the different spiritual directors to be relieved of her task of superior in favour of one more educated.

The letter she wrote to Don Cagliero is a masterpiece of humility. "I am writing this letter for your fatherly consideration since I dare not send it to Don Bosco, there are so many mistakes. Without many words it will tell you whether I am

³⁹ CAVIGLIA, *L'eredità* 23.

⁴⁰ MACCONO, *Lo spirito* 268.

capable and suited for the office of superior as our venerated Father, Don Bosco desires. You can judge from this letter that I am ashamed to send you, that my education, my writing, the mistakes in grammar and spelling all show that I am an ignorant country girl".⁴¹

Many testimonies of her great humility have been deposed. Mother Daghero affirms: "She was most humble. Her deep humility was evident not in words alone but in deeds. By preference she chose the heaviest, roughest, lowliest, work".⁴²

Her friend and life-long confidant, Mother Petronilla attests: "As for humility, it seems to me she couldn't have more. When the Congregation of the FMA was well established and we had houses in America and many trained teachers for both school and workroom, Sr. Mary Domenica said to me one day: 'These daughters show great charity in keeping us in the convent; we are good for nothing' ".⁴³

A teacher of
humility

She professed humility and lived it, but she was also a wise teacher. This is shown above all in her letters. There is not a single one that doesn't speak of humility. Some indeed, are remarkably expressive and spiced with holy witticisms: "Act in such a way as to trample on self love until it squeals and cries out. Do this through the exercise of humility".⁴⁴

"To be true religious we must be humble in every way, not just in words but in deeds".⁴⁵

"Think of your faults as weeds in your garden and that you must humble yourself and courageously

⁴¹ MACCONO, *Santa* I 240.

⁴² *Do* 223.

⁴³ *Do* 226.

⁴⁴ *MM L* 20,1.

⁴⁵ *MM L* 40,5.

fight against them. We are poor miserable creatures, unable to be perfect, so go ahead in humility, confidence and cheerfulness".⁴⁶

"Make humility your friend and learn from her. Pay no heed to the teacher, pride, who is the arch-enemy of humility. Don't be downcast when you see yourself full of defects but turn in all confidence to Jesus and Mary and then go on without fear".⁴⁷

The evangelical
spirit of the
"little Ones"

In our saintly Mother simplicity and humility were as two sisters walking hand-in-hand. Simplicity reflected humility as our Holy Father Pius XI has testified: "humble simplicity" and "humility clothed in simplicity".

Our Saint gathered from the gospel the impassioned cry that later came from the great heart of Pope Paul VI in *Evangelica Testificatio*: "We make this appeal to you. Keep the simplicity of the 'little ones' of the gospel. May you succeed in discovering this anew in an interior and closer relationship with Christ and in direct contact with your brethren. You will then experience 'through the action of the Holy Spirit; the joyful exultation' of those who are introduced into the secrets of the Kingdom".⁴⁸

Isn't this what our Saint did? Can it not be said of her that in the "greatest simplicity" she led "an extraordinary life in an ordinary way?"⁴⁹

Maccono records this affirmation of a Sister: "During recreation I often heard her say, 'ask our Lord to make me attentive to little things'".⁵⁰

⁴⁶ *MM L* 55,8.

⁴⁷ *MM L* 66, 3-4.

⁴⁸ *ET* 54.

⁴⁹ *MACCONO, Santa II* 175.

⁵⁰ *Do* 57.

This was one of the most frequent recommendations in her 'good nights' and conferences, in which she never failed to stress "the necessity of being faithful and exact in little things" and to point out "the grave danger that results from the neglect of little things".⁵¹

(Cir. n. 646 - March 24 1981)

Simplicity-climate
of life at
Mornese

Simplicity in all its beauty permeated life in Mornese where our first incomparable Sisters were formed. Don Bosco never ceased inculcating this virtue, as if he wished it to be the hallmark of his Daughters. In fact, Mother Mazzarello often repeated: "Don Bosco asks me to tell you to be 'simple and mortified'".

He himself, with almost prophetic vision said: "I can assure you that if you remain *simple*, poor and mortified your Institute will have a great future". Cardinal Cagliero, who was the authentic spokesman for Don Bosco, wrote to the novices and postulants: "Do all your actions with simplicity and for the love of God without self-seeking or fear of superiors. If you succeed in what you do, give God the glory, if you have little success and make mistakes blame your self love. Humiliate it and humble yourselves".

Like the seed in the Gospel these words fell upon good soil and produced abundant fruits of simplicity.

Mother Mazzarello, alert to the voice of the Holy Spirit was the personification of simplicity. This virtue seemed almost to be a part of her nature and constituted the basis of her spiritual structure. This fact was highlighted by the Pope who beatified her in the discourse we have already quoted.

⁵¹ Do 397.

Don Caviglia wrote that there was nothing extraordinary about her sanctity. It was "based wholly on duty, love and reserve with nothing which had any appearance of the supernatural or the miraculous; a life without any distinctive marks but whose significance lay in the pure love which animated it."⁵²

Don Maccono confirms this. He emphasised that our Saint, "was aware that perfection and sanctity consist in union with God through charity which leads the will to perform God's ordinances promptly and constantly. Therefore, sanctity is attained by doing the duty of the moment well and all the daily actions with singleness of purpose, at the right time and place"⁵³

To quote Don Caviglia again, "truly" her was a sanctity which seemed to be ordained by God... to prove that perfection can be attained in the most ordinary paths of life".

Thus, through the example of her life lived in simplicity of spirit and method, and through the simplicity of her words she was able to create an environment pervaded by the gentle fragrance of humility and simplicity.

Mother always mixed with the sisters as one of themselves sharing to the full in their life of prayer, work and recreation. The Sisters testify that this presence of hers, so simple and so much at the disposition of everyone, brought happiness to all.

Under her guidance spiritual life, inter-personal relations, work and prayer all became simple and easy and an atmosphere of spontaneity, festivity and hominess pervaded everything. Feastdays were cordial expressions of deeply-felt sentiments

⁵² CAVIGLIA, *Santa* 4-5.

⁵³ MACCONO, *Lo spirito* 333.

and cheerfulness rendered all demonstrations happy. There was complete union of heart because frankness and charity regulated all interpersonal relations.

In her private notes Mother Enrichetta Sorbone left us a wonderful picture of this life of simplicity and holy joy. It is a condensed illustration of the genuine, original spirit of Mornese, the Spirit of the early days.

Let us ponder over it together: "Great obedience, simplicity, fidelity to the rule; wonderful recollection and silence; spirit of prayer and mortification; childlike sincerity and artlessness; dealing and conversing with one another in fraternal love and holy cheerfulness, all of which made of the house a little paradise. No one thought of anyone or anything but God and His love, or of Mary most holy and of our Guardian Angels, and everyone worked in their gentle presence as if they were visibly there. Nothing else was sought for. What a beautiful life it was!".

This life had the beauty, attractiveness and fragrance of sincere simplicity and therefore exhaled pure joy. It realised to the full "*that supremacy of the interior life*" recommended by Pope Paul VI in his memorable discourse urging us to go back to the original spirit of the Institute.

The Servant of God, Father Matteo Crawley, apostle of the consecration of homes to the Sacred Heart, said, in a conference given to our Sisters in Sicily: "Your Institute, which I hold in high esteem, is characterised by its simplicity. Preserve this treasure left you by Don Bosco and build on the foundation of simplicity a palace of sacrifice and love, a royal palace worthy of the King".⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Cf Madre VASCHETTI Luisa, *Cir.* September 24th, 1925.

May this authoritative and precious admonition animate us to revive this pleasing characteristic in spite of the complexity of life around us. Let us make a personal and community effort to see that the genuine spirit of the early days regains its vitality and all its joyous splendour. Let us return to the school of our holy Mother and try to bring her example and teachings into our lives.

(*Cir. n. 556* - November 24 1972)

Apostolic fervour

The apostolic
fervour of our
Saint

Little by little we are discovering that the great love our Saint had for God permeated her entire life in the form of **apostolic zeal**.

“While still a child”, — writes her biographer — “she taught her younger brothers and sisters their prayers, was vigilant that they dressed modestly, that they were not in danger of either soul or body, that they did not find themselves in doubtful company, and should this happen, she would let her mother know. She used to repeat to her companions the explanation of the catechism or Gospel given in church by the priest, and would encourage them to frequent the Sacraments”.⁵⁵

When she joined the group of Daughters of Mary Immaculate she embraced whole-heartedly their apostolic programme. Her biographer writes: “Mary was the youngest of the Daughters but she was also the most zealous”.⁵⁶

She carried out her apostolate among the “Christian Mothers” as the regulations prescribed, giving them a conference every fortnight. “She prepared this

⁵⁵ MACCONO, *Lo spirito* 132.

⁵⁶ MACCONO, *Santa* I 63.

very carefully, firmly believing that if she succeeded in making them good and diligent in their duties as mothers she would thereby help their children to save their souls".⁵⁷

But the Holy Spirit, who was preparing her to share in the charism of Don Bosco, made her feel an extraordinary attraction for young people, so much so, that she took it upon herself, as Maccono attests, "to watch over this or that girl who was in danger, to advise the mother, to encourage the girl herself to attend catechism and to keep far away from dangerous occasions and worldly amusements".⁵⁸

Mother Petronilla attests that "Mary attracted the girls as a magnet attracts steel". In fact, the girls of that time later attested under oath: "We went willingly with her, because she was always cheerful, full of life, great kindness and affability". "No one could be in her company without feeling the urge to become better".⁵⁹

Her iron constitution, broken down by typhoid, and feeling herself unable to resume work in the fields, she invoked divine inspiration in fervent prayer, and resolved to learn the art of dressmaking in order "...to gather the girls around her, to teach them to sew and in so doing, keep them from all harm and guide them by her advice".⁶⁰

She made known this idea to her friend Petronilla, who agreed to co-operate with her with the aim of "...teaching the girls to know and love God, to form them and save them from many dangers".⁶¹

In the little work-room and the mini-hostel that adjoined it, a real apostolate flourished among the

Treading the
road of Don
Bosco

⁵⁷ Do

⁵⁸ Cf Do 61.

⁵⁹ MACCONO, *Santa* I 68.

⁶⁰ Do 88.

⁶¹ Do 91.

ever increasing number of girls who frequented it. Without in any way neglecting the professional training, the workroom became a school of piety, of joyful christian formation.

Don Caviglia sums up the life thus: "Work, prayer, remembrance of the presence of God, conscientious effort, good use of time, loving obedience and sincerity".⁶²

Without knowing it, Maria Mazzarello was doing exactly the same as Don Bosco did: everything was raised to a supernatural plane: "That which is not eternal is useless. What value has this for eternity? An hour less on earth an hour nearer to Paradise".⁶³

She watched over the Sacramental life of the girls, their devotion to the Blessed Sacrament and to our Lady. She instilled in them the sense of the presence of God. She was diligent in following up their work "...explaining everything in a very simple and patient manner and ready to give further explanations if needs be; but she also exacted that the girls worked attentively and didn't lose even one moment of time".⁶⁴

Without studying pedagogy, guided only by her own common sense, and her love for souls, she was a real educator. One of her former pupils relates: "Maria scolded us when we deserved it, but after the scolding, when she had made us realise our fault, she loved us as before and bore no ill-will. She didn't bring up the subject again and treated us as though nothing had happened".⁶⁵

Her love for the girls urged her to begin a Sunday Oratory. She didn't call it by that name, but that

⁶² CAVIGLIA, *Santa* 15.

⁶³ MACCONO, *Santa* I 110.

⁶⁴ Cf MACCONO, *Santa* I 118.

⁶⁵ *Do* 123.

is what it was. She gathered the girls for games in a little courtyard and for singing. She took them to church, and then for walks in the countryside. During carnival time she organised most attractive initiatives to keep them from dangers. Without knowing it she was treading Don Bosco's way.

The direct
influence
of Don Bosco

Through Don Pestarino, Don Bosco came to know of this zealous group and as he had already in mind the idea of founding a congregation of women to do for girls what the Salesians were doing for boys, he took great interest in them and began to follow them from afar.

In 1862 he sent the first message to them through Don Pestarino: "Pray, by all means, but do all the good you can for the young; do all in your power to prevent sin, even one single venial sin".⁶⁶

This is precisely what our Saint was already doing. "All her labours, all her efforts and sacrifices had but one aim: to prevent even a single sin and lead the girls to good".⁶⁷

In 1864 the meeting with Don Bosco took place and Mary Mazzarello sensed immediately that he was a "saint", the saint whose ideas, she felt, were in perfect accord with her own; the charism of the Holy Spirit had enkindled the same flame within them.

Don Bosco now began to guide them, giving them a little book of rules in which he stressed their educative mission among the young. "...have zeal for young people; keep the girls always occupied, be with them, never leave them on their own,

⁶⁶ Do 102.

⁶⁷ Do 127.

form them in solid piety without making it burdensome".⁶⁸

These few rules were nothing but an authoritative confirmation of what Mary Mazzarello was already doing.

When the idea of founding the Institute of the FMA fully matured, Mary Mazzarello was the first to form part of it, fully embracing the *da mihi animas* of the Founder. From that moment she had no other thought than to model herself on Don Bosco, to interpret faithfully his ideas and method and to apply them to her work for girls, to imbibe his apostolic spirit and insert herself with him, in Christ's redemptive mystery.

Full apostolic
harmony with
Don Bosco

As Superior she led her community to be imbued with this apostolic eagerness and to put it into action in the work that was gradually unfolding. She felt that the apostolic mission was inseparably bound up with her consecration to God, that all that was contained in the evangelical counsels must spill over into apostolic activity.

This is what Vatican Council clearly states today in *Perfectae caritatis*: "For Religious Institutes of this type apostolic and charitable works are essential to the religious life. These activities are the holy ministry and love-work which the Church has commissioned them to do, and which are performed in her name. Just as a member's whole life should be imbued with the apostolic spirit, so their apostolic activities must be shaped by a religious spirit".

In her task of full and perfect accord with the mind of Don Bosco, Mary Mazzarello not only made his motto her own, but also the ecclesial perspective that he lived and actuated: "The glory of the

⁶⁸ MACCONO, *Santa* I 174.

Church is our glory, the well-being of souls our interest".⁶⁹

In her missionary ardour she extended her apostolic dimensions to the whole world and in the course of her brief religious life she sent out three missionary expeditions.

She formed her Sisters to the spirit of total consecration to the young; she studied means to model herself and her daughters in the way demanded by Don Bosco's educational method, and gave herself to the work of catechising and living in common with them. She used to exhort the Sisters: "Work, work much in the field the Lord has assigned to us; never grow weary of working, work always with the intention of doing everything for God and He will prepare a great store of merit for you in heaven".⁷⁰

Her great love for God and for souls spurred her on. A Sister attests: "There was noticeable in her a deep and sincere love for the souls of the young, and how well she was able to instil her zeal into us, teachers and assistants, giving us practical instruction on how to form the hearts of the girls to solid piety and christian virtue".⁷¹

Another sister affirms: "Following the example of our holy Founder our unforgettable Mother made the young (girls) the object of her solicitude and care. She loved to be near them because she valued the purity of their souls. How many things she had to tell them concerning the beauty of a pure soul, and how she fascinated them by her heavenly discourses. She was watchful, above all of the behaviour of the older ones, assisting them lovingly, correcting them with gentleness, touching

⁶⁹ MB XVII 491.

⁷⁰ MM L 59, 4.

⁷¹ MACCONO, Santa II 103.

their hearts by her kindly ways, using every possible means to form them to be in their turn examples of virtue for their families".⁷²

Her
educative art

Without studying any branch of pedagogy, guided only by her sound christian sense, she gave them a complete formation which took into account all the natural and human components as well as the supernatural dimension.

Urged on by the characteristic "amorevolezza" of Don Bosco, she followed the girls with delicate motherliness. Several of the boarders of that time witness to this. "I remember her tender ways of giving us some little surprises from time to time, sometimes an outing, sometimes an invitation to have dinner with her and the Sisters on the occasion of some feastday sometimes, it was the gift of a sacred object brought from far away, or some other such thing".⁷³

As often as possible, she joined in the recreation. "I remember", attests another, "the cries of joy that broke forth spontaneously when the assistant announced that Mother Superior was coming with us. There was a rush to get near her".⁷⁴

Then the courtyard of Nizza witnessed a scene similar to what happened to Don Bosco in Valdocco, "...the girls, in great joy, carried her along with them in triumph".⁷⁵ Also in the manner of Don Bosco she knew the opportune moment to whisper a word in the ear of one or another, and this was, according to another boarder, "...a joy, a feast, a desired prize".

But in all these marks of care and attention, notes her biographer, "there was no softness or affectat-

⁷² *Do* 106.

⁷³ *Do* 108.

⁷⁴ *Do* 109.

⁷⁵ *Do* 109.

ion".⁷⁶ This was confirmed by one of the pupils: "she never caressed me, no, neither did I ever see her caress anyone else. I remember she had a dignified bearing that commanded respect and made us keep our place; but I remember also that in every word, every action, one could see and feel that she was always a mother".⁷⁷

She used to recommend to the Sisters: "My dear daughters, we who have the same mission (as Don Bosco) among the young, must show the same love as he does, but Don Bosco is a saint, and we are not, yet, therefore, we must fear for ourselves, because by nature, we and the girls are more heart than head! And in the bargain, tender hearts, weak and prone to stickiness... Be on your guard, therefore, that your heart does not betray you. There must reign among us only the spirit of motherly charity, or sisterly charity and religious reserve".⁷⁸

We still have two letters that she wrote to the girls: one to Maria Bosco, Don Bosco's grandniece, the other to the girls of Las Piedras. She wrote to the first because she was at home convalescing and it is a letter full of concern and of the hope of seeing her back soon with her companions. The second is a reply to the girls' letters; this too is full of tenderness, spontaneity and good advice.

The incarnation
of our charism

We have, then, before us, our Mother portraying the apostolic aspect of our charism. Paul VI reminds us: "Be faithful to the spirit of your Founders, to their evangelical intentions, to the example of their sanctity... It is precisely here that the dynamism proper to each religious family finds its origin".⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Do 113.

⁷⁷ Do 112.

⁷⁸ MACCONO, *Santa* II 135.

⁷⁹ ET 12.

Let us make our own this warm exhortation and apply ourselves ever more intensely to translate into our apostolic work the spirit that animated our holy Founders, so that the charism impressed upon it by the Holy Spirit will be always alive in our beloved Institute.

(Cir. n. 642 - November 24 1980)

Talent for government

Present in the
reality of Church
and society

The Holy Father, in his letter of August 15th of this year, calling for prayers from the whole Catholic Church for the happy outcome of the *Synod*, stresses this point: "This year's synod is an important event for the life of the Church as a whole and for her mission (that) is carried out largely within the family and through the family... accordingly the whole Church must in a sense take part in its work. The whole Church must, so to say, be at the Synod, present above all by prayer and sacrifice".⁸⁰

If this duty is incumbent upon everyone, we must feel it applies particularly to us in the privileged position we hold in the Church.

The laity have declared this themselves. In reply to the question: "What does the Christian family expect from religious?" they say: "First and foremost, the greatest help that religious can give in the Church and in the world is by their very presence".

Emphasising a concept expressed by Vatican II, they go on to explain: "Before what they do and how they act is to have any worth, any noticeable

⁸⁰ JOHN PAUL II P.P., *Letter re Synod of Bishops*, August 15th 1980.

effect — it is perhaps necessary to stress much more than is generally done — what they are. Yes, the very presence of a religious of a consecrated person, totally dedicated to God, is in itself an extraordinary and irrefutable sign; it recalls to all people, no matter what their condition in life may be, the truth that at the highest point of the scale of values we find God”.

Families then, expect from religious this fundamental contribution of being “a help to discover their dignity as children of God, to put this conviction as the basis also of their family life”.⁸¹

Our Saint and
the family

Our Saint, the object of our study in recent circulars, is an example for us also in this. Firstly, her very existence is rooted in a sound christian family, that greatly influenced her formation. Don Maccono brings this out clearly. In fact, one of the first apostolic works entrusted to her as a Daughter of Mary Immaculate was that with the mothers of families. Don Maccono tells us her feelings about this work: “that if she succeeded in making them good and diligent in their duties as mothers she would thereby help their children to save their souls, for the christian life of the family depends in great part on the mother”.⁸²

When she began her apostolate among the young girls of the village, and later as an FMA, she felt deeply her responsibility of preparing good and industrious girls for the family.

As Superior, she made it her duty to form the sisters to be authentic witnesses of christian and religious life as a help to families, and to be in their own communities living examples of family life, in union of hearts, in spirit of sacrifice, in mutual acceptance and donation.

⁸¹ *Da Testimoni*, n. 15 - Sept., 1980.

⁸² *MACCONO, Santa I 63.*

The talent of government

In this she revealed the distinctive gift that Pope Pius XI highlighted: **the talent for governing**. "...this humble, simple country girl, possessing only the most rudimentary education, showed early in her life that she possessed a talent, one of the greatest of talents, the talent of governing".⁸³

Cardinal Cagliero adds: "Don Bosco admired her outstanding virtue, her gifts and abilities distinguishing her among her spiritual daughters. He admired especially her prudence and religious discernment and so, despite her reluctance and her protestations of incapacity and lack of education, he wanted her as Superior".⁸⁴

He found in her a woman prepared by God, open to the gifts of the Holy Spirit and able to interpret them; a woman lacking worldly wisdom that can so easily obstruct the action of God, rich instead in that wisdom that makes one a vessel ready to receive the gifts of the Spirit.

Wisdom of heart

In her were combined all the gifts proper to "wisdom of heart", uprightness and rectitude of judgment, a sense of balance and moderation, sound common sense and motherliness, supported and strengthened by a firmness that she did not allow to degenerate into weak acquiescence, in seeking for popularity or in showing partiality.

She felt that her first duty, before all else, was to guide the souls entrusted to her to reach sanctity. Numerous depositions made in the process for her beatification bear witness to this. Mother Buzzetti affirms: "...to my way of thinking, she fulfilled this office (of Superior) as only a saint would, wholly intent on striving for her own perfection and seeking

⁸³ PIUS XI P.P., *Discourse*, May 3, 1936 in *Quadro FMA* n. 1, 8.

⁸⁴ MACCONO, *Santa* I 238.

to instill in us the same ardour and zeal for souls that inflamed her".⁸⁵

Don Maccono enlarges upon this: "...She had a special gift in guiding the sisters on the way of perfection, an ability to help and counsel them and to lead them to prompt obedience and a well-tried spirit of sacrifice. And all this was done in such a simple, kind and motherly way that the sisters trained by her fulfilled tasks demanding the greatest and hardest sacrifice; they obeyed with such submission of will, of judgment and heart that one would have said that it didn't cost them anything, that it never entered their minds to do otherwise".⁸⁶

Mons Costamagna states decisively: "I spent the happiest years of my life at Mornese, because the house was holy. Among other reasons, it was holy because the person at the head, Sr. Mary Mazzarello, was a saint. What words could fittingly praise her?".⁸⁷

In all this she was guided by sound common sense, the combination of serenity, order and dignity, an intuitive sense of the possibilities of each Sister and the inevitable limitations; in all, a true mark of a mature soul already advancing on the road to perfection. Her sense of justice guided her to distinguish between what was too much and what was too little.

Don Cerruti writes: "She had, I would say, the art of good judgment. I know few people who possess such sensitivity in directing, particularly in spiritual direction, as the Servant of God, Sr. Maria Mazzarello. She was a woman of few words and these not always grammatically correct, but she possessed

⁸⁵ MACCONO, *Santa* II 238.

⁸⁶ *Do* 239.

⁸⁷ *Do* 16.

a spirit of prudence, judgment and good sense that is seldom found”.

In the words of Mother Enrichetta Sorbone: “She assigned duties to the Sisters with motherly good sense, bearing in mind their physical, intellectual and moral strength, having only in view the will of God the good of the Institute and of the individual Sister”.⁸⁸

She made it her duty to know in a positive way the aptitudes and capabilities of each Sister, that they might use to advantage the gifts they possessed and to prevent overburdening them or frustrating them by giving them work or responsibilities for which they were not fitted either by nature or grace.

Being so close to each sister she knew how to understand and measure the fatigue and efforts made, to recognise and appreciate the work done: “she showed understanding of the sacrifices the sister made, she knew how to sympathise or bear with others, to show esteem and affection, and all this with a patience so kind, so affectionate and so motherly that she inspired confidence and love in each one”.

“Hers was truly the government of the best of mothers, full of good sense and good heart, enriched by God’s grace”.⁸⁹

“She thus exemplified, in her religious family, that which, notwithstanding particular needs and exigencies of specific tasks, must be in a well-ordered Christian family”.

Family Spirit

There predominated a real and tangible sense of motherliness, of practical commonsense enriched by supernatural charity. Mother Enrichetta attests: “She was gifted with wisdom above the ordinary,

⁸⁸ MACCONO, *Santa* II 240.

⁸⁹ *Do* 239.

possessing the gift of motherliness and the art of governing in an eminent degree. Her mode of governing was energetic and resolute, but loving. She treated us with great frankness, yes, but she loved us like a real mother. There was something about her... I just can't explain it... that drew us on to virtue, to duty and sacrifice, to Jesus. And all this with such sweetness, without force. Nothing escaped her eye. She saw the good and not so good in her daughters and was ever ready to provide for their needs both physical and moral".⁹⁰

What gained their confidence and made them trust her completely was her inborn capacity of "enclosing in her heart like in a tomb, the failings and defects she had observed in her daughters... and, while showing herself most warmhearted and affectionate to all her sisters, so much so that each one believed herself to be the favoured one, she never showed the slightest sign of preference".⁹¹

Mother Enrichetta again affirms: "She truly had the art of governing because she made herself loved without lightness and feared without being severe or rigorous. Her prudence was evident also in the way she foresaw abuses and prevented them".⁹²

Don Cerruti confirms all that has already been said: "when it was a question of preserving the good spirit according to the ideas of the founder or to exact observance of the rule she showed herself strong and discreet without letting herself be intimidated by human respect".⁹³

In everything she acted with such simplicity and humility that she appeared to be, not so much

⁹⁰ *Do* 240.

⁹¹ *Do* 241.

⁹² *Do* 240-241.

⁹³ *Do* 23-24.

our superior as our "big Sister".⁹⁴

The unanimous opinion of the Sisters bears this out; "she didn't make us feel the weight of her authority, she drew us more by her example".⁹⁵

Educated in that school, one worked peacefully, without questioning, guided by that motherly hand that directed everything without appearing to do so".⁹⁶

Her concern for her daughters was evident in her all embracing charity shown in a hundred and one different ways, in delicate attention, foresight and understanding. Here are some further testimonies:

"She was kindness and patience personified, especially with the sick, treating them with boundless charity. It was enough to know that someone was unwell for her to bestow on them the most delicate attention. She was ready to undergo the greatest sacrifice to help relieve the sick in mind or body".⁹⁷

"I was a postulant", relates a Sister, "and we young ones found it a real martyrdom to sit sewing and embroidering. Mother would come in and say: 'Come, girls, off you go for a run around the vineyard', or 'Leave your sewing and go to water the garden or the vegetable plot'. Off we went, needing no second invitation, delighted to stretch our legs".⁹⁸

Life of union

Her main preoccupation was to preserve fraternal harmony, union of hearts and minds, to make of the community a real life of communion. For this reason her biographer writes: "She was vigilant that living together did not result in any coldness, or worse still any rudeness or surliness, but that it should be, as it indeed was, marked by kindness,

⁹⁴ Do 243.

⁹⁵ Do 181.

⁹⁶ Do 239.

⁹⁷ Do 122.

⁹⁸ Do 150.

consideration, happiness and joy according to the spirit of the Founder".⁹⁹

Mother Mazzarello was able to transmit this art of governing to the first Sisters entrusted with this not so easy task. Her letters bear this out: "...now, Sr. Pierina, it is up to you to give good example, and to see that the holy Rule is kept by your daughters; to see that they love one another. ...Be careful that jealousies do not arise... (that) no one can say 'she likes that one better... she speaks more to her... she sympathises with her etc. Speak to all equally and show them as much confidence as you can, but let us be careful not to attach our hearts to anyone but the Lord. Always ask advice from our good superiors. Never neglect to do good because of human respect. Always point out the defects of the Sisters, but even while correcting, be understanding and sympathise with them. Do freely everything that charity demands".¹⁰⁰

"Always have great charity for everyone and the same love for all, with no particular affections. You understand what I mean, don't you? If there were some, for example, who manifested certain affection, under pretext that they love you, and that they find many things to say to you, but which in reality are only trivial things, if they always want to be near you to praise you, despise such silliness. Conquer human respect, and make it your duty to warn them every time. If you keep these things in mind they will leave in you a spirit that really pleases the Lord and He will bless and enlighten you more and make known to you His holy will".¹⁰¹

Be big-hearted

It is the duty of the Superior to correct, but it is no less important to have a heart big enough and

⁹⁹ *Do* 289.

¹⁰⁰ *MM L* 35, 23.

¹⁰¹ *MM L* 64,4.

understanding enough not to be surprised at human weakness, to know how to sympathise, excuse and wait. "Each one has her defects and we must correct them with charity, but not expect them to be without faults, neither imagine that they will correct them all at once. No, this is impossible; but with prayer and patience, with vigilance and perseverance, little by little you will succeed in everything. Confide in Jesus, place all your troubles in His Sacred Heart; let Him act and He will set everything right".¹⁰²

"I have nothing else to tell you except to take courage and not to let your heart be so small, rather, make it a generous, big heart and don't allow yourself to have so many fears. Do you understand?"¹⁰³

This "**big heart**" must be attentive to the physical well-being of the Sisters. The Superior should keep a watchful eye on the health of the community: "(You will tell her)... both of you must take good care of everybody's health because when that is lacking we can no longer do anything, either for ourselves or for others".¹⁰⁴

The **wisdom of heart** of our Mother was rooted, not only in her natural gifts but above all, in her deep piety that drew down upon her the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Illumined by this divine light, she went beyond all human knowledge and was enlightened from on high. Cardinal Cagliero affirms: "I knew her to be gifted with foresight to a high degree, with the grace of discernment and of reading hearts, even so far as to foretell the inclinations, the interior struggles, and the chances of success or failure in vocations".¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² *MM L 22,3.*

¹⁰³ *MM L 24,14.*

¹⁰⁴ *MM L 25,2.*

¹⁰⁵ *MACCONO, Santa II 246.*

These qualities are certainly a gift from God for her fidelity, a gift prepared for by total detachment from self, uprightness and much prayer. This, then, is the heritage that our saintly mother leaves to those who are called to render the service of authority, a legacy that will help them in this delicate task.

Re-living the
example of our
mother

If our communities reflect the family spirit fostered by Mother Mazzarello in the first community, if those called to offer the service of authority know how to imitate our Saint in her Motherliness, her firmness, her discretion and discernment, in a word, her art of governing, we can offer the world of today that witness of true spiritual values on which every Christian family should be based. May our Saint help us to model ourselves on her shining example of genuine family life.

(Cir. n. 641 - October 7 1980)

The significance of our saint's death

The significance
of our Saint's
Death

It was the last link in a chain of acts of love, the unconditional surrender to God's will.

It was the last link in a chain of acts of love: the most perfect, of exquisite radiance. As the light of eternity gradually drew nearer, the face of God revealed itself ever more clearly to her.

In the splendour of the infinite beauty of this adorable Face, the Saint perceived more clearly the shadows in her own life and in the lives of her daughters, and her heart was torn between the consuming magnetism of divine beauty and the crucifying pain of lack of correspondence.

I have given you all, O Lord!
Nothing remains with me but my life. Take it!
I offer it to you upon the altar
Together with the sinless Victim.

It was her supreme offering.

To Sr. Giuseppina Pacotto, who was leaving for the missions and suffering much at the separation, Mother confided: "Even if you remain here we shall be separated just the same. I shall not see the end of the year".

She added: "The good Lord has deigned to hear my poor request. That young Jewish girl, (Bedarida), who was prepared for baptism but never received it... Could not this be my fault? I have offered my life for this and for other things I see in the Congregation".

Sr. Pacotto related to Don Bosco what Mother had confided to her and begged him to obtain the revocation of this offering by prayers. Don Bosco replied: "The offering was pleasing to God and has been accepted".

"Could I not offer myself in her stead?", pleaded Sr. Pacotto.

"No, — replied Don Bosco, it is too late".¹⁰⁶

This account, recorded so precisely, is clear evidence that Mother Mazarello's was not an ordinary death. It was a death offered for the life of the Institute, for my life, for the holiness of the Institute, for my holiness. The death of the '*grain of wheat*' of the Gospel.¹⁰⁷

The Centenary,
a call

The Centenary then, is not the simple commemoration of a death, it is the acknowledgment of a seed of life firmly planted in the heart of the Congregation and in the heart of each one of us, by the hand of God Himself. It is a divine call, an impelling call to re-capture the pentecostal climate of our origins.

What obstacles to the realization of the Salesian

¹⁰⁶ MACCONO, *Santa* II 303-304.

¹⁰⁷ Cf *Jn* 12, 24.

charism did Mother Mazzarello see then and are still seen today in our communities, the charism the Holy Spirit invokes for us “with sighs too deep for words”?¹⁰⁸ How can we understand? By looking at her and comparing ourselves with her. In Mother Mazzarello God has given us the perfect model of the Daughter of Mary Help of Christians, even in this day.

“The Saints John Paul II declared at Lisieux on January 2nd, 1980 never grow old... they don't become the men and women of yesterday. On the contrary, they are the men and women of tomorrow, of future evangelic life, of humanity, and of the Church; witnesses in tomorrow's world”.

A hundred years have passed! Comparing ourselves with Mother Mazarello, our model, do we not find that certain characteristic features of hers have become somewhat blurred in us? And do we not feel the urge, the challenge to put ourselves back on her pathway to sanctity?

Our Lord has given us a wonderful gift in presenting to us in the book '*Non secondo la carne ma nello Spirito*', the chapter entitled “*Maria Mazzarello and the spirit of Mornese*”. In it the Reverend Rector Major gives us sure directives for a conversion, a return to the life-style of our origins.

All of us, communitarily and privately, should make a point of reading and meditating on it as our immediate preparation for the centenary.

And at this point we express our thanks to the Rev. Rector Major, because in the strenna of 1981 he urges us to re-live Don Bosco's interior life, following the example of Mother Mazzarello.

First and
fundamental duty

Speaking to religious (men and women) of Don Orione's order on October 27th last, the Holy Father

¹⁰⁸ Rm 8, 26.

used these words: "I leave you but one exhortation that wells up from the pastoral anxiety of the one who is head of the Church. *Preserve the spirit of your Founder.* Keep it intact and aflame within each one of you, within your Congregation in whatever place you are called upon to work. Keep it vigorous and alive despite the temptations and setbacks that you may encounter.

The previous day the Holy Father had said: "The new Beati whom we honour today proclaim to the world that the first and most important duty of each one of us is that we change our lives, that we sanctify ourselves, through orderly and persevering daily effort. The rest will follow".

The Pope repeats these wise fatherly words to us today. The real meaning of the centenary is as follows: *To convert ourselves personally and decisively and to keep intact and alive the original spirit of Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello, in the conviction that our first and most important task is that we change ourselves, that we sanctify ourselves.* We all have need of conversion; we are all exposed to the danger of spiritual emptiness. We are all liable to weaken in ourselves the grace of our origins and to do our share in exposing to risk the future of the Institute.

In an interview a Superior General had this to say: "Perhaps we have overrated the importance of discussions and research; we have initiated too many highly organised prospects and life has not been able to keep pace with the resulting theoretical findings.

...We have also to think again about the reasoning behind the word '*novità*' (renewal). There are changes that signify progress, but there are innovations that signify corrosion.

The motivations of the proposed changes should

be the point of departure for a new beginning, more exact, more concrete.

We must retrieve the characteristic aspects, the way of life proper to our particular vocation before God and before the Church”.

In our salesian educative mission have we not been, perhaps, too preoccupied with acquiring technical competence, psychological knowledge, the updating of methods, all excellent things in themselves, as no one can deny; but on the other hand, perhaps, we have not been equally pre-occupied with the fact that for us, education is above all else, Christian formation, it is the passion for the *da mihi animas* and is therefore a current of Christian life that is transmitted to the young in proportion to our faith and our apostolic zeal”.

“We have need of absolute values lived in depth”, was stated recently at a gathering of five hundred young people at La Spezia. Surface-scratching is not enough; for our Christian life to be credible it must be deeply rooted”.

Holiness, a
requirement of
religious life

A prayer that appeared recently in a missionary magazine echoes the words of these young people: “Lord, give us Sisters whose lives brim over with You, Sisters who know how to radiate your love, Sisters whose lives are leavened by prayer, whose lives speak louder than their words or their writings, Sisters without half-measures or boundaries. Sisters modelled on you”!

Don Bosco adds “. . . Sisters who neither regret having left the world, nor long for the pleasures and conveniences they have renounced; sisters who have no other ambition on earth than to follow Jesus Christ, who was humiliated, crowned with thorns and nailed to the cross... Sisters of a reasonably cheerful disposition, who desire, above all else to become Saints, not by doing anything extraordinary

but only what is normal, thus becoming an inspiration to their fellow-men, especially the young, and attracting them to the practice of the Christian virtues".¹⁰⁹

"Sisters, 'Mother Mazzarello completes', who are observant of the Rule even in the smallest things... humble, not only in words but in deeds, mindful that for us, religious, it is not enough that we save our souls, we must become saints and lead to sanctity so many other souls awaiting our help".

We can never measure the extent to which a Sister who lives in this way, always in a climate of conversion, more from interior conviction than from exterior promptings, can collaborate for the good of a community to attract and form young people morally and spiritually.

Then could be repeated the moving incident of a young student who some months ago asked her assistant in all seriousness: "Tell me how I can become holy. I feel I must become a Saint".

There springs the astonishing expression of the boys of Valdocco: "I really must become holy. I shall be unhappy until I have reached sanctity".

One hears again the echo of Don Bosco's words: "The Congregation has need of Saints"; and the strong appeal of Mother Mazzarello: "If you want to become holy there is no time to lose".

Sanctity, therefore, is moulding ourselves on Christ and this makes strong demands, even radical demands: those of the Beatitudes. But we must have great faith.

We have many Sisters living alongside us, who, quietly, but with decisive steps are treading the road to sanctity. They don't lose themselves in useless search for means that would make them saints. They use the means at hand in the ordinary everyday

¹⁰⁹ *DB L* May 24 1886.

circumstances of their daily life and duty; and they use them lovingly, with diligence, not only with others, but above all, for others.

They know that sanctity comes from God and that God is not far away. He is right here in this community, in these Sisters, in these pupils. And more than in any other way He is present in His Spirit that always works but never forces, desiring us to reach the full conviction of the transforming experience of St. Augustine: "You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our hearts will not find rest till they rest in You".¹¹⁰

No one, not even the person who loves and esteems us most, not even the most congenial occupations, nor the most desired successes, can satisfy the indestructible longing the soul has for God and the peace that comes from doing His will.

Mary most
holy, teacher
and guide to
holiness

"I will give you a teacher", Jesus said to little John Bosco and He says it again today, to us.

Who, better than Mary Help of Christians could be Mother and teacher of us, her daughters, in the way of holiness? She guides us little by little into the depths of her interior silence to help us live in the presence of God, to hear His words and accept His divine precepts.

Then God himself will unmask our illusions, our false security, and having helped us to overcome our delusions, will place before us our true selves, together with His infinite love that enlarges and lifts up our hearts.

The booklet: *Una pedagogia della Santità* by Don Eduardo Pavanetti (Quaderno N. 15) will be most helpful reading in this context. While it shows the docility of Mother Mazzarello to the Holy Spirit,

¹¹⁰ St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Bk 3. Chap I.

it points out very clearly the necessary dispositions required to transmit her message intact, first to the heart of our communities and then to the pupils, past-pupils and cooperators, because, as the Holy Father said, a saint is never the heritage of one family only, but is always, in God's providential plan, for the whole Church.

Let us endeavour, this year to assimilate and then to translate into our lives the abundance of material we shall have at our disposal to help us know our Saint better. The Holy Spirit will then lead us to the intimate sanctuary of the heart of Mother Mazzarello to bring about a real, spiritual transformation that will redound to the benefit of the souls entrusted to us.

This will be the most positive and fruitful commemoration of the Centenary, which, everywhere is giving rise to a fervour of initiatives and proposals.

(*Cir.* n. 643 - December 24 1980)

Instruments of sanctity

This centenary year that we are celebrating has led us to fix our gaze on our saint to discover at least some aspects of her rich and fruitful sanctity.

Now it seems opportune and fitting to take a look, however brief, at those persons who were instruments in God's hands in enlightening, guiding and setting her decisively on the road to sanctity, and the one who has spared no effort to discover and record her holiness so that it would be recognised by the Church and shine in all its splendour as the ideal that will inspire us.

Don Domenico
Pestarino

It seems to me that Mother Mazzarello wishes this recognition. We praise and thank God for having placed her from childhood under the sure and firm

guidance of Father Domenic Pestarino (1817-1847). Don Maccono has written about this saintly priest both in the life of our saint and in a pamphlet of *Letture Cattoliche* in which he gives a brief account under the title: "*The Apostle of Mornese, Fr. Dominic Pestarino*", while a much fuller documented account can be found in the recently published book by Fr. Adolfo L'Arco: "*Don Pestarino in orbito tra due astri*".

In addition the *Cronistoria* speaks of him and the book, "*Onwards in the course of a century*", as do indeed all the publications treating of our Saint.

Don Pestarino was the man chosen by the Holy Spirit, not only to re-invigorate the spiritual life of his native place, Mornese, but also to understand Don Bosco, to enter into his plans, which were those of God, and to prepare the nucleus of Daughters of Mary Immaculate, who were to become Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, or rather, the cornerstone of the '*living monument*' of gratitude of the Saint to his Madonna.

Don Pestarino formed our saint as the sculptor does, rounding off the sharp corners, correcting her vanity, tempering her character by firm interior discipline, enlightening her in the truths of faith. He guided her and filled her with love and enthusiasm for our Lady and the Eucharist, directed and supported her in her apostolic work.

A devoted Son of Don Bosco, to whom he gave himself completely from their first meeting, he was able to pay the price in his own person for the change of purpose, forced upon Don Bosco, of the College built at Mornese for boys, sharing with the Daughters the sufferings and humiliations of that hour of trial.

A docile instrument in the hands of Don Bosco, he put into effect the directives received in the initial stages of the Institute, acting in everything according

to the aim of the Saint, so, that the plan conceived by him, following the inspiration of our Lady, should take shape according to the views of the founder, of whom he claimed to be the humble instrument. But, as Fr. L'Arco made clear, "between Don Bosco, Maria Mazzarello and Don Pestarino there was a marvellous congeniality stemming from the charism of Salesianity infused in all three by the Holy Spirit".¹¹¹

Don Pestarino who was thus able to merge his spirit with that of Don Bosco was, according to the words of Fr. L'Arco, "A Salesian completely *empty of self and self-interest*, filled with God and given to his brothers".¹¹²

He formed our Saint from childhood and followed her "with special care".¹¹³ This and his selfless dedication and availability in guiding the Institute in its first steps are a work, for which Don Pestarino "truly merits our deep gratitude",¹¹⁴ as Don Bosco himself declares.

Cardinal John
Cagliero

Don Bosco, while only rarely involved in direct and personal guidance of the newly-formed Institute, did not fail to offer it the invaluable help of the best of his sons, whom he picked to be his representatives, to be other 'Don Boscós' with the aim of imprinting on it ever more distinctly that spirit that was to become "the feminine counterpart of the Salesian spirit", as Don Viganò asserts.

Among the representatives of Don Bosco the figure of Cardinal John Cagliero is pre-eminent. A young priest, he was full of zeal and already possessed

¹¹¹ L'ARCO Adolfo, *Don Domenico Pestarino in orbita tra due astri* (Torino, LDC 19800) 152.

¹¹² *Do* 155.

¹¹³ *Cron* I 38.

¹¹⁴ *Lettera* di Don Bosco premessa alle prime Costituzioni stampate 1878.

the qualities that fitted him for work in the feminine field.

As far back as 1874, Don Bosco, seeing the Institute well-established already and foreseeing its expansion, had the idea of assigning to it a director general, who would undertake, "as his delegate" the "spiritual direction" and he had Don Cagliero in mind.

Don Pestarino introduced him to the community of Mornese as "Don Bosco's lieutenant" in the second week of that same year, and Don Bosco himself presented him again in the following June, when he was at Mornese for the month's mind of the death of Don Pestarino.

Don Cagliero is one of the most outstanding figures of the Salesian Society. At the time of his appointment as director general of our Institute, he had graduated in theology, was teacher of moral theology the clerics of the Oratory, Catechist of the Congregation and spiritual director of a number of Institutes of women in Turin. Enterprising, full of life and most faithful to Don Bosco, he was one of his closest collaborators.

Our Saint entrusted herself to him implicitly and Don Cagliero perceived immediately her talent for government, so much so that he gave this account to Don Bosco: "La Mazzarello has special gifts from God. Her limited education is more than compensated for by her virtue, her prudence, her spirit of discernment and her talent for governing, based on goodness, charity and unshakable faith in God".¹¹⁵ They were two souls made for mutual understanding and our Saint followed his directives faithfully.

We still have six letters of the Saint to Don Cagliero, letters that amaze us by the delicate human warmth they reveal and for the scrupulous diligence with

¹¹⁵ MACCONO, *Santa* I 250.

which she gives him a report of everything that goes on in the house.

At her request, Don Cagliero was with her during the last hours of her life, representing Don Bosco who was in Rome at the time. She had several very enlightening conversations with him on certain matters affecting the Institute, so much so that he had later to confess: "If I had only listened to her I would have been able to foresee, ward off and prevent some inconveniences prejudicial to certain vocations and to the Institute in the early days".¹¹⁶ He was with her till she died and in the process for her beatification made many authoritative depositions on her holiness.

Mons. Giacomo
Costamagna

One who followed at close range those first days of the Institute was the spiritual director of the house, Fr. James Costamagna (1846-1921). He was sent to Mornese by Don Bosco in October 1874 and remained till November 1877, when he left for America, where he became Rector, Provincial, and was later raised to the episcopal dignity. Full of zeal and fervour, he took care of the Sisters' spiritual perfection, basing it on the spirit of piety, humility mortification and self-denial. An extremely active man, he instructed the Sisters in the art of teaching and educating, was a gifted musician, responsible for the music, he composed sacred canticles and also hymns and songs for the theatrical performances.

In 1877 he led the first group of missionary FMA to America, and watched over them carefully, having always in mind the unforgettable memories of Mornese and Mother Mazzarello.

"He suffered and even wept at leaving Mornese, but the Sisters suffered and wept too, for losing him

¹¹⁶ *Do* 359.

they lost a true son of Don Bosco, a zealous director a sincere and generous friend of their souls".¹¹⁷ Mother Mazzarello, although of a different temperament from him, and having several times suffered his humiliating reprimands given without any regard for human respect, wrote to Don Cagliero: "Now that he is used to the house and knows every one so well, you have to change him. . . , it's a bit hard. You who are a Father, show yourself to be that, and don't let him leave us".¹¹⁸

Don Giovanni
Battista Lemoyne

It was Fr. Costamagna himself who suggested to Don Bosco that Fr. John Baptist Lemoyne be chosen as his successor at Mornese.

He was Rector at that time of the flourishing college of Lanzo Torinese, but was sent by Don Bosco to Mornese in September 1877. He had lived for several years with Don Bosco from whom he had received intimate confidences.

He had fully imbibed his spirit. He was already known to the Sisters through Fr. Costamagna and they were pleased to receive him. From the beginning Mother Mazzarello had for him not only deep respect, but filial confidence and prompt obedience to all his directives. It was to him that Mother wrote one of the few really confidential letters in which she makes known that in what regards the spiritual well-being of her soul she is of one mind with this excellent director: "You, Reverend Father, must not spare me in any way; treat me as you think best; correct me without fear of human respect; in fine, treat me as a father treats his firstborn child".¹¹⁹

Don Lemoyne was with Don Cagliero at Mother's

¹¹⁷ MACCONO, *Santa* II 16.

¹¹⁸ *MM L 4*, 11.

¹¹⁹ *MM L 9*, 2.

bedside when she died. He administered the Sacrament of the sick, prepared her for her meeting with the Lord and received her spiritual testament to be given to the Sisters.

Don Lemoyne esteemed our Mother so highly as to look upon her as a real Saint, even during her life-time; in fact, he recommended to the Sisters leaving Mornese for Nizza: "Keep her room exactly as she left it; no one else must use it and nothing should be taken from it, nothing at all".¹²⁰

These zealous priests, so different in temperament, without doubt, contributed much through their ministry, their wise guidance and their work, to develop in Mother Mazzarello those gifts and charisms which made her the Saint we now venerate, in addition to the flowering of that spirit so genuinely characteristic that it has passed into history as "the spirit of Mornese". Let us thank God for those chosen souls; let us thank them also in our prayer and keep their memory alive.

Don Ferdinando
Maccono

Now there remains one great Salesian figure to be recalled to mind, one no less deserving of our gratitude, one to whom we are indebted in great part for Our Mother having reached the honours of the altar: Don Ferdinand Maccono (1895-1952). With characteristic tenacity of purpose and painstaking care, he worked for many years, at the express order of Don Rua, gathering together with scrupulous fidelity and clear discernment, the rich treasury of documentation for the successive biographies and for the processes.

He tells us himself; "I spared no effort in examining documents, both printed and handwritten, and in questioning religious and lay people who had known the Servant of God, had lived and worked with her,

¹²⁰ MACCONO, *Santa* II 51.

or who had simply heard her spoken of. In this way I gathered together an abundance of invaluable material and I have not said or affirmed anything of which I was not morally certain”.

Let us be mindful of all this. No one could have undertaken a task of such magnitude better than he did. And he put real love into it, filling his days and his heart with the spiritual richness of our Saint and presenting her to us as she was; indeed, his writings about Mother Mazzarello are, and will continue to be, the most authoritative sources.

The remembrance of Don Maccono therefore, is bound up and will continue to be bound up with that of our Saint. We have reason to hold him in honour, to value the work done by him and to thank God for enabling him to accomplish it.

As I said at the beginning, it seems to me that our saint is encouraging us to call to mind and keep ever before us these great figures and be thankful to God for having used them to serve Him in this way.

(*Cir. n. 649 - June 24 1981*)

Chapter V

THE INTEGRAL FORMATION OF THE FMA

The constant commitment to formation which Mother proposes to herself and her daughters, defining it with a biblical expression "holy pilgrimage", finds in a continuous number of circulars not only a strong point of reference, but soundness of principles and high ideals.

With that sense of realism and equilibrium which characterise her, she aims at the integral formation of the FMA.

She lays special stress on the human virtues of uprightness, truth, competence, capacity for dialogue and self-giving, indispensable basis for the realization of real progress in salesian formation.

She then directs towards that interior unification which is characterised by the coming together of all the energies in God, in total availability for his salvific design, above all, in favour of youth.

Consecration is engrafted on the woman

The already vast field of our mission is extended more and more in response to the just expectations of the Church. Such new openings called for by the growing needs of the Church and of Society, require, in consequence, Sisters better qualified in their preparation. For this reason the Chapter, besides the initial formation, decided to "intensify a process of on-going formation, which will guide the FMA to the knowledge of her real identity of Salesian-consecrated apostle". Only thus can our proposed mission objectives be realised.

As Don Bosco could say that he "was a priest at the altar, a priest in the confessional, a priest in the midst of his boys, a priest in the poor man's house, a priest in the palace of the king or his ministers",¹ so we always and everywhere must be *Salesian-consecrated apostles*".

But the consecration has to be engrafted not only in the christian virtues, which form its basis, but also on the human feminine virtues.

Values-
religious, human,
social of woman

The consecration is engrafted to the woman: woman in the full sense of the word, the christian woman.

We are about to close *the International Woman's Year* to which the Church gave its full support, proposing to itself, as on many other occasions, by means of the Magisterium and specialised organs, to set in relief "*the religious, social, human values of woman*", to favour and develop her participation in the work of evangelization, in real, recognised posts of responsibility. . . in ecclesial organisms of reflection, counsel and service operating at parish, diocesan, and also universal levels".²

¹ MB VIII 354.

² MONS. BARTOLETTI, in *L'Osservatore Romano*, September 10th 1975.

It is this which gave to our Chapter a new urge to enter fully into this programme and to carry it out in several initiatives already in the course of this year.

We admire the great number of chosen women, who have in various countries been providential instruments in hours of difficulty; courageous women, who by martyrdom have testified their love for Christ, who have illuminated the history of our Institute. From the figure of Mother Mazzarello to that of our pioneers on the Mission fields and to the hundreds of Sisters, unknown perhaps, but no less heroic in their dedication. Women full of tact and of daring, tender-hearted and strong-willed, fervent in prayer and untiring in work, rich in intuition and wise in discernment, reserved, yet pleasantly communicative, full of good sense and of equilibrium.

Religious
consecration
gives potential
to human
qualities

On this rich, human basis christian and religious consecration could bring about in them a real lover potential, and make of them ardent spouses of Christ, and authentic spiritual mothers in the Church.

It is interesting to discover, by means of attentive reading of the letters of Mother Mazzarello her maternal intent to form the Sisters to be strong and generous women. I select a few extracts here and there, leaving you to discover and study many others:

Mother
Mazzarello's
school of
formation

"It is no longer time to act the girl, but to be judicious and to give good example".

"Work without ambition, love sacrifices, be detached from your will".

"Sadness, never; it is the mother of tepidity".

"Not so much fear, not even of defects. Be always cheerful".

"Go forward with simplicity and patience".

"Let us carry the cross with courage".

The invitation to love the cross courageously is repeated with insistence. The fourth capitular commission, which did a deep study on abnegation, did not fail to throw into relief this essential element of our spirituality.

The Holy Father, in the audience of September 10th last, affirms that the cross is the pivot of the one, true, moral and vital religious system, and invites us "not to empty the cross of Christ", and assures us that "if we are faithful to the cross there will be revealed to us the secret reasons of our sacrifice placed close to that of Christ, source today of our salvation, and of our eternal happiness tomorrow, after death".

Let us listen to the voice of the Pope and of our saint, the voice of history, and those among the most authentic which you hear in this Woman's year, for a profitable, personal re-thinking and an exam of conscience of what God wants from us.

The ideal of
woman as
conceived by
God

God wants to live in us the ideal of womanhood that He has in His eternal thought, and wants to live it fully in the consecration for which He has chosen us.

We are called to give, with the richness of human virtue, assumed and transfigured by Baptism, the supernatural riches of faith, of hope, and of charity, the riches that the Church and the Institute offers us, and the experience of union with God.

It is not prestige, nor mere personal satisfaction, not the apparent efficacy and success of our mission which give stability to our identity as consecrated women, but the fact that God is, by means of us, better known and more loved, that His kingdom grows in the places where we are, in the persons with whom we live.

This makes us courageous and happy, and makes us participate in the life and in the needs of the

community and of the girls, with a warm heart, pure and free, because over and above all the difficulties, the successes and the failures, we are always conscious of the presence and action of the Lord, and we see the positive effects, even among the inevitable deficiencies and shortcomings.

God is present and always at work:

“Make your ways known to me,
teach me your paths;

Set me in the way of your truth and teach me,
for you are the God who saves me”.³

A serene and sincere personal re-appraisal can make us know what helps and what hinders our opening up in the ways of God, and our attainment in full of our *identity as women, Salesian-consecrated-apostles*.

(Cir. n. 585 - October 24 1975)

Truth in thought, word and action

Missionaries
of truth

Authenticity is one of the words most frequently used in our day. Hence it is not only used, but abused. Everyone wants to be authentic and to see authenticity in others. This means to be true in speech and actions.

This anxious search for authenticity, on being thought out, denounces a situation in which truth has been obscured. The sense of insecurity, discontent and diffidence which is cropping up everywhere proves the dearth of truth.

Such a situation creates the need of truth and stimulates us to become *missionaries of truth* in our communities, among the young and with everyone, in order to fulfill one of the most urgent needs of today.

³ Ps 25, 49.

Jesus, Master
of Truth

But in order to be a bearer of truth one must possess truth. Who, then, can give us truth? He alone who called Himself and really is Truth: "I am the Truth";⁴ He who taught us the language of truth: "Yes, yes; no, No; all that is above that is evil";⁵ He who invoked the Father for all: "Sanctify them in the truth";⁶ He who said, "If the light inside you is darkness, what darkness that will be";⁷ He who exhorted all to seek truth because "the truth will make you free",⁸ and because "the man who seeks the truth comes out into the light".⁹

Let us then draw from the words and example of Jesus, and renew ourselves as St. Paul admonishes, with the "unleavened bread of sincerity and truth",¹⁰ in order to spread the leaven of God's truth among the people around us.

Truth of life
of our Saints

Following the Gospel, our own saints, Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello did just this. They loved and lived truth and did not fail to bring this truth to light in the souls of those in their care. Reading the *Biographical Memoirs* and the life of our saintly Mother we are struck by the singleness of purpose which governed their manner of action and behaviour in everything. There was never any self-seeking, but only the search for God's will and His honour and glory.

a) To be *true in thought* their life rang true because being consecrated to God they worked for no other end. If we wish, as we should, to walk in their footsteps, we have a) no other option but to keep ourselves *true in thought*, working with singleness

⁴ Jn 14, 6.

⁵ Mt 5, 37.

⁶ Jn 17, 17.

⁷ Mt 6,3.

⁸ Cf Jn 8, 32.

⁹ Jn 3, 21.

¹⁰ I Cor 5, 8.

of purpose, not to please others, of or personal satisfaction, or vain glory, but for the love and glory of God.

In the life of our saint we find, among the few conferences left us, notes on a very precious one: singleness of purpose or right intention.¹¹ Let us re-read and meditate on it.

b) To be *true in word*, following the Gospel norm of "yes, yes, and no, no", that is, using the greatest sincerity in our speech.

If we glance through the precious *Repertorio alfabetico delle Memorie Biografiche*, which has been compiled with much love and skill by Rev. Father Pietro Ciccarelli, we shall find, under the word 'Frankness' many excellent examples of Don Bosco's holy freedom in truth with some outstanding illustrations which witness to his frankness. Among other things we read, "he hated lying, duplicity, unseemly cheating and used often quote the 'yes' and 'no' of the gospel".¹²

May our Father's example stand ever before us that we may always be loyal and frank in our speech. **This does not mean that we must say all that we think, but that what we do say must correspond with the truth.** At the same time we must also, as St. Paul suggests, know how to *live by truth in love*,¹³ which means to speak and state the truth without harshness, resentment or bitterness; thus the results will be more effective and enlightening.

c) *To be true in action*, which is to say, not guided by secondary motives, not to camouflage opinions and behaviour for the sake of opportunism, not to use subterfuge or false pretenses for the purpose

¹¹ Cf MACCONO, *Santa* II 250.

¹² *MB* II 221.

¹³ Cf *Ef* 4, 15.

of attaining ends at variance with conscience, the rule, obedience and our religious profession. Let us study the uprightness of our own St Mary Mazzarello whose every action was scrupulously in line with God's law, honesty, the rule and religious obedience.

d) *To see the truth*: to have an eye for the truth, the 'sound' eye of the Gospel.

"The lamp of the body is the eye, it follows that if your eye is sound your whole body will be filled with light",¹⁴ filled, that is, with the light of truth. Truth enables us to take an all round view of people, things and events not just a negative view, which would engender a pessimistic outlook leading to pessimistic judgements. Pessimism paralyses both the individual soul and the community.

Everything human has limitations, shortcomings and deficiencies and it would take a lot of ingenuity, and lack of realism to ignore them. Nevertheless, a sound, realistic vision of persons and things would not hinder the perception and discovery of the good that is everywhere and in everyone. Neither must we imagine that goodness is a thing of the past but rather, recognise joyfully, as the Holy Father does in his discourses, the movements for renewal in the Church and in the world of today and which we must also recognise in our communities and in the Institute.

e) *To testify to the truth*: If we are true in thought, word and deed, we shall be witnesses to truth and be able to communicate it to souls effectively. Words of truth which have no part in the lives of those preaching them and are not coherent with a life of truth, will find no echo in souls and will be repulsed. Young people, especially, are swift to sense whether

¹⁴ Mt 6,22.

words are in tune with life and if they find this is not so they are quick to react because of their radical demand for truth.

We, as religious educators, have a duty to give Jesus to souls but in order to do this it is necessary, as Mother Vaschetti used to say, "*to be redolent of Jesus*", and that, according to the liturgy, is "*to spread abroad the good odour of Christ*".

We must give God, especially through catechetical instruction. I have already spoken of this in its accepted sense in the circular letter of last September. Here I intend to refer to incidental and occasional catechesis, which is a possibility and duty for all of us through circumstances, meetings and conversations.

This will help us to nourish the word of truth in ourselves and prevent idle talk, gossip, chattering, the craving for information and news, and the making of vain personal remarks.

Nourish
ourselves
with truth

Our speech will be a vehicle of truth only if our spirit is nourished with truth. We have both the means and the possibility of making it such. Let us read the Word of God in Sacred Scripture and draw from the Magisterium of the Church and of the Pope. Let us take it as a sacred duty to read the Documents of the Holy See and the Discourses of the Holy Father, which are published from time to time or are printed in the *Osservatore Romano*. This will help us avoid the danger of making our own judgements on the latest news presented by any newspaper or periodical our criterion of truth, and consequently allowing ourselves to be guided by superficialities and, worse still, by a radicalism which could lead to a gradual loss of understanding regarding the real meaning of life and to a subsequent diminution of faith.

Let us know how to suffer and be silent for truth

then we shall shed much more light around us by our words and thus become witnesses to silent, suffering truth.

An excellent exercise in our formation as *Missionaries of truth* is the examination of conscience. If this is done well, with faith and without fear of the truth, it will make, "children of light",¹⁵ since it will place us in God's truth regarding ourselves.

True in the
fullness of
life and being

Above all, let us pray the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth under whose Pentecostal influence we are still living in this liturgical season, that we may be made 'true' in our whole being and in our lives.

Let us say together: Spirit of Truth, lead me to the knowledge of all truth",¹⁶ the truth of God and the truth about myself.

Immerse me in the fullness of your truth, that I may not betray it through my words or through my life. *Do not allow me to appear what I am not.*

Guide me in everything according to the truth, in singleness of purpose in thought word and deed.

Grant that through the power of your grace I may be a witness to the truth of the doctrine and law of Guide in all the circumstances of my life.

May I make others less interested in me and more in You the Essence of Truth, so that I may become a constructive element for the kingdom of God in souls and translate into my own life the reality of the Gospel. Amen!

(Cir. n. 536 - June 24 1973)

¹⁵ Lk 16, 8.

¹⁶ Jn 16, 13.

Truth in charity

In order that religious vitality may grow in the whole Institute, let us now resume the holy journey we started in preceding circulars.

We reminded ourselves last month that *we are, all of us, members of Christ* and we reflected together that a renewal of our communities cannot be realised until this great spiritual reality becomes our truth and our life.

But what hidden reason could delay bringing this about? It would seem to me through my various experiences that *we lack the courage of truth*, that is, to adhere fully and courageously to Christ, who told us: "I am the truth",¹⁷ and prayed for us thus: "Father, consecrate them in truth".¹⁸

"What is truth",¹⁹ Pilate asked Jesus who confessed,; "I have come to give witness to the truth".²⁰ But Pilate went out.²¹ He was afraid of knowing the truth.

The Courage
of truth

Have we the courage of the truth? That is, the courage to face ourselves, first of all, then the various facts and ideas, in the light of Christ who is absolute truth, and then to think, speak and act coherently? It is not an easy matter! It demands a continuous exercise in disinterestedness, uprightness and radicality in choice.

I am grateful to my novice-mistress who was really wise in her work of formation, placing much emphasis on certain basic truths. One of the most frequently emphasised was: It is not being praised

¹⁷ *Jn* 14, 6.

¹⁸ *Jn* 17, 17.

¹⁹ *Jn* 18, 38.

²⁰ *Jn* 18, 37.

²¹ Cf *Jn* 18, 38.

or approved of that makes me better; it is not blame or condemnation that makes me worse: I am what I am before God”.

The practice of always placing ourselves before God, the absolute truth, prevents us from becoming victims of easy opinions, of the flattery of self-love, of frequent pressures or arbitrary pluralism, all of which could condition and cause waywardness in consecrated souls.

At his first meeting with the Sisters of the Archdiocese of Turin, His Grace, the Archbishop, Mons. Anastasio Ballestrero, told them: “Be what you ought to be”.

Do not think that being problematic is synonymous with being profound... I am eagerly awaiting an epoch of religious life which will have less of the problem cult. There are certainties, and it is important to hold on to the certainties we are talking about, so that the most audacious explorations may have a consistently solid basis from which to start and to refer back to!”

He had already stated in his precious little pamphlet, *Scuola di preghiera*, that the truth is God and he who thinks it is his own discovery is arrogance personified.

Only by purification of the intelligence can we be able to behave as servants of the truth. Our intelligence will become more open to the truth and lead to communion the more it becomes more humble.

The courage
to be sincere
with ourselves

“The truth shall make you free”,²² says Jesus. Free from ourselves, first of all.

When we place ourselves before God in all sincerity and measure ourselves by His word, we can no longer cover up anything within ourselves. We are

²² *Jn* 8, 32.

urged to overcome our concern, to save face and always be on the defensive. We seek to free ourselves from the deception of self-interest and our own impressions and so enter into the clear, deep vision of our being before our Creator and Father, who "sees in secret".²³ Then one will be able to say with sincerity, "I am jealous", and another, "I harbour resentment", and still another, "I am independent". This sincerity already opens us to conversion and healing.

I could tell you of a sister whose perseverance was in jeopardy because of her independent spirit and who, after some time confessed to me: "My mentality has changed. A veil has fallen from my eyes, and I have entered into truth".

These are miracles that grace works when a soul measures itself by the word of God and places herself in communion with his life, especially in the Sacraments. As these interior miracles gradually take place, so the communion of charity is formed in the Community.

It has been said that to understand Mother Mazzarello's charity one must understand her love of truth. She did not want to seem to be. She was always her coherent, single-minded self. A person of a single word, she sought God alone in everything and never herself.

She was dominated by that open charity that was linked to her interior greatness. This explains how, unknown to herself, she developed the capacity for arousing a very great affection in her daughters, and by drawing them to herself she led them to God.

Sincere with
others

Jesus teaches us: "Let your speech be: 'yes, yes; no, no' and he added: "All the rest comes from the evil one":²⁴ it is, therefore, a substitute for truth.

²³ Mt 6, 4.

²⁴ MT 5, 37.

The devil is afraid of truth because he was a liar from the beginning.

Let us be honest, decisively opposed to duplicity, ambiguity, two-faced in word and behaviour! Let us train ourselves to that sincerity which is uprightness and honesty, and therefore critical of our own opinions, our actions and the absoluteness of our statements.

It is very sad to have to acknowledge at times that one thing is said to our face and another behind our backs. One may speak and work in community with Superiors and Sisters in one way, but in quite a different way with other people. Might it not be that this duplicity could have undermined the perseverance of once promising vocations?

Let us also be honest in reporting actions and speech. Let us not state as true what we have only heard from others. Let us get to the bottom of the matter and not speak on the basis of our feelings only. One could be taken aback on ascertaining what a change of interpretation can be given to words as they are influenced by sympathy or antipathy.

We must be ready to repress our antipathies courageously as well as the distortions brought about by uncontrolled inclinations.

Let us not seek popularity. It is not a virtue, but self-seeking which nearly always compromises sincerity in relationships. Let us make the Pauline programme our own: "Walk as children of the light".²⁵ When it is necessary to say the truth let us say it, but lovingly, as St. Paul again says: "speaking the truth in love".²⁶

A lack of delicacy in behaviour, a certain amount of egoistic arrogance, rough, noisy manners, sometimes

²⁵ *Ef* 5, 8.

²⁶ *Ef* 4, 15.

disguised as so-called *sincere criticism*, do not come from an objective love of truth but more often from one's own subjective opinion.

Are we bound in duty to speak of the failings of a certain Sister? Why is it that we only make a catalogue of her mistakes and defects and do not highlight her virtues also? Are we ready to recognise our mistakes in front of others?

I have read with edification Fr. Camilleri's diary: "I get too heated in discussion for love of truth, I think.

I must be more vigilant over myself and more moderate in form and manner in tone and words, in order to avoid, if only in appearance, an impression of sharpness, passion and aggressiveness!"

Sincerity
everywhere

The courage of truth with ourselves enables us to speak and act the truth in charity, not only in the environment of our own community, but in all the social situations where our mission places us.

A sincere acknowledgement of our limitations and an honest respect for others, prevent our behaving as if we knew everything and had no need of being informed by anyone.

An upright spirit guides us in discussing and in listening and even disposes us to change our own views in serious dialogue. Thus, we shall witness to the world that truth which is so much needed today.

"In the present disarray it is especially necessary for religious to give witness as persons whose vital striving to attain their goal — the living God — has really unified and deepened their life in God. This is accomplished by the integration of their faculties, the purification of their thoughts and the spiritualization of their senses".²⁷

²⁷ Et 34.

I will conclude with a short episode narrated by a missionary. She had just settled an account in a shop and, without realising it, the shopkeeper had handed back too much change. On arriving home she realised the mistake and immediately went to return the money. The shopkeeper was astounded and said: "Why did you come back? No one would ever know of the error".

"Because my God sees the heart and wants the truth".

This sparked off a desire to know the Gospel and the Baptism of that good pagan followed in due course.

Truth in Charity is an indispensable signpost on our journey to holiness.

(Cir. n. 612 - March 24 1978)

Enlightened conscience, right discernment, sense of responsibility

Last month's circular (May 1976) concluded with the comforting words of the Bible: "God fills the humble with good things and gives them the crown of victory".

These words, dictated as they were by the Holy Spirit, shed light also on the history of our Institute, and help us to understand the secret of the lives of many humble sisters who worked marvels and were fruitful animators of good.

Secret of
premature
maturity of
first Sisters

The emptiness created in them by their humility gave them a great capacity which God filled with an abundance of His wisdom. Although young in years they were already mature women, ready for great responsibility. Let us call to mind a few names from among the many recorded in the history of the beginnings:

- Sr. Enrichetta Sorbone, responsible for all the boarders at the age of eighteen;
- Sr. Maria Grosso, Novice Mistress at Mornese when only twenty;
- Sr. Elisa Roncallo, also twenty years of age, was sent as Superior to open the House in Turin, and her Vicar.
- Sr. Caterina Daghero, was scarcely nineteen;
- The missionary, Sr. Giovanna Borgna, was elected Superior of the House of Las Piedras at nineteen.

Other times, other needs one might well say, and I agree. But might we not also ask ourselves what it was that brought out so much maturity in them?

It seems to me that the answer might be found in a conversation the Rev. Father Serié' had with us, Sisters. This wise Superior highlighted three essential qualities in our own Mother, Sr. Mary Mazzarello:

- *an enlightened conscience* that led to a clear and upright judgment;
- *a strong will supported by faith*, that enabled her to persevere in doing good in spite of all the difficulties and sacrifices she encountered;
- *a sincere and amiable manner* that made her easy to collaborate with.

Now, I think that it was the possession of these qualities that proved the maturity of these sisters. Here, I believe, we have sufficient matter for a dispassionate comparison and a sincere self examination to see if we have, and in what measure, the mature sense of responsibility they had.

An enlightened
conscience

The first quality is an enlightened conscience and this gives the fundamental direction to one's whole life.

Our Holy Father, Pope Paul VI, often returns in his speeches to the theme of conscience. He says that

much is said about the subject, that the term is often abused and is given a sense which denies its most specific meaning.

Too often conscience is given a purely psychological value, while conscience is judgment on the morality of our actions with reference to the absolute criterion of good and evil, a criterion which must return to its inevitable centre, which is God.

But conscience alone is not sufficient, a law, a norm is needed, otherwise its judgment might vacillate under the impulse of passion, interest or the example of others.

In this case moral life becomes subservient to external circumstances and situations, and all the consequences of relativity and servility which derive from them. *Conscience is taught and integrated by external laws.*

Anyone who would think to emancipate himself from the law and from legitimate authority would have a dumb sense of morality on many principal and uncomfortable moral precepts, and would end up by losing the power of exact moral judgment and allowing himself a morality which is flexible and permissive.

The Constitutions point out clearly the sure way to an upright conscience: "Openness to the Spirit helps us to see God's will every day, through the Gospel, the Magisterium of the Church, the Constitutions, the Superiors and the Community".²⁸

Therefore it is not enough to say: "I have my conscience; I act according to my conscience". We must make sure that we have an upright conscience. This is so:

- if we do not cling to our personal judgment alone.

²⁸ C 1975 23.

This might produce a pseudo-truth fabricated by subjectivism and impulse;

- if we control our manner of judging and acting by the moral norms that regulate christian life, and by the Constitutions which are the code of life we freely chose at our religious profession;
- if we are capable of receiving from and listening to everyone without allowing ourselves to be bound by anyone;
- if we know how to control our own restlessness and insecurity, and do not allow ourselves to be influenced by pressures from outside;
- if we do not run after cultural mannerisms which today enchant us but tomorrow are outmoded;
- if we enable ourselves to be conscious of our intentions and actions and do not project our state of mind on others;
- If we do not seek personal interests, but always the common good;
- if we are successful in studying situations globally, without taking a rigid narrow view, which could prevent the making of a synthesis when faced with conflicting ideas and attitudes.

Right
Judgment

It is *only when there is an enlightened conscience that a right judgment can be reached*. Something ambiguous may always infiltrate our actions and projects. Our very generosity may lack light and disinterestedness.

Discernment is not learned from books but is the result of common sense and is, in the first place a gift of the Holy Spirit. It is acquired by that slow continual training which unifies the person and leads her to question Jesus in everything, through his words and example. What did Jesus say, what did he do when faced with this type of fact or problem? What was his attitude in such a situation, when he encountered such persons?.

All that happens to me and all my problems can find their parallel in the Gospel, and it is, therefore, from the Gospel that I can find light to guide me according to God's will.

Then there is prayer, which is the great means for obtaining the light we need: "make me know thy ways, o Lord: teach me thy path. Lead me in thy truth and teach me".²⁹

We do not arrive at this point in a day, but each day must see us beginning again, if we do not wish to remain infantile and superficial.

To one who would justify her immaturity with: "I am made that way", Mother Vaschetti, with her characteristic strength and wit, replied: "if you are made that way, unmake yourself!" This in our language echoes the words of St. Paul: "Put off the old man... and put on the nature of righteousness and holiness".³⁰

Evangelico Testificatio reminds us that as religious we are obliged to bear witness "to an undivided love of God alone, and of an absolute dedication to the growth of his kingdom".³¹ Awareness of this obligation should make us feel responsible for cultivating in ourselves a strong, persevering will to fulfill our identity as Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

We are also spurred on by the example and words of our father, Don Bosco. He always had the complete fulfillment of his priestly vocation in mind "A priest is always a priest and this must be manifest in his every word".³²

Our responsibility in professing the identity of Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, should make

²⁹ *Ps* 24, 4-5.

³⁰ *Ef* 4, 22-24.

³¹ *ET* 3.

³² *MB* III 74.

The essential
and the
secondary

even the details of our life important in us. Sometimes one hears it said: "I keep to the essentials"!

In view of what we have said concerning the sense of responsibility, let us ask ourselves: "What is essential? What is secondary?"

It is not an easy matter to draw a demarcation line between the two in regard to our religious life and it is never the individual person who decides, but the magisterium of the Church and of the Institute.

Are certain things, so easily classified as secondary, really so, considering the consequences they have on our spirit and on our brothers? Are not these things rather a help and support for our religious life and the sign of an adhesion to faith?

There are choices, modes of self-expression and behaviour which, at first sight, would seem to be of secondary importance, but which, in reality, have an impact on the fundamentals. How often a total collapse has been traced to the gradual crumbling away which was judged to be secondary!

Those who have a sense of responsibility will look with a discerning eye, even on what seems to be *a matter of small concern*.

Has not Jesus himself pointed out the value of small things and the omission of small gestures? The widow's mite;³³ a glass of water given in His name;³⁴ the thanks of the grateful leper;³⁵ the water Simon did not offer.³⁶

Do not other books of Sacred Scripture often remind us that what seems to be secondary often has essential values? Naaman, the leper is sent by the prophet

³³ Cf *Lk* 21, 3.

³⁴ Cf *Mk* 9, 41.

³⁵ Cf *Lk* 17,16-18.

³⁶ Cf *Lk* 7,44.

Eliseus to bathe seven times in the Jordan. Yet it was in those despised waters that he was cured.³⁷ That which appeared secondary, just because it was a sign of humble obedience asked for in God's name, acquired great value and worked wonders, even if it did not enter into the reason and logic of Naaman.

If we look at our own models nearer home, we find that our **Saint Mary Mazzarello** prayed and got others to pray that God would keep her "attentive to small things".³⁸

We also have a summary of a conference in which she spoke with great fervour "of the need to be faithful and exact in small things". She would have us guard against "transgressing and despising them as matters of little moment". She adds colour to her discourse with two very appropriate examples: that of a boatman who took no notice of the hole in his boat, and that of the building where small damages were neglected. Both these cases brought ruin in their wake.³⁹

Therefore, let us not hastily renounce our patrimony, even regarding the smallest traditions, in order to take up other forms which might be contradictory to the magisterium of the Church and to the spirit of the Institute.

If we use this wisdom, God will give us the grace to take on the responsibility required of us in this present hour so that we may work out with equilibrium the modifications and updating required by the times.

A recall to the sense of responsibility

The Acts of the Chapter, the Constitutions, the Plan of Formation are all insistent in reminding us of the duty of self-formation and of training to the

³⁷ Cf *Kings II*, 5.

³⁸ MACCONO, *Santa II* 57.

³⁹ *Do I* 397.

sense of responsibility. Even from their initial formation, the young "must acquire the capacity for responding (to God's) call, by a free, responsible and generous choice".⁴⁰

During the novitiate they must be placed in a position to assume coherently and responsibly the commitments involved in total consecration to God and to live those commitments in daily concrete circumstances".⁴¹

Every Sister then, is "responsible for perfecting and up-dating herself";⁴² she must obey as a free and responsible person;⁴³ should feel the responsibility for her requests;⁴⁴ "for all community property";⁴⁵ "for the aids provided for the various pastoral activities";⁴⁶ "for money".⁴⁷

Each time that the *Constitutions* and the *Manual* speak of the fraternal and apostolic community, they recall us to a sense of our responsibility.

This living insistence reiterates to every Daughter of Mary Help of Christians, that all the work of the Chapter, and all the wonderful programmes will bring the desired results only if each one of us makes the effort to use that lively sense of responsibility which characterised our first Sisters, and which is still the characteristic of many in our own day.

The more aware we become of the honour the Church bestows on us in calling us to participate in her work of salvation, the more generous and joyful will be our commitment to a life of coherence and fidelity.

⁴⁰ C 1975 81.

⁴¹ M-R 1975 110.

⁴² C 1975 96.

⁴³ Cf C 1975 25.

⁴⁴ Cf M-R 1975 16.

⁴⁵ M-R 1975 15.

⁴⁶ M-R 1975 191.

⁴⁷ M-R 1975 30.

If we live our consecration-mission faithfully, whether we be young or more mature in years and whatever work we may be engaged in, we shall, by even the smallest action, performed with love, enter into the mysterious dimension of the spiritual maternity of Mary most holy and thus collaborate with her in building up the kingdom of God.

The article entitled "When the Sisters Retire", published in the *Salesian Bulletin* of last April, is a marvellous witness to how much our dear sick and elderly Sisters feel the responsibility of their spiritual maternity in Christ's Mystical Body, the Church.

The Church is in our hands also. By our serene and generous community-life we become a sign "of authentic communion among the people of God".⁴⁸ No one can remain neutral or passive in community. Each sister must feel that she is involved in the whole life, and in all the works of the house. There is no 'my' or 'thy', only 'our'; no 'my girls', 'my work', 'my project', but the deep conviction that though working in different sectors, all the good done is done by all together. All for one and one for all in one only ideal and communion of works. This is the exhortation of our Father, Don Bosco: "Never seek your own personal advantage, but work zealously for the common good of the Congregation".⁴⁹

Let us tread the path of love in collaboration and co-responsibility not only in important matters, but chiefly in the ordinary circumstances of life.⁵⁰ And we can also add: and in our specific mission of evangelization and the education of the young.

⁴⁸ C 1975 30.

⁴⁹ *Teachings of St. John Bosco.*

⁵⁰ Cf C 1975 31.

Responsibility
in education

Our great primary responsibility among young people is that of forming in them also, an upright conscience that can evaluate with exactness, ideas and facts of personal experience and of the vision of the world and life.

We can do this in many ways, in religious lessons, in ordinary familiar conversation, in the use of the social communications media and at sports' meetings. Don Bosco's whispered '*word in the ear*' was just that, seeds sown in the hearts of the boys to help them form a Christian conscience.

In catechesis and in incidental catechetics, in every subject taught, and in occasional meetings we have always the happy possibility of passing on to our girls the truth which is the greatest gift for all their life.

As the Gospel and the Church teach, let us transmit the whole truth without ambiguity, not half-truths. Methods must be modern and according to age and place, but the content must always be in line with catholic doctrine. Let us avoid abstract discourses, too many discussions and debates. "Speak to us of God", said one of the young people, "and we shall then have no more need for discussion".

While we enlighten the girls with our doctrine, let us at the same time guide them to exercise the will, that their lives may be coherent with the truths they believe. But let us train them most of all in prayer and sacramental life.

We shall thus enable our young people to become co-responsible with us in the apostolate and shall have the consolation of seeing them courageously and joyfully profess their loyalty to Christ, the Church and the Pope.

They will be a christian leaven wherever they go, and their participation in social life will be active serene and constructive. We shall, in this way be

fulfilling our specific responsibility of bringing Don Bosco's message to the world.

(Cir. n. 593 - June 24 1976)

Spiritual commitment in little things

I invite you to praise the Lord for the gift that he has given to the Church and to humanity: the Encyclical of Pope John Paul II, "*Redemptoris Hominis*". It is a tremendous expression of faith in Christ, "in whom all things exist, and through whom we live".

Presenting the salvation and the redemption of every man in Christ, and repeating the invitation to open the doors of our hearts and of every earthly reality to Him, the Holy Father gives us a glimpse of a future full of hope. At the same time he makes us feel the great responsibility of collaborating with Christ in the work of redemption.

Collaborators in
the redemptive
mission of Christ

This obligation to collaborate directly affects us, not only because of our Baptism, but because of the specific mission to which we are called in the Church. It affects us personally and as communities because of the people who are in contact with us: the girls who come to our houses, their parents and all the lay people we deal with in our environment and in the local Church.

Under the guidance of competent people it would be good to make a study of the Papal document. The study could be undertaken from many different angles because of the denseness of the concepts presented. Today I would like to stress a reflection that flows from the very faith that pervades the whole Encyclical:

"For us to be **bearers of Christ** to others, He must have first place in our lives all the time: in the moments when we are seen by many and in those when we are in silence and apart".

All of these moments have value, or are lacking in value to the extent that I live them or do not live them in Him. His eternal word of truth confirms this: "As a branch cannot bear fruit all by itself, but must remain part of the vine, neither can you unless you remain part of me... Whoever remains in me, with me in Him, bears fruit in plenty for cut off from me you can do nothing".⁵¹

The spiritual
panorama
of Mornese

These reflections recall immediately the spiritual panorama of Mornese, the most important aspects outlined by the Rector Major: "The awareness of God, of the living presence of Christ, of the maternal interest of our Lady, was such that they were naturally considered with deep and spontaneous affection as members of the family.

... In Mornese there was a positive spirit of enthusiasm for the Lord, for our Lady, for the Guardian Angel, from which sprang an intense activity and a missionary zeal that embraced the whole world". Is this not the spirit that the Encyclical should find in each one of us if we are to be enthusiastic and courageous messengers of Christ?

However, to reflect well on the life that our sisters led in Mornese we must realise that their constant striving for perfection was not in exceptional or extraordinary things: they were exact in, attentive to, the small duty of every day. However, they knew how to give these things the stamp of great love.

They lived not according to the flesh but in the Spirit and the Spirit, the Spirit of love, gave their whole life the value of His infinite love.

For this reason, through the *little things* done by our humble Sisters, immersed as they were in the flame of His infinite love, God was able to achieve great things in the Church.

⁵¹ *Jn* 15, 4-5.

The value of
little things

The Encyclical of the Holy Father then leads us to reflect on *the little things*. And isn't it really the Spirit who wants us to do this? Is it not the Spirit who warns us against despising *little things*: "He who despises trifles will fall little by little".⁵² Is it not the Spirit who makes Jesus' spirit exult with joy because the Father has hidden many things from the wise and revealed them to the little ones?⁵³

"Do you want to be great"? asked the Holy Father at the *Angelus* on the first Sunday of Lent. "Start from the lowest point, from humility". He continued; "often we are attracted by what appear to be values, by external greatness, by things that affect the supernatural level of life. In this way a person pulls away from his depth, and often suffers through the destruction of what he has built up superficially".

Our father, Don Bosco, left a few words for the Salesians in 1875 that seem paradoxical: "in our houses we need concern ourselves only with the little things; the rest will take care of themselves". In these words we catch an echo of his famous sermon of 1875 (which we should bring to the notice of our girls), in which Don Bosco in trying to correct a wrong idea of holiness as being something for the chosen few, gave the boys three simple counsels to become saints: constant moderate joy; exact fulfillment of duties, including religion and study; regular participation in recreation with companions. "*The rest will look after itself*". Everything can serve to make us saints and Vatican II teaches us the same thing in the important chapter on "The call of the whole Church to Holiness" in "*Lumen Gentium*".

⁵² *Sir* 19, 1.

⁵³ *Cf Lk* 10, 21.

The path mapped
out for us by
our Constitutions

The Constitutions and Manual which map out the way for us to become saints, really present to us one small thing after another, small things but very important, because like a mosaic they are gradually making us more like Christ.

Therefore, we cannot speak of important articles and less important articles, because if even one piece is missing from the mosaic there is a gap in our likeness to Christ, a gap in the witness we should give.

We cannot define some traditions or norms superficially as "*little things*" and neglect them saying: "What harm is there in not doing that?, or "What is the good of it?".

Saints have always understood the value of "*little things*" done with love and have felt the need of becoming small themselves so as to discover the "narrow gate"⁵⁴ of the Gospel which leads to the Kingdom of God.

"I tell you solemnly, anyone who does not welcome the Kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it".⁵⁵

Evangelical
childhood

An enlightened Catholic, who had understood the spirit of Jesus' words well, prayed this way: "Lord, free me from the presumption of believing that I am an adult and teach me the way of evangelical childhood".

Someone else echoed his words: "Lord, widen your door because I can't get through. You have made it for the little ones, and I have grown too much!".

Instead St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus' "*little way*" gives her the certainty that the living of the little things through love, places her in the very heart of the Church and serves to build up the great life of the ecclesial community.

⁵⁴ *Lk* 13, 24.

⁵⁵ *Lk* 18, 17.

Pope Luciani considered “being in one’s rightful place, being where God want us to be and as he wants us to be” as a “great discipline for priests and religious”.

The Rector Major told us in Mornese: “Our life must be a true Christology, narrated moment by moment in the various situations of our life, with every person, in every event”.

It must be an eloquent story, not told in words and solemn actions, but in modest tones and in the ordinary events of our community and apostolic lives.

In community, a convincing story is told by the little attentions that make everyone happy, the little word of greeting, sisterly interest in little things that touch each other, the little efforts to keep quiet about the mistakes of others or the hurt that we ourselves suffer, the communicating of little items of family news, sincere recognition of the good done by others, the small efforts to refrain from asserting ourselves, peacefully and freely offering our help in little things, our contribution in countless ways of building up a community of reciprocal trust.

Each one of these little things contribute to the growth of an atmosphere of serenity and warmth in the Community. In this way the community becomes a real Christological story, in line with the spiritual infancy that gives us full evangelical meaning.

Educative project
a Christological
narrative

What a Christological narrative our serious and constant work in the educational field is!

I am thinking of the hundreds of Sisters who, hour after hour, are able to die to themselves so that they can welcome the girls as they are, listen to them patiently; counsel, réstrain, forgive, encourage. Just like the grain of wheat that dies in the earth

so they, with their patient goodness (*bontà*), are preparing the ears of wheat for the Church and for society.

Even our apostolic story is made up of little things, but who can measure their importance?

A past-pupil wrote to me recently: "Just to see Sr. so-and-so's serene face cleared away the dark clouds that had engulfed me for some time. Her words were discreet and warm with the strength of faith, and through my tears I discovered once again the meaning of prayer".

In our apostolic action it is not a small thing to be able to say a word that is meaningful, sincere, balanced and full of faith.

It is not a small thing, therefore, not to lose ourselves in useless, frivolous reading and to prepare ourselves with serious, helpful reading for our catechesis and school work, giving them a christian bias that will help our young people not to be carried away by every ideological wind that blows. It is no small thing to avoid spending too much time analysing the social, temporal situation so as to give sufficient time to announcing Christ.

It is no small thing not to act as though we were perfect, fully mature people who know everything and therefore, can never be contradicted.

It is no small thing, in catechesis especially, to acquire a simple language that is accessible to everyone, most of all the least gifted.

It is no small thing to form our young girls to a sensitivity for feminine virtues that are so effective in bringing about unity and serenity in the Family. They bring into every form of service, to which the woman of today is particularly called, the valid characteristics of feminine delicacy and concern. In the mystery of Nazareth and the public life of Jesus, our Lady contemplated in the light of the

Holy Spirit, the deep mystery of every word and action of her divine Son and modelled her life on them. May she help us never to become so *adult* as not to value the little things any more.

Little things
and
interior unity

Don Bosco warns us that when the enemy of our souls wants to seduce a religious and induce him to violate the commandments of God, he begins by making him negligent in little things, then in the more important, and after this it is easy enough to make him break God's law.

Mother Mazzarello told the sisters in her simple way: "What would you think about a boatman who sees a small hole in the boat but takes no notice and rows out into deep water? The water will soon engulf him and although he will want to remedy the situation it will be too late". Today, many years distant from Mother Mazzarello's time, a well-known vocational psychologist affirms: "I have never known anyone throw aside his vow all of a sudden. No religious decides on the spur of the moment to leave his Institute, little by little his steps lead him in that direction.

Little things are very important for the interior unity of the person and therefore for his perseverance". Some sisters who have had this sad experience confirm these words: "I began to neglect some practice of piety, to dispose of various things without permission, to cultivate friendships that distracted me from God and from my sisters and I never went for my monthly talk with my superior".

In this mosaic that should gradually bring us to likeness with Christ, the empty spaces multiply so that the over-all view of the beauty of this life is lost and a person no longer has either the desire or the strength to announce Christ with her life. He no longer has first place and becomes substituted by what is temporary, passing... In this way the Church and the Institute sadly lose those who

should be God's specialist, collaborating with him for the salvation of mankind.

I should like to repeat: the Holy Father's great encyclical helps us indirectly, to reflect on the mystical practice of the little things that can build us up into collaborators of Christ for the salvation of mankind.

The hierarchy
of values in
my life

Considering ourselves in the light of what we have said above, we can draw up a personal account: "*The hierarchy of values in my life*". Let us list what we would put first, second, third... last etc. Then let us note the little things to which we are habitually faithful and those we easily forget and the reasons why. In this way we mark down the empty spaces in our likeness to Christ and at the same time the way to fill them in. So we have a useful aid for a good examination of conscience and a firm renewal of our love for the Lord, without calculation, measureless, that will make us credible, efficacious witnesses of Christ.

When the Bishops of Puebla put the document drawn up at their Conference on our Lady's altar, their small action expressed their united faith, love and hope in the powerful intercession of Mary, Mother of the Church.

Let us too, put the little paper, on which we have drawn up our idea of life on our Lady's altar. Let us renew our consecration as her Daughters. During this month, dedicated to the Help of Christians, let us continue in a special way our enthusiastic re-launching of our Marian devotion in a way that is ever more ecclesial, so that we shall become, like Mary, bearers of Jesus to everyone, helpers with the Help of Christians in the redemptive work of Jesus.

(*Cir. n. 625 - April 24 1979*)

Young in spirit

The question repeatedly asked us by our Holy Father during the audience of July 15th, 1972 continues to re-echo within us as a reminder and spur to respond to the Church's call to the renewal of our missionary spirit.

Response to
the needs of
the Church

"Will your Congregation be able to respond to the Church's needs in these troubled times?"

I wish that each of you could answer in the secret of her own heart, 'I will do my best'".

The Pope asks for a wholehearted, enthusiastic response. He asks for the enthusiasm proper to the young, unburdened with egoistic calculations, narrow-mindedness and discouragement.

My thoughts turn to the many elderly sisters filled with holy enthusiasm and youthful serenity, who make the problems, anxieties and joys of the Church and the Congregation their own; who, whether they be missionaries in actual fact or in spirit make all these things a part of their inmost lives, taking them into their prayer, their conversations and their daily self-giving. I see these Sisters reading with delight our own special literature, the circulars, *the Notiziario, Da mihi Animas*, all of which unite us in spirit and action as we share the family news and receive directives to follow. I know that these Sisters are always ready to pray and to offer help in every way possible to them, as well as to give a hand when someone is missing.

Young in spirit

They are perennially young because of their sense of God and their interest in spreading the Kingdom, and also because their spirit retains the freshness of all that is new. The comforting words of the psalmist are renewed in them: "The Lord

...fills your life with good things renewing your youth like an eagle's".⁵⁶

Youthfulness is not, in fact, linked with years because it is a spiritual action of continual renewal such as we admire in the Church: Rich in a long past always living within her, and journeying towards human perfection in time and towards the ultimate destinies of history and life, she is the true youthfulness of the world".⁵⁷

Our Institute which develops in the Church a special mission among the young, has a singular share in her perennial youthfulness. This is why Cardinal Cagliero, the privileged disciple of our Holy Founder could repeat, while preserving his own spiritual youthfulness until death: "Don Bosco's sons never grow old".

The more we preserve and nourish this youthfulness of spirit the more we shall clothe ourselves in that missionary spirit which gives us a share in the "Church's salvific mission", and enables us to fulfill the specific aim of the Institute which is "by its nature and vocation educative and missionary".⁵⁸

In the words of the beautiful letter on the missionary spirit, written by the Reverend Rector Major in July, 1972, an "atmosphere of deep missionary spirit, fervour and enthusiasm for missionary action"⁵⁹ also serves to rejuvenate the spirit, give it fresh enthusiasm and a renewal of spiritual energies.

Now let us study ourselves to see if we have any of the signs of age which make life drag heavily

Signs of
aging

⁵⁶ Ps 102,5.

⁵⁷ *Conciliar message to youth*, December 8th 1965.

⁵⁸ C 1969.

⁵⁹ RICCERI Luigi, in *Atti del Consiglio Superiore della Società Salesiana*, luglio 1972, n. 267.

for us, or whether we have that spontaneous generosity which renders us ready for sacrifice, inventive in apostolic activity and serene and optimistic in difficulties.

The aging of the spirit is a symptom of lukewarmness. This is an unpleasant term which one never accepts for oneself, since lukewarmness implies limitations, a scaling down and renunciation of all ideals. Nevertheless, it is not difficult to slide into mediocrity in the spiritual life. In order to avoid this danger we must aim high, cultivate great ideals of sanctity and open up the spirit to a "clear vision of faith, which enables one to perceive the urgency of the coming of the Kingdom and of evangelization, and to react apostolically to the needs of souls".⁶⁰

Our own Mother fully understood this and recommended to the first Daughters of Mary Help of Christians: "it is necessary that we, the first Sisters in the Congregation should be, not only virtuous, but the mirror in which all those who come after us may see the true spirit of the Institute reflected. We must live, work and speak in such a manner they may be able to say: "What fervour there was among our first Sisters! How observant they were! what a great spirit of humility and poverty was theirs and how obedient they were! Thus following our example they will continue to live the true spirit of the Institute among themselves".⁶¹

We, too, open a new page in the history of our Institute. We are the '*first*' of this second century and hence our saint's words could not have truer significance than at the time in which we live. They form a programme which impels us to probe the depths of our being; to examine our manner of

⁶⁰ Do.

⁶¹ MACCONO, *Santa* I 399-400.

acting and to judge how consistent it is with our baptism, our consecration and our membership of the Church and the Institute.

Flee from
mediocrity

In order to avoid lukewarmness, we must feel and cultivate the need for personal, persevering prayer and have the courage of silence, which is the guardian of the interior life. If we do not hold on to these means we shall slide on to the easy, happy-go-lucky paths of spirituality. Thus we shall lose our taste for the things of God and become enveloped in our egotism. Our thoughts will turn more to what we think others should be doing than to what we should be doing ourselves and that is, basically, a subtle form of pride which makes us think ourselves better than others.

Hence comes the facility for criticizing others, of condemning others and of passing judgment. This is very far from the spirit of the gospel, which says "judge not and you will not be judged"⁶² and from the programme of Blessed Father Rua: "I will never judge anyone but myself".

Why waste time over the lack of perfection in others instead of using it for our own sanctification? Why should we seek reasons for justification and be ever ready to condemn those who have made a mistake. Let us keep the severe admonition of the gospel always before us: "Why do you observe the splinter in your brother's eye and never notice the plank in your own?"⁶³ All that is the fruit of radical lukewarmness.

Moreover, this lukewarmness leads us to think more of our own needs than those of others, to dramatise little upsets or discomforts, to defend ourselves while appearing to defend the rights of God and allow ourselves to be guided by oppor-

⁶² Mt 7,1.

⁶³ Mt 7,3.

tunism, resentment and certain secret motives which we dare not acknowledge even to ourselves.

Mediocrity becomes stronger when faith is weakening and one begins to judge by reason alone, when habit alone guides work, prayer, apostolic activities and every other action by which religious life expresses itself, reducing everything to the level of lifeless mechanics.

By this time the breath of love is weakened, if it is not already dead, and consecration has lost its attraction and beauty. Exterior activity may still continue and there may be programmes and initiatives without any interior spirit. Then we shall be unable to say, according to the Holy Father's wish, "I will do my utmost". On the contrary, uneasiness and weariness will begin to infiltrate, crises will commence to disturb, and sad to say, lukewarmness will become the yawning gap ready for the breath of the devil.

The malignant
action of the
spirit of
darkness

In his discourse of November 17, 1972 the Holy Father gave us a very clear reminder of the presence and malevolent activities of this spirit of darkness. He said, "He is enemy number one and the most powerful of all tempters. We know that this mysterious and disturbing being really exists and is still treacherously and cunningly active. He is the crafty sorcerer who knows how to insinuate himself by way of the senses, the imagination and concupiscence into our activities. Whoever is not vigilant to the point of a certain moral severity with himself, becomes exposed to the influence of the '*Mysterium iniquitatis*' to which St. Paul refers".

We know that the Holy Father's enlightened discourse on this subject has been subjected to rash criticism, but in the gospel, Jesus himself repeatedly puts us on our guard against the exploits of the devil by opening our eyes to his malign influence.

It is sufficient to remind ourselves of the threefold temptation of Jesus in the desert, the numerous episodes where the devil actually manifested himself, the parable of the wheat etc.

The devil shows his most subtle cunning in causing us to forget or even deny his existence. Cardinal Garrone wrote: "One hardly dares to speak of the devil now. Yet, there is a certainty in the Church concerning this matter which cannot be brushed aside with temerity, since it is based on constant teaching which has its source in the gospel and beyond it".

Do we mention him now in our catechesis? Are we, each one of us, convinced of the warning of St. Peter "...be watchful. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith".⁶⁴

Let us ask the Angels to defend and support us in our stand for the faith and may they help us to combat all the suggestions with which the enemy of good tries above all to entrap consecrated souls.

(*Cir.* n. 560 - March 24 1973)

Radiation of joy

I propose to you another aspect of this programme with a characteristic peculiar to our Salesian spirit, that of serenity. Serenity is a characteristic special to our salesian spirit and I would say, it is one of the most effective and beneficially contagious elements in the apostolate since it has a great influence, especially on the young. It is, in fact, an essential element to the radiation of truth of which

⁶⁴ *1 Pt* 5, 8-9.

it is itself a witness, and, therefore, an excellent means for the *missionary apostolate*.

Serenity infuses courage, stimulates enthusiasm, inflames souls and is, perhaps, the most acceptable defence of our faith because it is a concrete witness to the joy of belonging to God, of knowing Him and loving Him.

The gospel is
interwoven
with joy

The whole of the gospel *is interwoven with joy*. It opens with the joyful announcement of the angel, "...Listen, I bring you news of great joy... a Saviour has been born to you".⁶⁵ Jesus started his public life with the proclamation of the Beatitudes from which spring that joy which the world cannot understand.⁶⁶

The pages in St. John which express Jesus' testament exhale joy: "I have told you this that my joy may be in you and your joy be complete";⁶⁷ "...you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned into joy...";⁶⁸ "I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have my joy in them to the full".⁶⁹

All Sacred
Scripture
sings of joy

But *all Sacred Scripture sings of joy*, the joy of living before the Face of the Lord, and it would be a useful exercise to look up the relative scriptural passages. In his letters St. Paul praises joy and numbers it among the fruits of the Spirit.⁷⁰ He exhorts, "**Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say Rejoice**";⁷¹ St. Peter echoes this theme: "In this you rejoice, though now for a little while you may have to suffer various trials so that the genuineness

⁶⁵ *Lk* 2,10.

⁶⁶ Cf *Mt* 5, 1-11.

⁶⁷ *Jn* 15, 11.

⁶⁸ *Jn* 16, 20.

⁶⁹ *Jn* 17, 13.

⁷⁰ Cf *Gal* 5,22.

⁷¹ *Phil* 4,4.

of your faith may redound to praise, glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ".⁷²

The Acts of the Apostles are an embodiment of the **joy** taught by Christ and his Apostles, in the concrete situation of life. It is therefore a witness that joy is **the authentic atmosphere of the Christian life**. Joy is, therefore, an essential part of Christianity, a distinctive characteristic, and the mark of its completeness and authenticity.

The Salesian
spirit of joy

Happily, this evangelical characteristic is also the distinctive characteristic of our Salesian spirit. Our Father, Don Bosco grasped the interior formative value of cheerfulness and took it as the special element of the spirituality of our religious families, in view also of the apostolic aims to which they are directed.

The Biographical Memoirs abound in references to this and portray the figure of our saint in lineaments of joy which, however, is not the result of a happy disposition only, but the fruit of virtuous effort.

"Holy joy was for him the foundation of his social edifice".⁷³

"Wherever he went he carried cheerfulness and God's blessing with Him".⁷⁴

He affirmed: "The devil is afraid of cheerful people",⁷⁵ and used to advise, "If we would always be happy, let us be obedient".⁷⁶

Our holy Mother Mary Mazzarello also lived joyously and spread this holy joy in the community. Father Pestarino testified to this when giving his account to Don Bosco, "A spirit of charity, cheer-

⁷² *I Pt* 1, 6-7.

⁷³ *MB* VI 4.

⁷⁴ *MB* VIII 453.

⁷⁵ *MB* X 648.

⁷⁶ *MB* XIII 210.

ful harmony and joy reigns among them all".⁷⁷ The biographer notes that our saintly mother "was vigilant that living together should not be rigid and still less harsh or morose, but filled with gentleness, amiability, cheerfulness and joy according to the spirit of the Founder, and it really was like this".⁷⁸

She continually returns to the call for cheerfulness in her letters. In a letter to Sr. Vallese, April 9, 1879 she writes:

"Are you cheerful, Sr. Philomena? Always keep cheerful, won't you?".

"Sister Victoria, they tell me you are always good humoured, I am very glad indeed to hear it.

Sr. Gedda, keep all the sisters cheerful for me".⁷⁹

In a letter to Sr. Pacotto we find,

"... Sr. Giuseppina, be thankful that I am far away from you otherwise you would be getting your ears pulled. Do you not know that melancholy is the cause of all evil?"⁸⁰

And to Sr. Barilatti: "Be of good heart, take courage and be cheerful. This is a mark of a heart that has a great love for God".⁸¹

We could continue quoting examples but I leave each one of you to read for herself the letters printed in the *Manual* and to draw from them the grace of the holy joy they inspire, together with the conviction of our real obligation, as Daughters of Mary Help of Christians to educate ourselves in serenity.

Education to
serenity

Serenity is not just a matter of temperament. It comes, as our saints have proved, from the consciousness that the God dwelling within us is the

⁷⁷ MACCONO, *Santa* I 245.

⁷⁸ *Do* 289.

⁷⁹ *MM L* 19, 8-9, 14.

⁸⁰ *MM L* 21, 3.

⁸¹ *MM L* 60, 5.

God of joy. It is the fruit of grace which blossoms in joy and also the exercise of will over self, emotions and excessive sensitivity.

It has been said of Don Bosco, "A peaceful conscience and complete abandonment to God prevented him from succumbing to any discouragement or sadness".

Let us cultivate the life of grace within us, the life of faith, hope and charity, then joy will flow into our souls like a torrent.

If we avoid all compromise, all manner of acting that is not quite straightforward, all self-seeking and breaking of charity we shall never know the darkness that generates dejection by dimming grace and mitigating joy. If, moment by moment, we abandon ourselves to God's will and accept while developing the gifts of mind and heart he has given us, both success and failure from his blessed hands, we shall attain tranquility, balance and peace and also experience intimate and deep serenity in difficulties and sufferings.

Article 11 of our Constitutions [1969] binds us to be witnesses to serenity among the young. The Daughter of Mary Help of Christians "binds herself to live among the young with joyful Salesian affection and is a tangible and visible sign of God's love".

Article 34 presents joy to us as a participation in the intimate joy of the very life of the Blessed Trinity. Article 64 presents joy as the fruit of supernatural security and "authentic educational activity". Article 68 invites to happiness in a "humble laborious life" which will give testimony to religious life itself.

Education to serenity is education to an equitable disposition, a special characteristic of Salesian asceticism which is drawn from St. Francis of Sales.

Missionaries
of joy

Let us then *become missionaries of cheerfulness*. There is a great need of this, especially in our times. Our standard of civilization, in striving for the satisfaction of all our needs, has in fact, created many problems, much insecurity and dissatisfaction. Scientific discoveries and the acquisition of techniques do not fill the need for peace and joy.

Many young people do not enjoy true deep happiness because they have lost the true sense of values. Yet God desires that our *joy may be full* and continues to offer us through creation and grace a world of values calculated to satisfy us here and to be for us a sign and foretaste of what awaits us in eternity. Let us look around at the beauty of nature, the harmony of colour and sound, the perfection of technique, the simplicity of children, the attractiveness of youth and the goodness of so many people. Each of these is God's gift to us.

Let us train young people to discover these realities, admire them, praise God for them and delight in them. A precious little pamphlet from the pen of that radiant apostle of the paschal joy of Christ, Monsignor Cavallaro, might be useful. Its title is "*La gioia perfetta*" (Perfect Joy). The radiation of holy joy together with the witness of our lives would refute the accusation, "Christians have an air of people who are unsure of salvation". We are, instead, happy because we belong to God and possess Him.

First of all, let us diffuse serenity in our own houses by putting into action the wise counsel of holy Pope John XXIII, to promote "that which unites rather than that which divides". Let us revive the 'family atmosphere' in our work relationships in all shades of meaning brought out in article 36 of our Constitutions.

Let us discover once more the holy joy of Don Bosco, Mother Mazzarello and our first Sisters, and

revive it among ourselves, especially at recreation time, as article 38 of the Constitutions would have us do.

A serene
community
fascinates

A community where serenity reigns is a community which fascinates the young who feel attracted toward it and find in its serenity those values which the world can no longer give, serenity which reflects the countenance of God.

A woman convert to catholicism confessed that one of the greatest urges towards taking this step came from her long observation of the constant serenity of a community of Sisters. It made her ask herself: "What is it that makes them so happy?". The answer could be none other than "God's grace".

Venerable Don Serié used to say, "One should always be able to see written across your forehead, 'God loves me and that makes me happy'".

Let us then try to look with a serene countenance on all around us. By doing this we shall contribute our share to the Holy Year which has already been proclaimed. We shall, meanwhile, follow faithfully all that is proposed in this regard by our particular diocese.

In conclusion, let us not forget for our own encouragement and stimulus the Holy Father's words on July 15th last year, "The Daughters of Mary Help of Christians are spending their lives cheerfully in humility and generosity, their faces alight with composed but sincere joy".

Let us strive also, that his fatherly wish for us may become a reality: "Be always souls in tension, in enthusiastic joy".

Thus, we shall fulfill the wonderful programme of becoming *missionaries of serenity*.

Bearers of the
message of joy

Cardinal Corrado Ursi, in his homily on the occasion of the golden jubilee of the Neapolitan Province left us this very beautiful and challenging programme: "Daughter of Mary help of Christians, sow joy around you, in the Church and in the world!".

And the official speaker at the celebration, The Hon. Oscar Luigi Scalfaro, as if echoing the Cardinal's words, said: "You, Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, have chosen to represent the smile on the face of the Church".

On St. John Bosco's feastday, Mons. Edward Pironio, Pro-Prefect of the Sacred Congregation of religious, who came to Casa Generalizia for the Eucharistic Celebration, left us the following instruction: "Live the joy that comes from hope: bring the message of the joy of salvation to youth".

The Notiziario brought you his homily, which obviously was a faithful echo of the Apostolic Exhortation, *Gaudete in Domino*, which I hope you have read and re-read so as to make it a part of your life.

The Holy Father had, perhaps, a special intention when on Nov. 22nd he made a gift of that exhortation to the missionaries, men and women of our Salesian Family. It is a gesture and gift that speak for themselves. It is as if he had said: "You Salesians, will add this to the other qualities of missionary life: 'Be missionaries of the joy of the Lord', and as if he would repeat to us in particular: "*by your dignified joy*". Many and very authoritative voices have reached us recently presenting to us the same theme: *joy*.

Joy, a duty of
Salesian life

As the Holy Spirit encourages and helps us to read into the signs of the times, do you not think, dear Sisters, that in this hour of world tribulation and sadness he calls us with firm divine insistence to a *duty*, so closely bound up with our Salesian vocation "that of educating ourselves to true joy so as

to testify to it, spread it and make of it an effective instrument of our educative mission?”.

I said *duty*, and I don't think you will find the specification too strong. I have concluded this from the attentive reading of our saints, of the documents dealing with the genuine spirit of our Institute and of the reports of the capitular commissions, which affirm that the life of our communities and all our pastoral action must be permeated by a cheerful, happy spirit, if it is to be authentically salesian.

Our saints
and joy

You will remember that gentle, insistent reference to cheerfulness which Mother Mazzarello makes in her letters: “Keep everybody cheerful”.⁸² “Let your joy be always superior⁸³ to your troubles”.⁸⁴ “Are you cheerful? Oh I hope so, because woe to us if we allow ourselves to be overcome by depression... Therefore, be always cheerful”.⁸⁵

Witty expressions are not lacking: “Be always cheerful, my dear Sisters: this life is fleeting by”⁸⁶ (...*passaggera, buona sera*”).

Mother Mazzarello, like a refined psychologist, with that kind of psychology that comes from good sense, from experience and from the wisdom of the Holy Ghost, points out clearly that which threatens serenity at its very roots: “To be really cheerful we must go forward with simplicity, not seeking satisfaction in creatures, never taking offence and being ready to help anyone in need”.⁸⁷

Foundation of
Christian and
Salesian joy

And Don Bosco? I will not quote references from his life and writings. I invite you just to read the extract from St. Paul to the Philippians, chosen for

⁸² *MM L 21, 6.*

⁸³ *MM L 16, 2.*

⁸⁴ *MM L 47, 9.*

⁸⁵ *MM L 60, 5.*

⁸⁶ *MM L 51, 14.*

⁸⁷ *MM L 21, 4.*

his feastday: "Rejoice in the Lord always; and again I say rejoice".⁸⁸

The foundation for these repeated invitations of St. Paul to joy is to be understood in the exhortations that follow them and which don Bosco carried out so faithfully in his life: "There is no need to worry, but if there is anything you need, pray for it to God..."⁸⁹

"Fill your mind with everything that is true, everything that is noble, everything that is good and pure and honourable".

And above all, faith in the most consoling certainty:⁹⁰ "The Lord is near".

Salesian joy, which at first sight seems in the dream of our Founder almost a vague bower of roses, is, therefore, a path of continual upward ascents and the fruit of virtue which is joyously austere.

"True joy is the fruit of love which comes from the cross", Mons. Pironio told us: and the liturgy in these recent weeks has recalled us to consideration of the meaningful extract of the letter of St. James: "My brothers, you will always have your trials, but when they come, try to treat them as a happy privilege; you understand that your faith is only put to the test to make you patient".⁹¹

It is, therefore, very touching to think that the first Salesians were pained when they saw Don Bosco unusually cheerful, because the conviction was common among them that those were the moments of greatest suffering for the saint.

The "dignified joy" that we must testify to is not then the result of a happy temperament, or the

⁸⁸ *Phil* 4,4.

⁸⁹ *Phil* 4, 6.

⁹⁰ *Phil* 4, 8.

⁹¹ *Jm* 1, 2-3.

consequence of favourable conditions; it is a strong virtue, rooted in the rock of faith, which grows through free, noble choices made in renunciation, and expands in the warmth of a sincere charity. The 4th commission by the means it indicates for a formation to the vital practice of abnegation introduces us to the sure paths of serenity and peace even amid daily sufferings.

The deepest joy

But it is, above all, in the assimilation of the word of God, in the strength of the life of grace that we experience the deepest joy: that is, the certainty that *God lives in us, and is with us to the end of time.*

To be able to establish at every moment a rapport of deep personal intimacy with the living God within me, and to be able to establish it in the truly unique way of a spouse which the charism of my religious profession has opened to me, is a joy which surpasses all others. It is a joy which purifies, transforms and consequently expands the heart in love for all.

Freedom from
egoism the
condition for
true joy

And it is truly our personal response to the love of God living in us and its divine ever-growing demands that help us, even between falling and rising, to shake off many forms of self-love that generate sadness:

- the tendency to close in on self in isolation;
- rigidity of mind which puts us on the defensive and in an attitude of condemnation of others;
- the habit of lamenting easily;
- excessive preoccupation with our personal interests and needs;
- the self-sufficiency that does not ask for, or accept advice.

As we gradually free ourselves from egoism, we breathe true joy. We breathe it by admiring crea-

tion and new discoveries in all fields; in penetrating the immense richness of the liturgy, of the sacramental life; in accepting the positive in things, sometimes hidden under a negative aspect; in burying every evening in pardon and in prayer offences received, and in beginning every morning to love and to smile as if nothing had saddened us; by making more spacious and foreseeing the love of the heart to all and making pastoral love for youth more ardent.

We breathe pure joy also in rereading in silent adoration the story of God's infinite love for each one of us; in recalling the mysterious ways of our vocation and the benefits received from the Institute; in meditating, above all on "*the unfathomable riches*" that the Heart of Jesus participates to us, through which we feel *realised in Him*, in the fullness of our aspirations, rather, beyond all our desires.

We thus penetrate in an experience which is ever more vital, the mystery of the Beatitudes and we learn the wisdom of the cross from which springs true and lasting joy.

Christian joy, while it opens the heart to all men and to the entire world, creates in us a longing for heavenly joys: "we shall see God face to face"⁹² and "reflecting the brightness of the Lord shall be transformed in the image that we reflect".⁹³

I will arise! Those I love will also rise. What comfort, strength and joy these certainties give us! Christian Joy is, therefore, the fruit of faith, hope and correspondence with grace.

We FMA must in a particular way educate to joy, because our educative method is based on a joyous charity which helps us to penetrate more easily the world of youth and save it.

Joy in our
educative
system

⁹² 1 Cor 13, 12.

⁹³ 2 Cor 3, 18.

To make the girls live in joy we do not give them the external means only but help them to discover its true sources.

“Don Bosco sowed the love of God in hearts and from it there blossomed a cheerfulness that was the radiation of God present in souls”.⁹⁴

Perhaps never as in these times has youth the need of being led back to the sources of Christian joy, and we all can and must help to create in our houses the atmosphere of a joy which is the radiation of grace.

Everyone experiences joy according to his age and temperament. Some express it in a diffusive, others in a calm quiet way, but we must all be convinced that a dignified joy is a quality of our Salesian vocation, and one of the means of making our apostolic action acceptable.

For this reason the project drawn up for the formation of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and now being tried out, places, among the criteria to be remembered when admitting to the Salesian religious life, a “*basic disposition to joy*”.⁹⁵

The value of
recreation

The subject we are considering leads me to underline, not only the psychological but the communitary, and therefore religious value of joy.

Among the lamentations that escaped from Don Bosco's heart in the letter from Rome — 1884 — there is this one: I no longer heard the shouts of joy and the songs as in times past. In the actions and on the faces of many, boredom weariness and mistrust could be seen. From dislike for recreation comes coldness in approaching the Sacraments, negligence in the practices of piety, lack of cor-

⁹⁴ PAVANETTI, *Il Sistema* 72.

⁹⁵ *Piano per la formazione delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice* (Roma, FMA 1975) 52.

respondence to vocation... ingratitude, murmuring and many other deplorable consequences”.

The sorrowful stress of our Father should suffice to make us reflect on the value of recreation in his eyes, and make us understand that weakening in faith, in charity, in vocation can have as cause the neglect of recreation.

Article 38 of our Constitutions shows the value of recreation as a means of nourishing the family spirit and of maintaining “the equilibrium indispensable to consecrated souls”.

The variety of activities will not permit mid-day or evening recreation in all the houses, but let us see that it is not neglected and above all, that it is not substituted by TV shows except in particular cases.

Let us revive our beautiful Salesian recreation, cheerful, animated, interspersed with witty wholesome jokes which bring oxygen to the constitution, take the dramatic out of certain situations, unite hearts and make them good. Maccono writes that recreation in Mother Mazzarello’s company was always pleasant and instructive: she knew how to unite the humorous with the serious and everyone would have wished it to continue.

It was also said of Mother Vaschetti that she had a special art of arousing interest, in releasing joy, so that souls might be uplifted and hearts united in that tonic gaiety which is the secret of charity. Mother Daghero encouraged joyousness at meal times which should be a time of cordial expansion to renew energies and unite hearts.

The holidays too should be characterised by serene and dignified joy organised in keeping with the vow of poverty and in places not alien to our condition as religious.

Dear Sisters, the Lord wants us to be joyful: “That

my joy may be in you and your joy be full";⁹⁶ "The kingdom of God... is justice, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit".⁹⁷

Our Identity In
a life of Joy

All the work of the Chapter aimed at the re-discovery of our identity as Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and consequently of this our characteristic of joy.

We must cooperate with the Holy Spirit to build it up. Will we not have to redimension our concept of Christian joy? Shall we not also have to redimension the idea that joy is an optional element in our life, rather is it a specific one of our identity of FMA and therefore, a definite duty.

What personal contribution do I bring to the serenity of the Community, and in particular to recreation?

What testimony of joy do we give and communicate to the pupils? Is our joy still on a psychological level only, and therefore at a high level only when all is going well, or is it a joy which is constant in faith and sacrifice?

What are the real causes that prevent our acquisition of the very necessary even-humour?

If we do not educate ourselves to true joy we can run the risk of going in search of "*substitutes for Christian joy*", attaching excessive value to satisfactions, which however good and lawful, are temporary, like the organization of work, comfort, knowledge, scholastic results, human relations... directed over-much, perhaps, to our personal projects.

Let us live, dear Sisters, the beautiful assignment which has been given us: "to sow the joy of hope in the Church and in the world". The reminder

⁹⁶ *Jn* 15, 11.

⁹⁷ *Rm* 14, 17.

has come to us also from a recent discourse of the Holy Father: "to live our Christian hope serenely, courageously, and fully conscious that the optimism of our hope may be based on events which are apparently and humanly-speaking, contrary to it, "because all things turn to good for those who love God".⁹⁸

May our Lady communicate to us her joy of spirit expressed in the *Magnificat* so that in every community our strong, genuine, joyous spirit may be revived as the Chapter desired.

(Cir. n. 590 - March 24 1976)

Salesian charism of gratitude

To make
ourselves
God's voice
in the Church

Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello will certainly rejoice in heaven at the response the Encyclical of the Holy Father, Pope John Paul, has received in our houses.

It seems that almost everywhere it has been presented to the communities, to the pupils of the senior school, especially, to parents and past pupils. It is beautiful to hear that some Sisters have even succeeded in transmitting some of the concepts in very simple words to children in the infant and junior schools. This really shows love and zeal for the Pope: the zeal and love which animated our Father, Don Bosco!

One little girl, walking along the road with her father, asked him: "Do you know that all these people are children of God? The Pope says they are!" Another child, opening and closing her eyes, said to the teacher: "Wouldn't it be horrible if the Lord hadn't given us eyes!".

⁹⁸ PAUL VI, General audience, feb. 25th, 1976.

Both of these children, each in her own way, had understood the meaning of the encyclical, the mystery of God continually showering his love on each and every person. It is a fact that little ones who are closer to the moment they received baptismal grace are more open to the things of God. This should encourage us and make us God's voice and the voice of the Church for those who are confided to our care. If every institute is a "*history of salvation in miniature*", we are so especially for the salvation of young people, transmitting to them the values that are presented by the magisterium of the Church.

What a rich source the papal document "*Redemptor Hominis*" is for helping young people to discover "*the value of man in the mystery of the Word Incarnate!*" How it throws light on and gives value to the whole meaning of human Life!

Our response to
God's generosity

This tremendous Encyclical, which is a little theological treatise on Christ the Redeemer, places before us the innumerable gifts God has given us through this fundamental mystery of our faith. Let us recite with our young people the hymn of thanksgiving that St. Paul invited the Colossians to pray: "our hearts will be filled with wonder, adoration, thanksgiving. Let us leave aside the many other reflections that the Encyclical gives rise to and concentrate on meditating together on the great value of thanksgiving that flows from every truth contained in this precious document, which should make an impression on our own spiritual lives and on the integral formation of our young people.

Jesus reminds us of this virtue in the gospel: "Were not all ten made clean? The other nine, where are they?"⁹⁹ Isn't his question repeated today? Every

⁹⁹ Cf *Col* 1, 3. 12-20.

¹⁰⁰ *Lk* 17, 17.

moment millions of people are receiving good things from Him and how few are they who thank Him! Let us, with our girls, multiply the number of those who are really grateful and let us thank God in the name of those who do not know how to thank or do not want to thank. Let us ask the Holy Spirit to help us penetrate, more, assimilate, the movement of grace that pervades the whole of Scripture and the Liturgy.

Praise of God, reminders of His goodness to us, invitations to praise and thank Him, follow one another; this is especially so of the liturgy of the hours:

"... Let every creature bless His holy name".¹⁰¹

"Yahweh's love fills the earth".¹⁰²

"O all you works of the Lord, bless the Lord".¹⁰³

"Great are your achievements, Yahweh".¹⁰⁴

"Give thanks to Yahweh, for He is good".¹⁰⁵

The Eucharistic Liturgy too, opens with a song of praise of God in the wonderful prefaces: "Father in heaven, it is right that we should give you thanks and glory: you alone are God, living and true...". The Eucharistic prayers themselves are a hymn of thanksgiving to God: "Countless hosts of angels stand before you to do your will... and praise you night and day. United with them and in the name of every creature under heaven, we too praise your glory as we sing..."¹⁰⁶

Already in the "*Gloria*" the Church has us raise this unsurpassable hymn to God: "We worship you, we give you thanks, we praise you for your glory..."

¹⁰¹ Ps 144, 21.

¹⁰² Ps 32, 5.

¹⁰³ Dn 3, 57.

¹⁰⁴ Ps 91, 9.

¹⁰⁵ Ps 117, 1.

¹⁰⁶ Eucharistic Prayer IV.

You alone are the Holy one, you alone are the Lord, you alone are the most high...”.

Truly at the centre of the whole movement of thanksgiving in the Church is the Eucharist, which is in itself “Thanksgiving” par excellence. The Mass transcends time and space and in it Jesus unites us intimately with Himself in Communion, with the Saints, with the living and the dead; He gathers us with Himself around the altar to let us share in His praise and thanksgiving to the Father. To live the Mass therefore, is to live a continual “Thank You”.

Salesian Charism
of gratitude

Gratitude is the particular aspect of the Salesian charism that Don Bosco wanted to be stressed by the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. In fact he wanted our “Baptismal priesthood” to be lived in the whole Congregation as a hymn of thanksgiving to our Lady, almost like an unending echo in the Church of her hymn of praise to God: the “*Magnificat*”.

“My soul *magnifies* the Lord”, says our Lady and she adds, “my spirit exults in God, my Saviour”. This is a lesson for us!

Gratitude is not just the fruit of the intellect, neither is it simply a matter of words; it is given colour and joy by the whole of our being, especially our heart. Don Bosco dreamt of us like this: a monument made up of people whose hearts and spirits exult and rejoice: who continue Mary’s “*Magnificat*” in honour of God’s power and mercy, because he has done “*great things*” in us too. Don Bosco wanted to instil in us a characteristic attitude of his own spirit and heart. Mother Eulalia Bosco, Don Bosco’s niece, told us how she had always noticed that Don Bosco was prompt and delicate in thanking those who did him a good turn, no matter how small the thing was. She remembered seeing him come home to ask for

the first fruits of the season, or baby pigeons, or other country gifts to give pleasure to his benefactors' children.

When she was a newly-appointed superior, he gave her this advice always: "Thank everyone, thank them from your heart, thank them even for the smallest gifts". Don Bosco accepted, or rather encouraged the feast of gratitude, not for the homage he received, as for the educational value it afforded for the integral formation of the boys.

Educate
to gratitude

Educate to a sense of gratitude and help others to realise that we are all debtors towards each other, we are not superior to anyone. To thank is not only an act of human courtesy, it is also an act of humility and faith that shows us that God is present in the gift he gives us through other people. Those who are not humble do not feel the need to thank.

Sometimes you meet superficial people who consider saying "thank you" to be an old-fashioned formality, but these same people are the very ones who are bitter and denounce others for lack of human understanding if they themselves are neglected or not thanked.

Should we not remember the words of the gospel: "Always treat others as you would like them to treat you"?¹⁰⁷ Gratitude given and received is a human value that must not be under-rated, especially in our family spirit.

Constant alertness to notice every gift we receive and to thank sincerely from our heart helps to make community life happier, warmer, and more religious. If this is missing, then uneasiness is created immediately; coldness that gives rise to egoism and individualism creeps in, to the detriment of the spiritual and apostolic life of the community.

¹⁰⁷ Mt 7, 12.

The Servant of God, Laura Vicuna, young as she was, made this resolution: "I never want to pass near to anyone and feel indifferent to them". This is an example to put before our young people.

A pedagogy of
gratitude

The Encyclical "*Redemptor Hominis*" can be considered a real pedagogy of gratitude. The great truths contained in it renew us in the spirit of the "*Magnificat*" and give our lives and the lives of our young people a particular tone of gratitude.

Let us thank God "since it is in Him that we live, and move and exist";¹⁰⁸ let us thank Him for His infinite and eternal Being, for His Incarnation and Resurrection, for His providence in human history and for His great Mercy in wanting to lead us all to salvation.

Let us thank Him for our Congregation, for its charism, for the school of sanctity Don Bosco has given us in our rule.

Here I shall just mention the event that we shall celebrate on the 3rd of September next year, the centenary of the date when Don Cagliero presented our Sisters in Mornese with the first printed copy of the Rule.¹⁰⁹

Let us sow
little acts of
gratitude on
our daily path

Let us hasten to say a heartfelt "thank you" to all the Sisters for the good that they accomplish, for every service they render, for their collaboration in community and in the pastoral action.

Let us thank the older Sisters who have worked many years for us. And must we not thank those who work for all of us in the service of authority? If we sow these little "*thank yous*" throughout our day, we shall make goodness (*bontà*) and happiness flower in our houses. Let us also thank our young people. It is God who sends them to us. Don Bosco

¹⁰⁸ At 17, 28.

¹⁰⁹ Cf *Cron* III 77.

presents them to us as a help towards our own salvation: "*Salve, salvando, salvati!*" (By saving others, save yourself) The best way of thanking them is really to show them the way of eternal salvation and to let them see that we are authentic witnesses to the truth we teach.

Let us then have a "thank you" for everyone: for the workman who comes to do a job in the house, for the postman, for the person who opens the door for us... Let it be a polite, gentle, "thank you" that touches their hearts.

Let us educate our young people to thank their father who comes home from work tired, their mother who has prepared the meal and ironed their clothes, their grandparents who have spent themselves for the sake of the family, their teachers who give all they can in school. Let us educate them to thank God for the intelligence He has given them, for their health, for everything that nature, science and art offer them and for every gift of friendship. And why not help them too, to learn the wisdom of the cross that leads us to thank God for the inevitable sufferings of life that have a providential, purifying function?.

The "thank you" of life prepare us for the ultimate "thank you" in death to the Lord who comes. There is a particular "thank you" that I should like to point out to you and to the girls: 'thank you' for the good that we receive from priests. It is a 'thank you' that is always inadequate for the help they give us: from the Word of God, to the Sacrament of Reconciliation, to the Eucharist that touches the height of divine gift. It is a deeply felt 'thank you' to be said always with a respectful attitude that takes nothing away from our friendly spontaneity, but enriches it with delicate respect. I have said 'thank you' to priests, but I cannot refrain from adding, 'thank you' especially to the

Salesians who are the great strength behind our spirit.

Crusade of
education to
gratitude

A crusade of education in gratitude will prepare our young people to be more thoughtful, more serene; it will form families that are more united, and will increase solidarity among the various social classes. The crusade cannot limit itself to words, but requires a practical expression and includes the gift of prayer.

For this beautiful mission to be effective, let us first cultivate a sense of gratitude in ourselves. Shall we try to compose our own personal litany of thanksgiving?

Thank you, Lord, for the gift of life.

Thank you, for the gift of baptism... for those intimate gifts that are a secret between us and God alone.

Thank you for us and for everyone!

This chorus of daily 'thank you's' to the Lord can cover over the voices of hatred and violence and draw down God's mercy on the whole world.

In my personal litany I would add:

Thank you, Lord, for so many kind wishes and gifts that were given to me for the feast of gratitude; thank you, most of all for the prayer and the commitment to cultivate goodness (*bontà*).

And thank you again, Lord, for the many dear Sisters that I was able to meet recently in England and Ireland and for the great work that they are doing for young people.

Thank you for the feast of the centenary at Nizza Monferrato that I was happily able to share in, and thank you for the hundreds of sisters who have gone out from that house to be missionaries all over the world.

Radical conversion to a life of faith

The mystery
of Mary

The mystery of Mary lies entirely in her faith: "Blessed art thou that hast believed".¹¹⁰ Her faith leads us to the reality of the gospel and helps us to penetrate it and live it. She lived this reality in the plenitude of Faith. The gospel itself tells us that "she kept" the words, works and events that concerned her divine Son "within her heart"¹¹¹ in an attitude of attentive and loving faith. And this faith was a compound of abandonment to the design of God in perfect disponibility and adoring silence. Faith lived, treasured and nourished by her, through the mystery of her maternity and her participation in the story of salvation, is transferred to our souls.¹¹² Our Lady, therefore, not only our exemplar in faith *but is the mother of our faith.*

Let us therefore, fix our eyes on her and let us ask her to enfold us in the mystery of her faith so that our lives too may be animated and vivified by faith. In fact, the conversion towards which we are striving during this Holy Year demands a clear, solid foundation of faith in our lives, which in turn, implies a review of this faith of ours.

Foundations and
requirements of
faith

We have faith not only if we know God on an intellectual level, but if, like Mary, we recognise His action in our lives and in event. That will help us to realise that we cannot count on ourselves, and our efforts only, but on God and on his grace.

This faith rests on the certainty that God is "faithful",¹¹³ that God loves us: "I have loved you with an everlasting love".¹¹⁴ This certainty of the fidelity

¹¹⁰ Lk 1, 45.

¹¹¹ Lk 2, 51.

¹¹² Cf Lg 65.

¹¹³ Ap 19, 11.

¹¹⁴ Jer 31, 3.

and love of God makes us like the “*prudent*” man in the gospel, “*who built his house on a rock*”, on account of which *nothing could shake it*.¹¹⁵ Faith, in fact, is to live on earth in the light of those realities which one day we shall enjoy in the vision of God. It is, therefore, the foundation of hope and the beginning of active love. It is to this our Constitutions refer in art. 32, where every community is called a *community of faith*, and where each Sister is exhorted to cultivate in mind and heart a sense of joyful gratitude to God for the gift of Faith, which is “*the beginning of salvation, the foundation and root of justification*”.

It is the gift of gifts for which we should incessantly thank God. Through faith He reveals himself to us in His divine light, and introduces us to the mystery of His life and his sanctifying action.

Little by little, as we cultivate faith we feel that its requirements become absolute, radical. We can no longer deny God anything and all our existence tends towards Him. Faith thus becomes the “*root and foundation of every justification*”, through it we are “*saved*”, St. Paul tells us, not by ourselves, but through the gift of God.¹¹⁶

Such a gift, though we are rewarded beyond our every merit, also requires, our active cooperation; it requires that we faithfully preserve it and constantly nourish it, because faith is life and life must be developed. The Constitutions, therefore, suggest to us: “*She (the FMA) will seek to preserve and strengthen this gift by study and meditation and particularly by the constant exercise of this same faith, especially in dealing with her neighbour and in the correct evaluation of the events of daily life*”.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Cf *Mt* 7, 24-25.

¹¹⁶ Cf *Ef* 2, 8.

¹¹⁷ *C* 1969 32.

Let us commit ourselves, therefore, to deepen our study of the word of God, the better to conform our lives to it. Meditation will then be desired as a time when we can steep ourselves in God's presence, contemplate His truth and communicate with Him in a filial way. This constant exercise will lead us to see things in God's light, not in a purely earthly perspective but in that of the divine plan.

Faith gives personal and collective security, our communities should become oases of supernatural certainty especially today. It is the most urgent mission among our girls, arising out of a very real crisis of faith.

Our positive
answer to the
crisis of faith

Cardinal Gabriel Garonne, in a discourse given at "*Teresianum*" in 1972, brought into relief certain aspects of this crisis. Following his line of thought we can get some directives for the formation of that mentality of faith of which there is such great and urgent need at the present day.

He spoke of a "*disintegration of faith*", which leads to the acceptance or rejection of truths due to the *moving away of faith from the word of God*", which is "*its root and its fulcrum*". Now doesn't this tell us of the ever greater necessity of bringing our young people ever closer to the word of God, and of helping them to understand and penetrate it so as to draw from it dynamic ideas for their life? It also reveals that many regard faith as being "absolutely irrelevant to that which they call reality (the world and life itself) and thus they go directly towards a "distortion of faith", which little by little, will bring about "its entire disappearance". So serious a view of the crisis of faith cannot but bind us seriously to make of the teaching of catechism, religious instruction and evangelization in general, a real training for life which departing from actual situations illumines

them and resolves their problems in the light of the immutable truths of faith.

From all this, Cardinal Garrone deduces that “*swerve in the field of behaviour* which justifies” attitudes less conformed to the deep certainties of faith and the strict traditions of Christian morals”. But he rightly concludes that these sad contestations must not, “on any account”, discourage our efforts; on the contrary, “they should give increased vitality to the action of those who have responsibility for the faith”.¹¹⁸

Well then, before the difficulties that we can meet with in an apostolic mission, let us take to heart this authoritative programme, and make it our own.

Personal and
community
renewal
in the faith

The recently published document of the C.E.I., “*Evangelization and Sacraments*”, having projected the phenomena which threaten our faith today, suggests the method through which we can reach “contemporary man”, and that is: “the necessity of deep research and of translation into modern language of the Christian message, in such a way as to be able to transmit it, not only by teaching, but above all by means of our way of acting. Only thus, will ours be a true work of evangelization. But the above mentioned document goes on to say: All this will demand a serious renewal of our christian communities, called on to be and manifest in their lives, a visible sign for the salvation of men”.¹¹⁹

There is a question, therefore of a “personal conversion” and of a “community conversion” which, if required from the Christian communities in general, will all the more be required of our reli-

¹¹⁸ GARRONE Gabriele Marie, *La vita della fede nel mondo di oggi*, in *La vita nella fede* (Roma).

¹¹⁹ *Evangelizzazione e Sacramenti*, documento pastorale dell'Episcopato Italiano 1973, n. 22.

gious communities, by reason of our consecration to God's service and to the Church.

Through the mission to which, by our vocation, we are dedicated, we are called to this renewal, by means of **a radical conversion to a life of faith**. This alone will plug us in to the current of the urgent mission of evangelization which the Church requires from us in every country of the world.

(Cir. n. 567 - November 24 1973)

The deep impression made on me by participation in the Salesian Missionary Centennial Commemoration in Turin is with me still.

The Eucharistic Celebration, the various ceremonies were a continuous, thanks to God for the blessings lavished on us during these hundred years of the great missionary epic.

Faith the root
of the
missionary epic

I have been thinking of the inspiration, the roots of this epic: a granitelike faith, which gave strength to the heart and perseverance to the step of the missionaries.

I thought of our humble, yet great Sisters, who possessed the "one thing necessary" and for this reason were always attentive to God, His presence, His Word, His will and in consequence, were so attentive to persons and their needs and so generous in their daily dedication.

In the monotony of their days and in the bitterness of their trials there was in them a continuous, trustful, abandonment to the Lord, which brought about in them that gradual transformation which reflected in their lives, made them victorious in their mission. "This is the victory which overcomes the world: our faith".¹²⁰

¹²⁰ 1 Jn 5, 4.

Last month (November 1975) we treated of prayer as an expression of our faith; today we are faced with the example of our missionaries, therefore let us consider how **all our life must be an expression of Faith.**

The life of
faith in our
communities

The second Capitular Commission, which studied the means considered efficient in making faith more vital, has made an accurate examination of the position of faith in our communities. It brought a positive purification from immature attitudes, the passage from a traditional to a personal faith, formed on a theological, biblical basis, and indicated the necessity of creating a *community "joyful in faith"* which witnesses to the spirit of the beatitudes.

However, it underlined the obstacles to the growth of faith, the lack of communitary charity, activism, deficiency in the penetration of the word of God, the adopting of the secularised mentality of the girls and the erroneous interpretation of the concept of liberty.¹²¹

Reflection on these positive and negative points, brought out by the Second Commission, makes us more conscious of our mode of speaking and acting and leads us to have faith as decisive orientation and not the maxims of the world.

Our human existence is born, lives, develops and declines in existential and moral relationship with God... we are His creatures...

Intelligence, will, liberty, heart, love, sorrow, time and work, human and social relations, in a word, life, has a derivation variously determined and has an end which is also defined in rapport with God. God knows us, observes us, penetrates us, preserves us continually: He is the Father of our life.

¹²¹ Cf *Acti GC*. XVI 61-69.

He is, He lives, He is true.

In Him we live, we move, we exist.

Mentality of
faith

These words of the Holy Father indicate the foundation of that "*mentality of faith*" which distinguishes Him who has chosen the Lord with an undivided heart and has made of the total gift of self, according to God's plan, the scope of his existence.

The mentality of faith gives us, above all, the certainty that God is faithful: "He who calls you is faithful".¹²² "The Lord is faithful; He will confirm you and protect you from the evil one".¹²³

It forms us to the vision of the scale of values, making us appreciate all human values, but putting God, his truth and his will always in the first place.

The solidity of evangelical principles should never be risked through false interpretation. The search for truth should always be our guide rather than the sense of novelty.

Thus liberated from superficiality, we will not allow ourselves to be influenced by current opinions, by personal ideas but will rest securely in the doctrine of the Church, in love and fidelity to the Pope, the immovable rock on which Christ has founded the Church.

The mentality of faith never allows itself to be imprisoned by vague psychologism which does not concretise faith in work. It forms in us, instead, personalities with robust ideas who appreciate and live the nobility of daily duty and do not look for evasions by seeking things spectacular or of one's

¹²² 1 Th 5, 24.

¹²³ 2 Th 3, 2.

own taste; personalities free from an unfortunately prevalent danger of putting oneself in the centre of everything, but rather the type ready to forget self every time there is good to be done.

It helps us, on the contrary, to accept with free choice and love of adhesion, the will of God moment by moment, and to fulfill it courageously. All the circumstances that constitute the fabric of our daily life in the light of faith become means from which God, even from the evil he does not will, draws good and reaches the highest ends.

Not abstraction
but concrete
vision and
responsibility

The mentality of faith is not abstraction or supernaturalism, but seeing persons, things, responsibilities concretely in the light of God, of His Word, with that intuition which is a gift of the Holy Spirit.

It unites the prayer we offer in church to all the happenings and occupations of the day. It makes us meet God and speak with Him even as we iron a habit, prepare the meals, read a book, give any kind of help to a sister or girl, carry out any duty because, over and above all created reality we believe in another reality: **the presence of God, which is communicated to us where, when and how He pleases.**

Every communication with God vivifies us with His grace, renews us, fills us with His Spirit, transfigures us into a revelation of Himself.

Today, many of our brothers are experiencing the bitterness of a life void of ideals, insecure, perhaps even wicked, and it may be many notice that the breath of God is missing in them.

He is ready to repeat for them the story of Exodus, but He wishes to use instruments to revive the sense of God in the world. We, *consecrated* souls, must, not only in words, but with our choices, our sense of values, our behaviour testify to

the world that God exists, that God is a Father; and that all life comes from Him, flows under His paternal gaze to be reunited with Him eternally.

In particular, we must offer to our pupils in the Oratories and Schools an atmosphere of supernatural certainty. We must, like Don Bosco, take into account what the girls like, but only as a spring board to bring them to God, to His knowledge, His love, which alone can satisfy them intimately.

Let us think
of God and
reveal Him

The mentality of faith leads us to stress perennial values, it makes us faithful and creative in animating and stimulating great discoveries in the field of truth and grace.

The perfect mentality of faith is not easily attained. All that we have said when speaking of prayer helps us. The persevering effort to foster and preserve our faith, the earnest effort to see the Lord, His will or His permission in events and people gradually form in us this mentality of faith.

Let us look at Mary, who, as *Lumen Gentium* tells us, "goes before us in the pilgrimage of faith", who, in fact, "for her intimate participation in the history of salvation, reunites and reflects in herself the central truths of the Faith", and with her example urges us to progress "continually in Faith, Hope and Charity, in everything searching out and doing the will of God".¹²⁴

The Holy Father, Pope Paul VI in an address of November 20th 1968, in which he invited all to walk with God, concluded thus: "Let the warning which made a great impression on us when we read it on a photograph of a crowded street in Holland, a great placard suspended over the restless traffic of the street carried in huge letters this inscription: *think of God*."

¹²⁴ LG 65.

How strange, yet how wise this message seems as it falls on the busy and profane thoroughfare of modern life.

Let us think of God. He is always near. We need Him. It is always possible to meet Him; Yes, let us think of God".

This admonition, addressed by the Holy Father to all the faithful, can be completed by us: "Let us think of God and let us reveal Him by our entire life".

A little reflection on our concrete life of faith could indicate the itinerary of a happy and deep conversion at the end of this Holy Year and a definite orientation for the new year which approaches and which I wish may be for you an equally holy year in the light of God.

(Cir. n. 587 - December 24 1975)

Conversion in "the life of the Spirit"

I have returned to Rome after the long journeys of these last months. As at Caracas and Mornese, so too in Japan we became aware that the Holy Spirit has achieved the "*unum sint*" desired by Christ. He gave us unruffled and sincere *evaluations* which matured resolutions of spiritual renewal for the good of communities and of young people. Thank the Lord with us and thank Him also for the consolations He had stored up for us in the visits to Australia, Teheran and the Holy Land. There are so many things I should like to tell you about that country, sanctified by the earthly life of our divine Saviour and Mary most holy, but they are things that surpass us and exceed the possibility of adequate expression. One can feel there the presence of the Lord, whose mysteries are relived as one goes from place to place. One

almost seems to glimpse His footprints or catch the echo of His voice. The gospels and the whole of Scripture take on a new light which makes them alive and very meaningful for today.

This visit to the Holy Land has indeed been the crowning act of our common efforts for renewal along the lines traced out by the Chapter.

In the moments of prayer in those unique places it seemed to me that our Lord was ratifying with His grace everybody's good-will in carrying into effect the programmes proposed as a result of the "*verifications*". In the visits to the places where Jesus lived, preached, suffered, died and rose, I took with me as an incentive to intense prayer, the urgent necessities which had emerged in the *evaluations* in the different continents:

- change of mentality
- redimensioning
- initial and on-going formation
- community-communion
- central position of the person in community relations and pastoral action.

And Jesus' words echoed in my soul as a reminder and an answer: "Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness".¹²⁵

The words
of Jesus
an invitation
to conversion

"Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven".¹²⁶

"Learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and My burden is light".¹²⁷

"For whoever does the will of My Father in heaven

¹²⁵ Mt 6, 33.

¹²⁶ Mt 5, 16.

¹²⁷ Mt 11, 29-30.

is My brother and sister and mother".¹²⁸
 "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in Me".¹²⁹ "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them".¹³⁰

In those places where they were uttered by the Word Incarnate, these sentences took on a special significance and power which rendered them more lucid, more valid for our times and more effective. They impressed upon me moreover, the conviction that to carry out all the commitments we have undertaken in the various evaluations, **radical conversion**, to which the gospel insistently invites us, is demanded of each one of us. It is a conversion which must make us pass from the material and visible world that claims all our attention and conditions us, to the invisible interior world of the presence of God which constitutes the ultimate basis of every reality, from which everything draws consistency and is the source of all energy and hope.

Life in the Spirit
 the reason and
 measure of
 effective work

There came back to my mind the outlines of work which every province drew up at the close of the various encounters — outlines to be developed later in programmes involving the whole province. These programmes are excellent, inspired by so much pure searching for the glory of God, but I am always more convinced that we shall be able to put them into practise only in the measure in which we all learn to **live in the Holy Spirit**, as the Rector Major has pointed out. He has said repeatedly: "it would be unthinkable that we who have received a call from the Holy Spirit should not perceive its reality and not succeed in bringing

¹²⁸ Mt 12, 50.

¹²⁹ Jn 15, 4.

¹³⁰ Mt 18, 20.

its presence into our personal and community life in a special way in order to help us face the difficult situations of the present times”.

It is the Holy Spirit, in fact, who provides the correct light to penetrate such situations and all other events and enables us to understand the deeper reality which human intelligence can never reach. The Holy Spirit “*examines everything, even the depths of God*”.

There is an enormous difference between a person who leans for support solely on his own intelligence, on his own natural human energies and one who, instead, seeks support entirely in the Spirit of God who dwells within him. If in ourselves we find little faith in the presence and action of the Holy Spirit, then we shall receive scarce light and charity will become mere calculation. If there is complete and unconditional faith in Him, then we shall experience the fulness of light and be endowed with boundless charity.

Interior life
in the Holy
Spirit

I am returning, therefore, to the theme developed in the retreat by the Rector Major, because I consider it fundamental and desired by God for us, that we may not run the risk of working a lot, but performing empty and ineffective acts.

I think that in the transmission of the “verifications” the first priority should be that of teaching the Sisters and encouraging them to *live practically, day by day, circumstance by circumstance, an interior life in the Holy Spirit* to ensure, together with our personal holiness, the very fruitfulness of the apostolate. I stress “in the Holy Spirit”, that takes for granted a living faith in His indwelling within us, as holy Scripture tells us, “I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Counsellor to be with you for ever”.¹³¹

¹³¹ Gv 14, 16.

"The Spirit of truth dwells with you and will be in you".¹³²

"Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you"?¹³³

We must become more aware and more convinced that by baptism we have become this "temple" of the Holy Spirit, and that this presence which invests us with itself is a living, operative presence that purifies and transforms us, raises us up to the divine and infuses into us, together with faith, hope and charity, an unquenchable desire for God. It penetrates us with its grace, its gifts and its charisms.

It urges us to love God and teaches us to embrace in the redemptive mystery of Christ the entire world in order to lighten it with our witness and save it with our apostolate. Above all it teaches us that the wiles of Satan are only overcome by humility and humility becomes the condition and measure of our most intimate union with God and men.

To discover,
study and
examine life
in the Spirit

"We shall discover *life in the Spirit*, the Rector Major told us, particularly in the letters of St. Paul, where he especially underlines the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and in the *Acts of the Apostles*, in which the action of the Holy Spirit becomes incarnate in the very history of the early Church. For us, then *life in the Spirit* is personal and apostolic sanctity according to the Salesian Charism: interior holiness and donation to others in the life of the Church.

Today, the Holy Spirit can no longer be called the "Great Unknown" since Vatican II has proclaimed him life and strength of the people of God, vigour of its mission, source of its myriad gifts, bond of

¹³² Gv 14, 17.

¹³³ I Cor 3, 16.

its marvellous union, light and beauty of its creative power, flame of love.¹³⁴ In virtue of the Holy Spirit, in fact, the spiritual and pastoral awakening of those last years reveals a particularly privileged¹³⁵ moment for a new bridal springtime in the Church as she reaches out towards the day of the Lord.¹³⁶

This passage, which I have freely transcribed, is found at the beginning of the recent *document on the relationships between bishops and religious* in the Church, a precious document, which the Rector Major often quoted in his preaching at Mornese. I urge each community to read it carefully.

Therefore to reach an ever fuller and more joyful awareness of the mystery of the dwelling of the Holy Spirit in us and of the brotherly love to which it impels us, I think every superior should make it a duty to provide instruction, reading and meditation books of sound doctrine on the Holy Spirit which present him as the foundation of faith, the life-giving animator of hope, the bond of love, the inspirer of holy Scripture and the guarantor of the magisterium of the Church.

In Italy Mons. Anastasio Ballestrero's book: *Viventi nello Spirito* can be an excellent text for meditation. In other countries there are many good works approved by the ecclesiastical authorities.

By carrying out this study we shall avoid the danger of reducing our programme of *life in the Spirit* to a mere slogan to be repeated in our gatherings or written on our walls. Without it we could even run the risk of treating it as a shield instead of translating it into a decisive programme of life.

¹³⁴ Cf *MR* 1.

¹³⁵ Cf *EN* 75.

¹³⁶ Cf *Ap* 22, 17.

The Holy Spirit will thus lead us ever more deeply into the Church and we shall be able to show the faithful the *fruits* of the Holy Spirit, which according to St. Paul are; "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, forbearance, gentleness, faith, courtesy, temperateness, purity".¹³⁷

Life in the Spirit at the school of our Saints

Following the teaching of St. Francis de Sales, Don Bosco had learned this most important devotion to the Holy Spirit. Don Barberis affirmed: "Right from the time I was a young boy, Don Bosco's devotion to the Holy Spirit made a great impression on me. Particularly during the novena and octave of Pentecost he managed to instill in us such firm trust that we would obtain the Spirit's gifts and enlightenment, that I have always preserved a grateful memory of it. I used to see him recite the "*Veni Sancte Spiritus*" at the beginning of his conferences with such fervour that it seemed almost as if he had Him present before him.

Pius XI confirmed that the calm and recollection of Don Bosco allowed one to catch a glimpse of his continual absorption in something that his soul contemplated and with which his heart was engaged: the presence of God within him.

Maccono states of Mother Mazzarello: "Even in the midst of the most varied occupations, she kept her spirit incessantly turned towards God". Her programme was, "Every moment an act of love of God". Today, after Vatican II which has laid greater emphasis on the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in us, she would perhaps have modified it: "Every moment an act of love of God in the Holy Spirit", in the humble certainty that He, uncreated, substantial love of the Blessed Trinity, can turn to infinite account our small actions and draw from them great glory for God and rich graces for the Church.

¹³⁷ Gal 5, 22.

To live in the Spirit is the shortest way to be transformed into Jesus and to be transformed into Him in His plan for the salvation of the world.

Living in the Holy Spirit is the way of the poor and humble of the gospel who, uncluttered by the obstacles of vain glory, open themselves to the wonderful humility of Christ through whom the Father floods us with His peace and His light.

In the heart which possesses Jesus *mEEK and hUMBLE of heart* there is love for everyone: there is fire of charity and zeal for the salvation of young people; there is the deep, patient, constant intuition of our educational system which is completely based on the words of St. Paul: "Charity is patient, charity is kind... it never gives up hope, and bears with everything".

Living in the Spirit is the path pointed out to us by the Constitutions. In the introductory page we read:

"The Holy Spirit

brought us FMA into being in the Church

gives life to our Consecration

consecrates us in Christ chaste, poor, obedient

gathers us together with Mary

sends us to the young

unites us in fidelity to our charism

guides us to unity in plurality".

A symbol
of our life
in the Spirit

I look with fresh insight at the coat of arms of our Institute: "the synthesis of our spirituality" -as it has been described.¹³⁸

The Salesians had an official crest in 1884.¹³⁹ In our Institute it figures only in documents from

¹³⁸ Cf DALCERRI Lina, *Monumento vivente dell'Ausiliatrice* (Roma, FMA 1972) 212.

¹³⁹ Cf MB XVII 365-366.

1907 onwards. On the whole, it is the same as that of the Salesians, with just a few variations — Mary Help of Christians in the place of St. Francis of Sales. Above, over the symbols which characterise the virtues of the FMA, the Holy Spirit's wings, as if to indicate that He is the active vivifying presence of all our spiritual life.

Consequently, this life must predominate and animate every expression and every personal and apostolic activity of the Daughter of Mary Help of Christians, leading her to achieve in herself, according to the well-chosen expression of Don Rinaldi, "working contemplation and rapture of action".

It would be good, then, for this programmatic crest, which presents a wonderful synthesis of our life — with our Lady in the Holy Spirit — to find its way once again into our documents and we shall send a copy of it to each house. Above all, however, it is good that it be engraved in the life of each one of us, day by day.

And as our Lady is the way chosen by the Holy Spirit to live and operate in us, may she be our way to reach Him as she was for our Saints. "When the Holy Spirit finds Mary in a soul", says St. Louis Grignion de Montfort, "He enters it in his fulness and communicates Himself the more abundantly the greater the space given to His Spouse".

Let us therefore, "*make a place for our Lady in our home*". Let us continue with praiseworthy zeal, which can be noticed everywhere, to enlighten our young people on devotion to our Lady and to lead them to her. Together with Mary, let us recite each day, with renewed fervour, *the Veni Creator Spiritus* before meditation.

If we take on a serious commitment *to live in the Holy Spirit*, little by little we shall come to

avoid superficiality, excessive activism, living on the surface, and satisfied with words and noisiness, poverty of content in community and apostolic relationships. As our inner converse with God gradually becomes habitual, the atmosphere of greater recollection will prevail and the community environment will assume a more religious aspect, imbued with a sense of respect and truly constructive dialogue, together with an attitude of fraternal acceptance. The assimilation of the Preventive System, as it has been expressed in the documents on pastoral formation, will grow and we shall be able to animate with our presence the historical rhythm of progress in the milieu and times in which we live.

Some questions

What is our life in the Spirit like?

This is a query which rises spontaneously from the previous reflections.

Let us ask ourselves a few questions:

- Am I convinced that the point of departure for a real renewal is the integral acceptance of the words of Jesus, which call me to a radical conversion?
- Can I say that I live my life in the Holy Spirit or is it not rather a life made up of action which is too exterior and tied up in myself?
- Do I manage to discover in our saints the action of the Holy Spirit so as to follow with decision in their footsteps in fidelity to the charism communicated to them by the Holy Spirit?
- Am I convinced that while I must strive to acquire "maximum fidelity to Don Bosco, considering the initiative of the Holy Spirit in his life", I must, at the same time, continually revive my Salesian vocation?
- Do I try to become more aware that I must mix the leaven of the spirit of the beatitudes in the

human reality that surrounds me, answering the needs of the modern world without falling into the danger of worldliness?

• Does the crest of the Institute say anything to me? Am I concerned to interpret it and live the programme which its symbols present to me?

(*Cir.* n. 619 - October 24 1978)

Hindrances and helps

A Sister writes: "I am discovering that fidelity to the constitutions is bringing about perfect harmony in my relationship with God and my neighbour and everything else".

This comforting discovery is in lively contrast with certain deceiving expressions that one comes across at times: "The structure of the Constitutions impoverishes the personality and prevents a person from developing her full potential in self-giving".

Let us be open
to a vision of
faith

Such noticeable differences of viewpoint lead us to ask a very searching question: Do we, religious, always have a clear, overall picture of life and of our world?

Are we able to go beyond the material, beyond the level of feeling, of the purely rational, to discover the invisible reality in which we are all immersed?

This unified vision comes only from faith, and faith must be prayed for on our knees: "Lord, I believe, but increase my faith!".

Then the words of the Psalms are seen in a new light: the Lord is the good shepherd who tenderly cares for His flock,¹⁴⁰ but He is also the most High, the most wise, before Whom the nations are like

¹⁴⁰ Cf *Ps* 22.

a drop in a bucket;¹⁴¹ "Exalt the Lord our God, bow down before Him".¹⁴²

Only when we place ourselves in the position of humble adoration can we be pervaded by the luminous wisdom of God, open ourselves to His Being and to the wonders of His power.

Only then do life and the visible world form a unified vision; everything and everyone comes from God, we converge towards Him, we live in Him.

No one of us is separated from the multitude of creatures created by God through His goodness, and given a share in His own divine life. This fundamental vision of faith is the only one that can lead us to an exact interpretation of our existence, and urge us to use it in full fidelity to God and the children of God.

Without this clear and deep vision of faith, we cannot understand our vows or the Constitutions; we cannot understand evangelization, nor put our Preventive System into effect. Everything remains on a superficial, horizontal level, lacking in faith, motivation, and therefore, unable to imbue us with deep trust, generosity and peace.

Don Bosco was a tremendous organizer who carried out his plans tenaciously, yet, at the same time, he was a deeply contemplative man. In everyone and in everything, even in the saddest trials, He saw God, He adored God, He breathed God.

Mother Mazzarello, like Don Bosco, was an exceptional worker. She never gave herself time off from her daily duty, but was united with God, *saturated with God* as he was.

This was the secret of their heroic fidelity and the fidelity of so many of their sons and daughters.

¹⁴¹ Cf *Is* 40, 15.

¹⁴² *Ps* 98, 9.

God himself, through a wonderful series of meditations enlightens us, encourages us, supports us to remain within the trustworthy ambit of union with Him.

Opposing forces
that threaten us

Unfortunately though, we realise through experience that we are surrounded by a stream of evil which dims our intelligence, and pushes us in the opposite direction to grace, threatening our very salvation. We need to look into these opposing forces and study their tactics so as to understand the terrible situations they can lead us into and we need to pray to do something about them.

- What explanation can there be for the deceitful way we organise our lives at times, and so guide the lives of our young people?
- Why is it that some Sisters who accept hardship, who are enthusiastic in their apostolate, who possess spiritual sensitivity when confronted with the expressed will of God, become rigid and refuse to obey, even justifying their position?
- How is it that some Sisters are able to touch young people and adults when they speak about the Word of God and then, faced with some sacrifice themselves are unable to call to mind and live that word which they have spoken so convincingly to others?
- Why do we exert so much influence on young people to encourage them to do things which are good, but only earthly, and show such reticence and almost human respect in putting forward strong, christian principles?
- How is it that after making public profession of vowing our whole life to God, we are hesitant about making a decisive break with the world and its mentality, and we lack the courage, born of the word of God and His grace, to be leaven in His kingdom?

It is important to think over all this because it is the only way we can achieve real liberation and live an authentic religious life.

The obscure
realities of
evil

During the Retreat held here in Casa Generalizia, an unusual theme was presented and developed: the devil and his temptations. This brought the reality of evil persistently to my mind. Here are some useful thoughts from the retreat:

“The more we walk in the way of humility and charity, the more we perceive a negative reality playing its part in our lives: that of the devil. The one who tempted Jesus continues to tempt us.

He exists, he is a person, not just an idea.

St. Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians puts it very clearly: “Put God’s armour on, so as to be able to resist the devil’s tactics. For it is not against human enemies that we have to struggle, but against the sovereignties and the powers who originate the darkness of the world, the spiritual army of evil in the high places”.¹⁴³ And St. Peter warns us: “Be calm and vigilant, because your enemy the devil is prowling around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour. Stand up to him, strong in faith...”.¹⁴⁴

However, we have the great possibility of having the infinite strength of the Holy Spirit of God at hand to combat the limited strength of the spirit of evil, and discover the tactics he uses to tempt us.

Often he does not invite us to do something wrong, but inspires a good action, knowing well that it is not sufficient to do good, but that we must do the good that God wants us to do as religious, as Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, in the way that he has established according to the Constitutions approved by the Church.

¹⁴³ *Eph* 6, 11-12.

¹⁴⁴ *1 Pt* 5, 8.

Besides this, the devil puts before us so many good things at the same time. In this way our strength is dispersed and we are more involved in the works of God than “with God” and we do not find time for prayer.

The devil is more interested in creating divisions among us than big sins. He creates division by opposing one good initiative with another that is equally good. It is easy to pass from discontent, murmuring, to divisions.

It is also in the devil’s interest to nourish thoughts of discouragement, to make us avoid serious effort, to inculcate excessive fear and so lead us to lack of trust and isolation.

A constant tactic of his is to fill our heads with “*lies*” and make us believe that they are great truths. It is easy to let temptation come into our lives but it is difficult to get rid of it. A human weakness is enough for it to enter, but we need the power of God to make it go away.

We must take up the shield of faith and then we shall experience what divine power in our life really is.

The Word of God, the life of grace, communion with the community which is the Mystical Body of Christ and evangelization which weakens Satan’s kingdom, are powerful arms against the devil: “By saving others, save yourself!”¹⁴⁵

Don Bosco experienced the evil presence of the devil against himself and the Oratory.

If you read what Don Bosco had to suffer on account of the devil it will bring to mind what Pope Paul VI said about him. He called the devil a “hidden enemy, a perverted being who seeks to pervert others, the tempter par excellence, who

¹⁴⁵ MB VI 409.

gets a hold on us through our senses and our imagination". And although the Pope affirms that we cannot say that every sin is directly due to the work of the devil, he declares that "anyone who refuses to believe in the existence of the devil, and explains him away, is outside of biblical and Church teaching".¹⁴⁶

Cardinal Garrone writes: "One hardly dares speak about the devil today. And yet, on this point the Church is so secure that one should be way above rejecting it, because it is the constant teaching of the Church which must be accepted with the wise attitude of one who gives assent to the affirmations of faith, without pretending to know more than what Revelation tells us".

Those who want to know more are the "*false prophets*" whom Jesus warns us against. The devil makes use of "*false prophets*" who "*come in sheep's clothing*",¹⁴⁷ as though they were learned teachers who were able to update us with the lie of showing us a greater good. Jesus warns us: "By their fruits you will know them".¹⁴⁸

Have we not witnessed institutes that have done great good in the Church, reduced almost to sterility, because they preferred *false prophets* to the teaching of the Church and their Founders?

We too should examine ourselves seriously, to see if what we teach and do is the complete gospel message of the Church, of Don Bosco, or if it is only a message suited to our own weaknesses, to our all-too-human reasoning and suggested by the devil to keep us away from the inconveniences of *the narrow way*, shown by Jesus to be the way of salvation.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁶ PAUL VI P.P., General audience, November 15th, 1972.

¹⁴⁷ Cf *Mt* 7, 15.

¹⁴⁸ *Mt* 7, 16.

¹⁴⁹ Cf *Lk* 13, 24.

The conquering
power of Mary
and the angels

In spite of the snares persistently set by Satan, we can always conquer, because we have the invincible power of Mary on our side.

With this circular I enclose a brief summary from the Biographical Memoirs that shows us the reality of the devil and the power of our Lady and the Angels against the diabolical forces of evil.

In Don Bosco's dreams the devil is always in angry opposition to the motherly presence of Mary. Don Bosco, with his experience being continually enriched, invokes her against the enemies of the Church and of individuals as "Most powerful Virgin, terrible as an army in battle array".

He never tires of placing his sons under her protection, of having them invoke her, of giving them her blessing, of having them wear her medal round their necks, of putting her picture everywhere.

Exaggeration? No! Humble faith in the Church, in her teaching, in her rites, in her prayers. Faith that we must imitate today if, like our saints, we want to win the holy war against evil.

In the dreams our Lady showed herself as the helper, by sending an angel or a host of angels to defend us.

Just as it is true that there are hidden forces of evil around us, it is equally true that we are surrounded by the powerful presence of the Angels. Sacred Scripture bears witness to this, right from the Book of Genesis through the new Testament, the Church's magisterium, up to the beautiful liturgical texts for the Masses and Office in honour of the angels and archangels. How helpful it would be for us and for the girls to look up these texts and apply them to our lives!

The Angels are at the service of Christ's Mystical Body, they are ministers of His grace. They see

good in all its aspects and they want it with their whole being.

They are strength, energy, life; they put themselves in contact with us. They do not contact us through our feelings, our senses, but through our spirit. To come into relationship with them we need recollection, faith, sincerity.

When we think of them, let us invoke their help, open up our spiritual self so they can act in us, in the persons and places we want them to come to help.

The angels have an influence on the whole of creation: they are "God's agents in the cosmos".

A modern philosopher has written: "The angels are watching us. They are completely involved in human life. Without the help of the angels and the light received from them, human reason could not bring its knowledge to completion... All of this is fundamentally normal and corresponds to a fundamental law of nature, as well as to the demands of grace".

The greatest saints and men of God have had close familiarity with the angels, from St. Augustine to Newman, Gemma Galgani and Padre Pio.

I shall leave aside the witness of the Saints and limit myself to what contemporary Popes have shared with us on this matter.

Pius XI confided that he often invoked the help of his guardian angel and had recourse to him and to the angels of people he had to deal with, especially when difficult matters were at stake: an understanding between the two spirits always helped his own understanding.

Pius XII reminded American pilgrims: "The invisible world that surrounds us is populated by angels. They were in the cities you have visited... were your companions on the journey... keep on

familiar terms with the angels who are constantly concerned with helping you in the work of your salvation. Please God you will live a joyful eternity with the angels: get to know them now”.

John XXIII joyfully took the opportunity, on several occasions to remind us of the consoling truth of the presence of the Angels: “The guardian angel is a good counsellor, he intercedes for us, helps us in our needs, frees us from dangers”.

The teaching of Paul VI crowns the witness of his three predecessors. In his *Creed of the People of God he professed*: “We believe in God... Creator of invisible beings such as pure spirits, also called angels” and he concludes: “In heaven souls are associated with the holy angels in governing Christ’s Kingdom for us”.

And why not add to these solemn affirmations the witness of John Glenn, the astronaut? As his space flight was entering its most critical phase, he admits that for a moment he felt afraid of being all alone up there in space. Suddenly he experienced the presence of a mysterious companion within him who gave him renewed courage. At the same time on earth, his daughter Lynn, who was anxious about her father, was praying: “Angel of God, who are *his* guardian, enlighten protect and guide...”.

Besides the *Biographical Memoirs* and the *Cronistoria* why not read the lives of our Sisters, especially those of Mother Emilia Mosca, Mother Enrichetta Sorbone, and Mother Clelia Genghini, who were so devoted to their guardian angels?

This would help us to grow in the certainty of the active presence of the angels. They would no longer seem to be just decorative figures in our churches and we would be careful not to present them to children as little angels dressed in pink

and blue, but we would bring them into their lives as a reality, as living persons, rich in love and power, pleasant companions on our earthly pilgrimage.

Perhaps we have to confess that a certain lack of success in our apostolate is due to our having neglected our alliance with the angels, one of the helps that God has given us in His plan of salvation. The angels multiply time, strength and trust for us in our daily toil. Let us put them to the test!

They will help us to be faithful right to our last hour and they will introduce us into eternal life and lead us for ever into *the shade of the Almighty*, where we shall share in divine life for ever.

Let us live these comforting *certainties of faith with gratitude* and try to spread them around us! If we do this not only will we experience great happiness ourselves, but we shall give our whole self to Christ without reserve, in the spirit of wedded love and in Him, to all those He sends to us: we shall arouse in our young people the desire to share, as we do, familiarity with the eternal mystery of God's love, which is the fundamental and crowning dimension of our vocation.

(Cir. n. 629 - September 24 1979)

Our life in the light of the eternal truths

Among many articles in the daily newspaper I read about earthquakes; dead and injured; aeroplane crashes, no survivors; policeman killed and passer-by injured; a man struck by a heart attack dies on the street etc... It all forces me to reflect: today the newspapers become a sermon on the *eschatological* realities.

It is true that they limit themselves to repeating,

death, death, but with the vision of our faith, we complete the picture: death, judgment, hell and heaven. We feel urged to reflect a little more deeply and make these truths part of the work of evangelization.

Meditation on these ultimate realities has given wise and honest men to our society and the glory of many saints to the Church.

A clerical worker once told me that every morning on leaving home he reflected on the possibility of his not returning. He therefore said a prayer each time for a happy death. "The awareness of death", he added, "is a further impulse for me to live a decent life".

The thought of death leads to "wisdom of heart"

The thought of death places life in its proper perspective.

We read in *Psalms* 89:

"Lord, you have been our refuge age after age.
(...) To you, a thousand years are as a single day, a yesterday, now over, an hour of the night.
(...) Our lives are over in a breath;
(...) they are like grass, sprouting and flowering in the morning, withered and dry before dusk.
(...) Teach us to count how few days we have and so gain wisdom of heart".

Even for us, consecrated persons, the burden of temporary concerns, the influence which they exercise upon us, colouring our thoughts and our actions, may obscure within us that *wisdom of heart* and, consequently, that truly authentic vision of life.

Examining the number of our deceased sisters for 1977 I find there are 164, and for 1978 there are already 54. I read through their names: among them are some who were very old and others who were very young. I ponder on the circumstances

of their death: months and years of sickness contrasted with unexpected entrances into eternity, sometimes in sleep.

We live confined within time, but it is not in our power to overcome time's limitations. It flows relentlessly on towards the life to come, carrying with it every moment of our present life.

Only what has been directed to God and to the fulfilment of His will shall we find transformed into eternal happiness.

What of this feeling, judgment, or the action that I am doing, will remain for eternity?

Don Bosco often repeated: "Always work as you would wish to have done at the point of death". Yes, he who brought so much joy into the lives of the young is, perhaps, the saint who spoke to them most frequently about death. Every month he had them make the exercise for a happy death. On August 1st 1876 he wrote to Don Cagliero: "Recommend that they never omit the exercise for a happy death. It is the key to everything else".

Article 46 of our Constitutions presents the monthly exercise for a happy death as a decisive moment of conversion in our journey towards sanctity.

Death is the door which opens on to the new heavens and the new earth, having broken down the barriers of the body, death will bring us face to face with God.

It is precisely in this realization that article 99 of our Constitutions reminds us that we live in the expectancy of His coming and that the moment of death brings about the fulfilment of the Christian beatitude: "Happy are those who are called to His supper".¹⁵⁰

In this light death becomes more than an event

¹⁵⁰ Ap 19, 9.

to which we submit because ultimately inescapable. It becomes an act of love born of the consciousness of our radical helplessness and poverty to become a final act of abandonment to God, because through death He wholly accomplishes His will in us..

Encounter with
Christ our
Judge

After death the encounter with Christ our Judge will take place.

“Yahweh, you examine and you know me”.¹⁵¹

“You repay man for his actions, Yahweh”.¹⁵²

“The judgments of Yahweh are true and righteous”.¹⁵³

“Judge not, and you will not be judged”.¹⁵⁴

We ought to read the passage of St. Matthew's gospel: “When the Son of Man comes in His glory...”.¹⁵⁵ It is a page that already anticipates the judgment of God, here in this moment and throughout the entire course of our existence.

God will not ask us in that moment to draw up a list of our outstanding achievements, which may, indeed, have cost us much fatigue. He will make a penetrating judgment on what has been our capacity to discover Him in an attitude of mercy towards every person.¹⁵⁶

“I tell you solemnly, in so far as you did it to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to Me”.

Let us reread this page of Matthew's gospel very slowly, in the light of the Holy Spirit right up to the climax of the tremendous words which are on the lips of Christ himself, a stark confirmation of the existence of hell: “Depart from Me with your curse upon you, to the eternal fire prepared

¹⁵¹ *Ps* 138, 1.

¹⁵² *Cf Ps* 27, 4.

¹⁵³ *Ps* 18, 10.

¹⁵⁴ *Mt* 7, 1.

¹⁵⁵ *Mt* 25, 31-46.

¹⁵⁶ *Cf Mt* 25, 40

for the devil and his angels".¹⁵⁷

Don Bosco often spoke on this subject. The following words are his: "If only I could help you and prevent your falling into hell";¹⁵⁸ and again: "A priest never goes to hell or heaven alone".¹⁵⁹

By preference, However, Don Bosco spoke of heaven: "Heaven is more important to me than all the riches of the world".¹⁶⁰

"Here on earth we work for heaven".¹⁶¹

"Take heart, we shall rest in heaven!".¹⁶²

"A little bit of heaven will repay all the rest".¹⁶³

In a similar way Mother Mazzarello, according to the testimony of Cardinal Cagliero, "...often spoke of heaven as if she were already there".¹⁶⁴

"We have become Sisters, 'she writes', to assure ourselves of heaven; but to obtain heaven great sacrifices are required; let us carry our cross with courage and one day we will be happy".¹⁶⁵

"Take heart! The work, the sacrifices, the hardships, life and death are nothing, compared with heaven which awaits us with its glory and eternal happiness".¹⁶⁶

"Here the struggle, there the rest; here the suffering, there the enjoyment".¹⁶⁷

"How beautiful nature is but how much more beautiful will heaven be!"¹⁶⁸

Our saints believed that the gospel contrasts death

¹⁵⁷ Mt 25, 41.

¹⁵⁸ MB VI 504.

¹⁵⁹ MB XVII 220.

¹⁶⁰ MB I 218.

¹⁶¹ MB XIII 870.

¹⁶² MB XIV 421.

¹⁶³ MB VIII 444.

¹⁶⁴ MACCONO, *Santa* II 188.

¹⁶⁵ MM L 5.

¹⁶⁶ MACCONO, *Santa* II 189.

¹⁶⁷ Do.

¹⁶⁸ Do 344.

with the return to life. St. Paul frequently makes this a subject for exhortation and a warning; "We too believe, and therefore, we too speak, knowing that He who raised Jesus to life will raise us with Jesus in our turn, and put us by His side and you with us".¹⁶⁹

In heaven we will see "with our veiled faces reflecting like mirrors the brightness of the Lord" and we "will all grow brighter and brighter as we are turned into the image we reflect; this is the work of the Lord who is spirit".¹⁷⁰

All this will come about by means of a special intervention of the Lord himself. A significant passage of Don Camilleri's work reads: "Small and finite notwithstanding, our glorified nature, we will see descending upon us from each of the perfections of God Himself, inexhaustible torrents of love and we will be there, conquered, and partaking of the immensity of life, carried up into unimaginable regions of light and happiness which nothing could equal but the happiness of God Himself".¹⁷¹ In the heart of the Holy Trinity we will see Mary, Daughter, Spouse, Mother of God!

Our life in the
light of these
truths

Our starting point was the daily newspaper and we have come to the abyss that is the Blessed Trinity.

It has been a passage from one to another of the most basic realities of our lives which touch us personally and commit us on a vital level. The awareness of these truth prevents us from being prisoners of fleeting realities and helps us to live in the faithful accomplishment of our daily duties in the places and situations in which we find

¹⁶⁹ 2 Cor 4, 14.

¹⁷⁰ 2 Cor 3, 18.

¹⁷¹ CAMILLERI Nazareno, *I Novissimi e la comunione dei Santi* (Brescia, Morcelliana 1961) 261-262.

ourselves and to strain forward towards eternity, motivated by the desire for the eternal resurrection. It directs our pastoral activities, helping us to make a "clear proclamation that, in Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man, who died and rose from the dead, salvation is offered to all men, as a gift of God's grace and mercy. And not an imminent salvation, meeting material or even spiritual needs, restricted to the framework of temporal existence and completely identified with temporal desires, hopes, affairs, and struggles, but a salvation which exceeds all these limits in order to reach fulfilment in a communion with the one and only divine Absolute: a transcendent and eschatological salvation, which indeed has its beginning in this life, but which is fulfilled in eternity".¹⁷²

The review of our lives which we wish to make in the light of this reality will bring us necessarily to trust in the help of our Lady, because we recognise the eminent place that she has in the plan of salvation and we know that her mission is to be our help in life and in death.

(*Cir.* n. 614 - May 24 1979)

Sanctity - our most urgent service to the girls

Some Sisters have expressed a desire: "Couldn't Mother General in her circulars speak to us about socio-political topics which are so much a part of today's life, and thus give us helps for the pastoral work to which we are committed?..."

The desire is legitimate, for I know well that from one day to the next in every country, pastoral work is becoming ever more difficult and requires

¹⁷² EN 27.

adequate preparation. I am, above all, aware of the problems of young people, the specific field of our apostolate, problems which the ever increasing secularization of thought and lifestyle make ever more acute and pressing, on account of which we must seriously reflect if there are deficiencies of pastoral preparation in our Salesian educative work.

But is it not for this that we try everywhere to implement the unified plan of initial, on-going and pastoral formation?

Is it not for this that meetings are held in every province to draw up programmes at every level?

Is it not for this that the dear Mothers, besides sending documents and aids in keeping with the educational Salesian spirit, travel all over the world, not only to the big centres of the Institute, but to reach every house, every individual sister with the intention of getting an ever-clearer grasp of the problems of the various countries and environment in which we work and study together possible solutions?

Key to solutions
of present-day
problems

I am, however, strongly persuaded that all this intense, vast work will bear light and fruit only in the measure in which a spiritual sap will feed the individual sisters and the communities, a sap of interiority, prayer, silence, reflection and of sanctification of work.

If this were missing, the Congregation would soon fall into a dangerous superficiality, and into disintegrating activism, to the detriment of persons and works.

Only by giving priority to the interior life can we have, for the benefit of our mission, that first requisite for fecundity which comes from "*God's being in us and we in God*".

Faithful, therefore, to the tasks entrusted to me by

article 105 and 108 of the Constitutions, I strive in the Circulars to guard "fidelity to the charism so that the Institute may, in every time and place realise the mission for which the Holy Spirit raised it up in the Church".¹⁷³

This fidelity is not simply regularity of external observance, which has its value, **but goes to the roots of our being and creates the requirement of sanctity.**

Don Bosco said: "The Institute has need of Sisters desirous above all of becoming saints, not through extraordinary actions but by means of ordinary works, so that they may be to their neighbour, especially to the young, a stimulus and training in Christian virtue".¹⁷⁴

Sanctity:
our most urgent
ecclesial service

The reminder is most authoritative: it comes from the Holy Father, Paul VI, in one of his discourses to religious: "The Church is as much in need of your sanctity as she is of your service. These conclusions are for you, beloved Daughters in Christ; and one suffices for all: religious life today more than ever, must be lived in genuine integrity, in its highest tremendous demands... in a word, it must be holy; and holy so to meet the demands of modern psychology, and be ready for the most arduous and strenuous moral combat of the modern laxity which surrounds us. Either holy or non existent".¹⁷⁵

Let us return again to the subject of sanctity: if it penetrates us vitally we shall no longer have need of any discussions, of many words, but we shall love one another, pardon one another, we shall sacrifice ourselves and we shall joyfully consume

¹⁷³ C 1975 105.

¹⁷⁴ DB L 24 May 1886.

¹⁷⁵ PAUL VI P.P., *Discourse to Religious*, 11th Sept, 1965.

ourselves in the ways that God's design on us requires, in the various places and times.

Gaps in the ranks of the Church's Saints

In the circular of May (1977) we have reflected on the undeniable duty to become saints, of which the Church, the Institute and our conscience makes us aware.

I will take my cue from an expression that makes one think, underlined by his Excellency, Mons. Castillo, during our retreat: "How many constellations are missing in the sky of the Church's saints!"

There are religious souls, he said, who have received everything from God to make them saints: a vocation and with its many gifts of nature and of grace, but at a certain point, they have become weak in faith and failed in generosity; they have come to a standstill in the path of sanctity, thus frustrating the plan of God for them. What a tremendous responsibility!

This point, of course, is not reached all at once: one slips little by little, proving what the Scripture tells us and that which our father, Don Bosco reminds us in his *"Exhortations"*: "He that despises small things shall fall to ruin little by little".¹⁷⁶

The sad descent

How does this sad descent come about? Let us analyse the causes together. The most frequent is that of putting our will before the will of God. No less frequent, that which leads us to subvert values. God has a design for us and it surely is the most perfect: we, little by little, prefer our own choices.

The subtle deceit of satan infiltrates and takes possession of us to the degree that we justify it; "My plans are really for something good, for the kingdom of God".

¹⁷⁶ *Sir* 19, 1.

In this deceitful security one loses that spiritual sensitivity, which helps us to discern God's voice which always aims at bringing about order and preventing us from working according to our individual views even in the good we do. It is these things which almost without our being conscious of it lure us out of the divine plan, so that for us the grave admonishing words of St. Augustine ring true: "You run well, but off the track". It is then easy to fall into various temptations.

Various
Temptations

1. *The Temptation to vainglory.* Father Columbière says: "Much grace is necessary to resist the complacency one feels in having brought about a change of heart, as also in not feeling complacent about the confidence placed in us by persons whose hearts you have touched".

2. *The temptation to self-righteousness,* to feel better than others, and assume the attitude of the pharisee. "Oh, God, I thank you that I am not like other men... I fast... I pay tithes..."¹⁷⁷

3. *The temptation to feel called to reform the Community and the Institute of which* the negative aspect only are observed, forgetting that reform begins with oneself. Don Bosco foresaw this danger saying: "Avoid the itch for reform".

4. *The temptation to withdraw from the common life* to isolate ourselves because we lack that sense of adaptation which is not acquiescence but comprehension of limitations, of temperamental differences, of the weaknesses we are all subject to.

5. *The temptation to lose the sense of values, even the very truth of faith,* because we see that they are not lived by those who propose them, not taking into account that, given the limitations and

¹⁷⁷ Lk 18, 11.

misery of human nature, of faith and reality, what is said and what is lived are sometimes in contradiction.

6. *The temptation of knowledge.* Knowledge puffeth up: only if it is inspired by love of God and of neighbour does it build solidly. St. Paul tells us so: "knowledge puffs up, while love builds up".¹⁷⁸ The Church has canonized great men like St. Augustine and St. Thomas, not for their science but for their sanctity.

7. *The temptation to pray, speak of spiritual things with the secret desire of being esteemed;* or the contrary, the temptation of never speaking of such things, and of not ever paying a little visit in chapel, for fear of being considered "holy".

8. *The temptation of not uniting mortification to prayer:* Union with God is stranded because it is the result of our personal effort to eliminate the obstacles to the gift of God's grace — obstacles that prevent its growth.

9. *The temptation to despise through superficiality authentic values,* to pursue those which are secondary and which cannot resist the impact of difficulty. Jesus describing the fall of the house not built on a rock,¹⁷⁹ puts us on our guard against superficiality.

10. *The temptation of not appreciating the validity, the worth, the holiness of our Salesian vocation,* and of seeking elsewhere one's own spiritual fulfilment, thus compromising radically the plan of God, and the place assigned to us in the Church.

Held fast by views and reasonings too subjective and human for our consecrated life, its supernatural orientation is cancelled, and we are no longer

¹⁷⁸ 1 Cor 8, 2.

¹⁷⁹ Cf Mt 7, 24.

penetrated by the words of the liturgy: "Lord, make us love what you command and desire what you promise, so that while working amid earthly realities we may keep our hearts fixed where true joys are found".¹⁸⁰

In this state the practices of piety remain ever more on the surface of the soul. All the secret world of rapport and love of faith and love of God, from which strength, peace and joy flow, is experienced less and less, and it is inevitable that the heart should feel the cold of solitude and the need of turning to creatures, first for a little esteem and affection, then for illusory evasions and finally alas, for dangerous deviations.

One begins with easy justifications which soon lead on to resistance of the inspirations of the Holy Spirit. The spirit gradually becomes lazy, dry, empty; one acts and works still, indeed, compensation is sought in activism. Natural means are multiplied because one no longer feels the strength of those which are supernatural, and spiritual fruits grow scarcer and scarcer. Apparently on the exterior all is in order, but within the soul mediocrity and tepidity are taking over.

Some
confessions

Some sincere confessions lay bare this reality.

1. "I had reached the point of justifying myself, always blaming others (the community, the superiors, the structures) and I had never sincerely said to myself: the supernatural dimension is missing in me, which would make me interiorize events and situations and accept them in the light of God and of faith".

2. I foolishly thought I was self-sufficient, and had no need of others, least of all superiors; now I see how closed and impoverished I am".

¹⁸⁰ Prayer of 21st Sunday ordinary time.

3. "I was preoccupied about what the girls thought of me. I tried to understand their language, their problems, but now I notice that I was not equally preoccupied about what I should be and possess so as to give myself to the girls as a Salesian educator".

We will conclude this brief analysis of the descent which could deprive the Church of constellations of sanctity, with these confessions.

Let us open
ourselves to the
light of truth

The analysis, however, is not intended to enclose us in a grey pessimism but to open us up to the light of truth.

It is in this light that we see the radiant figure of the Risen Christ, who continues to repeat to us: "Behold, I am with you all days, even to the end of the world";¹⁸¹ and "without Me You can do nothing";¹⁸² but also "He who abides in Me and I in him bears much fruit".¹⁸³

The Risen Jesus shows us the only way to gather fruits of sanctity: the Sermon on the Mount, the beatitudes.

The Constitutions too have indicated for us the sure way of growing in sanctity.

Any other way, any other step cannot give us the assurance of leading to sanctity. The Constitutions are the very essence of the gospel applied to our particular vocation in the plan of God and in the mission of the Church.

Dear Sisters, after these reflections let us renew our faith in the word and presence of the Risen Jesus, in the communications of the Spirit, and confiding ourselves to the powerful Help of Christians, let us together make the resolution of not being a cause of sorrow to the Church, through

¹⁸¹ Mt 28, 20.

¹⁸² Jn 15, 5.

¹⁸³ Do.

our slowness of response and the obstacles we place to the realization of sanctity. Let us repeat with sincerity of purpose the words said by many of our sisters: "I want to become a Saint".

This offering of love will be like the breaking of Mary's vase at the feet of Jesus that filled the whole house with its perfume.¹⁸⁴

Let this be the homage which in the spirit of that true disciple of Christ, we will offer to the Heart of Jesus as the coronation of the month dedicated to Him. And let us invoke His divine Heart, confiding in the promises made to His apostle, St. Margaret Mary Alacoque: "Tepid souls will become fervent; fervent souls will quickly reach perfection".

(Cir. n. 604 - June 24 1977)

Interiority - the road to sanctity

I want to
become a saint

Following the considerations we made together through the May and June circulars (1977) and the meditation on the discourse of the Rector Major on the evil of individualism, the hidden enemy, destructive of holiness, (I trust the Superiors are still using it for conferences and good nights), and having become more aware that the Church and society need holy religious to neutralise infiltrating evil and stimulate the urges towards hope that are multiplying everywhere, I think that every one of us, in serious reflection before God and the whole of society will have felt the imperative need to say: "God, I want to become a saint as you want it wherever you want it, cost what it may". "Each one of us has to write an unedited page in the history of salvation, a page *entirely our own*. We often waste time observing what others are

¹⁸⁴ Cf *Jn* 12, 3.

writing or worse still, how and why they have written things which we consider of little value, or are, according to our judgment, wrong. In the meantime, we neglect writing our own page. What is essential for us is to know what God asks of ourselves".¹⁸⁵

But where do
I begin?

Where, then, shall we begin? First, by making a serious, sincere and practical decision: to begin with myself at this moment, in this situation, in this house and with these persons.

A good stimulant to this decision would be to reflect attentively on what it means to me to be a religious. Why did I voluntarily leave my natural family? Why after years of information and formation did I freely decide to make the vows, to live in the religious family of the FMA? For whom have I tied these bonds? To whom have I given myself?

And if I have chosen God and consecrated myself entirely to Him, does not this imply that I intend giving Him the first fruits of my life? Do not the Constitutions state that "we are called to express our baptismal consecration more fully?" and for this, "we lay ourselves completely open to the action of the Holy Spirit"?

Now, to what extent do I know God? How and how often do I meet Him? Do I feel that the reality most to be desired is that of a nuptial union with God, who wishes to communicate to me the fulness of His divine life at every moment?

The virgin of
God is
within us

St. Augustine tells us that our souls contain a mysterious "abyss" which has nothing in common with time or the terrestrial world, and is by far superior to that part of the soul from which the body receives life and movement.

¹⁸⁵ PIRONIO Eduardo, in the *Osservatore Romano*, Aug. 15th 1976.

We know by faith that this abyss exists, beyond the feelings, senses, imagination and even the spiritual activities and those of the intellect and will. The saints call it the *centre* of the spirit, *where*, God dwells and operates and raises us to Himself, communicating His life to us.

This is the mysterious meaning of the words of the gospel: "The kingdom of God is within you".¹⁸⁶ Jesus presents this kingdom in various parables as an interior, divine and permanent spiritual reality.

St. Teresa insists very much on the importance of knowing that God is not far away but within us. She says: "For those souls subject to distractions it is very important not only to believe this truth but to make efforts to understand it experimentally through keeping company with the God who is within us. All the harm comes from not understanding that God is always present and is within us".

The august presence of the three divine Persons in our souls penetrates and stimulates us and transfigures our lives. But perhaps there is an objection. Might not the living out of this concept and allowing it to penetrate, us, induce quietism and isolationism? Certainly not. The interiority that enables us to discover the kingdom of God within us is neither quietism nor isolation. God lives in us so that we do nothing, but in order that faithful to His grace we work actively and courageously even under trials.

A spirituality that seeks God for personal satisfaction alone, soon becomes spiritual egoism, arrests the movements of love and leads to isolation and emptiness instead of creating space for that generosity and activity which is spurred on by love of Christ who gave His life for all.

¹⁸⁶ Lk 17, 21.

The Sisters who faithfully attend to the presence of God in order to render their lives more supernatural through Him, know well how they must work in order to combat self assertiveness; what an amount of control and effort is needed to overcome egoism; how much strength to cope with their own failings without becoming discouraged; how much courage to continue selfgiving in the face of indifference and ingratitude; how much vigilance and silence and watchfulness over their hearts in order to place no obstacles in the way of God's action in them!

The beneficial effects of union with God.

The Servant of God, Don Rinaldi, who knew this interior life from experience wrote: "If union with God really enlightens the FMA in her relations with Him, she will feel the need of not losing a moment of the precious time allowed for the practices of piety. During the day she will find herself carried naturally to intimate, habitual union with God even in the midst of an uninterrupted variety of occupations. Useless discussions concerning herself or the Sisters will dry up on her tongue and her actions will experience the fire of divine love for the benefit of others. It will not then be difficult for mind and heart to be continually directed to God who becomes the direct end of all her actions".¹⁸⁷

Don Rinaldi also wrote to a superior: "Recommend the Sisters to animate their work always and everywhere with interior life, which is the presence of God in us remembered, invoked and loved. The spiritual life should enter into class, recreation and every activity not so much by talking about it as by thinking of it. In this manner the Sisters will be true religious and God will live in them and with them".

¹⁸⁷ RINALDI Filippo, *Strenna* 1930.

This is what the authoritative voices says in *Evangelico Testificatio*: “Such an orientation will make of your religious families the vital environment in which the seed of the divine life will be sown, that seed which was planted in each of you at baptism and which your consecration, if lived to the full, will bear its fruits in greatest abundance”.¹⁸⁸

Our Constitutions also highlight this in Art. 55. They present our apostolic activities as emanating from the same “mystery of salvation” of Jesus Christ and therefore, being a prolongation of His life and mission.

The acquisition of habitual union with God therefore, does not mean being inactive and alienated from the needs of others. Rather, it means growth in fraternal charity, where the love of God finds its constant verification.

Meeting God means discovering the deep reality of our life and learning from Him the true hierarchy of values.

The unifying
centre of life

The unifying centre of the life of Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello and of those of many of our Sisters, as well as of good lay people involved in many complex duties, **lies in the constant convergence of everything in God.**

Pope Pius XI knew our great Father, Don Bosco personally and was able to state in the discourse on the heroicity of his virtue: “One of his most beautiful characteristics was to be present to all, surrounded by a continuous throng, assailed by problems, among a turmoil of requests and consultations and yet to have his spirit always elsewhere, always on high, where calm reigned and serenity was imperturbable and dominated supremely, so

¹⁸⁸ ET 38.

much so that in him work was actually effective prayer, and the great principle of the Christian life was verified: *qui laborat orat*".¹⁸⁹

Regarding our own saint there comes before our mind the surprising confession she made when just a Daughter of Mary Immaculate, of having "been a quarter of an hour without thinking of God".¹⁹⁰ The mind and heart of our saint was in truth fixed on God. Cardinal Cagliero was able to state this with authority in his evidence for the processes: "She lived, one could say, lost in God",¹⁹¹ yet in the midst of unremitting activity.

Concerning the Servant of God, Sr. Teresa Valsè-Pantellini, Don L'Arco in his recent beautiful biography was able to state: "one could say of her that she prayed continually with her lips but still more with her life; she had reached the vital union of action and contemplation".¹⁹²

I have also read recently a testimony presented by the Pontifical Society for the Propagation of the Faith; "I am the mother of three children. Many are the graces I have received during my life, but the greatest of them all is the growing desire for God, to love Him and make Him loved. . . I often feel the need of stopping my work and allowing myself to be taken over by the Most High, abandoning myself to Him. I then take up my work again with renewed vigour and fresh courage".

It is not easy to reach this stage in the interior life and it would be counterproductive to use too much mental tension to will it. St. Francis de Sales tells us to *begin gently but perseveringly every day* and in a small way, I would suggest in those little spare moments so frequently lost.

¹⁸⁹ MB XIX 83.

¹⁹⁰ MACCONO, *Santa* I 61.

¹⁹¹ MACCONO, *Santa* II 192.

¹⁹² L'ARCO Adolfo, *Ho scelto i poveri* (Roma, FMA 1977) 95.

Why, unless there is a real necessity to speak, not make use of walking along a passage, climbing or descending the stairs, walking in the playground, intervals of waiting, of walking along a stretch of road, in order to enjoy a few moments of silence and make those acts of faith that will lead us to say joyfully: "I am not alone; God lives in me!?" "O God, you are my God... my soul thirsts for you". "Lord, you search me and you know me; lead me along the path of life".¹⁹³ "They are happy whose strength is in you, in whose hearts are the road to Sion".¹⁹⁴

We decided to journey along the road to holiness on the day of our profession and we want now to travel it with ever-increasing alacrity.

Interior activity

First of all we believe that the journey towards holiness begins with interior action. We all need to be silent and to reserve within ourselves a cell for attentive listening, for reflection to determine if there is not an interior vacuum that the exterior tumult cannot fill or satisfy.¹⁹⁵

Whoever is not courageous enough to hold fantasy and activity in check and exercise herself on the upward path of daily renunciation with frequent intervals of interior silence in order to meet God, will be always caught up by her occupations to the point of living more on the surface than in depth. She will be better pleased with appearance than essence and will never feel the strength and calmness that stems from faith in the presence of God within us.¹⁹⁶ The practice of the interior life is undoubtedly fatiguing at the beginning, because it demands recollection, reflection, battling with

¹⁹³ Ps 62, 2.

¹⁹⁴ Ps 83, 6.

¹⁹⁵ Cf PAUL VI P.P., *Discorso*, 20 February 1977.

¹⁹⁶ Cf ET 46; C 1975 35.

the superficial and with useless curiosity. It also requires detachment from self and from superfluous things that clutter up the mind and heart. But with God's grace and the intercession of Mary, the shrine of the Holy Spirit, the exercise will gradually become easier, until it reaches the point of being habitual. God takes us and raises us above ourselves and our restricted horizons and introduces us into His own life: "Eternal life is this, to know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent".¹⁹⁷

We shall then understand how petty we are when we just make our own poor judgments, our proposals for the morrow and our nostalgic regrets for the past without sinking them in God's will.

During a conversation one day, our venerated Superior, Don Antal, made the following distressing observation: "There are people, and also religious, who are very gifted and rich in culture and qualifications, but they are so full of themselves that they have become almost impenetrable to the supernatural!"

When however, we decide to take this path to holiness, confessing with humility of heart: without you, Lord, we can do nothing,¹⁹⁸ we immediately experience that if the goodness of God is hidden from the wise, it is magnanimously revealed to little ones.¹⁹⁹

Sincere review
of our interior
life

Dear Sisters, I would entreat all of you, with the heart of our Lady, for the life of the Institute that she willed and blessed, to use one of the beautiful September feasts in her honour to pause in prayer before the tabernacle or in adoration of the Blessed

¹⁹⁷ *Jn* 17, 3.

¹⁹⁸ Cf *Jn* 15, 5.

¹⁹⁹ Cf *Mt* II, 25.

Trinity in the silence of the Spirit and to ask yourselves sincerely:

- What is it that prevents me from living that interior life which is at the root of holiness and hence is the authentic realization of my identity as an F.M.A.?
- Am I more concerned about programming, organization, work, success and outside approval than about the supernatural values and motivation to be given to my activities?
- Without my realizing it, might not printed matter, imagery and audiovisuals which, perhaps, I adopt without due need and preparation have engendered in me a mental slavery of which I may not even be aware but which, gradually and by degrees, causes my mentality and my life to sideslip on a purely rational and secular plane?
- Do I draw my God-sense and the sense of Salesian religious life from books of sound spirituality, or do I choose those with fragile values which make them poor stimulants to a commitment to holiness?
- Do I no longer feel the need for silence? If so it is a sign that a perilous interior void is being created in me which I try in vain to fill with exterior substitutes.
- The dissatisfaction, which we so often blame on structures is perhaps, an indicator of the lack of that basic structure in our life which is called "intimacy with God"? Consequent on this is the lack of that joy which radiates from the knowledge of God's presence, the feeling of being loved by Him in a continual unsuspected way that is ever new.

I trust, my dear Sisters, that the Holy Spirit will meet our good will with His light so that we can recognise our weak point, and that our Lady will

help us to take the decisive step to overcome ourselves and walk resolutely on the path to holiness. It is never too late, no situation is insurmountable. God awaits our **yes** in order to give us the gift of His grace and He will walk at our side when things are difficult. Let us pray for one another and the charity of this reciprocal prayer will increase His grace.

(Cir. n. 606 - September 24 1977)

Jesus the source and model of sanctity

Jesus source
and model of
Divine life

In the preceding circular we spoke of the mysterious *abyss* in which God lives and works in us. We understood that the root of our holiness is in our awareness of the presence of the Trinity within us. It is the awareness that unfolds to us the infinite love of God overflowing into the holy humanity of Jesus, offers us in Him a source of divine life, also the perfect model and the supreme Teacher.

Thus sanctity becomes for us a living Person to contemplate, listen to, love and make others love. Jesus passed close to us one day and said to us also: "Come, follow Me!". We, touched by grace, left everything and followed him with the firm intention of remaining always with Him. *Perfectae Caritatis* states: "the ultimate norm of religious life is the imitation of Christ as set forth in the gospels; therefore this norm should be held by institutes as the highest rule."²⁰⁰

As the years pass and in the divine light we get a clearer view of the figure of Jesus, the more we discover that his divine perfection, His greatness and His merciful love surpass even our wildest imagination.

²⁰⁰ PC 2.

Let us look at the living person of Jesus as the gospel presents Him to us: humble and gentle yet firm and strong with those who profaned the Temple; tired at the well of Sichem, yet vigilantly awaiting the Samaritan woman; rich in mercy towards the adulteress but stern in rebuking the pharisees; full of kindness to children whom he called to Him and caressed, but demanding, to the extent of abandoning everything, from those He wished to follow Him; liberal in generous understanding of the crowd, as He satisfies their hunger by multiplying loaves, but is austere with Himself, having no place to lay His head; transfigured with glory on Thabor, but firm in pointing out to us the choice of the lowest place; as quick to welcome the hospitality of Bethany as to accept the agonizing loneliness of Gethsemane; permitting His feet to be anointed with Mary's precious ointment and generously ready to face untold suffering and the cruel ignominy of His passion and Calvary; buried as an apparent failure and risen in glory, victorious over death and hell.

The person of Jesus is still living and working today, spiritualizing, elevating and making our life divine. Fixing our gaze continuously, lovingly and full of faith on Jesus, will transform us.

The Gospel therefore, is to be contemplated and prayed rather than read, without ever taking our eyes off Jesus who also acts and speaks for us today and invites us to converse with Him and like Him.

It is possible to read the four gospels, to know them by heart, be expert exegetists, to comment on them in a masterly fashion and yet not to establish an intimate contact with Jesus and hence not to enjoy the benefit of His divine influence.

When our contact with Him becomes personal and intimate we feel "how sweet it is to be with Jesus,

to be united with Him, to make his attitudes, His interior dispositions and His activity our own".²⁰¹ Perhaps also, someone might utter the heartrending, yet liberating confession of St. Augustine. "Late have I loved thee, O Beauty ever ancient ever new!".²⁰²

Jesus said: "I have come to bring fire to the earth and how I wish it were blazing already!"²⁰³ Ablaze with this fire the martyrs went calmly to death and the saints of all times overcame difficulties and embraced sufferings of all kinds in order to remain faithful to the *Sequela Christi*. Today too, our Sisters find courage to live the fulness of their consecration in situations of environment and life that demand heroism. Listen to what they write: "We are happy to follow Jesus in sacrifice. The hard life we are obliged to live is making us more mature in our religious vocation.

We are happy because we share in the joys and sorrows of the Church and because no one can separate us from the love of Christ".

Who Jesus was
for the saints

For the saints Jesus was the Supreme Reality, living and present in every detail of their lives which they continually compared with His, drawing from Him light and vigour. Their lives are full of testimony in this regard. We limit ourselves to just a sample of what our Saint's letters contain.

It would seem that Mother Mazzarello was unable to write without continually recalling the name of Jesus. This goes to prove that she identified with His manner of feeling and thinking. Here is a small selection.

²⁰¹ PIUS XII P.P., December 27th 1953.

²⁰² St. AUGUSTINE, *Confessions* X 27.

²⁰³ *Lk* 12, 49.

“If I love Jesus with all my heart, I shall also know how to make others love Him”.²⁰⁴

“Keep yourselves closely united with Jesus, work for His pleasure alone”.²⁰⁵

“Jesus must be all your strength, with Jesus burdens become light, fatigue becomes pleasant, thorns will change into sweetness”.²⁰⁶

“Let us imitate our dearest Jesus in everything, especially in humility and charity. We must really do this, mustn't we?”.²⁰⁷

“My last souvenir for you is this: when the cross seems heavy, take a glance at the cross you wear around your neck and say: ‘Oh, Jesus you are all my strength; with you all burdens become light, fatigue pleasant, and thorns turn into sweetness’”.²⁰⁸

“Do not lose heart no matter what happens. Take everything from the hands of Jesus. Place all your trust in Him and hope for everything from Him. Act so that Jesus may say to you: ‘My daughter, you are dear to Me; I am pleased with what you are doing’”.²⁰⁹

“Never get discouraged even when you see yourself full of shortcomings, but turn confidently to Jesus and Mary”.²¹⁰

She often said: “Oh, if only I could remain always near Him! (to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament). If only I were permitted to work at the back of the

²⁰⁴ *MM L 9, 2.*

²⁰⁵ *MM L 19, 8.*

²⁰⁶ *MM L 37, 12.*

²⁰⁷ *MM L 23, 4.*

²⁰⁸ *MM L 64, 5.*

²⁰⁹ *MM L 65, 1-2.*

²¹⁰ *MM L 66, 5.*

Chapel in the last bench in order to keep Jesus company and not leave Him so much alone".²¹¹

"What time is it? . . . It is time to love God. Let us love Him more and more".²¹²

"Who are you working for? Work for Jesus. Remember you must always work for God".²¹³

"Sometimes she would take the crucifix hanging round her neck and, holding it in her hand would point to the figure of Jesus and say: 'He here, then pointing to the back of the cross would add: 'and we here' ".²¹⁴

These fervent expressions of our dear saint tell us what Jesus meant to her and that this love was not wrapped up in pure sentiment and vain affectivity, but brought her to the condition of living in Him, with Him and for Him, humiliation, sacrifice and the cross. Let us go to the school of our saint that we too may know how to appreciate the inestimable gift of the living presence of the Eucharistic Jesus in all our houses in order to live more intensely with Him and for Him.

Live with Jesus
in order to give
Him souls

In its most profound reality our mission as educators is just this: to make Jesus known through the gospel, through catechesis; to bear witness to Him in life and bring our dear young people to Him, living in the Eucharist and present in every man.

The girls of today are often deprived of the evangelical truths and are, unfortunately, influenced by many vain and wrong ideas. Let us not waste too much time with them in an intellectual research

²¹¹ MACCONO, *Santa* I 115.

²¹² *Do* 291.

²¹³ *Do* II 162.

²¹⁴ *Do* II 117.

into a truth so obvious as that of the Person of Jesus.

How was Christianity spread among the pagans? Not by research and subtle discussions but by the convincing power of the first Christians and their witness of faith which led them to say: "We have known a man called Jesus; and by relating all they knew of Him. They bore witness; the Holy Spirit made their lives fruitful and conversions multiplied.

Today, when a new paganism is infiltrating society we also must become apostles, not wasting time in irrelevant discourses, but presenting to the girls immediately and in convincing terms, the Person of Jesus, the pure, genuine, complete Gospel without any watering down. The Holy Spirit will then lead us and the girls to "the whole truth".

If we live with Jesus we cannot abstain from speaking of Him, nor fail to radiate to all who approach us the light with which He fills us.

How do we live
and transmit
this reality

In the last circular [September 1977] we tried to accentuate the interior life that should characterize our spirituality. Here, if only by suggestion we seek to emphasise the essence of our holiness which is *conformity to Christ*. Now let us ask ourselves:

- Is there in us a continuous tension towards a greater knowledge and a loving imitation of Jesus, which the Father never denies to the humble of heart?
- Does the gospel hold first place in our study, in our searching and above all in our mind and heart?
- Are we satisfied with reading which, even if continuous, is superficial and does not penetrate the deep sense of the words or the significance of the movements and actions of Jesus?
- Have we tried to read it in depth from a parti-

cular angle, for example, the relationship of Jesus with the Father, the spirit of prayer which always animated Him, the faith He demanded from all who approached Him?

- Are we zealous in assimilating the words of the Gospel so as to make them our language of Faith and of life?
- Do we know how to present it to the girls as a book of life in which they can find the solution to all of their problems?
- Are we taking pains to help them find the Person of Christ through reading the Gospel?
- With how much faith do we believe in and live in the presence of Jesus in the Tabernacle?
- Do we praise and thank God for the gift which allows us to live under the same roof with Him?
- Do we visit Him often, even if only briefly, with the faith and love with which one seeks the most faithful of friends?
- Do we also, as our saints did, invite the girls to share these encounters of divine friendship?
- Above all, whether in the gospel or the Eucharist, do we look to Jesus as the teacher and model to whom we must conform in all the circumstances of life, imitating Him in humility, charity, obedience, detachment and adherence to the will of the Father?

We could continue asking questions but each of us can ask them of herself according to the inspiration of the moment and to circumstances. What is important is that these questions should be an impetus to ever greater **conformity to the Lord Jesus** in order to be transformed by Him into a "teacher of life" for our pupils.

May Mary most holy who, by divine election was called through the divine motherhood to form Jesus, help us in this work.

The transforming power of grace

The mystery of
grace

We find ourselves in adoration before this ineffable mystery of which the Church, by God's will is the custodian.

Grace, we know, is a completely gratuitous gift of God through which Jesus Christ gives us a share in His divine life.

It is truly "the mystery hidden for ages and generations in God",²¹⁵ that St. Paul speaks of. It has become the central mystery of the life of the Church and of our own existence, that is, as the apostle again says, "Christ in you the hope of glory".²¹⁶ Therefore we can make our own the Apostle's cry: "it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me".²¹⁷

Nothing remains but to plunge ourselves into deep, silent, adoration. The gift transcends every possibility of our being. The Holy Spirit alone can enlighten us on its immensity and show us to what immeasurable greatness God raises us, tiny impoverished beings as we are, giving us a share in His own life.

It is true that our nature remains subject to temptation and also to falls. St. Teresa confesses of herself; "Sometimes it seemed to me that I was detached from everything and, put to the test, I proved that I was. At other times I felt so wretched, so weak and attached that I no longer recognised myself".

Mother Mazzarello echoes this thought: "We all have our shortcomings and we cannot expect to correct them all at once, but we must not give

²¹⁵ Col 1, 26.

²¹⁶ Col 1, 27.

²¹⁷ Gal 2, 20.

up hope and, without being discouraged turn to Jesus and Mary”!

It is faith in the reality of grace that prevents discouragement and fills us with strength to overcome our difficulties. It also makes us optimistic and hopeful regarding everyone because, all of us, strengthened by grace can become new creatures. I remember the happy change in the life of one of our Sisters after a course of catechetical lessons on grace. She was finding it very difficult to accept obedience and had been putting up a certain amount of resistance.

After the course she told her provincial: “Now that I understand what grace is, send me where you will, to do whatever you wish! I am now persuaded that what matters is not being here or there but having God’s life in me and making it grow. Grace will give me strength and peace!” From that day forward she was a happy Sister!

The transforming
power of Grace

“*Your grace. O Lord, is better than life*”.²¹⁸ Grace anticipates our needs, follows us, support us, envelops our nature, transforms it and matures it for eternal glory.

God gives Himself completely. We share His life in the measure we wish to do so. It is we who place limits. If we remove the obstacles of our egoism, God’s life will have free access and will invade us. There will then follow an existential radiation of the divine wealth that is in us to all those who approach us.

Don Bosco had an exceptional influence over people, but it was the supernatural, that is, the riches of grace, of the divine life in him, that subjugated and conquered. He radiated this life and transmitted it in a way that the young in loving him, ended up by being vanquished by the power of

²¹⁸ Ps 62, 4.

grace within him and they were spurred on even to holiness.

This was how the influence of grace emanating from Mother Mazzarello, led many girls, among them the young Countess, Emilia Mosca, to choose the poor uncomfortable environment of Mornese for a life of religious consecration.

Faith in the power of grace, which will give vigour and space to our weak powers and shortsightedness, will cancel out of our vocabulary such expressions as: "I cannot succeed;" "it is impossible":²¹⁹ They are the fruit of restricted vision which is completely rationalistic.

By helping us to see persons and things in the correct perspective, the power and balance of grace will create a new life in us and enable us to witness to those heavenly things already present in the world.

Thus we shall become the "missionaries of hope and joy" his Eminence Cardinal Pironio wished for us when he spoke to us in such a warm and fatherly way during the unforgettable commemorative meeting on the 14th November last.

The sacred journey we have undertaken along the path to holiness can only be made by drawing the life of grace from the Church.

The sources
of grace

But where and how can the Church communicate this divine grace to us?

Primarily through the Sacraments.

I limit myself to a few notes on the two which are of central importance in the order of progression of grace, namely, the Blessed Eucharist and Penance. However, I warmly recommend everyone to deepen her appreciation of the Sacramental life by prayer

²¹⁹ LG 44; cf C 1975 7.

and the reading of solid, trustworthy books on catechesis. These are indispensable for our christian, religious and apostolic formation and can be found in every country.

We know that Jesus is substantially present in the Eucharist under the species of bread and wine in a unique manner. In the Mass He renews the mystery of His death and resurrection and we, offering ourselves in Him and with Him become renewed.

The Church lives by the celebration of the Eucharist and the Eucharistic presence. These are the secret and most powerful sources of her fruitful vitality.

The Mass prepared, shared and lived empties us of self through the merits of Jesus and gives us the fulness of the Holy Spirit who purifies us, elevates our faculties, invigorates our spirits, gives peace even to our physical being and gradually *conforms* us to Christ. Thus the Holy Eucharist strengthens and lightens our day.²²⁰

But we are all aware how fragile and unstable we are and therefore, we thank God for giving us the gift of the Sacrament of Penance. Through this sacrament "we renew in Jesus our Redeemer our experience of the Father's mercy and our reconciliation with the Church, wounded by every sin".²²¹

I should like to speak to you at length regarding this sacrament which today, more than ever, needs to be rediscovered and appreciated. However, I limit myself to telling you that the more we recognise the incomparable beauty of a soul in grace, the more we shall understand the incalculable hurt suffered by those who neglect frequent confession.

There are certain existences that are lifeless, grey

²²⁰ Cf C 1975 47.

²²¹ C 1975 46.

and sometimes bitter. They lack the light, warmth and strength that frequent confession can give. In fact, it enhances an upright conscience, gives peace of soul, drives off spiritual laziness and stimulates the will to good. How many sad consequences there have been for souls and for the Church through neglect of and indifference to the Sacrament of Penance, and how many gaps this leaves in the ranks of the Saints!

Ecclesial and personal Influences of these Sacraments

Are we all convinced that besides being a personal evil our sins affect the whole Church? Therefore, do we regard Confession as a gift offered us by God's mercy for our continual conversion and the strengthening of our relations with God and the ecclesial community and that it helps us to understand and fulfil better the divine plan?

When we celebrate these sacraments, is our attention turned more to the rite or is it permeated with faith in the presence of Christ, who, while he gives us a share in His life also demands personal cooperation?

Can we say that throughout the day we live again our communion under the influence of the Spirit of Jesus in thinking, loving and acting, or could it be that a certain question posed by a non catholic - "Why is it that if you truly eat Christ you are so little like Him in your Lives?", might apply to us also?

How can we possibly call that which could cause the inestimable riches of God's life in us to grow or to decline "a small matter"? Does not God, with His grace, envelop the whole of our life even in its smallest details?

Fundamental obligation of our Mission: to lead others to God's grace

We have spoken about grace and the Sacraments as seen in relation to our personal holiness, but we must also add that in our role as educators we have the mission of transmitting true values to the

young. Therefore, we should feel an absolute need of meditating on the mystery of grace and of reviving, in order to be real apostles for the girls, the unique good we call grace.

It is true that it is God who acts directly in souls, but we must be *mediators* who try ways, means and more adaptable instruments as educators responding to the times, to condition the hearts of the young people to accept the Mysterious gift of God.²²²

The whole life of the Congregation is given to the functioning of this specific mission. If we fall short of this we shall bear the great responsibility of obstructing the plans of God for our Institute. Bearing witness, the Word of God and the Sacraments are the preferred ways and means of attaining our end. The recent Synod of Bishops also underlined this with insistence.

We must make every effort to create a witnessing environment, but together with this we must be preoccupied with a catechesis in the form and language adapted to age and basic preparation, in order to transmit clear ideas and deep convictions concerning the wonderful reality of grace.

It would be better not to speak in the abstract but in a personal manner. Grace is the God-Person placing Himself in personal contact with us.

The girls understand this and they also understand that this mystery can only be accepted in faith. However, we prove this by its effects: **behaviour with other people** considered as brothers and not exploited to serve our egoism; **a plan of life** constructed, not for self-interest, but with God-in-us in generous dedication to all; taking part in Mass and in the Sacraments not as if we were paying a debt, but **as a personal meeting with God.**

²²² Cf *Acts* GC XVI 127-134.

Catechesis on the life of grace is the central element of all our catechesis because the reality of sons of God and therefore, of the new life in Christ with the Father in the love of the Holy Spirit is the foundation of all christian life. It is not enough to restrict ourselves to highlighting this reality in various spirituality encounters. If the continuous and systematic intervention of catechesis is lacking the doctrine of grace remains incomplete and is often lost in the vastness of connections with all the rest of the christian universe.

As we turn over the pages of Holy Scripture we can lead the girls to discover that it is God's will that expressions such as: "alliance, friendship, kingdom, nuptials, eternal life, mystery of Christ..." should in concrete terms, be translated as the gift of the life of grace He gives us.

Becoming familiar with the gospel of St. John, the letters of St. Paul, the documents of Vatican II and the discourses of Paul VI, the girls will find that emphasis is always placed on this support of our christian life in all its richness and depth.

We shall then be persuaded that formation to the life of grace does not only consist in urging the girls to approach the Sacrament of Penance: "Go to confession and you will be able to keep in the grace of God".

The Sacraments of the holy Eucharist and Penance especially, as our Constitutions remind us in article 69, are the best means of strengthening and and re-gaining the life of grace. But this requires enlightenment from the Word of God and must be translated into a constant effort towards conversion.²²³

A liturgical life becoming ever more interior which causes to emerge from the mystery of Christ the

²²³ Cf EN 47.

mystery of Mary, Mother of divine Grace, brought close to the lives of our girls, is another means, among the most valid for revival and growth of the life of grace.

The various action groups, deeply imbued with Salesian characteristics, can and must become the preferred ways for enriching and rendering fertile the life of grace for our girls.²²⁴

(Cir. n. 609 - December 24 1977)

Holiness is founded on the word of God

The Word
of God
foundation of
sanctity

As we progress on the "holy journey" we have undertaken we become more and more aware that the foundation of all sanctity is the "rock" of the Word of God. It is this word that creates, works and transforms. "As the rain and snow come down from heaven and return not thither but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, bringing seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose and prosper in the thing for which I sent it".²²⁵

This is why Jesus stated: "if anyone loves Me he will keep My word", and he added the comforting promise, "and My Father will love him and we shall make our home with him".²²⁶

Don Bosco was so convinced of this truth that he not only proclaimed the Word of God in church but wrote texts on the walls of the house, thus placing God's word before the eyes of the boys at all hours of the day. It resembled a mirror in

²²⁴ Cf *M-R* 1975 68-71.

²²⁵ *Is* 55, 10-11.

²²⁶ *Jn* 14, 23.

which one could view oneself, a *two-edged sword* to separate the good from the bad, and therefore, an examination, a stimulus and a guide for life.

How touched I was last May, to read under the porticos of Valdocco the texts of Scripture Don Bosco chose. Here are a few:

“You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my Church and the gates of the underworld cannot hold out against it”.²²⁷

“If we acknowledge our sins then God who is faithful will forgive us our sins and purify us from everything that is wrong”.²²⁸

“When your eye is sound your whole body is filled with light”.²²⁹

“We are prepared to die rather than break the laws of our ancestors”.²³⁰

Who will ever know what thoughts and discussions these texts roused in the boys? It is then a good and wholesome Salesian tradition to present the words of Holy Scripture in this manner. Let us not allow it to lapse. Let us rather present it through the pictorial language of modern times that it may become for the young, relevant, familiar and alive.

Don Bosco believed that the Word of God was *spirit and life* and that it forms the saints.

“If anyone wants to be a follower of Mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow Me”.²³¹ Francis of Assisi allowed himself to be penetrated by these words and with determination set out on the road to holiness. Does not the personal history of each one of us bear the mark of some word, some scriptural expression which

²²⁷ Mt 16, 18.

²²⁸ 1 JN I, 9.

²²⁹ Lk 11, 34.

²³⁰ 2 Mac 7, 2.

²³¹ Mt 16, 24.

at a certain moment enlightened us, led us to discover truth previously undiscerned and produced an upheaval in our mentality and behaviour?

God speaks in
the depths
of our hearts

But God speaks in the depths of our hearts. If we do not perceive this truth is it not because we have not yet sufficiently trained ourselves to silence, recollection and detachment and have not freed ourselves from what are obstacles to the action of God?

Allow me to repeat it, dear Sisters. Many of these graces God pours out upon us do not produce the fruit He wills because esteem and love for silence has diminished. Yet our Constitutions tell us clearly that silence creates in the community an environment of peace, makes reflection possible and is a school of great virtue.²³² And it is the silence of our whole being that makes us efficacious in our apostolic mission.²³³ Article II of the *Manual* (1975) confirms these concepts.

The Institute offers us special moments of silence and prayer in the Spiritual Retreat and at the Exercise for a happy death²³⁴ and at the day of relaxation from work.²³⁵ These help us to grow in that habitual attitude of listening to the Word of God and in that availability to His will which should involve the whole of our Salesian life, from prayer in church to assistance on the playground or any occupation.

This is the attitude we have been able to admire in many of our sisters, especially in those who lived in the early days of the Institute. They shared generously in the various activities of the house and in apostolic works. They were young and vivacious

²³² Cf C 1975 39.

²³³ Cf C 1975 53.

²³⁴ Cf C 1975 46.

²³⁵ M-R 1975 6.

but possessed the unmistakable characteristic of those who live in God's presence, listening to His Word. There is recorded on page 344 of the *Cronistoria* Vol. III the death of Sr. Catherine Nasi, whom everyone called the Sister of silence. She died at the age of 29 and left a moral portrait of herself in her last message: "Keep your heart detached from everything that does not lead to God and you will be happy in life and in death".²³⁶

Our saint never tired of recommending it: "Speak little, very little with creatures; speak instead very much with God".²³⁷

Before leaving Mornese, Fr. Costamagna gave silence as his souvenir message.²³⁸ The *Cronistoria* also passes on to us the strong words of Fr. Cagliero: "Without silence there is no recollection or interior life and therefore no religious life".²³⁹

Let us be vigilant
of negative
influences

The recollection and interior life, measure of our religious life, meets with serious difficulties from various sources, especially from mass-media which combine to remove the certainties of faith from the depth of our souls and to replace them with our own superficialities and the fluctuating opinions of the day.

"Grant that we may live the divine certitudes of faith and radiate them around us", we pray in the visit to the Blessed Sacrament. Art. 64 of our Manual reminds us of our responsibility and we are told that "in the choice of reading-matter and television programmes we must always be guided by the needs of our mission and by our awareness of what is permitted by the austerity of Religious life and the commitments of community life".

²³⁶ *Cron* III 344.

²³⁷ *MM L* 19, 10.

²³⁸ Cf *Cron* II 334.

²³⁹ *Cron* II 334.

Are there not some Sisters, some communities who must acknowledge in all sincerity before God, that if there is a weakness in their manner of listening to the Divine Word and in their interest in the life of the Church and the Institute, it is due to an accentuated interest, even to the extent of abuse, in useless reading and in radio and television?

Worldliness and sanctity can never go together.

Let us hasten to make amends where this is necessary otherwise we shall never prepare fertile soil for the seed of the Word of God either in ourselves or in the girls and we shall never savour the divine sweetness or be able to transmit it to others. Let us then prepare the ground with good will and the Holy Spirit will fertilize it. It was He who inspired the sacred books and therefore, it is He whom we must ask to open the seals. But He will only do so for the upright of heart. Did not Jesus say in the Gospel: "I bless you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to mere children".²⁴⁰

A Sister when dying asked that the Gospel and the Constitutions be placed in her coffin. These two books were found to be very worn because of assiduous reading and they had also been heavily underlined and annotated during daily meditation. Both Sisters and girls said of her: "in conversation with Sr. Natalina one felt that she enjoyed divine wisdom". Habitual contact with the Word of God will be reflected in our words, manner and even our gestures, which, little by little, will be modelled on those of Jesus.

There was no nervousness, vehemence or impatience in the Words of Jesus.

His speech was neither aggressive nor heavy. Neither was it hesitant or domineering. His manner of

²⁴⁰ *Lk* 10, 21.

speaking was calm, sincere, simple and measured, even when He did speak with authority. "Nobody ever spoke like Him".²⁴¹

The Church
is the guardian
and interpreter
of the
revealed Word

Our Divine Master's words must be our words and they will be if we follow the invitation of *Perfectae Caritatis*. "In the first place, they, (religious) should have recourse daily to the holy Scriptures in order that by reading and meditating on Holy Writ they may learn the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus Christ".²⁴²

Let us also read again the Constitution *Dei Verbum* in order to understand how to present the word of God to the girls in a manner that will be accessible to them but always under the guidance and directives of the Church's magisterium.

In fact, Pope Paul VI states: "The effort to adapt the revealed word to the understanding of the hearers exposes it to the dangerous risk of ambiguity, reticence and alteration in the integrity of the message, even if it does not absolutely succumb to the temptation of choosing from the treasures of revealed truths that which is pleasing, and leaving the rest aside. . . This danger and temptation is common to all because those who come into contact with the Word of God seek to adapt it to their own mentality and culture, to subject it to that liberal examination which takes from the Word of God its unequivocal significance and its subjective authority,.... This observation should be sufficient to convince us of the goodness of the divine plan which protects the revealed word contained in Scripture and Apostolic Tradition through a transmitting channel. By this we mean through a

²⁴¹ *Jn* 7, 46.

²⁴² *PC* 6.

visible and permanent magisterium authorised to guard, interpret and teach that Word.²⁴³

What questions can we ask ourselves concerning what has been said so far?

- Do I read God's Word with a lively faith and with a sincere will to practise it or simply for instruction or curiosity; or do I yield to the temptation of adapting and manipulating the Scriptural texts according to my own interests or the tastes of others?
- Do I esteem as I should the irreplaceable value of silence in order to listen profitably to the divine Word?
- Have I the sincerity to confess to myself the real obstacles to the Word of God in my life and have I the courage to remove them definitely.
- Have my conversations the Christian value of faith or do they bear the worldly mark of secularism?

Let us return
to Mornese

Let us return to Mornese, dear Sisters; let us return to that blessed spirit of our origins which Mother Enrichetta Sorbone summed up in the words of that famous page to which we have often referred.

How could such a life be explained if it were not imbued with the Gospel, nourished with the Eucharist, lived in great charity and with much cheerfulness in the presence of God and of Don Bosco? This is just the spirit that the young people of today need. They have seen many illusions fade away, even those which caused contestations.

It is evident that today the young are avidly seeking for those who are able to speak to them with assurance of truths believed in and lived by the

²⁴³ PAUL VI P.P., General audience, December 4th 1968.

person who speaks, and are presented in the language of simplicity, goodness and joyful hope. *Let us return to the spirit of Mornese and we shall find again the secure ways of our Salesian pastoral work*, all based on the Gospel, the Eucharist and Mary Help of Christians.

Let us return to Mornese! I repeat this invitation also in view of the meeting we shall be having there with the Provincials and delegates of Europe, the United States, the Middle East, Zaire, Mozambique and Australia from August 9th -16th for the Spiritual Retreat and the triennial review of the post-chapter period.

I invite you all to pray to the Holy Spirit, Our Lady, our Saints, and the sisters of the early days that these meetings may define, develop and be enriched in the blessed spirit of Mornese in order that there may be a true spiritual renewal which will lead all to repeat the joyful concluding phrase of Mother Sorbone: "How beautiful is this life!".

(Cir. n. 616 - July-August 24 1978)

The sanctity of "daily life"

The joyful liturgical celebration of Easter in which we are still living will undoubtedly have renewed in us the mystery of Christ's Resurrection, enabling us to advance along the road to holiness that we have laid out for ourselves. In fact, using the words of St. Paul, the Easter Liturgy invited us to put into practice the programme suggested in the last circular: to know, love and live the truth. "Christ, our passover, has been sacrificed; let us celebrate the feast then, by getting rid of all the old yeast of evil and wickedness, having only the

unleavened bread of sincerity and truth".²⁴⁴

When we come to think of it, the inner security of our life is something very simple, something we can all grasp: **following the will of God moment by moment, that is living to the full each fleeting instant of our day**, of our daily round with all its duties great or small. It is a lesson St. Francis of Sales teaches us. One day he was questioned about the best time and way for giving oneself to God. "Right now", he answered.

The truth of life rests in faithfulness to daily tasks

"This very moment is the correct time because the past is no longer ours, nor is the future within our power. The present moment is, therefore, the best, the most suitable time and the one which we must use faithfully".

Making use of it "*faithfully*" means adapting oneself constantly and lovingly to the divine will as expressed in events, situations duties, commitments and unforeseen happenings which occur day by day. As St. Francis tells us elsewhere, "in all of these, as in a kernel, is concentrated the seed of eternity".

Holiness in one's daily round in the ordinary or common-place happenings, is what our Saints taught and lived after the example of St. Francis de Sales. Don Caviglia often stressed this aspect of Don Bosco: "This is his ideal and programme of sanctification, or if you prefer, his system of spirituality — that holiness has to be exercised and shown in the occurrences of every day and every minute and in the prayers and practices which one's way of life allows him".²⁴⁵

Holiness in ordinary daily life the characteristic of our saints

Pius XI also expressed this in his audience of May 31st, 1934 for the pupils of the Pius XI Salesian

²⁴⁴ *I Cor* 5, 8.

²⁴⁵ CAVIGLIA Alberto, *Il Magone Michele*, in *Salesianum* XI 3, 464.

Institute. "In Don Bosco's life we have to imitate particularly his heroic fidelity to duty at every moment and in every situation as it cropped up. He was always ready to give of himself to the last meeting, to the latest request. He was ready to give himself to everything and everybody, just as though each thing or person were the only thing, the only person that mattered. . . Now, the fulfilment of duty, whatever it may be, with dedicated promptness, is the basis of every type of holiness".²⁴⁶

Mother Mazzarello followed the same path, so much so that her holiness can be described as "*everyday*" holiness. This has been brought to light by Sr. Lina Dalcerri in her book "*A Soul Led by the Holy Spirit*". Thanks to this, St. Mary Mazzarello was able to transform every moment, all of her life, into a living Gospel, accepting even the most common daily duty as a sacrament of the will of God, living it in the continual freshness of an ever renewed Easter mystery.

All the consequences of her humble life — the tiring work in the vineyards, housework, looking after her young brothers and sisters — all became for her a prolongation of the Mass in which she took part each day in the parish with great intensity and at the cost of personal sacrifice.

Every duty was for her *an appointment with God*. As Maccono has pointed out, her programme was "to do what ordinarily has to be done, but in an extraordinary manner", to be very punctual at all her duties and to do the usual things unusually well, to do them with the greatest perfection possible, because in everything she wished to please God and she found nothing so common that, if done well, could not be offered to Him.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁶ MB XIX 315.

²⁴⁷ MACCONO, *Santa* I 50.

Together with her consecration to God in the religious life and her task of governing the Institute, this programme became the substance of her life and the foundation underlying her work of religious formation.

If we read her life properly, our Saint is always to be seen present at all insignificant and important duties, very observant of the rule, active in work, ready for sacrifice and renunciation, open to obedience, attentive to charity, calm in trials. On account of this, moment by moment, point by point she managed to effect God's project for her.

Everyday holiness
in the teaching
of the Church

It is the ideal of holiness which the Church sanctioned in *Lumen Gentium*: "... all Christians, in the conditions, duties and circumstances of their lives and through all these, will sanctify themselves more and more if they receive all things with faith from the hands of the heavenly Father and cooperate with the divine will, thus showing forth in that temporal service the love with which God loved the world".²⁴⁸

It is the ideal which Paul VI has underlined in many of his speeches, exhorting us not to hide, not to flee, not to evade our duty, but to love it, to fulfill it with energy and love" because "duty is the will of the Father which we proclaim every time we say the prayer Jesus taught us: "Your will be done, as it is in heaven", in the realm of the Blessed and in the Cosmic order, so on earth, by us little creatures, your servants, rather, your children! ... Here duty and love meet, and give meaning to one another, and light a spark which gives meaning to the present and future life".²⁴⁹

It is the ideal that the Church herself has recently

²⁴⁸ LG 41.

²⁴⁹ PAUL VI P.P., General audience, August 9th 1972.

presented to us in the beatification last October 30th of the two saintly catechists, Brother Mutien Marie and Brother Febres Cordero, both De la Salle Brothers.

“They are two authentic catechist and educator saints”, wrote a journalist, “with no legends, no vision, no astounding actions or ecstasies attached...” Their life follows the “pattern of the greater part of mankind” and the message of their holiness lies in “the ordinary run of faith in the ordinary run of life in the service of education, in fidelity to one’s daily round of duties, in the progressive spoliation of self, all in view of a boundless giving to young people...”²⁵⁰

Everyday
holiness

This is what our apostolic and Salesian vocation demands, especially in assistance, which according to Don Bosco, is and must be a continual presence among the girls, sharing their life, knowing their problems, helping them to solve them and supporting them in their difficulties. All this implies a total, joyful giving of ourself moment by moment, with a deep love for souls such as Don Bosco had. Salesian assistance is true education in practise, education which teaches by witnessing, and is therefore, persuasive, convincing and attractive. It teaches how to live the life of faithfulness to duty in a Christian manner. Don Bosco never wearied of giving this lesson to his young people, teaching them by his own living example and sharing their life in the playground, in church, in the study-halls and in the work-shops.

The duty of assistance then, is our “daily holiness” in practice among the girls. However, while it is the means of our sanctification it is, at the same time “the triumph of supernatural charity intent

²⁵⁰ SCAGLIONE G., in *Avvenire*, October 31st 1978.

on defending the life of sanctifying grace in souls, protecting it by means of confidence, preserving and enriching it by means of cheerfulness".²⁵¹

The daily task-
a way of
holiness
for all

Our Saint and the Church urge us to place ourselves on this simple and sure road to holiness. let us set about it, therefore, with courage, and even more, with love. Of course, our daily round is of itself monotonous and can drag us down into a mediocre life of routine. To avoid this danger, *let us strive to live day by day* with a sense of the infinite putting the thought of eternity into everything that we do. A pagan artist once said: "I am painting for eternity". How much more in every undertaking ought we to fix our sights on eternity, and the glory and good pleasure of God.

When faced with things that weigh upon us, let us dispose our souls in that spirit of penance which allows us to accept them in union with the paschal mystery of Christ the Saviour. Considered in this light, in the spirit of our vocation, we shall welcome them joyfully, finding them lighter, pleasant and even desirable.

Let us not look for special roads to holiness, but let us set out with determination along this one which is open to all, the one of "*everyday*" holiness, with that fervour and love which make of the ordinary, the extraordinary.

Today we hear so much about leaders. How many of the Sisters in our houses are *leaders in fidelity to daily duty!* Sisters who for years and years, day in, day out, sometimes from seven a.m. to seven p.m. welcome and follow up the children in the primary school, always patient and ready to offer a good word to their relatives; Sisters who are diligent and silent in the obscurity of a secre-

²⁵¹ Cf PAVANETTI, *Il Sistema* 18-19.

tarial office; sisters who make a daily offering of love to the houses by their invaluable work as bursars, infirmarians, receptionists, telephonists, linenarians, cooks and so forth, and who feel themselves completely and serenely fulfilled in doing the holy will of God. Many of them are saints without the name, without recognition or applause, satisfied that God alone sees them; and they are real builders of peace and well-being in the Community.

I have never forgotten a dear Sister, now in heaven. She used to spend many hours washing and cleaning vegetables and one day, with sincerity shining from her eyes, she remarked to me: "You know I am happier than a queen on her throne". She was a queen on her own way, on that everlasting throne which grace was fashioning for her. God is faithful and communicates His joy and strength to those who are faithful to Him.

Our
Blessed Lady
shining model of
evangelical life

In *Marialis Cultus* Pope Paul VI presents our Lady as very imitable: "She is held up as example to the faithful... for the way in which, in her own life she fully and responsibly accepted the will of God, because she heard the word of God and acted on it and because charity and the spirit of service were the driving force of her actions. She is worthy of imitation because she was the first and most perfect of Christ's disciples".²⁵²

It has been very assuring to me to read in so many of the replies to the February circular that the Sisters stress *imitation of our Lady* and think of her as Help of Christians, first and foremost in assisting them to become more like her. I thank God for it, also because the numerous letters I received are evidence of just how much love there

²⁵² MC 35.

is in the Institute for our Lady. The replies are very realistic and practical for our religious life as consecrated apostles.

I should like to thank one by one the Sisters who wrote, but since there are so many, I am taking this opportunity of thanking you all, a thanks which I shall repeat, please God, on May 24th in Turin, where I hope to spend several hours in prayer before the painting in the Basilica. Among the things I will ask our Lady on behalf of my Sisters will be this: that each one may learn to read the picture well and know how to rediscover in it the features that Don Bosco gave us when he called us Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. The picture reminds us that "by living our vocation we imitate Mary most Holy who loved Christ and the Church with total dedication".²⁵³

While gazing at the top of the painting, where we contemplate Mary's relationship with the Blessed Trinity, our confidence will be renewed and the *Magnificat* will spring spontaneously to our lips. Then on looking at her, Mother and Queen among the Apostles, the prayer: "O Mary, most powerful Virgin" will rise from our hearts, while we shall feel the necessity of making our own the '*Da mihi animas*' of Don Bosco when we turn our eyes to the bottom of the canvas, where we find the Congregation a vital part of the Church represented in the Basilica.

The painting, in fact, portrays our Lady as the perfect contemplative of the infinite grandeur of God and also as the dynamic Apostle who cooperates with motherly love in the salvific mystery of the Church. These too, are the traits of the FMA, always contemplative, in the church, in the play-

²⁵³ C 1975 9.

ground, in the furrow of daily duty and yet a dynamic apostle, always seeking the best way of living the *da mihi animas*:

How many, many things we can learn from the picture in the Basilica, and how I should like to be sure that every single one of our houses has this picture either in chapel or in some other part of the house.

May our living faith and daughterly love give it meaning in our lives! Perhaps we shall take a long time to gather all the theological, ecclesial and Salesian richness that Don Bosco put into it in such abundance but every examination of it will bring home to us ever more deeply the characteristic lineaments of our identity as Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

The *Biographical Memoirs* Vol. VIII, Chap V, or Don Ricaldone's book, *Maria Ausiliatrice* in the chapter entitled *Il Grande Quadro*, will help you to penetrate the heart of Don Bosco and discover his thoughts and ideas behind it.

(Cir. n. 613 - April 24 1978)

The narrow way, the way to sanctity

The Gospel story of the rich young man offers food for meditation. Jesus looked at him, and revealed to him the surest way to follow him but the young man "went away sad because he had much wealth".²⁵⁴

Jesus continues to fix His gaze of love on each of us who had chosen Him definitively, and every day continues to indicate to us the sure means of making our "*Sequela Christi*" more effective and stable.

²⁵⁴ Mt 19, 22.

Jesus says: "He who would come after me must renounce himself, take up his cross daily and follow me".²⁵⁵ And St. Paul reminds us: "Christ has loved us and delivered himself for us".²⁵⁶ Therefore, *Sequela Christi* is synonymous with renunciation, abnegation, sacrifice after the example of our Divine Master.

The "Sequela Christi" is love which sacrifices self

In the rite of our religious profession, after receiving the crucifixes, we formerly prayed: "Good Jesus, dear Saviour of my soul who has died for me, I embrace your cross, and promise to keep it henceforth, as my most precious ornament and comfort...".

Today, the Church, by inserting the rite of profession in the Holy Mass, gives our consecration its full significance, uniting our total gift to God with the Eucharistic Sacrifice of Jesus, to the paschal mystery of his passion death and resurrection.

The religious life, one may say, flows out from the sacrifice of the Mass and is realised, day by day, in the total gift of ourselves to God and our neighbour, thus perpetuating itself in the mass of our lives.

Abnegation unifies interior life

"You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our hearts are ever restless till they rest in Thee",²⁵⁷ St. Augustine wrote in his *Confessions*. The repose of the heart, true peace, is found only in God. It does not come from the success of our undertakings, nor from the result of our works, nor from human approval and appreciation, nor yet from our fulfilled desires: it does not come from without but from interior peace, which is the fruit of order and unity. This order and unity are reached solely by self-control and abnegation.

²⁵⁵ Lk 9, 23.

²⁵⁶ Cf Eph 5, 2.

²⁵⁷ St. AUGUSTINE, *Confessions* I, 1.

Abnegation causes the props on which we frequently lean in search of human security to fall away, and helps us to build solidly from within. By means of it our tendencies, gradually brought under control, converge at the centre of our religious life, which is "God supremely loved"²⁵⁸ and then we live our consecration in fulness and unity.

In the *CLAR* document "*Life according to the Spirit*", it is stated that in the consumer world of today, the ascent to the supernatural has been somewhat set aside, and it has been shown "that in asceticism there is a going forward in the perfection and integration of one's existence". It is through abnegation that man subjects everything to the invitation of the Spirit which demands of him kindness, goodness, meekness and temperance. The Holy Father in *Evangelico Testificatio* reminds us "of the degree of renunciation demanded by the practice of the religious life". He concludes: "Religious tend to sanctity by a narrower path. In the midst of these greater or lesser troubles your interior fervour enables you to recognise the cross of Christ and helps you to welcome it with faith and love".²⁵⁹

Permanent
abnegation

The heavenly Father has called us, through the religious life, to be more conformed to Jesus Christ, who, from Bethlehem to Calvary, offered Himself to Him as a perfect holocaust. In the religious life, therefore, abnegation has a permanent place and character: it accompanies it and qualifies it in all its dimensions.

It is a question of accepting our daily crosses, of employing all our ability in doing our duty well,

²⁵⁸ *LG* 44.

²⁵⁹ *ET* 30.

of feeling the need also of doing penance for others.

The Church, in the Apostolic Constitution *Paenitentini*²⁶⁰ “invites all to accompany the entire conversion of the spirit with the voluntary exercise of the exterior practice of penance”. The invitation is most suited to this lenten season of penance, which should be distinguished as the time of conversion and penance. Let us welcome it and strive to live it intensely as a preparation for the approaching paschal mystery.

Our Saints,
faithful disciples
of the cross

Our Saints too have been true, courageous, disciples at the school of the cross. They lived it and taught it.

The life of our holy founder and father is all a sequence of trials from childhood to death which he faced courageously, sustained only by his great faith. Confronted with his example of total immolation of self for the glory of God, we cannot do less than receive with generous love the programme he left us in the letter of 1886: “...to me it seems that the Institute has need of sisters formed in the spirit of mortification and sacrifice, who greatly desire to work and suffer for Jesus Christ and for the salvation of their neighbour; (...) of Sisters, who have no other ambition on earth than to follow Jesus Christ, humiliated, crowned with thorns and nailed to the Cross; in order to surround Him exalted in heaven, robed in glory among the splendours of the angels and saints...”²⁶¹

And our Saintly Mother Mazzarello lived fully throughout her life the teaching left us in a concrete way by the example of the Crucified.

²⁶⁰ *Paen* 3.

²⁶¹ *DB L* 24 may 1886.

Indicating the figure of Christ she said to the Sisters: "he here", and then turning it over: "and we here", In these incisive words there is a whole lesson in renunciation and mortification: there is the "*being crucified with*" of which St. Paul speaks. Today, in a world which is ever more conscious of created values and of the abilities of man, the Daughter of Mary help of Christians in a vision of faith centred on love will esteem abnegation as:

— A means of raising human life, Christian and religious, to its full potential.

— A means of truly loving God and neighbour in a way free from egoism.

— A fuller insertion in the mystery of Christ which is the Paschal mystery prepared for by Good Friday.

The Daughter of Mary Help of Christians, who does not consider abnegation as a participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (that is a dying to rise triumphant) does not understand that abnegation is the maturing of the person on a human and christian level".

May our holy Founder be able to repeat of our Communities what he said in 1886: "That which consoles me is the way in which the members are acquiring the true spirit of the Congregation; I see realised that ideal that I had set before me when it was a question of gathering individuals together who would help me to work for the glory of God. I see in general a spirit of heroic unselfishness, a spirit of abnegation of self-will, an obedience which is touching".²⁶²

Abnegation
gladdens and
enriches our
mission

The "*diving daily*"²⁶³ does not make us sad. Freeing ourselves from the slavery which is in us, we

²⁶² MB XII 77-78.

²⁶³ Cf 1 Cor 15, 3.

are able to taste paschal joys. The experience that our good will, sustained by grace often gives us victory, where formerly with resignation we had said: "I won't succeed", brings us unexpected joys and urges us to become ever more docile to the promptings of the Spirit.

Besides, abnegation makes us more suited to our specific mission as educators. "The educator", Don Bosco tells us, "is an individual entirely dedicated to the good of his pupils; therefore, he must be ready to face every inconvenience, every fatigue to accomplish his end which is the civil, moral, and scientific education of his pupils".²⁶⁴

Now this dedication requires interior freedom, self-forgetfulness, complete selfgiving.

For us, Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, the area of abnegation is above all, in the carrying out of the Preventive Method, and in particular, of Salesian assistance. Assistance, in the true spirit of Don Bosco, is the best and most authentic expression of abnegation.

"Assistance is our asceticism: that is, the meaning of discipline, purification, sanctification. (...) In fact, our educative system, conscientiously applied... demands a regime of real mortification, of radical detachment, of rigid asceticism.

What, in effect, does it impose? We all know it. First of all the crucifying law of vigilance without respite, (...) Truly in this vigilant presence is grafted the most exacting and most difficult renunciation for the Salesian educator, because her task and her responsibility oblige her to fight incessantly against laziness, routine, the temptation of evasion, the fear of inconvenience and annoyance, seeking of self and of one's own comfort, in a

word, a fight against all that goes to make up an easy, placid comfortable life".²⁶⁵

But this assistance is also the joy of the Daughter of Mary Help of Christians, who finds perfect self-fulfilment in her vocation of total dedication to youth.

May our Lady help us to understand ever better and embrace ever more generously the obligations of our consecrated lives, through her loving fidelity to the very end — Calvary.

(Cir. n. 571 - March 24 1974)

²⁶⁵ DALCERRI Lina, *Assistenza e Sanità Salesiana*, in *Atti del Convegno Nazionale Italiano Direttrici-Assistenti* (Torino, FMA 1961) 304-306.

Chapter VI

OUR INSERTION IN CHRIST THROUGH THE RELIGIOUS VOWS

Mother Ersilia, while speaking frequently of the religious life, does not really give us a full treatise on the vows. However, she has meaningful touches here and there that throw light on the power and value of our radical choice of God and on our total dedication to Him by means of an active and attentive presence among the girls.

As the centenary of the death of Mother Mazzarello approaches, she presents to us in our Saint the ideal from which to draw inspiration for our insertion in Christ chaste, poor and obedient, to realise, as she did, in fidelity to our charism, our vocation as FMA.

Mother dwells particularly on the vow of chastity, the charismatic character of which, distinctive for our Institute, she brings into relief.

Poverty she presents as a liberating force and as a participation in the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection.

She doesn't linger on obedience, possibly because reminders of this virtue emerge boldly and convincingly from the example of Mother Mazzarello.

Religious consecration: plenitude of love

On August 5th (1980) I am sure that the thoughts and fervent prayers of all were turned to our novitiates and houses of formation where young Sisters from many parts of the world became members of our religious family, thus repeating in the name of Mary the event that first took place on August 5th, 1872.

The foundation of the Institute came into being with the formal declaration of the vows of Chastity, Poverty and Obedience, made before the altar and received by the Church in the person of the bishop, Mons. Sciandra, assisted by the holy founder, Don Bosco.

It was for our first Sisters the beginning of a new life, one that Vatican II defines clearly in these words: "Members of each Institute should recall first of all that by professing the evangelical counsels they responded to a divine call so that being not only dead to sin but also renouncing the world they may live for God alone. They have dedicated their entire lives to His service. This constitutes a special consecration, which is deeply rooted in that of Baptism and expresses it more fully".¹

Our saintly Mother knew how to penetrate to the very heart the gravity of this contract. She fully understood all its consequences, she was ready to see and embrace all that it demanded.

Christ the aim
and measure
of life

It was the same awareness to which all consecrated souls were recalled by our present Holy Father at the beginning of this year (1980). "Renew in yourselves, therefore, the awareness and joy of your state as consecrated persons; Christ must be the

¹ PC 5.

aim and measure of your lives. Your vocation had its origin in the meeting with Him: faith in Him determined the 'Yes' of your commitment, the hope of His help now supports its persevering fulfilment, the love that He has lit in your heart nourishes the enthusiasm necessary for overcoming inevitable difficulties, and for the daily renewal of your offering".²

Mother Mazzarello understood that the threefold bond of the vows constitutes the very essence of religious life. Christ becomes in the words of Pope Paul VI: "The purpose and aim of life, which in this way becomes characterised by the fulness of love, because the vows that bind us to God, far from restricting the personality, liberate it from every imperfection, every impediment, even natural and legitimate, to the one highest, fullest love of God".³

Dangers that
undermine
consecrated life

The example and teaching of our holy Mother will help us to overcome the dangers that today undermine the very essence of Consecrated life, dangers that our Holy Father so clearly warns us against: "But there are not lacking, either, examples of confusion with regard to the very essence of consecrated life and one's own charism. Sometimes prayer is abandoned and it is replaced by action; the vows are interpreted according to the secularising mentality which dulls the religious motivations of one's own state; community life is abandoned with a certain irresponsibility; socio-political attitudes are adopted as the real aim to pursue... Beloved Sisters, never forget to maintain a clear concept of the value of your consecrated life. For this you need a deep vision of faith, which is nourished and

² JOHN PAUL II P.P., *ai fratelli religiosi degli Istituti clericali di Roma*, Jan. 12th, 1980.

³ PAUL VI P.P., *all'Unione delle Superiore Maggiori d'Italia*, Jan 12th 1968.

preserved by prayer. This faith will enable you to overcome all uncertainty with regard to your own identity, and will keep you faithful to that vertical dimension which is essential for you in order to identify with Christ according to the spirit of the Beatitudes, and in order to be true witnesses to the kingdom of God for men in the modern world".⁴

May these authoritative words of the Holy Father enlighten us and spur us on in generous fidelity to our consecration.

(Cir. n. 640 - September 24 1980)

Chastity, Poverty, Obedience in the life of Mother Mazzarello

The vows -
an admirable gift
to God

The religious Consecration made this fullness of love brim over in Mother Mazzarello; she belonged completely to God and desired to live only through Him and with Him.

She looked upon the vows not as a renunciation but as a total gift of herself to God, nay, more, as an incomparable gift of God to her. From the moment of her profession until her death the most diligent and compulsive fidelity to the vows became the vital concern of her life.

Chastity

Chastity, which, according to the mind of Don Bosco, "should be cultivated in an eminent degree by the FMA in view of their delicate mission among the young", was apparent in Mother Mazzarello in a striking way.

Many witnesses confirm this. Mother Daghero testifies: "Her demeanour, her look, her words revealed

⁴ JOHN PAUL II P.P., *to religious sisters*, Mexico 27th Jan. 1979.

the extraordinary love she had for the virtue of purity. In her conferences to the Sisters and girls she sought always to inculcate the necessity of being pure in thought, word and deed in order to be pleasing to God".⁵

And Mons. Costamagna categorically affirms: "She was a fragrant lily of virginal purity".⁶

Poverty

Her whole life was admirable testimony of *evangelical poverty*, in all its fullness and its demands, reaching its peak in the early days of religious life at Mornese.

Mother Emilia Mosca testifies to this: "There was extreme poverty in the house of Mornese: the food was scanty and of poor quality, work was hard, it was difficult to earn enough for our daily bread and provide for other needs".⁷

What sorrow filled her motherly heart when they reached the point of not having a crust of bread for their supper. That evening Mother Mazzarello was seen to cry, not for herself but for her Sisters. A Sister attests: "She not only accepted privations, she coveted them. Her little room was furnished with the bare necessities: a small bed without a mattress and a little chair; she didn't even have a table or desk for her use and when she had to write letters she looked for a room where there was one".⁸

Another Sister relates: "She wore the most thread-bare habit as if she were the last in the house; I remember seeing her in a habit that had been

⁵ MACCONO, *Santa* II 231.

⁶ *Do* 233.

⁷ MACCONO F., *Lo spirito e le virtù di S. Maria D. Mazzarello*, (Torino, FMA 1958) 287.

⁸ *Do* 290.

re-dyed and a veil and cape darned by her own hands".⁹

Added to this material poverty was her poverty of spirit as seen in her detachment, her humility, her joyful acceptance of her scanty culture, her humble social background, her limitations, all of which she openly admitted.

Her spiritual testament at the end of her life was an entreaty not to lose the spirit of poverty: "...Up to now we have been poor and have often felt the consequences of poverty... but we have not, on this account, been less willing to work.

... Now our work is spreading, it will reach even greater proportions... Gradually this will bring about changes in the life of the FMA. I will no longer be with you; little things will improve... You will enjoy the comforts of a prosperous family... you will have all that is necessary and much that is merely useful. But, for pity's sake, my daughters, for pity's sake, God forbid that these comforts should bring about the loss of good spirit among you, the spirit of Don Bosco, the spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ.

... Even among the comforts that the Congregation will provide, be poor, poor in spirit, using well what is given without attaching yourself to anything, using these means but at the same time being ready to leave them ... use them in the spirit of one who is ready to suffer the consequences of having to be without them.

I beg you, even in the midst of these aids, to love and practise poverty".¹⁰

Obedience

No less assiduous and perfect was her observance of **Obedience**. She had ever before her the obe-

⁹ Do 290-291.

¹⁰ MACCONO, *Santa* II 138-139.

dience of Christ who "had learned obedience through suffering".¹¹ To model herself on Him was her aim.

She saw in the orders and recommendations of Don Bosco and of the various directors at Mornese the expression of God's will and she followed them readily in search for true liberty of spirit. It was said of her by the Sisters that (obedience) made her fly rather than walk. She wanted to be dependent even in things that were of free choice in order to be more pleasing to God and she used to repeat that holy obedience is the most perfect, the most meritorious and the most pleasing act in the sight of God".¹²

Mons. Costamagna continues: "As for obedience, she was perfect. A word, a hint, the slightest wish, not only of Don Bosco but also of the local director, was law for her to be put into practice immediately... so that she herself and all the others could obey cheerfully and promptly".¹³ She used to recommend: "Our obedience should not be merely external, but should lead us to submit even our judgment to the one who commands. If we obey exteriorly only, the Superior will be satisfied, but before God such obedience loses much of its value".¹⁴

Her obedience truly conformed to that of Christ. "It seemed to me that obedience came naturally to her and that she didn't find any difficulty in it; I learned later that she had a hard struggle to overcome herself and submit her judgment to that of others". Such is the testimony of one of the Sisters.¹⁵ She also learned to obey through suffering.

We have before us then, the picture of our Saint as

¹¹ *Heb* 5, 8.

¹² MACCONO, *Santa* II 218.

¹³ MACCONO, *Lo spirito* 305.

¹⁴ *Do* 307.

¹⁵ MACCONO, *Santa* II 218-219.

the perfect religious who lived her consecration fully and who today repeats to us the recommendation that she gave her daughters at St. Cyr in October 1880: "My dear Sisters, endeavour always to obey promptly and to be detached from yourselves and your own satisfaction in everything.

Remember the three vows that you made with so much eagerness and often ask yourself how you observe them".¹⁶

(*Cir.* n. 640 - September 24 1980)

Primacy of Chastity

Chastity -
the distinctive
mark of our
Institute

We know how our father, Don Bosco, made chastity the distinctive mark of his sons and daughters: "The thing which must distinguish us from others, the mark of our Congregation is the virtue of chastity. Let us all endeavour to possess this virtue to perfection and to inculcate and plant it in the hearts of others.

(...) If we have this virtue we shall be sure of walking on the right path... and winning the immortal prize of our heavenly homeland and complete happiness... this will be the triumph of the Congregation and its way of thanking God for His many favours".¹⁷

In sermons, conferences, good-nights and in his numerous writings, Don Bosco continually exalts the beauty and excellence of this virtue and urges everyone to foster it: "We must possess and practise it and make it shine out in everything we do or say".¹⁸

¹⁶ *MM L* 49, 5.

¹⁷ *MB XII* 224-225.

¹⁸ *MB X* 1105.

Among the reasons he gives for so doing, there are two in particular which concern us first as consecrated souls, then as those called to the apostolate.

1. "With this virtue the Religious achieves his aim of being entirely consecrated to God".¹⁹

2. "Chastity is necessary for everyone but especially for those dedicated to the young".²⁰ The reason is as stated in the Constitutions, that the specific mission among the young "*demands a total detachment from everything that is not God*".

His reminders, recommendations and exhortations were most effective because chastity emanated from his countenance and whole demeanour. Canon Balesio, among many others attests: "Not only his words, but his presence and still more a look or smile from him, inspired love for this virtue which was in our view, one of the most splendid ornaments of the Servant of God".²¹

Allow me to quote some expressions used by Rev. Fr. Javierre, Professor of the Salesian Pontifical Atheneum, on the occasion of Don Bosco's feastday: "Some people think that Don Bosco was inexact in insisting on the primacy of chastity.

An educator of Don Bosco's stature, gifted with his deep insight knows that chastity must be first in our educative work because it responds radically to the problems of young people today.

Vatican II, wishing to focus on the pastoral activity of religious, while on the one hand, affirms that the poverty of the Church must be the *standard* raised in front of the world, when it speaks to religious and says that they too must be *signs*, reverses the order of the vows, putting chastity first.

¹⁹ MB XIII 799.

²⁰ MB IX 705.

²¹ MB V 167.

So Don Bosco, in perfect accord with the Council, is, among other things, amazingly modern, because he has given us as a special characteristic 'the primacy of chastity'.

Vatican II and the Salesian Congregation are in perfect harmony because both have reflected on a common basis: a pastoral basis. The Council reached the same conclusions which Don Bosco, pastor of young souls, reached in anticipation through intuition and careful thought".

Characteristic
message of the
Institute

If we immerse ourselves in these elevating and consoling thoughts we shall certainly grow more aware and convinced that the characteristic message of our Institute *is a message of purity.*

But if this message is to attract souls it must first be lived by us as it was by our father, Don Bosco, in the spirit in which he presents it to us in the Rule, namely as "an outstanding gift of divine grace" which "consecrates us with undivided heart to the total love of God",²² in "detachment" from everything other than God, in "great purity of heart", manner, behaviour and speech so that we are among the young "as a tangible, clear sign of God's love".²³

This message of purity is more necessary than ever today when pitfalls abound on every side to make young people lose their virtue. Let us make sure that our houses breathe this air of purity which our girls can inhale on entering, may grow to love and feel impelled to live in a world so different from the one they are forced to live in and strengthen themselves against all the attractions of evil.

The family spirit proper to our educative system when lived to the full will help us to guard and foster chastity,²⁴ for the girls it will also be, after

²² C 1969 10.

²³ C 1969 11.

²⁴ Cf C 1969 14.

the grace of the Sacraments, their greatest aid to a life of that purity which is the source of true and lasting joy. Above all, that '*atmosphere of supernatural certitudes*' which we shall create in the houses will be of great assistance.

We must aim at this and direct all our efforts to this end, rather than make a lot of recommendations and rules which girls today find more and more distasteful.

The Baptismal
consecration

First among these wonderful '*supernatural certitudes*' to be passed on to our girls is our baptismal consecration. No argument will be as deep or as valid in stimulating to perfect purity as the conviction that through Baptism God has taken up His abode in us and *we have become temples of God*. If the girls are convinced of the dignity which Baptism imparts to their bodies, Christian behaviour and dress will become more natural for them. This full consciousness of their Christian character will lead them to make choices conformed to their dignity as children of God in reading, television and cinema shows, companions and all the circumstances of their daily life.

I should like to propose to you, therefore, that '*a Baptism Day*' should be celebrated in every house on a suitable day before the school year ends. I urge you to prepare very well for this, so that it may produce the desired fruits. I recommend a deeper study of the meaning of the baptismal consecration and its marvellous riches, all of which is contained in the new baptismal rite.

There can be all sorts of initiatives, which I leave to the ingenuity of those who wish to be animators of the idea in each house. I should be very pleased to get an account of what you do and the most interesting and significant could be made known to all.

However, that which we should have most at heart

is the effect of the initiatives; it should be a greater consciousness of the presence of God in us and the offering to Him, as a homage of love the gift of complete purity, safeguarded and intensified by concrete, practical resolutions.

(Cir. n. 537 - March 24 1971)

Constructive and apostolic power of chastity

I will not delay over the various ways in which the Institute contributes to evangelization and to social betterment of the underprivileged; I will merely outline the specific style which everyone of us must possess to have the guarantee of being on the line willed by the Church according to the special charism of Don Bosco.

— We shall see, that is, the necessity the fascinating attractiveness, the constructive force *which purity injects into our pastoral activity.*

Theological
foundation
of chastity

“We could be asked — said Don Antonio Javierre, when preaching the retreat of the Chapter — why Don Bosco gave so much importance to the virtue of Chastity. The answer takes us to the theological depth of the question.

The Religious Vows are symbols of the trinitarian mystery. That which signifies the virginal fecundity of the Father's love is chastity. The primacy given to it by Don Bosco is far from being arbitrary.

The decision of Don Bosco meets perfectly the perennial requirements of his educative, formative mission among the poorest young people in society. The physically and spiritually orphaned need a father. But the educator will be that as a sign of the Father who is in heaven, with a gratuitous love, total preventive and *pure*, which is that of God the Father.

Don Bosco's message of purity continues to be fully relevant in the world of today.

The Preventive System is based on love and draws inspiration from that of the Father; it is virginal, without a shadow of egoism, without the satisfaction of personal passion as a compensation.

"The Preventive system is at the root of all our spirituality. Not a prevention understood in a mathematical sense, but with that touch of delicacy of which St. Paul speaks in treating of preventive love.

It is that ideal of Don Bosco which we must aim at today more than ever, to respond to a need of our up-dated spirituality in one of its most transparent vertices".²⁵

Our specific style

This is the specific style that the FMA must update in our work of evangelization: *to aim decisively at the transparent vertices of love.*

"Virginal love, strengthened by consecration is a source of profound communion in the Spirit. This helps us to live our chastity joyfully, and commits us to confidence, and the fraternal gift of self in the characteristic sensitivity proper to women".²⁶ To choose chastity for the sake of the kingdom is to have at heart as permanent programme the command of Jesus : "Love one another as I have loved you", a command which is at once a gift, a participation in the charity of Christ, a paschal event, an anticipated transfiguration which is being brought about in us.

To live in chastity for the kingdom of God is to live so possessed of His Spirit as to be invested with it in mind, heart and body; it is to acquire

²⁵ JAVIERRE-ORTAS A.M., *Cristo Parola e Parola di Cristo* (Roma, FMA 1975) 258-259.

²⁶ C 1975.

an interior purity and penetration which makes one see and love all things and people in God.

Not 'angelism'
but enrichment
of humanity

pating in the humanity of Christ, becomes richer, pating in the Humanity of Christ, becomes more rich, more secure, more ready to see and comprehend the needs of others, and to intervene so as to relieve and help. "It is, in fact", the Holy Father tells us "not only not to close the windows of our cells on the world but to open them so as to pour out in a charity which sublimates and gives itself in the service of others and in the sacrifice of self, and which makes virginity the incomparable source of evangelic holiness, which ensures in the Christian economy the hierarchical primacy of love".²⁷

Chaste love is an upward path. Was it not so for Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello? Their human contact became a ladder to climb to God. That which most surprised and conquered in Don Bosco was the mysterious, fascinating power of his purity. "It was like the vivifying smile of God, over the sadness of the world's sin".

Constructive
force of
chastity

Purity, in fact, is the splendour of energy. There is no Sister more delicate and I would say, more affectionate to her neighbour than she who has reached the transparent vertices of love. Detached from self, available to others, she embraces in an ever wider dimension of charity the needs of the Sisters who live beside her, of the child or the young girl confided to her care, the problems of her community, of the local Church, of the region; she does not attach herself to an individual person, but having become the transparency of trinitarian love, she loves all creatures, because in all she finds the reflection of God.

²⁷ PAUL VI P.P., nella festa della Presentazione del Signore, 2nd feb. 1976.

The Holy Spirit, who is active today as in the early Church in every evangelizer who allows himself to be possessed and guided by Him, suggests to him words and deeds which of himself he could not perform.²⁸

It is the Holy Spirit who gives to the pure soul that dignified, warm, serene, youthful love, even in advanced years, which is expressed in many little ways, simple and spontaneous, a service rendered in a patient, attentive listening, a delicate simplicity in passing over what might hurt or be less than correct and in bringing to light instead what might be edifying or appreciated. And it is still the Holy Spirit who gives discernment for our positive contribution to pastoral work willed by the Church and studied and set in relief by the Capitular Commissions.

But while the Holy Spirit urges us to an ever greater collaboration with the forces of Catholic Action to be a ferment for good in earthly realities this divine Spirit admonishes us and forbids us, precisely in fidelity to our vow of chastity, to assume behaviour not in keeping with our consecrated life.

Signs of heavenly goods

The consciousness of our belonging entirely to God makes us "*signs of heavenly good*", matures in us a balanced expression of our womanhood and gives us that dignity of manner, of conduct and language which have always been characteristic of us and which takes nothing from the spontaneity and cordiality of mutual relations.

While being simple and serene we cannot subject ourselves to certain forms of behaviour which would be detrimental to our identity.

To know how to say "NO" with decisive, willed detachment is coherence, is strong, mature love.

²⁸ Cf EN 75.

Certain ways of gesticulating, speaking, dressing, treating with people cannot be called spontaneous, but are unbecoming and are by no means suited to religious.

It is not an exaggerated fear that makes me speak. He who truly loves knows how to be faithful in little things, and the repeated testimony of lay people persuades us that from the Sister who has never aped the laity, but knows how to collaborate with them in an open serene manifestation of her religious consecration they have drawn richness for their Christian and apostolic life.

“Our zeal for evangelization”, Pope Paul says “must flow from true sanctity of life”. Without this counter-signature of sanctity, our words will never open up the path to the heart of the man of our day, but rather run the risk of being vain and unfruitful.²⁹ The Sister who evangelises would lose her efficacy were she to wander from those transparent vertices to which her whole life and love should tend.

Personal and
community
review

Let us, dear Sisters, add to the community initiatives which we will undertake for Lent, a personal and community *check up* on our practice of chastity. First of all, an examination of our way of loving, disinterested, generous, loving all indiscriminately, beginning with the Sisters near us, then the less gifted pupils, those materially and spiritually poor. Then a check on the self-control of our expressions: could there be in them some discord with the dignity of chastity?

Could not an excessive confidence in our maturity have exposed us rashly to some danger?

Would it not be useful and necessary to examine

²⁹ EN 76.

our conscience also on the education to purity which we should give to our girls?

And in this verification will it not come spontaneously to us to detach ourselves, in a Spirit of lenten penance, from little or big things of a worldly nature which we so easily justify as necessary for the apostolate and which instead, prevent that freedom which the heart needs so as to love our young girls with full dedication and efficacy?

Some days ago a dear Sister, coming from a country where the house and all they owned has been taken from them, said to me: "I was preoccupied with so many useless things! Now we have nothing, but my heart is more free to love God, and stronger to suffer and to give myself as much as possible to all. And I am really happy!".

Dignity,
sincere joy

Our Holy Father, Paul VI, said in the memorable audience of July 15th, 1972: "We have always noticed a dignified joy on the faces of the FMA".

Is this *dignified joy* not the spontaneous fruit of a heart that is pure, free, all for God, from whom it receives uplift of sentiment and nobility of behaviour?

Under every sky, in every country may this *dignified joy* continue to be our specific style of life and evangelization, and may Mary, *Mother Most Pure, Cause of our Joy*, render it fruitful through her maternal intercession.

(Cir. n. 589 - February 24 1976)

Chastity in the light of Mary

Let us fix our eyes on Mary, the Immaculate (...) the all pure and holy, the full of grace.

Mary - model
of genuine, pure
rich womanhood

The liturgical feast which we are about to celebrate invites us to contemplate her under this aspect and to make of her not only the object of our prayer

and meditation but to look on her as the model of consecrated life and to present her to our girls as the incarnation of that ideal which expresses all that is truest, purest and richest in woman.

Our Lady is immaculate, not only through absence of sin, but because of her fulness of grace and hence of divine life, through which everything in her achieves perfection, from natural qualities to supernatural gifts.

We should keep her before us and present her to the girls in this light.

This is a duty which is more pressing today than ever.

Unfortunately, we live in a society — as the Holy Father sadly revealed in his discourse of October 1st — subjected to profanity, secularization and amorality — more so, perhaps, than ever before. One is urged “to let oneself be absorbed by the mentality of the social and temporal environment”, to let oneself be capsized by “changes and downgradings with conformist zeal and in a so-called progressive spirit which could hardly be called christian, let alone apostolic -and all of which could be described by the words ‘shameless permissiveness’.

Crusade against
the “pressure”
of amorality

We are in the happy position of being able to engage in a crusade to off-set this pressure by using every means to lead our girls to avoid all kinds of dress and behaviour which goes against the Christian dignity of woman with a sense of co-responsibility in the holy Church of God. Our Saints would deplore any betrayal of that message of purity which they have left us as Christian educators of the young.

Any regrettable “consent” on our part in this field would seem to the girls like a justification of their conduct, and therefore what a responsibility that would place on our shoulders!

The atmosphere in the Oratory of Valdocco in Don Bosco's time was one of purity which pervaded and attracted souls: Don Bosco himself confided to Don Barberis: "How many there are who preserved their baptismal innocence and here in the Oratory continue to preserve it, even while at the dangerous period! There are many, too, who change completely when they come here after falling victims to the devil several times before their arrival. It seems indeed that they are entering a different atmosphere altogether".³⁰

This is the atmosphere we must create and guard in our houses if we want God's blessing on our works, if we want to be the apostles whom the Church needs, especially now, if we want to increase the number of vocations direly needed by our Institute.

Let us listen again to the stirring words of the Pope as he puts us on our guard against thinking "that a dignified and frank defence of the Catholic press, of decent shows and fashions hides a complex pretext of inferiority" and let us form our girls to shake off "that human respect which fights, shy of being in any way different from others in ideas and way of life".³¹

This is truly the best way of asserting that "*personality*" so much talked of today and at which the young people so eagerly aim. It is precisely the training of the *Christian personality* which we must constantly make our goal in our educational work if we want to say that we are truly daughters of Don Bosco.

Enlightened by the Gospel, the Church and the teaching and example of our Saints let us see the totality of each child and girl we are educating:

³⁰ MB XIII 888.

³¹ PAUL VI P.P., General audience, October 1st, 1969.

body, soul and grace. This vision will lead us to discover more deeply the dignity of the human person which is the basis of a true harmonious education in purity, by which every thing, exterior behaviour and interior attitude reflects the beauty of a soul in grace.

How well our Saintly Founder and Father understood this and never grew tired reminding his collaborators: "Are they (the boys) not the dearly loved sons of the King of Kings?"³²

Personal and
community work

Our personal and community work for this month in the light of our Lady Immaculate will be:

1. To study and meditate privately and in community on Chapter 8 *Lumen Gentium* so as to refill our minds and spirit with the interior beauty of the Madonna;
2. To examine together and see whether, in our religious life, everything is indeed hallmarked by the noble serene behaviour of one consecrated to God.
3. To study and make known initiatives for a campaign to promote the right Christian values in dress, in reading in entertainment etc.

May our Lady Immaculate turn to us in her glory and help us to understand that there can be no complete consecration to God without complete virginal purity, because purity is love and that it is the beatitude of purity which will enable us to see God and so unites us to Him more intimately in prayer.

(Cir. n. 522 - November 24 1969)

³² MB X 1081-1082.

Chastity, our charismatic distinctive

The recurrence of the lovely feast of the Immaculate renews our joy every year with the remembrance that the Salesian Congregation came into being in the light of Mary's purity. Our Lady wanted to show us that this is the light that must mark our spiritual journey and the fruitful dynamism of our apostolate.

On December 8th last year [1978] in the Basilica of St. Mary Major, when Pope John Paul II concluded his homily by entrusting himself and the whole Church "to her, in whom the tremendous victory of good over evil, of grace over sin is achieved" he exclaimed: "I am all yours, O Mary, and all that I have is yours. Be my guide in all things".

With his motto "*Totus Tuus*", he gives us an example of a life lived totally with Mary. It brings to mind the words of Mama Margherita to Don Bosco: "Belong entirely to our Lady", words which were confirmed by Don Costamagna: "Don Bosco has always been all for Mary and Mary was always all for Don Bosco".

Let us remember too, the innocent figure of Dominic Savio, who on Don Bosco's advice consecrated himself totally to Mary: "O Mary, I give you my heart. Grant that it may be yours for ever!". And Laura Vicuña who drew light, comfort and courage from our Lady in the difficult trials she underwent and affirmed: "I want to belong to you and to Jesus".

Grace,
transforming
energy for
Don Bosco

Don Bosco, who knew and understood human weakness and the cunning of the devil so well, insisted that people put themselves and all they had, especially the treasure of divine grace which safeguards every virtue, into the hands of Mary

most holy, so that she, the Virgin, Help of Christians, with her wisdom and power might be the anchor of salvation for all.

He did not like indulging in the analysis of weakness or failure. As soon as he had grasped the negative reality present in a soul, he concentrated decisively on the positive aspect of grace, on its transforming and divinizing power.

Many times in the course of his priestly- educational mission he had experienced how grace has power over and above purely natural means.

His pedagogy is founded above all on the work that grace achieves in the soul. Therefore, he did not allow himself to be influenced by naturalistic pedagogical trends that already in his day tended to condition educators and young people.

He would never adapt Christianity to fashionable trends and penetrated the reality of his time with the sole motive of adapting this reality to the Gospel and preaching to everyone the inestimable value of grace.

For Don Bosco the presence of grace and its salvific action is everything; its loss through sin is the greatest misfortune.

Because of this Cardinal Alimonda called him "*the one who brought the divine into the century*"; but he wanted his sons and daughters, called to continue his charism in the Church, to bring the divine into our own times and environment. He calls everyone to be an apostle for the triumph of the life of grace, especially by means of the sacraments.

Only by responding to this invitation and putting it into effect shall we be sure of reviving the climate of shining purity and contagious joy which has made and still does make many of our houses into real training grounds in sound christian virtue and promising seed-beds for religious vocations.

The detailed study of Don Bosco's pedagogy of

grace, carried out by Don Caviglia, in the lives of Dominic Savio, Michael Magone, and Francis Besucco, written by our Saint, can help us to find the guidelines for our pastoral action. These pass through Mary, are re clothed in her purity and reach the goal securely through the power of grace.

Virginal purity
outpouring of
grace

In an audience to our young people, John Paul II came out with this tremendous statement: "When you live in purity you acquire such brightness that it allows you to have an influence for good on the hearts of others".

A young past-pupil of ours was teaching in a mixed school. One day a boy said to her: "Thank you for the good you do me". When he saw her surprise, he went on: "You make me think of our Lady and your strength gives me courage".

That past pupil, who is already in heaven, certainly did reflect, even externally her strong, limpid spirituality. The boy became a priest. Her example may even have been a help to him in his courageous choice of priestly celibacy.

While virginity gives the capacity for a deep love for Christ, it also gives the power to reflect this love in serene generous oblation towards all those the Lord puts in our path.

"More than a flight from the world, virginity is a flight with the world towards God".

It is beautiful to remind ourselves and our girls that God is for ever calling to a life of virginity and it is particularly significant to recall it this year, the twenty-fifth anniversary of Pope Pius XII's encyclical, "*Sacra Virginitas*".

An attentive re-reading of this encyclical will help us to grasp more and more its precious values. The great Pope reminds us that virginity is the virtue of the strong, but that it needs to be protected

with humility and charity, because though original sin has been cancelled in us, there still remains the sad consequence of interior disharmony, so that we continue to live more according to the flesh than according to the spirit. The Pope therefore, recommends educators: "while not neglecting to present the noble merits of purity, to inculcate clearly God's commandment in all its gravity and seriousness".

He exhorts them to form young people to self-control, to flee from danger and from occasions that excite their passions and to cultivate a sense of natural and Christian reserve.

False views
regarding purity
in our modern
world

Do we not hear it said at times: "I am not a child any longer!, to justify an overly-free attitude to certain reading, or toward shows or even to some social relationships that are a danger to the speaker and often a cause of harm to others as well?

Under the pretext of liberation from "taboos" do we not perhaps, become lax in certain ways of speaking, acting and dressing, in certain ways of behaving that gradually leads to a lack of reserve and to moral insensitiveness?

This permissiveness not only spoils the development of vocations but also the uprightness of married life among our past pupils and the unity and serenity of family life.

Behaviour is usually the external expression of the ideas that guide our life. People who are richer interiorly are always the ones who have greater dignity and delicacy in their behaviour, while adhering to the norms of correct social interaction.

"Signs" of our
consecration

We, who are consecrated to God, bear witness to our consecration even by our external appearance and behaviour. The Holy Father, addressing priests and religious in Ireland said: "Rejoice at being

witnesses to Christ in the modern world. Do not hesitate to make yourselves recognisable as such, to be identified on the streets as being men and women who have consecrated their lives to God, who have thrown everything of the world aside so as to serve Christ.

Believe in the value of the visible signs of the consecration of your lives.

People need signs, reminders that point to God in this modern secular city in which very few signs remain that direct us to God.

Do not give a helping hand to the attempt to drive God away from the streets of the world by adopting secular ways of dress and behaviour!"

These authoritative words urge us to be '*visible signs*' that remind everyone of the value of purity which is one of the noblest senses of our human and Christian dignity.

Unfortunately, today reserve is easily considered an outdated prejudice, but this only goes to show that its protective function, in regard to chastity, assigned it both by nature and God's law, is not understood.

Raissa Maritain has shrewdly perceived that reserve 'is a spiritual instinct in which the real superiority of the spirit over the flesh is revealed. It is the vindication of the spirit against the dominion of animal instinct. As soon as man feels his flesh begin to fight against his spirit, reserve raises its voice as high as it can which will be proportionate to how free the spirit is and how innocent the way of life'.³³

This voice can become so powerful as to produce the strength for martyrdom.

³³ MARITAIN Raissa a cura di J. Maritain, *Diario* (Brescia, Morcelliana 1966) 89-90.

Purity:
charismatic
distinctive
of our family

In our Salesian family this voice made twelve year-old Laura Vicuña intrepid capable of a tremendous victory in a very hard battlefield, heroic to the point of offering her life for her mother'.

Alessandrina Da Costa, a Salesian co-operator, who is a candidate for canonization, was paralysed for thirty years after jumping from an up-stairs window to escape from someone who was threatening her purity.

Maria Casella, a humble oratorian, who could neither read nor write and is now Spiritual teacher to many, enlightened on the value of purity and the dangers one can meet with, prayed: "Jesus, I offer myself as a victim to preserve the purity of young people living now and in the future".

The whole of the *Cronistoria* of our Institute could be read with this ardent love of purity in mind, purity which has always been a noble characteristic of the Daughter of Mary Help of Christians, following the example of Mother Mazzarello, who while still a child, consecrated herself to God with a vow of chastity.

At the centre of these shining examples from our own family, there is always Mary, the allpure, the allholy, the faithful Virgin: around her are enkindled great fervour in prayer, apostolic enthusiasm, true paschal joy.

The Sisters were happy to know that Don Bosco wanted purity as the characteristic virtue for his sons and daughters not only so that they would live it themselves but that they might make it flower among the young people.

How moved they would have been by the dream of the handkerchief given by our Lady,³⁴ by the dream of the Congregation³⁵ and others that still

³⁴ MB VI 973-975.

³⁵ Cf MB XVII 384-389.

today, offer us rich material to understand more and more the spirit of Don Bosco and the remarkable esteem he had for purity?

While our Father, Don Bosco, taught his young people how to defend themselves from bad habits and dangerous occasions, he also showed them how to acquire *the genuine form of purity which is modesty*. This is always identified with the ideal of devotion to Mary and we know how modesty for our young people is always a conquest that demands strength and self control.

Articles 10 and I of our Constitutions (1975), guiding us to a faithful living of the precious virtue of Chastity, say that it is a sign of the presence of God, a need for our mission, a source of evangelical unity. The Manual, in the introductory part, reminds us of the practical means, suggested by our holy Founder, to sustain us in fidelity.

Purity the vertex
of the vows in
Don Bosco's mind

To conclude these things we have remembered together, I want to share with you some enlightening and orientative affirmations made by His excellency Mons. A. Javierre, secretary to the Sacred Congregation for Education: to the Capitulars: "I would like to go to the heart of our Salesian Spirituality and point out for you the most characteristic vertices. (...) Our identity results from a particular touch that penetrates every sector. Purity is at the vertex of the vows in Don Bosco's mind. (...) Chastity figures in the first place long before Vatican II switched the order. And this was because Don Bosco wanted to show in an undisputable way that chastity is above everything else in our life.

Don Bosco's message of purity given to the boys of his century is still applicable today. In fact it is the most authentic way of realising that ideal of greatness to which modern man aspires: real liberty,

true personality".³⁶

I conclude with the prayer that this feast of Mary Immaculate, 1979, may spark a special effort to make the precious gem of purity shine brightly in our environments, as it did at the time of Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello, and that all of us may carry out a diligent and delicate formation in this virtue among the young people.

(*Cir. n. 631 - November 24 1979*)

Poverty - the paschal mystery in action

During this month dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, which is an everlasting thanksgiving through the Eucharist to the Father, we should like to continue, with Christ and in Him, to thank God for ourselves and for everyone.

Let us stress the gift Jesus gave us by proclaiming: "Blessed are the poor in spirit",³⁷ and let us thank him for the beatitude of our religious poverty.

An urgent
reminder

Nowadays there is a real need to deepen our understanding of the wealth of values that stem from the practice of evangelical poverty. This need exists for ourselves and for the young people we educate. Today we often speak of the poor and of poverty. The Church herself, in her capacity as teacher, invites us to reflect on the material poverty that afflicts so many of our brothers and on the profession of poverty that characterises the religious state.

The bishops at Puebla spoke about poverty and the poor; the Holy Father speaks to us about

³⁶ JAVIERRE, *Cristo Parola* 253-259.

³⁷ *Mt* 5, 3.

poverty and the poor in his encyclical '*Redemptor Hominis*' and in various discourses.

Our own XIth General Chapter spoke about poverty and the poor and our Constitutions speak of it also. Art. 59 reminds us to seek 'in preference, poor and abandoned young people' where there is economic hardships, emotional deprivation, moral or spiritual poverty'.

The Manual, in articles 76-77 makes us feel the responsibility of preparing our young people to give coherent witness in their work situation and to take on effective social commitments inspired by the Church's teaching.

Therefore, we must not be concerned with those young people only who are in need of care materially, but help all young people to form themselves to a style of life that enables them to be free from slavery to things and to themselves so that they can '*open their doors wide* to Christ' and be open to the needs of all men.

Life, the great trial

Life is man's great trial, It doesn't make sense if we hold that life is only for profit, for using and taking,³⁸ John Paul II asserts.

What have we done and what are we doing to help every young person who comes in contact with us to face the '*trial of life*'? seriously and in a christian way? Are we committed to become spiritual guides for our girls, cooperating with grace to promote that vision of faith that modern man seems to have lost in this secularised consumer society?

In the light of the Spirit

To be spiritual guides for our girls we must have a very clear picture of the present socio-cultural situation in which we live. It will be useful to

³⁸ JOHN PAUL II P.P., *Discourse to university Students Rome*, 5th April 1979.

read again the chapter: *'Ora privilegiata della vita nello Spirito'* in the Rector Major's book: *'Non secondo la carne, ma nello Spirito'*. That is what he calls this transition period that we are now living through.

He presents it as a dawn of a new age in the history of mankind and invites us to consider realistically the special presence of the Holy Spirit, who urges us to free ourselves from too much comfort. The Holy Spirit, the spirit of freedom does not let us feel comfortable.

This divine Spirit reveals to us the great value of creation in new forms and makes us realise that the active presence of God and the progress of man are not two contrasting realities but are in harmony with one another.

It is up to us to see that this harmony is always present in our lives and in the lives of our young people. Therefore we must help them to give priority always to the spirit rather than to the material and consequently lead them to strive not to *'have more'* but to *'be more'*.

Do we put before them and help them to appreciate such values as moderation, temperance, work, (housework included) almsgiving?

We do the girls a great favour when we help them to overcome the weaknesses and inconstancy of their temperament. These things hinder self-control discourage sacrifice, self-giving to others, and bar the way to generous and noble ideals.

Poverty sets
us free

Behind the unrest and painful experiences of many young people there is often the cry of the Spirit, imprisoned in passing things, which always create emptiness and a sense of being hemmed in. It is significant that there are rarely any drug addict's among young people who love their work.

On May 5th, 1979, Pope John Paul II said to our

Salesian youth: "Even when the present generation of young people make use of the comforts offered them by our consumer civilization, they realise that so much extravagance hides a deceptive attraction, and that they must stop short at the frivolous experience of materialistic opulence.

You are therefore, continually searching for the true value of your life, of your personal responsibility".

Freeing young people from idleness and from seeking their own pleasure must also be the basis for our work for vocations.

"The crisis of vocations — Paul VI states — hides perhaps, a fear of sacrifice. As educators, we must guide young people to a free and joyful acceptance of sacrifice. Only if we do this can they accept Christ's call for them because even if He prepares the way for happiness beyond our human comparisons, He makes it spring forth from our decision to sacrifice ourselves for love of Him".

But are young people today open to formation, to sacrifice?³⁹ Answers in the affirmative can be multiplied. It is today that we see groups of committed young people reach a point of making "a promise to be poor". They amaze us because of their capacity for renunciation. They have discovered that poverty makes them free.

In religious environments where the Sisters live their experience of evangelical poverty to the full, love and sacrifice become contagious.

"Now I believe that the Sisters do not just make a vow of poverty, but actually live it with joy". This statement was made by a young student who stayed for a while in one of our houses. It was

³⁹ PAUL VI, P.P., *Message for the XIV "Universal day of prayer for Vocations"*, Dec. 8th, 1975.

this happy experience that prompted her to ask to be accepted into our Institute.

Cardinal Cagliero tells a charming little incident about the times in Mornese, that really makes us reflect: "One evening, everybody, Sisters and girls alike, agreed to bring all the things that were not strictly necessary to recreation; a chest was filled with these things, and all were pleased to make the sacrifice".

"The pupils", continues Don Maccono, "were led to make these detachments, because when they saw how happy the Sisters were, they were convinced that if they detached themselves from superfluous things they would enjoy the same happiness".⁴⁰

It is important to note: *the girls were not struck or attracted by the comfortable life of the Sisters, but by the happiness that resulted from authentic religious poverty.* It was a poverty that did not consist in privations only but in liberation from slavery to things and self, for love of the Kingdom; it brings happiness in a more intense communion with God and in the possibility of giving oneself to those in need. It is the poverty of the Beatitudes!

Poverty In the
Paschal Mystery

This austere and joyful kind of poverty existed in Valdocco and Mornese and still exists in many of our houses, especially where our Sisters experience '*hunger, fatigue and contempt*'. From this kind of poverty many vocations flower — incredible though it may seem.

And another Sister affirms that to be efficacious in preparing the girls for *the great trial of life* our word must have about it an echo of our living the paschal mystery in a continuous exodus from the slavery of the flesh to the liberty of life in the Spirit.

⁴⁰ MACCONO, *Santa* I 295.

If our fidelity to the action of the Spirit weakens, our young people realise inevitably that we too fall back on the satisfactions of passing things. Our life in the Spirit becomes only a screen behind which we hide our life of the flesh.

“What man”, His Holiness, Pope Pius XII asks, “sharing as well all do the infirmity of original sin, can remain untouched by affection for earthly things, if he does not every so often, rather very often, separate himself in some way from these things and abstain energetically?”

The poverty that detaches us from things is still quite easy, but the poverty that leads to detachment from ourselves is certainly not easy: only the Spirit of the Lord with His gift of fortitude can help us to reach it. It is the Paschal road of real resurrection with Christ in “*newness of life*”.

Illusions
regarding
poverty

It is very easy to have illusions about poverty but in the light of the holy Spirit it is possible to distinguish things clearly:

- if we are too anxious to satisfy our own desires and seek our own comfort, we are not yet poor;
- if we go to great lengths to have things for our own private use that should be for the good of the community, we are not yet poor;
- if we get too upset when we lack something, or when we are asked to do some service for others, or when there is an unexpected change of plans, we are not yet poor;
- if we still think that we are indispensable in our work, we are not yet poor in Spirit.

Of course some of these sentiments can be there as temptations, but confident recourse to prayer will prevent them from taking root in the deep zone of our spirit and from there manoeuvring our will in its decisionmaking.

The sense of personal property is a subtle poison that little by little weakens and cools relationships with the community.

It is not so much the thing or the satisfaction in itself that damages us spiritually but the deformation that takes place in our mentality, which, without our realizing it, leads us to adopt a way of thinking speaking and acting as if we were 'owners'! This is a real impedimento to '*peace in the house*' and is an obstacle to carrying out our mission in the Church.

God - our one
and only good

The Chapter on poverty in our Constitutions opens with the words of Psalm 15: "I have said to God 'You are my Lord, without You, I have nothing'. This is a song of praise raised to God by our poverty. The Spirit of truth who lives in us, communicates to us His light and His truth and leads us to seek God alone. This search does not only lead us to renounce the possession of material things willingly but should God ask it, also to detach ourselves from gifts of mind and heart. It helps us to rejoice that good is accomplished by others too, and in ways we may not have imagined.

As long as the good is done, as long as God is known, loved and glorified, let us accept joyfully 'that He grows and I diminish'.⁴¹

For those who want to follow Him, Jesus lays down a condition: that they leave their nets, sell their goods, abandon everything, He does not ask for things but the totality of the person in his most intimate self: 'You follow me'.⁴²

The
"caetera tolle"
conditions the
"da mihi animas"

When we answer 'Yes' to this request for **total detachment**, we arrive at **true evangelical poverty** and we **give back to God the right to exercise**

⁴¹ Jn 3, 30.

⁴² Jn 21, 22.

absolute initiative in our lives. Our hands are empty, but our hearts are full of God and exult in the blessings of poverty.

This beatitude is closely bound up with our mission among the young. In fact, poverty, which assumes different forms and motivations in different religious institutes, becomes for us a readiness to accept the *Caetera tolle* through enthusiasm for the *Da mihi animas*.

It is a readiness, availability (I'll go!), self-giving all the time, in fraternal collaboration, fired with apostolic charity.

It is the community witness of liberation from all that is superfluous, cumbersome, so as to increase more and more our work of human-christian formation for poor young people and continue the charity that the Institute is able to accomplish abundantly, not only because of our work but because of the poverty of our Sisters.

All this helps us understand why Don Bosco loved poverty so much, lived it rigorously and reached the point of pronouncing these grave words: "As long as the Salesians and Daughters of Mary Help of Christians consecrate themselves to prayer and work, practise temperance and cultivate the spirit of poverty, the two Congregations will do a lot of good; but if it were to happen that their fervour should weaken, if they shun work and love the comforts of life, they will have run their course; the downward curve will begin, they will fall to the ground and be smashed".⁴³

Our poverty
in the light
of Mornese

Mother Mazzarello and our Sisters of Mornese reached heroism in their poverty. It would do us all good to read the Chapter '*Blessed are the poor*

⁴³ MB X 651-652.

in spirit' in the book 'A Soul Led by the Spirit', by Sr. Lina Dalcetri.

We are still enjoying the fruits of their heroic virtue today, but we should take to heart the words of our holy Mother: "For God's sake, my dear daughters, continue to love holy poverty in a real and practical way, even in the midst of greater comfort".⁴⁴

Mother Luisa Vaschetti precisely states in her characteristically frank and down-to-earth way: "When a letter is enough, don't send a telegram; when writing is all that is needed don't make a journey; when a postcard is enough, don't send a letter; when prayer is sufficient don't use anything else".

Let us avoid all waste in clothing ,furniture, equipment and so forth, and under specious pretexts, let us not border on wordly affectation in our dress and underwear.

Don't overspend and don't demand for yourself things that even the wealthy wouldn't allow themselves. Also, don't forget that even during the holidays the vow of poverty is never on holiday. Do not accumulate useless personal effects or superfluous objects. May each one of us, when our hands are open to receive the last anointing be able to say: "I own nothing".

Luminous
example
of poverty

We have an authoritative example of this poverty in the true spirit of Don Bosco in the Servant of God, Mons. Luigi Olivares. After his perpetual vows he wrote these words in his '*Spiritual Rule*': "I am poor. Everything is good for the poor; everything is too much! Therefore, never a lament about food, room, clothing, poor travelling conditions, etc.; Regarding money that in a certain sense

⁴⁴ MACCONO, *Santa II* 651.

the Lord offers me by means of my relatives, I shall try more and more to lessen the use of it according to my idea. I must be determined, if this is God's good pleasure to reach the point of detachment from any dealings with it, even with the consent of my Superiors, from any sense of ownership of it".

To help us enjoy the fruits of our poverty, Mother Laura has sent to every province a review of our poverty, based on the articles of the Constitutions and the Manual. If we make good use of it we shall grow in fervour and happiness and spread these around us as in Mornese.

(*Cir. n. 627 - June 24 1979*)

Chapter VII

PRAYER FOUNDATION AND SUPPORT OF THE CONSECRATED LIFE

A series of circulars reveal Mother Ersilia's anxiety that a life of deep prayer be realised in the Institute, capable of vivifying and balancing the intense activity that runs through every day of the FMA.

We find again theological motivation, well-grounded pedagogical indication, and precise Salesian expertise.

The circulars often invite us to an opportune and concrete review.

Mother, with precise, incisive questions offers directions for the realization of "Life in the Spirit", from which is derived, in deep communion with God, a real and fruitful openness to our brothers.

As encouragement and incentive Mother Ersilia puts before us our Lady, "the very image of prayer".

Growth in the knowledge of God and in the exercise of His presence

I shall begin these monthly circulars with a loving tribute of gratitude to our dear Mother Angela who will always be present with us. "I have always lived by faith, and yet I have never just stayed with my arms folded".

My fraternal
service
in fidelity

These words of Mother Angela become ever more meaningful to us as the days go by and I should like them to shine out through these few modest words which I am addressing to you.

Continuing along the lines followed by Mother Angela, my task will be a humble fraternal service to help one and all to plumb the depth of the great wealth of our religious consecration — to meditate better on the word of God, the Holy Father, the Church, our Saints and on the deliberations of our Chapter which have become rules of life for us.

The chapter assembly took place in a universal atmosphere of prayer and offering which was truly touching and edifying. We could see how much grace and light from the Holy Spirit this won for all the capitulars.

We are receiving consoling news from all directions showing complete and generous loyalty to the deliberations and an atmosphere charged with true spiritual renewal.

From this we can see how much we want to give God and the Church the consolation of a religious family which does not play down its obligations but makes of them a true, complete witness to its genuine spirit: *"to live to give glory to God and save many souls"*.

On our own however, we could never give everything to God, all the time, without bringing petty calcu-

lations into it. "Without me you can do nothing",¹ said the Lord. But then He added: "Ask and you shall receive; seek and you shall find; knock and it shall be opened to you".²

True renewal in the spirit of prayer

If, therefore, He makes prayer a condition for His favours, our first duty after the chapter must be a genuine renewal in the spirit of prayer.

The chapter went back to the source and original spirit of the Institute... There it found souls of deep unbroken prayer like Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello. It found many of our dear Sisters who made their unceasing hard work a means of loving union with God and a constant recollection of His presence. So returning to the source means for us returning to a renewed, deep spirit of prayer.

When every Daughter of Mary help of Christians becomes a specialist in her way of praying and in her intimate, personal relations with God, she will become an ardent apostle who will live her "*Da mihi animas*" in practice and give the right proportion to contemplation and activity in her life. Union with God casts its glow on every branch of our activity in her life — it bestows generosity of heart, a correct estimate of reality and a quiet balance and efficacy in her work. I shall not speak about prayer in any great detail as there are plenty of books on the subject. I shall, however bring out a few fundamental ideas which I would ask you to think about privately and discuss in community. They could also come into the good-nights and conferences of the Superiors.

The whole attention of our communities should be focused on prayer. Through the grace of the Holy Spirit we can hope that this will fructify our own

¹ Jn 15, 5.

² Lk 11, 9.

personal renewal from which every other renewal will spring.

I shall be eager to know later how this task has been carried out in the various communities and with what results. These reports will not only be useful for me, but will become additional wealth for the whole Institute.

Here then are a few ideas on prayer:

- Before prayer we should foster the desire for prayer. We foster it through an *increasing knowledge of God achieved through living in His presence.*
- Prayer is like loving: when we love, no occupation can take our minds off the beloved. We learn this fact from the lives of the saints. Even in our own day we are edified by the example set by many of our Sisters who prove that contemplation and activity can go hand-in-hand as the Council wants them to.
- We cannot pray well without remembering that the Holy Spirit lives in us and is keeping our souls recollected enough to be alert to the interior movements of the Holy Spirit.
- We cannot pray with faith unless we study our Lord's words in the Gospel, and like Him aim at the Father's glory.
- Finally we cannot pray well unless we are filled with love of our neighbour: "Whatever you do for the least of my brethren, you do to me".³ "If you are about to offer your gift at the altar and then remember that your brother has anything against you, leave your offering there at the altar and go and make it up with him. Then come back and

³ Mt 25, 40.

offer your gift".⁴

If this is our life of prayer we shall easily train ourselves in Salesian piety, **Eucharistic, Marian and Ecclesial**. All our Community prayers will become a source of personal sanctification and of zeal for the salvation of souls. I now leave it to you, dear Sisters, to develop these ideas which I have just outlined and to pool your own knowledge and experiences among yourselves.

Helps for your study

You will find a very extensive field of study:

— in the Gospel, where we have the example set by our Lord and His instructions on prayer;

— in the Council Decrees, which are often a real lesson on prayer;

— in the talks given by the Holy Father, who treats the subject admirably. I should like to mention particularly the general audience which he gave on the 13th August 1969: "*Return to private prayer*";

— in the lives and writings of our saints and in the biographies of our deceased superiors and Sisters.

However, let us not reduce our study to a mere intellectual work, but make of it a means of firing our hearts, bringing them into close unbroken contact with God and a generous love for everyone.

(Cir. n. 520 - September 24 1969)

Primacy of prayer

I hope that animated by the desire of that renewal in the spirit of prayer which I proposed to you in my last circular (September, 1969) as the first

⁴ Mt 5, 23-24.

step towards the interior renewal laid on us as an obligation by the General Chapter in the name of the Church, you have made the points given for your reflection the object of special study individually and as a Community. I am waiting to read your reflections, experiences and conclusions, having in view that mutual enrichment which will raise the tone of the whole Institute.

Absolute
primacy of
prayer

Now I should like to bring up a basic aspect of prayer: its fundamental necessity. Unless we are fully aware of this need, *our prayer* will never have its rightful place in our lives, that is to say, *an absolute primacy of place above all other activities.*

Our Lord teaches us in the Gospel this "primary position" of prayer and with frequent reminders proclaims its urgent necessity: "Watch and pray at all times";⁵ "Watch and pray";⁶ "You must pray always and never grow weary".⁷

But even before proclaiming prayer as a rule of life He has given an example in Himself. The Gospel underlines the numerous occasions when the Master withdrew from the crowds to go into solitude and pray. It presents Him in unbroken contact with the Father, intent on glorifying, adoring and thanking Him. The teaching and example of our Lord who, we would think, did not need to pray, is the most convincing proof of the fact that prayer is irreplaceable.

The great law
of life of the
spirit

Prayer, in fact, is the great law of the spiritual life. A soul of prayer is a spiritually rich soul. A soul careless about prayer is already on the path of lukewarmness and perhaps even on the path to ruin. Prayer and holiness are intimately related;

⁵ Lk 21, 36.

⁶ Lk 22, 40, 46.

⁷ Lk 18, 1.

the more prayer, the more holiness; the less prayer, the less holiness. Prayer in fact, puts us into contact with the living God who does the work of sanctification in us.

Our state as religious, particularly, requires a constant seeking for God and such an intimate contact with Him that He lives and works in us, as though we were His instruments. This point is brought out explicitly in "*Perfecte Caritatis*": "In fidelity to their profession, and in renunciation for love of Christ, let religious follow Him as their one necessity... full of concern for His interests... and living for God alone".

Unless our minds are always turned in his direction, unless we have this living, vital contact with God, our religious life runs dry and becomes a real contradiction. This is the root-cause of many consecrated lives being slipwrecked, and even of the collapse of religious Orders and Institutes.

Our father, Don Bosco, did not hesitate to put this thought clearly before us in his introduction to the Manual, in the chapter on piety. Let us read this chapter again and meditate on it. Here I shall quote only the conclusions which he reaches from particular cases of religious Institutes and Orders. He says: "These have flourished and promoted the good of religion as long as piety has been maintained actively among them. On the other hand, we have seen not a few fall into decline and some even passing out of existence altogether. This happened when the spirit of piety slackened off and each member began to think of his own interests, not of those of Jesus Christ, like those Christians about whom St. Paul complained".

Our saintly founders understood well the need for prayer especially in our active life. Activity, which is not permeated by prayer merely cloaks an appalling interior void and obviously cannot bear fruit.

If, on the other hand, all our activity, all our working days not only begin with prayer but are permeated with prayer, that is union with God and offering everything to Him, how holy they will be, and how sanctifying for others! Let us strive to reach this ideal programme of life. If we do we shall have taken to heart and carried out one of the most vital messages of the Gospel and will have understood, as our Founders did, the fundamental place of prayer in our lives as consecrated souls.

Personal and
community work
on prayer

And now, as on the last occasion, I am proposing some work for you to do, privately and as a community. This will help you to develop the points I have just made on the need for prayer:

- Look up what Don Bosco said about the need for prayer and the reasons he gave. (Biographical Memoirs, Companion of Youth, Manual).
- Go over and collect from *Perfectae Caritatis* and from the Holy Father's speeches the most significant expressions on the subject.
- Read and comment on at least a few pages of Chautard's book: *The Soul of the Apostolate* which the Servant of God, Don Rinaldi, recommended so much.
- Bring out the reasons, which will always hold good, quoted in *The Great Means of Prayer* by one of Don Bosco's favourite Saints, St. Alphonsus Maria De' Liguori.
- Examine and discuss the chief reasons for sustaining and defending the primacy of prayer over the utilitarianism, naturalism and materialism of modern life, so as to equip ourselves for our apostolate among the young.

(Cir. n. 521 - October 24 1969)

Mary most holy - authentic model of prayer

In our last circular (October 24, 1969) we examined the necessity of prayer and I am quite sure that you have reflected and gone deeply into the question privately and as a community. We could now ask ourselves: "How are we to pray?" This is where we meet the most genuine model of prayer: Our Lady Immaculate. Her beautiful feast is closely associated with our Salesian family which started with her, through our father, Don Bosco and our mother St. Mary Mazzarello.

Our Lady, the
incarnation of
prayer

Our Lady is the very incarnation of prayer. The Gospel presents her as "*keeping the Word of God in her heart*", that is meditating on it and making it life of her life. The few words recorded of her in Scripture form a prayer, from her reply to the angel Gabriel to her Magnificat and her plea for the newlyweds at Cana.

And when she presents herself to the world in the course of her miraculous apparitions she has always been in an attitude of prayer and invites to prayer: thus it was at Lourdes, La Salette and Fatima, to mention the most outstanding.

Mary is "the prayerful soul" par excellence because she is the truly *poor in spirit* of the Gospel.

The first condition for praying well is just this; a consciousness of being limited, small and needy just as our Lady proclaimed herself to be in the *Magnificat*. So we must shed all our presumption and self-sufficiency. This means presenting oneself to God in "*Simplicity*" of spirit, *that childlike simplicity* mentioned in the Gospel which relies on God for everything, because it has no power of itself.

Let us fix our eyes on our Lady Immaculate and

from her we shall learn another condition of prayer: recollection.

Mary presents herself to us as one wrapped up in God, living *entirely in his presence*. This is where we fail so often. We go to chapel or elsewhere to pray too taken up with work, people or surroundings... when it's time for prayer we must, like our Lady, give ourselves entirely to God, think of Him, be immersed in His light, filled with His love, attentive to transform into a offering of union with Him all that could draw us away from Him.

But our Lady is the creature of prayer par excellence, because she is the Immaculate.

May our Lady Immaculate clothe us in her light and help us to understand that there can be no complete consecration to God without complete virginal purity, because purity is love and the beatitude of purity is that which makes us "SEE" God and therefore, unites us more closely to Him in prayer.

(Cir. n. 522 - November 24 1969)

Prayer, the foundation of our personal, community, apostolic life

The third commission which studied *the means of formation considered most effective in re-vitalizing prayer*, concluded its report thusly:

"Young people learn to pray by seeing us pray.

We FMA must reveal to youth, by our praying presence, the mystery of man in Christ, through the spirit, is in relation with God the Father".

Make of every
community
a school
of prayer

The chapter invites us, then, to make of every community a school of prayer, not only for our own good, but for the good of youth and of every person we meet. It is a noble endeavour and one of great responsibility.

No girl should leave our houses without having understood and tasted prayer in its essence and vitality. It is good therefore, that we make a sincere review and deep study of our prayer, both personal and communitary. I will not stop to emphasize the modifications which the Chapter permitted regarding time and form of the basic community prayers, neither will I linger on the reasons and the spirit that inspired these modifications. I know that the provincials have already faithfully transmitted these aspects.

I will, instead, treat with you about the way of checking up on our prayer, so as to advance ever more in the formation of a spirit of prayer, in such a way that each one of us and the Community as a whole, may become a real school of prayer.

The point of departure for this check up is the conviction that we are Salesian consecrated apostles in the measure in which prayer is the foundation and soul of our personal, communitary and apostolic life.

The root-problem of prayer is not solved by changing the time, modifying the rhythm, substituting certain expressions in the practices of piety for others.

My intimate relationship with God is the measure of my prayer.

To pray is
to be converted

The criterion by which to judge if I pray well is the transformation of my life.

Our verification, must however, start not with prayer itself, but with the preparation we make for it. There is a whole atmosphere of preparation. If this preparation is lacking, prayer runs the risk of being reduced to a formality which makes it dry and empty.

The climate of prayer is created communitarily or

personally by means of recollection, silence, charity, the nourishment of the Word of God.

If we really want to pray well, we must make *a crusade of silence* in our houses: a fight against idle useless words; moderation in the tone of voice during the day, during hours of work as well as in those of lawful relaxation; observance in religious silence especially after night prayers.

Our Constitutions and our Manual show the great importance of silence in keeping us united to God.

It depends very much on ourselves, even during the busiest day, to be able to create those spaces of interior solitude in which, conscious of the indwelling of God within us, we breathe freely the spirit of intimate union with Him.

Then it is most important, I would say indispensable, to prayer, to cultivate during the day the sense of the continuous, living and active divine presence of the Risen Christ in us and around us. To revive the faith in this divine presence, to bring ourselves into a relation of love with the living God is to open up to prayer.

The example of
union with God
of our saints

Our Saints give us an admirable example of this. Cardinal Alimonda, on the occasion of the month's mind of our holy founder and father, Don Bosco, defined him as 'union with God'.

The Servant of God, Don Philip Rinaldi, when presenting him to us affirmed "...Don Bosco has identified to the maximum his vast, external, untiring, absorbing, activity full of responsibility, with an interior life that was rooted in a sense of the presence of God... and which, little by little, became a reality so constant, so vivid as to be perfect union with God".⁸

⁸ RINALDI, *Strenna* 1931.

The “*presence of God*” might be called the Saints’ slogan.

Limiting ourselves to his meetings with our Sisters, he often stressed the sense of the presence of God. Thus at Alassio as well as at Mornese he frequently repeated: “Continuous prayer is necessary... It consists in the right intention of doing all for God only to please Him, with the heart and mind on Him, with frequent loving ejaculations”.⁹

“How lovely it would be if the FMA always remained in the presence of God; But, my good daughters, we can actually do so: by renewing the intention of doing all for the greater glory of God, every time we change occupation”.¹⁰

Of our saintly Mother her biographer gives this testimony: “Her thoughts and affections must have been continually turned to God, because from everything, in a very natural way, she took the opportunity of speaking of Him. How often when I approached her for purely business matters, she left me with the impression of the presence of God”.¹¹

Cardinal Cagliero could affirm at the process of her beatification: “She lived, one might say, lost in God”.¹²

The thought of God was so vivid in her as to bring forth from her heart those expressions which she addressed now to me, now to another to keep them awake to the presence of God, spring to her lips... “What time is it?... It is time to love God. Have you done anything today which was not for Jesus?” “Work in such a way that every evening Jesus can say to you: ‘My child, I am pleased with you’ ”.

⁹ Cron II 51.

¹⁰ Cron II 247.

¹¹ MACCONO, *Lo spirito* 71.

¹² MACCONO, *Santa* II 192.

“We say, Viva Gesù; Viva Maria!, but do we really have them in our hearts?”¹³

Habitual contact with God’s presence permits the Holy Spirit to infuse charity into us, which, while it unites us ever more intimately with God, generates in our hearts sentiments of goodness towards all. Only then can we open our hearts fully toward God, who is Father of all.

Prayer, the
nourishment of
the soul

But our prayers can be anemic and lacking in faith not nourished by the word of God. *Perfectae Caritatis* says of religious: ...“They should read the Bible every day, so that by reading and meditating on the Scripture they may learn the excellent knowledge of Jesus Christ’ ”.¹⁴

The word of God, deeply assimilated, moulds thoughts and sentiments; recalled during the day it leads to an ever more enlightened discovery of God, draws us away from pre-occupation with self, and fixes us in Him; it thus infuses stability and strength into our life and leads to true prayer.

This preparation stimulates us to make our practices of piety through interior impulse rather than habit, and the desire will grow within us to live to the full our vital prayer-moments, to discover and assimilate their meaning and values. The Chapter has indicated what these moment are: the Eucharistic Celebration, Liturgy of the Hours; meditation, reading, Visit to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and the rosary. And it is very significant that in the post-capitular programme, many Provincials have given priority to *prayer*.

It is truly consoling that the Provincials consider as one of the greatest gifts to the Sisters, to satisfy

¹³ MACCONO, *Santa* I 291-292.

¹⁴ PC 6.

their profound need of prayer. The programmes reflect the need and endeavour towards formation in prayer, personal and communitary: a serious, ecclesial, vigilant formation, which will preserve for our piety its Salesian characteristic.

We could identify this characteristic in these aspects:

Characteristics of
our salesian
piety

- *A theological piety*, solidly based on faith and nourished by the word of God.
- *A sacramental and liturgical piety*, which makes of Mass and the Sacraments the centre of prayer and of life.
- *A Marian piety*, which passes through Mary, ideal and model of the FMA.
- *An apostolic piety*, which embraces the souls to which each one of us is consecrated.
- *A living piety*, a prolongation of the encounter with God in the Eucharist, which transforms work and all the circumstances of life into a living liturgy.

The whole is stamped with that beautiful *simplicity*, attached more to the spirit than to the form, more to substance than to methods.

We must thank God for times of prayer, for the courses which are being held everywhere on the liturgy, especially the psalms, the better to penetrate the meaning of them and make of the liturgy of the Hours a real celebration;¹⁵ and on the Mass, the richest source of spiritual life.

We must also thank God for a better understanding of the theological riches of the rosary, which in its varied forms, is felt to be in "close association with the universal canticle of praise and universal intercession of the Church".¹⁶

¹⁵ Cf PC 6.

¹⁶ MC 48.

Assessing
our prayer-life

Today, more than ever, our thanks is due to God for the renewed thirst for prayer which the Holy Spirit is awakening in Christian people.

In this providential moment our part must be that of animators, who with word and example teach prayer.

Let us therefore, ask ourselves:

— Am I really “*a praying presence*” revealing to those who approach me the mystery of my union with God?

— Am I convinced that prayer must have first place in my life, and as it is a gift of God do I ask for it incessantly?

— Do I renew myself in it every day?

— Do I take pains to prepare myself for prayer in an atmosphere of silence and by the exercise of charity?

— Is prayer a serious obligation for me, something I desire, something that transforms?

— Is there lack of continuity between my life of prayer and of work?

May the season of Advent, fast approaching, be for all of us a school of prayer: let us live it with Mary, in expectation of Jesus.

(Cir. n. 586 - November 24 1975)

Prayer - the source of apostolate

The Rector Major, Don Luigi Ricceri, has written a splendid circular to the Salesians. Much of what he expresses with so much clarity and depth is more than suited to our needs and combines perfectly with the programme we have set out for ourselves. With reference to the fulfilment of our

Circular of the
Rector Major,
Don Ricceri,
on prayer

mission the Rector Major states: "Our Salesian mission, as part of the Church's mission, is not fully defined simply by what it does in the way of educating, evangelizing and helping the particular people we work for. These are fundamental elements but they are incomplete and do not portray the full character of our mission. Its wealth goes deeper and has its source in a dimension that is theological. To be true to itself, a 'mission' presupposes 'and hence the awareness of 'being sent', the actual relationship with the sender and being dependent on Him, a continual 'referring' to the sender by the sent.. Only thus is our mission a part of the mission of Christ who is the sole mediator and hence the model and reference point of every apostle.

... All Jesus' life and activities are inextricably related to the Father. His prayer flows from the very depth of His being which is so completely dominated by the sense of the Father that Christ is not so much an 'adorer' or 'glorifier' of the Father as 'adoration' and 'glorification' personified.

... His prayer flows and manifests itself in colloquy with the Father: this is the sublime and fruitful mystery of the prayer of Christ (...).

If it is true that Christ was the 'man for others', we could add that it is from the Father that this completely altruistic Christ derives the motivation, the energy, the meaning of His total self-giving".¹⁷

He is the exemplar from whom we draw inspiration for our apostolic and our missionary spirit. Like Jesus, in Him and with Him we must acknowledge that we also are 'sent' by God and act in His name through the Church which represents Him

¹⁷ RICCERI Luigi, *La nostra preghiera* (Roma, SDB 1973) 29-31.

and the Congregation which is part of the Church. Hence like Christ we must feel constantly *dependant* on Him, keep in close *contact* with Him and be always united with Him in prayer.

Prayer - the
source of
apostolate

Prayer, this intimate 'contact' with God must constitute the interior source of our apostolate. This apostolate will become more enlightened and fruitful in the measure of the ardour and richness of our life of union with God.

During one of my latest journeys I met a missionary who consoled me with the following affirmation: "It is my daily experience that the fecundity of my arduous apostolic work is actually proportioned to my daily prayer".

Our holy founders, formed by the Gospel, truly grasped and imitated two fundamental aspects of Christ's life: His salvific action and His uninterrupted intimate contact with His Father. Don Bosco was called '*union with God*', in spite of his incessant apostolic labours, and our Mother, St. Mary Mazzarello, who was very active, made union with God a special feature of her spirituality.

The spirit
of prayer
at the heart
of the Salesian
tradition

This spirit of union with God and of prayer is, therefore, according to the Rector Major, part of "*our most genuine Salesian tradition*", rather, it is *the centre of our tradition*".

If this is so, it should be one of our most urgent preoccupations to renew this specific characteristic of our spirituality continually. But in order to keep alight this interior flame which unites us to God and sustains and animates our interior activity, we must first pay attention to the practices of piety and the spirit of piety.

The Rector Major, in the circular already quoted, does in fact say: "...prayer is, in our Salesian life, a fundamental dimension' of the community. It

is both an expression of the Community and its basis. The community expresses itself as such, i.e., as a religious community, by means of prayer”.

“Prayer also builds up the community. This is especially true of the Eucharist, without which no community can be formed, but it also holds for all prayer. When the community prays it becomes more conscious of its intimate and vital relationship with God”, the sense of belonging of selfgiving increases, the presence of the spirit strengthens faith and love, the two pillars of any community”.¹⁸

Living, active
presence
to God

We must not think that these salutary effects of prayer are obtained only through long, numerous and complicated prayers. Let us do well, by our lively active presence that which the rule prescribes, and then, throughout the day, during our work and in going from place to place let us make good use of those short turnings to God, those acts of offering and of contact with Him which we know as ejaculations and are so much recommended by Don Bosco and form part of our traditional piety. These are very simple but very fruitful means for keeping united with God, increasing our faith and love and demonstrating our missionary spirit.

Walking the streets we meet many people. Why should we not make use of this means, which is always at hand, to obtain light for those who surround us, to thank God for all the good and beautiful things which we see and make reparation for what could offend Him? Ejaculations coming from the heart are like breath to the soul and form in us an ever more lively spirit of prayer which will even penetrate all our actions from the most material to the most spiritual. Our dear Sisters of Mornese lived absolutely immersed in this spirit.

¹⁸ RICCERI, *La nostra preghiera* 37-38.

Their every breath was prayer. The significant expression of Mother Eulalia Bosco, a boarder at Mornese, verifies this. She said: "*We imbibed God!*"

This holy custom will help us to surmount what we might be tempted sometimes to consider, as the Rector Major puts it, "an obstacle to prayer" and "a source of distractions" and to change into "an invitation and an incitement to pray". In fact, as Don Ricceri continues, "... the daily ups and downs of our work should not constitute an obstacle to prayer or be a source of distractions: rather should they be an invitation and incitement to pray. They should help us to include in our daily prayer-offering to God all people, things and events that form part of our work".¹⁹

Daily events
and union with
God

Thus we shall live the missionary spirit in all its fullness and our entire life will be transformed into prayer. But this transformation, according to the Rector Major, "... comes from deep down, from where the soul loses itself in God. Only then does prayer become 'a kind of restful, basic harmony which continues playing against the background of the chaotic melodies of daily occupations'.²⁰

If we succeed in attaining this '*basic harmony*' then the spirit of prayer will also overflow spontaneously and habitually from our being and our very presence so that we shall be as "*our mission demands*" accomplished in prayer. This is of paramount importance to our apostolic action among the young.

Help young
people discover
the value
of prayer

Referring to their document on renewal in pastoral activities, the Rector Major says, "Today, more than ever before, we must help the young to re-

¹⁹ RICCERI, *La nostra preghiera* 56.

²⁰ *Do* 58.

discover the value of prayer in dedicated living. It gives fresh vigour to faith; it enables them to listen to seek out and follow the spirit; it builds up interior life and creates community in and with Christ”.

But in order to be *teachers and guides* for the young, he adds, “we must ourselves be men of prayer”.²¹ The first teaching must come from the witness of our lives which must find their justification, their strength and their joy in prayer.

Once this foundation has been laid let us enlighten our young people as to the reason for that sense of emptiness and insecurity which we find at times in some of them, and their deep need for trusting themselves to Someone in order to find light and strength in a truth and justice which is certain and secure. All of this finds its response in prayer, but in prayer which is alive and vital and is truly an interior encounter with Someone, with a Person, with Christ himself.

Let us help them to discover the depth of meaning and the infinite and vital worth of the Mass and prepare them for a full, intelligent and active participation in the liturgical celebrations. Let us lead them to an understanding that such participation consists not only in performing pre-determined actions or gestures, but in an increasingly intimate encounter with the Person of Christ, present and active in every Mass through which the Mystery of Salvation is fulfilled for us today. They must learn too, that participation in and fulfilment of the Mystery of Christ must be carried forward into the duties of everyday life.

The ‘*Guida al Lezionario Festivo*’ of L.D.C. would be a valuable aid to liturgical catechesis. It has

²¹ Do 33.

been prepared by two of our Sisters in collaboration with the Salesian Catechetical Centre and constitutes true formation to a sense of the liturgy, offering vital exegetic doctrinal and liturgical explanations of the Sunday masses for the three cycles.

Form the girls
for a personal
encounter with
the Lord

Besides training our young people to liturgical prayer, let us also lead them to private prayer, to a personal meeting with God. We must form in them the habit of turning their mind and heart to God in the various happenings of the day, of making the person of Christ the point of reference of their thoughts, their worries, their joys and their griefs and in the manner of Don Bosco, make them feel that He is the true Friend of their souls.

We must also know how to widen the horizon of their prayers so that it embraces all the needy, the poor, the suffering and sinners; those who are far away and those who are near; those they know and those they do not know; believers and unbelievers. They will thus become ecclesial souls and we shall have formed in them that missionary spirit which must animate us all as Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and the Church.

May the Paschal Mystery which we are living give us this enthusiasm in our prayer and inspire with this missionary spirit which inserts us completely into the Mystery of Christ's Redemption.

(*Cir.* n. 561 - April 24 1973)

Prayer flows from silence

Prayer, which was the theme of last month's circular (April 24, 1973), encourages me to treat now of the subject which all writers of spirituality regard as fundamental to prayer and the atmosphere

in which it is cultivated and preserved, namely, **silence.**

Silence the
climate of prayer

It is through silence that we make contact with the "True Word Who speaks without the sound of speech".²² From this encounter comes prayer, union with God and the seeking for and love of His interests, thus silence becomes a vehicle by which we meet souls in God and in this way it assumes a missionary character.

There are missionaries of action, missionaries of prayer and missionaries of suffering, but there are also missionaries of silence who, looking at things from God's angle, are able to embrace the whole world and offer the sacrifice of silence for the apostolic effectiveness of the work of those called to transmit the Gospel message.

Perhaps, in this epoch of "*inflation of the spoken word*" and never ending "noise" there is need, as never before, for souls who, withholding speech come to understand the mysterious and fruitful secrets of silence. Souls who bring some balance into the overwhelming and suffocating world of words. This would seem to be a contradiction yet it is the one and only cure for the evil which leads to emptiness. Silence is, in fact, "*one of the principal pillars of the interior temple of the soul*".

A modern author of spirituality wrote: "He who does not keep silence knows neither God nor himself, nor his duties nor his transgressions. But a religious who observes silence sees what he must do in order to correspond to grace and thus he will attain his end.

(...) Silence is one of the characteristics of a good religious. To be capable of keeping silent and to

²² DALCERRI Lina, *Il Mistero di Giuseppe* (Roma, FMA 1973) 30.

be a good religious is almost the same thing, because a religious who keeps silence and does not seek consolation from men renders himself worthy of remaining close to God and is so preoccupied with pleasing Him through the observance of the Rules and practices such as prayer, recollection and spiritual reading, all of which make or form a good religious”.

The council document, *Perfectae Caritatis*, recommends religious, “let them strive to foster in all circumstances a life hidden with Christ in God. Such dedication gives rise and urgency to the love of one’s neighbour for the world’s salvation and the building up of the Church”.²³

Silence is, then, one of the most powerful means for the intensification of the spiritual life. If we look back to the life led by our Sisters in Mornese we find it rich in union with God and in religious spirit. The secret of this can be discovered in statements such as this, “The house of Mornese was built on silence, prayer and mortification”.²⁴

This admirable and practical testimony reminds us of the actual words of Pope Paul VI in a discourse to religious, words which, not only in essence but also in form express the same thought: “Your life must be geared to silence, recollection, fervour, love and still more to the mystery of grace to which you are dedicated”.²⁵

Empty and
dangerous Silence

However, not all silence is holy and sanctifying. There is also an empty silence and a dangerous silence. Holy silence is silence filled with GOD, “charged with prayer, contemplation and love”.²⁶

²³ PC 6.

²⁴ MACCONO, *Santa I* 307.

²⁵ PAUL VI P.P., *Discourse to Religious*, Oct. 28th 1966.

²⁶ DALCERRI, *Il Mistero* 27.

This is what St. Mary Mazzarello instilled when she said, "We have a treasure in this rule given us by Don Bosco. It points out all the means for becoming saints. We are told we must observe silence well. Why should a Sister keep silence? In order to be more easily united to God and able to speak to Him, to tell Him her needs, and to listen to His voice, His advice and His teaching."²⁷

But she was enlightened by the Holy Spirit she knew well how to discern that false silence which is not born of grace and does not bring grace but consists in self-centredness, peevishness, resentfulness and daydreams.

"If a Sister", she says, "does not speak but ponders over worldly affairs and loses herself in vain or useless thoughts, if she tries to work out what is going to happen to her or what others think of her, if she concentrates on the success of some particular task or on a word overheard here or there, tell me, do you think this religious has kept silence? Certainly not! She may have been silent exteriorly, but her heart and mind have kept up continual conversation and have not certainly been united with God".²⁸

True silence comes from the practice of the presence of God and leads to adoration. It is therefore, the **fruit of faith** and the **source of Charity**, which, if enkindled by love of God leads also to love of neighbour. Thus, the defects and character weaknesses of others are covered by the veil of that silence and charity governs conversations and actions with prudence and knows how to listen rather than importune others with ones own uncontrolled assertions.

Spiritual writers have always given great importance

²⁷ MACCONO, *Santa* I 400.

²⁸ *Do* I.

to silence. We read in "The *Imitation of Christ*", which still provides valuable food for the soul, even in these days: "In silence and quiet the devout soul makes progress".²⁹ Saints, and especially founders of religious orders and congregations have always considered silence a fundamental element for perfection and religious life.

The silence of
Mornese

We have already heard our Mother St. Mary Mazzarello's concept of silence, but as a confirmation of this let us read Maccono's enlightened observations on the cenacle of Mornese. We can say with truth that silence was habitual in the house of our origin. Maccono says it was *observed to an excellent degree* and he gives us among others the pleasing episode which tells of the astonishment manifested to Don Costamagna by the bricklayers:

"I have never seen Sisters like those Mother sends to carry bricks, stones and whatever else is needed for building!

— Why, what have they done?

— If you heard them talk!

— What? They talk? — asked the surprised Don Costamagna, shocked that the Sisters should break silence, since to his knowledge they had never before broken it. —Did they speak to you? What did they say?

— Listen, I say to them, "What is your name?" No answer.

— Where do you come from? No answer.

— 'Do you like it here?' Still no answer. But I can scarcely open my mouth to say, 'bricks, water lime', before I have already been served! I tell you I have never seen Sisters like these...!

²⁹ *Imitation of Christ*, Book I, c. 20 n. 7.

— I already knew quite well, 'concluded Don Costamagna, that they did not speak to the men or among themselves during the silence required by the Rule, but that they kept up continuous conversation with God' ".³⁰

Can this be said
of our silence
today?

From this silence was born the piety, charity and holy joy of the "*house of divine love*". Contemplating this spirit and comparing it with the atmosphere of our houses today, can we say that there is any resemblance? Is not this pillar of our interior temple weakening? It is true that exterior causes have arisen to pressure us and distract us from the peace of silence. We are completely surrounded by a noisy society and uproar, but our reaction should be an effort to fortify the defences of our castle of silence and to seek refuge within it; it should create in us a need to encircle our souls with a zone of silence.

Perhaps, instead, we allow ourselves to be drawn away by external currents. Is not this the reason why so many religious weaken and, together with their disappearing interior life, also lose their attraction for God?

Let us place ourselves before our Blessed Lady who jealously guarded every word of God in her heart. The already quoted spiritual author proposes this example to us. He says: "The whole of the Blessed Virgin Mary's life on this earth was a lesson of silence and deepest recollection. What guard must we put on our soul to prevent its breaking loose? The answer is Christian vigilance. And how can vigilance control the soul?

Through silence. It is silence which closes all exterior gates and prevents any escape and it

³⁰ MACCONO, *Santa I* 306-307.

ensures, moreover, that the soul, being enclosed may not lose itself in distractions. The long winter of silence prepares for the pleasant, fruitful apostolate of summer”.

How true it is that speech, which is most fruitful in good, wells up from the depths of silence! The soul that lives on its own doorstep, intent on receiving and passing on news, concerning herself with all that takes place, living on current gossip and on unbecoming interests has no idea of interior life. She also runs the risk of talking nonsense and passing absolute judgements on matters she has not thoroughly examined, since her life consists of superfluities.

Articles 45 and 52 of the Constitutions remind us of the prescribed times of silence and its spirit and values are placed in proper perspective in order to encourage “familiar encounters with God and the Sisters”, and from the angle of the apostolate, in order to absorb the word of God and “pass on its message more effectively”.

May our dear Help of Christians, whose month is drawing to a close, be our teacher in the art of silence that we may live with her in union with God.

(Cir. n. 562 - May 24 1973)

Chapter VIII

FRATERNAL LIFE COMMUNITY-COMMUNION

Community life, central to Salesian religious life, is at the heart of Mother Ersilia's formative preoccupation.

For her the Eucharist is its foundation, the supernatural binding force of minds and hearts.

She gives clear directions in keeping with the salesian charism building on the "family spirit" which marked the communities of Valdocco and Mornese.

In every house — Mother explicitly says — the presence of Mary, who in the Cenacle built the first Christian Community in unity, must be felt.

The Eucharist - source and centre of community life

The reflections made on the reading of the preceding circulars on the values of community life, our personal dispositions towards the community, the contributions which each one is called on to give toward the construction of a truly religious Salesian community could give rise to the spontaneous exclamation: It is beautiful, but it is difficult! It is really like that.

The community is always under construction

In building a true fraternal community difficulties are met with within and without; difficulties which oblige us toward a continual striving to overcome in faith and charity. Nor can we ever call a halt, the community is never fully formed, it is ever under construction, it requires the endeavour, the effort of every day, of every hour: it is a question of always beginning.

We all know from experience that sentiment is not enough, neither is the will to give a secure and firm foundation to these bonds which have to bind us in unity. Many temptations are ever at hand to destroy God's work. The most serious of these is discouragement, which leads us to fold our arms in passivity, shuts us off in isolation and throws us into pessimism.

But pessimism takes over when faith grows weak. All that we can devise to bring about union of minds and hearts crumbles if the support and soul of faith is missing. For this reason the Constitutions, before speaking of the various aspects of the *fraternal community*, speak of a communion of *faith, hope and charity*.

We have come together in the name of the Lord

The foundation of faith sets before us the great and consoling truth that "every Daughter of Mary Help of Christians who consecrates herself to God

becomes a living, operative member of a religious family gathered together in the name of the Lord, vivified by the Blessed Eucharist and united around Mary help of Christians, Mother of the Church and of the Institute".¹

The religious community therefore, is not born from below, is not erected by human efforts only, but it is born of God, is formed in virtue of His grace which blends into one, human love and the charity poured into our hearts by the Holy Ghost.

It is not blood-relationship, or natural sympathies which unite us in community living, but the Lord, who has called us around Mary and binds us together in unity by the Eucharist.

Jesus from the tabernacle repeats to us: "I am the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end".² He is the Lord of peoples and of individuals, the Lord of history, of each one of us and of our communities, present and operative in every instant and in every event.

Vivified by the
Eucharist

In every Sister of ours there is a living, actual, operative presence, which puts at our disposal sources of light and which communicates life to us. "For day and night He is in our midst, He is dwelling among us full of grace and of truth. He is giving formation to morals, sustenance to virtue, comforting the sad, strengthening the weak. He stimulates all who approach Him to imitate Him..."³

We all believe in the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist but how much more operative it would be in us if we were more conscious of this Pres-

¹ *C* 1969 31.

² *Ap* 22, 13.

³ *MF* 3.

ence, if it were more real to us and if we lived under its divine influence!

It is on the reality of this faith that we have to question ourselves, to religiously build our communities. Today, theories and opinions that attack faith are being circulated; for this reason we have to draw light strength assurance from the word of the Pope, the episcopal conferences, from the Church's Magisterium. If our faith is not rooted in the Word of the Church, which is God's word, it will become dried up and we run the risk of running into false subjectivity.

Jesus In the
Eucharist
operative In us

The Eucharistic Mystery in its reality and in its vital and active participation thought its celebration is the centre and source of unity. Indeed, the conciliar document on the *Ministry of Priests* affirms: "...No Christian community however, is built up unless it has its basis and centre in the celebration of the Holy Eucharist; from this therefore, all education to the spirit of community must take its origin".⁴

Jesus in the Eucharist is, therefore, the living and vivifying source of the community. He lives among us, for us, in us and makes of us one Body in Him. The fraternal community is, therefore, fully realised by means of the Eucharist only. In fact, the cult of the divine Eucharist, affirms the Holy Father, in consequence, acts on the soul as a powerful moving force towards perfecting 'social' love. This is the cause of the community,... and we extend charity".⁵

Jesus is present in the Eucharist, not only that we may adore Him individually but that we may adore and love Him in union with our Sisters and in Him

⁴ PD 6.

⁵ MF 36.

and with Him we build up, to God's glory, a fraternal community.

Vital centre of
the community

The important moment for a community is, therefore, that of the celebration of the Eucharist. Gathered around the altar we together offer our prayer of praise, we offer ourselves with Jesus Christ, in Him and through Him to the Father and we put ourselves entirely at the disposal of His will.

On the dispositions of faith and love which each one brings to the Eucharistic Celebration depends the interior purification received from it and the richness of grace she will be able to communicate throughout the day, to her Sisters. If in the daily Eucharistic contact we grow in faith and love, the stimulant to that diffusive charity will also grow in us, which will lead us to do good to all, mindful of the words of Jesus: "What you have done to the least of these, my brethren, you have done to Me".⁶

Do we wish our community to become that "paradise" where "all love one another reciprocally and each one enjoys the good of the others as if it were his own"?⁷ Let us intensify our faith in and our love for the Eucharist.

I bless the Lord for the return to times of adoration of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, on occasions of meetings, retreats, special feasts, and I bless Him also for the thirst for the liturgical life which is growing everywhere, and I praise and encourage all the initiatives which help to make participation at the community Mass more active and deep. This is an evident sign that everywhere there is a thirst for communion with God and with the Sisters.

⁶ Mt 25, 40.

⁷ M-R 1969. *Carità* 53.

If the Eucharistic Celebrations are carried out with dignity, decorum and devotion they become a school of Christian and religious life which radiates in every place an atmosphere of grace, of warmth, of charity imbibed from the altar.

Our Mother, Mary Mazzarello, brought the perfume of each morning's communion wherever she went during the day.

The Eucharist -
pledge of charity

Eucharistic Communion must be translated into mystic Communion. Receiving the Body of Jesus, we receive and welcome *the "whole Christ"*, as St. Augustine says, that is, Jesus and all His members: we cannot, therefore, exclude any person from our charity.

Jesus fuses us into the unity of a single body with Him. From this follows a strong obligation of charity, together with the certainty of a source of strength and comfort which helps us overcome the inevitable difficulties of living in community. This person who contradicts me, that other to whom I feel a natural aversion, or that one who, through her character, disturbs the harmony of the surroundings, are all inserted with me in Jesus. He loves them and communicates to me the love He has for each one of them and makes me capable of comprehension, of pardon; of renunciation, of donation.

Every obligation of corresponsibility and collaboration in the community will produce that affectionate acceptance, that strong patience, that sincere help which cannot be the result of a purely technical approach, however good and useful it may be, but are the work of the warmth and supernatural strength which emanates from Jesus, only if, before being guided by group dynamics, it is immersed in Jesus, present and operative in each one of our Sisters.

Problems studied in community, decisions taken

have not only the value of intellect and logic, but of the search for the will of God, of His glory and of the seal of charity which supernaturalises them.

If Jesus in the Eucharist becomes the vital strength of our days, the occupations which follow one another are no longer links in a chain, impersonal, monotonous, heavy, but are transformed into a rite, a liturgy that they may become acts in a cult. Then for us too the great programme will be verified: all life in the Mass and in the Mass all life.

When temptations and weariness arise, the thought of Jesus, living and present in the tabernacle, will make us run to Him even if only in spirit, and in Him we shall find strength and fervour. When, instead, grace triumphs in our hearts, when through one of our Sisters we feel the reflection of the goodness of Jesus, it is still to the tabernacle we will go to say our "thank you".

Truly, the eucharistic life, lived in depth, as the Saints knew how, transfigures our existence and makes of it a radiation of charity. Don Bosco, Mother Mazzarello, in every circumstance of their lives turned their thoughts and their steps to the tabernacle, and to the tabernacle they directed their sons and daughters, persuaded that only contact with Jesus will make us conformed to Him, especially in charity.

If at Valdocco and at Mornese there lived communities rich in fervour, in joy, in union, in apostolic zeal, it is because Jesus in the Eucharist was the divine ferment of such fruitful and strong vitality.

Where the Eucharistic life is strongest and permeates by itself all the environment, there its vitality gives vigorous life to all, community life and apostolic life, so that we are inserted into the Paschal Mystery of Christ, making us participators of the

redemptive strength of His death and of the power of His resurrection.

(Cir. n. 574 - June 24 1974)

The Holy Spirit - the unifying force

I trust that during last month (June, 1974), our Eucharistic Jesus was pleased with our faith, which in every contact testified to Him that He is truly "sovereignly loved"⁸ in our lives. I also trust that the whole community has felt its beneficial reflex. If, however, there should still be clouds to disperse, difficulties to overcome, let us recall what we daily repeat in the Holy Mass, "May all of us who share in the Body and Blood of Christ be brought together in unity by the Holy Spirit".

The mystery of Jesus in the Eucharist is intimately linked with the mystery of the Holy Spirit... One of the Fathers of the Church, St. Cyril of Alexandria, underlines this reality in these powerful words: "As the power of the Sacred Body of Christ makes corporeally one those to whom it is given, so the one and indivisible Spirit of God lives in all and urges us towards spiritual unity".¹⁰

If the Eucharistic Jesus is the centre of Communion, the Holy Spirit is its virtue, its strength, which acts in each one of us, unites us and renders us capable of doing that which, by our own strength alone, we could not do.

The Holy Spirit is the supreme gift of Jesus,¹¹ given to us to lead us all to Him.

Have we ever asked ourselves why we have such

⁸ LG 44.

⁹ *Eucharistic Prayer* 11.

¹⁰ St. CYRIL of Alexandria, *Lib II*, PG 74.

¹¹ Cf *Jn* 14, 15-26.

difficulty in having communion with our neighbour after so many Masses and Communion? Is it not, perhaps, because we do not allow the Holy Spirit to work in us, and because we delude ourselves, thinking that we can achieve it by our own simple human virtues?

Charity
is diffused
in our hearts by
the Holy Spirit

Charity, a supernatural virtue, is not, and could not be only the fruit of our personal efforts, our sentiments, our human inclinations. Charity is a capacity which imprints in us a reflection of the image of God, who is charity; it is a gift of grace which makes us participate in the very love of the Blessed Trinity.

This gift inserts itself into our natural faculties, empowering and transforming them; the Holy Spirit thus achieves what these alone, even with our greatest efforts, could not achieve. We, therefore, knowing our limitations and our needs, should greatly desire the gift, ask for it unceasingly and open the way for it by faithful practice of the Word of God: "If anyone keeps my word, my Father will love him, and we will come and abide with him".¹² The priestly prayer of Christ with this ineffable vow is a sure promise: "...that the love with which you have loved Me may be in them and I in them".¹³ Evidently this "love" is the Holy Spirit, who is the only trinitarian love.

Without the Holy Spirit, the Cure of Ars says, we are like the pebbles of a torrent; with Him, instead, we become sponges, saturated by grace and holiness.

Without the Holy
Spirit the
community
loses light and
vigour

Have we not sadly witnessed, sometimes, the state of some Sister, who has lost the ideal which oriented her on the day of her profession? She sees what

¹² *Jn* 14, 23.

¹³ *Jn* 17, 26.

she should do, but has not the strength to make the daily sacrifices, she is blinded by egoism, fondered by passivism, captivated by self analysis... Therefore, she goes on with tired step, resigned, dragging. Community encounters are superficial, cold, hurtful; the whole climate of the family atmosphere is resented, one is disturbed and creates an uneasiness which leads to a weakening of faith, to the loss of joy, to tiredness and sterility in the apostolate.

All this is a clear sign that the Holy Spirit is imprisoned and cannot freely act in us. We need, as St. Paul says: "To walk according to the Spirit"¹⁴ following, not our natural impulses, but His motions. Then His fruits will be superabundant in us; they are: "charity, joy, peace, longanimity, goodness, fidelity, meekness, temperance".¹⁵

The Holy Spirit lives in us; He possesses us from our Baptism: He is the "sweet guest" of our souls. Do you think of this? Let us exert ourselves to make room for Him, to take away all the obstacles that could impede or even lessen His illuminating, sanctifying, action.

The Holy Spirit is the spirit of liberty and cannot be exploited or bound by our personal interests. Did not Jesus say in the Gospel: "The Spirit breathes where He wills"¹⁶ That He may act He asks for truth, poverty, docility, silence.

In the Holy Spirit
the community
has life and joy

If the soul abandons itself to Him, He takes on its direction and guides it securely to the fulfilment of the divine plan in its regard. But He gives in the measure of our capacity. "Make room in yourself, and I will make myself a torrent". He

¹⁴ Gal 5, 16.

¹⁵ Gal 5, 22.

¹⁶ Jn 3, 8.

said to St. Angela of Foligno. Our Lady was invaded by Him because of her total abandonment, because of the completeness of her availability.

The Acts of the Apostles, which is the Gospel of the Holy Spirit, makes us feel His presence, as living and vital it appears in every line of the Sacred Book, one might say, from the Pentecost event which transformed that group of fearful disciples of Christ into intrepid proclaimers of the great works of God, to the discourse of Peter which was full of the Holy Spirit, to the election of Matthias and the deacons¹⁷ and of many in the Church who have been called to announce the Kingdom of God.

The Holy Spirit guides every event and every person, so that Peter could affirm "... the Holy Spirit who was promised and what you now see and hear is the gift that He has poured out on us; He is the strength that urges the announcement and gives life in Christ Jesus".¹⁸

This presence of the Holy Spirit which showed itself so vivid and vivifying in the early Church, has not ceased in the present-day Church, even if it is less visible; it continues today as it did yesterday, even in individual communities of the faithful. This presence, as always radiates grace, light, strength and joy.

If the above characteristics are not evident in our communities we should fear that this presence has weakened, certainly not because the Holy Spirit was unfaithful to His mission, but because our fidelity to Him has lessened.

The Holy Spirit
is the supreme
teacher

The Holy Spirit makes us perceive and receive His teachings. He never acts in the zone of the senses

¹⁷ Cf *At* I, 1-26, 2-6.

¹⁸ *Rm* 8, 1.

and sentiments, but at the centre of our spirit. He not only lives with us but in us: "The Spirit of God lives in you",¹⁹ and while respecting our liberty, moves and guides us. Sometimes He causes upheavals, at others He bends us gently. He always responds to our invocations, directing us in the way of truth, according to the promise of Jesus.²⁰ He teaches us not to depend on ourselves, or on creatures, but to lean totally on God, whose help will never fail.

Under His guidance we will discover the value of evangelical poverty, which is the door of the Spirit: we will rejoice in having nothing of our own, because like Mary, being totally available to Him we will live every instant in a joyful 'yes' to all His requests. In this happy spiritual condition we will feel our thirst for silence, which is the climate of God, growing.

If we live anchored to the Holy Spirit in this climate, charity will increase, and move from being simply a strict duty to the irradiation of God who lives in us.

The Holy Spirit tears us away from ambiguous ways; places us in the truth, exercising us in constant confrontation between our life and the Word of God; frees us from legalism and formalism, making us act in love and for love.

The late lamented Don Camilleri wrote in the preface to the book "*Sweet Guest of the Soul*" by Mons. Martinez: "...If we wish to truly orientate our life to the service of God, we can only do so in the Holy Spirit.

If we wish to serve our neighbours as brothers, the Holy Spirit must move us to it and only in

¹⁹ *Rm* 8, 9.

²⁰ Cf *Jn* 16, 13.

the spirit of charity can we preserve christian concord which is a duty. The social unity of those who belong to Jesus Christ is a society of which the Holy Spirit is the chain".²¹

The Holy Spirit
and our
Congregation

What could a Sister not do if she were guided by the Holy Spirit? What did He not do in St. Mary Mazzarello, a soul who was truly, of the Holy Spirit? What would He not do in our Congregation, and in the whole world by means of our Congregation if every FMA not only invoked Him but allowed herself to be possessed by Him, taking Him into all the surroundings in which she lives, and to all those whom she meets?

We must have more trust in the Holy Spirit than in our virtue. This secure trust will tear up from the roots every discouragement, it is no longer we who would act, but the Holy Spirit, whose efficacy admits no doubts.

The Holy Spirit, origin of every charism, is the Author of our Congregation. In the first dream, Jesus confided little John Bosco to our Lady, who was full of grace and of the Holy Spirit; it was He who guided him through our Lady.

The preventive method is completely based on charity. Charity is a fruit of the Holy Spirit and renews souls in grace, unites them in the Family spirit and adapts new forms and means to meet the various needs of the times.

Don Barberis testified that Don Bosco, from his youth, was devoted to the Holy Spirit, and from his ordination sought to implant this devotion in the boys, exhorting them to ask for the gifts and lights of the Holy Spirit by the fervent recitation

²¹ MARTINEZ Luigi M., *Il dolce ospite dell'anima* (Torino, LDC 1957) 11.

of the *Veni Sancte Spiritus*, which he recited daily and had recited before conferences and which he suggested in confession and on many other occasions.

Let us recall with gratitude our past Superiors, who, having studied the crest of the Institute, placed the Holy Spirit hovering over our Lady and the various symbols, almost saying that all in our Institute departed from Him and converged on Him. It is an admonition and a comfort.

Paul VI in the general audience of January 2nd 1974 said to our Juniores: "The Church has need of a perennial Pentecost; she needs fire in the heart; words on her lips; prophecy in her look". She needs the Holy Spirit in us, in each one of us and in all together.

In the general audience of January 2, 1974, he said to our Juniors: "The only fecundity, the only inspiration which enlivens your Congregation is the Holy Spirit".

The rejuvenation of the Church, of our communities, more than the removal and renewal of some structure which time may have worn down, will be brought about by saints; by those who, that is, docile to the action of the Holy Spirit, acquire a new spirit, a new heart, young, on fire with charity, who work in the furrow of obedience, because they know that every charism is given for the good of all.

Are there Saints
in our
communities
today?

Are there still saints in our communities today? Thanks to the Holy Spirit who vivifies them, yes: we could document this with concrete examples and make a long list. Many Sisters in their simplicity and radiant goodness, possess an extraordinary interior richness and keep the secret of their love *for the King*. Often, at the hour of death this leaks out, and then we have stupendous revelations of souls who really understood their

consecration; souls like the humble and joyful Sr. Edvige Mercuri who died on April 15th in a hospital in Rome, exclaiming with the impulse and frankness of a child: "Oh, beautiful Jesus, come, come, I am ready"!

There are many other examples I could give about which you know. I would have pages and pages of an account which I received on the death of the Superior, Sr. Teresa Casaro, former Provincial in the U.S.A. and of Varese, who died in Turin on April 22 last. I limit myself to her last words which confirm the joy of her meeting with Jesus: "I would like my funeral to be a joyful occasion... I would like the *Veni Sponsa Christi* sung as it was at my profession..."

I am happy to die an FMA... I have loved the Superiors, the Institute..." Then "Amen!, all is finished!".

Sisters, does not this tell us that there is still sanctity in the ranks of the FMA? And it is *holy Sisters* more than anything else that the Congregation wants.

Updating, yes, the Church also asks for it, because we must walk with the times, but if sanctity is missing, we lack the sap of any updating. The most up-to-date FMA are the saints, those who insert their human capabilities into the light and strength of the Holy Spirit who rectifies ideas, deepens fidelity, gives courage.

"There is only one answer", Paul VI said in that unforgettable audience of July 15, 1972, "which explains the extraordinary fecundity of the past and infallibly assures the vitality of your Institute: Sanctity".

May our Lady grant us that we render ourselves available, like her, to the action of the Holy Spirit,

so that we give to God, to the Pope and to the Church the answer of Sanctity.

(Cir. n. 575 - July-August 24 1974)

Community values

I hope that the sincere examination we have made before God and the community regarding the points presented last month will have borne positive fruit, bringing us to a recognition of the failings which are at the root of so much uneasiness in our communities. This honest acknowledgement of our failings should have persuaded us that instead of pointing a finger at the faults of others we should first of all endeavour to correct our own, remembering the Gospel admonition: "Why do you observe the splinter in your brother's eye and

Acknowledge
one's own
limitations,
understand,
accept
and pardon
one another

never notice the plank in your own? Take the plank out of your own eye first and then you will see clearly how to take the splinter out of your brother's eye".²²

We are all imperfect. We all have our limitations and our difficulties. The knowledge that we are all weak and fragile should enable us to understand, accept and pardon one another.

Our holy founder Don Bosco, reminds us of this. He says: "there is no one on this earth, no matter how virtuous he may be, who has not some shortcomings. Therefore, he who wishes others to bear with his defects must begin by bearing with theirs, fulfilling the law of Jesus Christ as St. Paul says; "Bear one another's burdens and fulfil the law of Christ".²³

²² Mt 7, 3-4.

²³ Gal 6, 2.

We need one another and cannot mature nor be saved without reciprocal brotherly love.

Converted to
the community

Do we not need to be converted to the community in order to build it up together?

Do we not need to direct our attention and reflection to community values to the richness the community brings to our human, Christian and religious growth and in consequence to the multiple contribution of good we can give to the Church when acting together as a community?

Conversion to the community, therefore, is a decision to place it at the centre of our thoughts and interests, not our individual selves but the mission of the Institute in the Church. When Don Bosco put us on our guard against the five faults to be avoided he stressed in a special way the need for renouncing "individual selfishness".

This fault could lead us to seek our personal perfection alone and to fail in embracing the two-fold charity involving both love of God and of neighbour. This means lack of practical faith in the words of Jesus: "In so far as you did this to one of these my brothers, you did it to Me".²⁴

These divine words have in themselves such supernatural strength and such deep significance as to transform and change mentalities and lives completely. In the light of these words it is impossible not to discover that the community is an invention of the Heart of God intended to promote union of hearts and sanctity.

With this in mind let us convince ourselves of the following:

— I am made for the community.

²⁴ Mt 25, 40.

— I need the community.

— I shall grow in the community in the measure by which I enable the community to grow.

Insufficiency in community, in community life menaces our human, religious and Salesian formation. It is only at community level that we shall find the means of attaining interior freedom. It will only be possible for us to grow and mature both on the natural and supernatural planes in so far as we grow in harmony and unity with everyone, thus encouraging the growth of the community itself.

Community
Values

The community offers us continual opportunities of knowing ourselves and knowing the others, of giving and receiving, of being faithful to “wholesome traditions” and of searching for new ways of expressing our spirit according to the “Signs of the times” and the directives of the Church.

It is in community that we discover better and make use of the gifts God has given us, and can become aware of the wrinkles on our own faces. Contact with others reveals us to ourselves. Has it not happened that a community need has given us an opportunity of knowing and expressing new, unsuspected, creative aptitudes? Has not a set-back or a contradiction caused our empty sense of security to crumble and given us a correct estimate of our small amount of patience and still unstable equilibrium?

Moreover, is it not in community that we realise to the full our deepest feminine characteristic, that of self-giving?

The young Laura Vicuña formed the resolution never to show indifference to anyone.

When eye and heart are exercised in delicate and eager attentiveness they discover values beyond the intemperateness of a young person who wants to

burn her boats and the sorrowful lamentations of an elderly person who has used up all her energy in work. If one does not live on the surface but searches deeper to find causes, one might even discover hidden worth beneath behaviour which cannot in itself be approved. There may certainly be uncontrolled reactions, but perhaps these are resistance in the face of very real situations which need re-appraisal. For our part let us leave the judgement to God and all of His everlasting mercy to ourselves to stimulate us to mercy towards others.

The community is a great school of experience, with its plurality of characters, situations and circumstances. It enriches us and makes us mature women as well as mature religious, and renders our life still more of an oblation, thus multiplying the power for good.

Identity of spirit, common ideals, richness of example, direction and the experience which the Institute provides are a support and continuous stimulus to our fraternal community.

At times the community also offers us the gift of the cross. These are precious moments during which the voice of Jesus comes across to us through whatever might have occurred: "Anyone who does not take up his cross and follow in my footsteps is not worthy of Me",²⁵ and He assures us that His grace will never be wanting.

How to build
the community

If everything in our religious life calls for community, if the values it gives for our human and religious fulfilment are so great, then consequently, for the effectiveness of our apostolate, we must place at the summit of our endeavours the building up of a fraternal community. This building up cannot be done by one Sister alone; all must work together.

²⁵ *Mt* 10, 38.

Neither is it a purely exterior work but rather an interior effort based on fundamental dispositions that aim at communion. These are:

- The humble confession of one's limitations and deficiencies combined with humble and grateful acknowledgement of the gifts received from God;
- respectful esteem for every person who, although virtuous, also has weaknesses and makes mistakes;
- the moment by moment renewal of one's choice of God in order to live the "Sequela Christi" faithfully;
- an ever-increasing conviction and awareness that Don Bosco designed the construction of our communities on the lines of the Gospel and the Church's Magisterium.

May we be enlightened and strengthened by the unshakable conviction of our own Saint, Mary Mazarello: "Don Bosco is a Saint! I feel it"; "Don Bosco knows what our Lady wants from us!"

In the very first Rules our holy Founder gave us secure norms, which were revised and confirmed in the special general Chapter, for creating in community "the family spirit", consisting of mutual esteem, co-operation and co-responsibility; of mutual respect... with signs of good-will and true fraternal friendship, "so that their religious and Salesian unity may be obvious to all".²⁶

In his practical wisdom he interspersed the working life of the community with pauses for relaxed recreation in order that each one might give vent to spontaneity and tighten still more the bonds of "fraternal... and spontaneous union of mind and heart".²⁷

²⁶ C 1969 35-37.

²⁷ C 1969 38.

Where recreation is neglected and where spontaneous inter-communion of mind and heart are impeded by the habitual viewing of TV programmes it is difficult to create the warm atmosphere of family life.

Don Bosco also required periods of silence, "school of eminent virtue".²⁸ This important atmosphere of interior silence, besides being favourable to prayer and union with God, as we pointed out in the circular of May, 1973, "favours familiar encounters with the Sisters".²⁹

Where the true family spirit is lived, where there is love of silence and a life of piety, an atmosphere of charity is created which is helpful in work, attentive towards the sick and elderly, and affectionately co-operative with all, as articles 39 and 46 of our Constitutions point out. Thus a community will be constructed which Don Bosco calls a foretaste of paradise".

The presence of
Mary - source
of unity

The first community in the Church was formed in the Cenacle around our Lady who through her intercession, obtained the gift of the Holy Spirit, who is the bond of unity.

The communities of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians during the first hundred years all gathered around Mary, and Mary, in the words of Don Bosco, 'lived among them!'

The Holy Father, in his recent *Apostolic Exhortation, Marialis Cultus*, calls all to a revival of Faith in Mary, "outstanding type of womanhood and pre-eminent exemplar of life lived in accordance with the Gospels". I am sure we have all made a study of this document, but let us also seek to penetrate

²⁸ C 1969 45.

²⁹ Do.

its meaning so as to live to the full the Marian character of our religious family.

The more we venerate our Lady the more will she be with us to help us build joyous, holy communities, because she will disclose to us what will be the centre of every community. This will be the theme of the next circular letter.

(Cir. n. 573 - May 24 1974)

Personal insertion in the community

To be born again with Mary means to imitate her virtues and to base our lives on hers. I should like to pause with you and contemplate her in the intimacy of family life at Nazareth. Everything there points to a life of loving dedication to Jesus and Joseph; to perfect understanding of mind and will; to continuous, refined thoughtfulness; to a well-tried spirit of sacrifice; to a humble silent acquiescence in all things.

Common - life -
a key-point in
religious life

Common life is a key-point in religious life because it creates an environment where our vocation is consecrated and apostolic souls can expand according to the special characteristics stamped upon them through the charism of our Founder.

The '*Outline of Spirituality*', which is familiar to all of us states in point VIII: "In virtue of their consecration, they (the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians) will be ready to undertake any task proper to the mission of the Institute, and they will build it up from day to day, reliving *in the charity of community life, which unites and preserves the family spirit* that reigned in the house of Nazareth.

The strength of the Holy Family's union at Nazareth sprang from Jesus. It is still Jesus, the Jesus of

the Eucharist alone, who can render a fusion of hearts possible. We are reminded of this by the authority of the conciliar decree, *Presbyterorum Ordinis* n. 15, and by the *Instruction on the Eucharistic Mystery* which expresses it clearly in these words: "For no Christian community can be built up unless it be rooted and centred in the most Holy Eucharist. It is there that education in community spirit must begin".

Studies on the theology of religious life give us the foundations of community life relating to the ineffable mystery of that intimate life of God which is a life of communion in the Blessed Trinity.

The Constitutions, under a series of sub-headings and articles give us a complete spiritual picture of our community from every angle: a community of faith, hope and charity; fraternal community; a praying community and an apostolic community. The little book - *Educative Community* also offers us valid help in achieving this end especially in the line of the particular purpose of our Institute.

Let us make good use of the means at our disposal in order to deepen the true sense of *community* and make this the subject of study and meditation.

At the moment, however, I wish to consider community life with you under a very well-defined and real heading: our personal part in the community.

What Inserts me
into the
community

Through the strength of the Eucharist I must become a living, positive part of the community to which I belong. In chapel the Eucharist is the bond which unites me to my Sisters through our celebration of the same Mystery and our sharing the same Eucharistic Bread. After meeting Jesus in the Eucharist my heart should be an extension of the Heart of Jesus to the community and I should live according to His sentiments and radiate His love.

And the sentiments are those He so frequently expressed in the Gospel: "Learn from Me because I am gentle and humble in heart";³⁰

"The Son of man did not come to be served but to serve";³¹

"Lord, how often must I pardon my brother, if he offends me? Seven times? And Jesus answered: "I tell thee to forgive, not seven times but seventy times seven";³²

"If you love those who love you what title have you to reward? will not the publicans do as much- If you greet none but your brothers, what are you doing more than others?";³³

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you".³⁴

Jesus loved us unto death on the cross. If then the purpose of the Eucharist is to promote union among us so that we may reflect the Heart of Christ how can I really radiate His love in practice? St. Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians, draws a complete picture of charity in practice through the stupendous passage which constitutes one of the most beautiful pages ascribed to the Apostle. After having affirmed that without charity even the greatest among the charisms, gifts and qualities are vain and useless he lists the most outstanding and practical aspects of charity: "Charity is patient, is kind, charity feels no envy, charity is never perverse or proud, never insolent; does not claim its rights, cannot be provoked, does not brood over an

³⁰ *Mt* 11, 29.

³¹ *Mk* 10, 45.

³² *Mt* 18, 21.

³³ *Mt* 5, 46-47.

³⁴ *Jn* 15, 12.

injury: takes no pleasure in wrong-doing, but rejoices at the victory of truth; sustains, believes, hopes, endures to the last".³⁵

These are very practical points which call for an accurate examination of conscience.

Concrete reminders of Don Bosco on community life

Our Father, Don Bosco, also treats of the subject, showing us when we are and are not reflecting Jesus in the community.

We are doing so, he says, when we contribute our share towards forming a community where the pleasure of living together can be appreciated, and when we are "all united in the determination to serve God and to assist one another in mutual charity", because "when brotherly love reigns in a community all love one another and each one rejoices in the good fortune of the other as if it were his own".³⁶

We do not reflect Jesus when "self-interest takes over or quarrels and disagreements arise".³⁷ He enumerates ways and causes: "murmuring", reporting to anyone the evil that others may have said of him; "destructive criticism"; "giving offence to a Sister"; ridiculing her; "disputes" "unwillingness to tolerate the faults of others".³⁸

He further exhorts us to mutual *pardon* as the Gospel inculcates; not to love our Sisters in words only", but to help them by extending every kind of service to them". We must also be zealous in seeking the spiritual good of all, and he concludes by reminding us of the theological foundation of charity: seeing Jesus Christ in the person of our neighbour".³⁹

³⁵ 1 Cor 13, 4-7.

³⁶ M-R 1969, Historic Section: *Fraternal Charity*, p. 53.

³⁷ Do.

³⁸ Do 54-55.

³⁹ Do 57-58.

Our Father's words pre-suppose a community with common ideals, daily encounters, vigorous reunions producing mutual enrichment and inevitable difficulties. A clear view is taken of everything: True charity makes a house into a "paradise";⁴⁰ True charity incites us to be affable and gentle with everyone".⁴¹

Such a clear-cut and true-to-life picture should spur us on to the practice of patience; to overcome inconstancy of character; to be refined in behaviour to all; to keep a prudent silence concerning the shortcomings of others; to forgive and forget; to control anger and to avoid "arrogant and uncouth manners".⁴²

With these compact and practical pages open before us each should ask herself in all sincerity: What do I bring to my community? Is my attitude positive or negative? In this we must not look at and judge others, but each one must look into herself, keeping her eyes fixed on the Gospel admonition: "How is it that you can see the speck of dust in your brother's eye, when you are not aware of the beam in your own?"⁴³

What is my
attitude in
community?

Now let us repeat our question: what is my attitude in community? How do I collaborate in making it a real Salesian community? what contribution do I make to its activities?, to its mode of expression, including recreation?

Let us concentrate on these points during the examination of conscience on retreat day, so that we may become better, more humble and truer elements of peace and union. If each of us could succeed in

⁴⁰ *Do* p. 53.

⁴¹ *Do* p. 55.

⁴² *M-R* 1969 56.

⁴³ *Mt* 7, 3.

taking one decided step forward on this path our communities would become dominated by that spontaneity, simplicity affectionate rivalry in fraternal service and that joy of heart that lights up each countenance, that characterised the lives and was the genuine spirit of our first Sisters and which has gone down in history as the spirit of Mornese.

I can still see the dear ninety-year-old Sister I met on my last journey and I seem to hear her repeating with enchanting simplicity and a peace which could make one envious: "I am happy because I never sought the company of those who criticised".

I also remember vividly another who said, almost joyfully, on her deathbed "during my life I have never judged or condemned anyone. God will now keep His promise to me: 'Judge not and you will not be judged'.

I could quote many other similar examples, because, thank God, many of our Sisters are edifying in their humility and wonderful in their charity.

The liturgical cycle is taking us towards the pentecostal season. Pentecost is the feast of the Spirit of love, the Holy Spirit. May this divine Spirit fill us with charity, for St. Paul says "the love of God is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit".⁴⁴

This love which has its source in God is not just emotion, nor is it affection; neither is it sensibility, much less softness. It is a sharing in the same love with which God loves us. We are not on our own, capable of love, nor can we love with the plenitude of love. Theological charity is a gift. Let us humbly ask for this gift, repeating the words of the liturgy: "Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts

⁴⁴ Cf *Rm* 5, 5.

of your faithful and enkindle in them the fire of your love”.

But let us not stop there. Having implored this gift with faith, let us lay ourselves open to the action of the Holy Spirit and make every effort to practice this charity.

May our Blessed Lady, the chosen Spouse of the Holy Spirit, make us as she was, completely open to the sanctifying action of the Holy Spirit.

(Cir. n. 550 - May 24 1972)

Radiators of peace in the community

At Christmas Jesus comes as the *Prince of Peace*,⁴⁵ *full of grace and truth*,⁴⁶ and the angels announce peace to men of good will.⁴⁷ This is the vision of Christ's birth to which we are brought face to face every year by the liturgical cycle.

But this vision of peace is in utter contrast to the rumours of wars, the egoism and hatred which cause them, and the numberless sufferings which accompany them. This sad reality makes us feel the urgency of the Holy Father's appeal *for the coming 'Day of Peace'*.

Peace depends
on you, too

The directness of approach used by the Pope is a vivid and personal summons to the responsibility that we all have in the face of this distressing human problem. With those touching words the Holy Father says to us: if your heart shares fraternally in the misfortunes which weigh heavily on so many brothers; if you really wish to co-operate in the speeding up of peace, do not be content to deplore

⁴⁵ *Is* 9, 6.

⁴⁶ *Jn* 1, 14.

⁴⁷ Cf *Lk* 2, 14.

and lament the present situation, do not lose yourself in abstract projects. The Pope's appeal calls for an effective response: get down to a concrete work and begin by creating peace within yourself. How can you, in fact, cooperate in the bringing about of peace if you haven't got it in yourself?

What is peace?

It is vital that we have, from the outset, a clear idea of what peace is and know its value. On January 1, last year, the Holy Father, in a homily given at Boys' Town, Rome, for the day of peace, addressed his hearers in the following words: "And what is peace?" He defined it thus: "Peace is the good which, in this temporal life, embraces all peoples, it is the order, the true order, not only of exterior discipline, but that order which ensures the good of man in his entirety, and that of all men".⁴⁸

In a word, it is that which St. Augustine defined: "The tranquillity of order", and that is the harmony and equilibrium which must begin to operate from within so as to radiate without. The Holy Father puts it to us like this: "It is in the heart that peace has its source; everyone must recreate peace within himself so as to re-establish it with others". It is, therefore, the fruit of personal and continuous effort which must lead us to model our spirit in harmony with this peace, which is, in the first place, the harmony of the human will with that of God; dominion of our tendencies, of our sensibilities, of our impressions and pre-occupations; it is a heart *free* in grace, and in the certainty that God loves us, modelled on the image of the Heart of Christ,

⁴⁸ PAUL VI P.P., *World Day of Peace*, Boys' Town Rome, Jan. 1, 1972.

in which our peace resides, rather, "which is our peace".⁴⁹

All this tells us that peace is a good far superior to all other goods because it comprises all. For this reason the wish of the Risen Jesus sums it up in a prayer which is also a gift: "Peace be with you",⁵⁰ a fulfillment of the promise made at the last Supper: "My peace I leave you; my peace I give you".⁵¹

For this reason the Church begins the Eucharistic Celebration with the greeting: "The grace and peace of God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all", and having again wished us: "The peace of the Lord be always with you", invites us to exchange "the sign of peace", and finally dismisses the assembly with: "Go in peace". It is a wish which means "*be bearers of peace*". *makers of Peace*" in the environments to which you go.

It is that which, in his evangelical spirit, steeped in the Beatitudes, our father, Don Bosco knew how to make his own, and sought to realise in his religious families. He wished his communities to be united in love and in peace⁵² and for this intention he had a 'Hail Mary' recited daily 'for peace in the house'.⁵³ Peace was for him the condition of that *heavenly life*⁵⁴ sung of by the psalmist: "Oh how beautiful and pleasant it is to see brethren live in unity!"⁵⁵

Obstacles to
peace

Peace pre-supposes a vigilant spiritual activity. As the Pope says: "... peace is not a stagnant condition of life, in which its perfection and death can be found at the same time; life is movement, growth,

⁴⁹ Eph 2, 14.

⁵⁰ Lk 24, 36.

⁵¹ Jn 14, 27.

⁵² Cf M-R 1969.

⁵³ Cf MB VI 441.

⁵⁴ Cf M-R 1969, *Charity* 53.

⁵⁵ Ps 133 1.

work, effort, conquest... for the very reason that it coincides with the highest good of man, a pilgrim in time, this good is never attained fully, but ever in the process of new and inexhaustible possession; peace is, therefore, the central idea and driving power of the most active fervour".⁵⁶

Many obstacles to peace within us require a constant effort to be surmounted. Among them, excessive sensibility, which denotes an egocentric attitude, which easily causes resentment, irritation, jealousy and leads to isolation from the community. Articles 36 and 37 of the Constitutions, which I invite you to make the object of meditation and examen, will help us to recognise these manifestations, indicating the means of overcoming them.

Another obstacle to interior peace is that impatient zeal devoid of humility which does not take into account prayer nor the means indicated by Don Bosco: reason, religion and kindness are necessary for the success of any true apostolate, as Article 63 of the Constitutions reminds us.

To the above we can add spiritual laziness, which is insensitivity to the invitation of the Church and the Institute for the necessary updating and which defends itself with the phrase: "We have always done it that way".

These obstacles, closing us within ourselves, create an ever greater poverty made of egoism. Only a strong interior life, open to a continuous enrichment of soul, can remedy it.

Interior peace

Interior peace is born through the liberation from the above-mentioned obstacles and leads to a decisive orientation towards God. Until we bring about this interior unification we shall always be restless.

⁵⁶ PAUL VI, P.P., *Message for World Day of Peace*, 1972.

This restlessness is a symptom of an illness, which denotes the presence of something that impedes the union of our will with that of God. The confession of St. Augustine is ever true: "Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are ever restless until they rest in thee"⁵⁷

To rest in God is to accept and love all that He permits; it is to allow ourselves to be guided by His providence; it is to live in the certainty of His love and of His presence. This is the first and greatest cure for restlessness of soul.

Another which is no less efficacious, is to put situations in their proper perspective, in a word, to consider them for what they are, not exaggerating them, not deforming them, not giving them a weight and value which they don't have. Sometimes we make mountains out of molehills and a tragedy out of a mere nothing.

Our saints had eternity as a point of reference and they said to themselves "That which is not eternal is nothing; it will pass with time and with people". Let us, too, try to anchor ourselves safely in God and then nothing will disturb us.

Of course, all of this requires work of self dominion for the building up of character which is conducive to peace. But if, as the Holy Father says: "Peace depends on you too", this is precisely the work which this Holy Year of renewal and reconciliation demands of each of us.

A peace that
is lived

Jesus declared "blessed" not only those who are in peace, but "blessed are the peacemakers";⁵⁸ those who bring peace, who work for peace.

Peace, like everything which has its roots in grace,

⁵⁷ St. AUGUSTINE, *Confessions*, Bk 1, chap. 1.

⁵⁸ *Mt* 5, 9.

is always active. That this may be so we must act in an environment by means of a testimony which radiates and communicates it. Now the first environment that should enjoy the beneficial effects of our interior peace is the community. And if in the community we shall all be radiators of peace we shall give a collective testimony which will greatly influence the world around us.

But to bring about the miracle of this wonderful peace, we must do what John XXIII so warmly recommended: "Let us seek that which unites and pass over that which divides". If we know how to read with the eye of the spirit the chapter of our Constitutions on the *fraternal community*, we shall find practical indications for the realization of this beautiful programme in our communities and in the sphere of our apostolic work.

Those articles, in fact, teach us to gather and value the positive in our Sisters, to set it in relief for an ever greater fusion of minds and hearts, for the serenity of the environment and to promote personal and collective interior life.

Peace is
contagious

A peaceful soul creates about it circles of peace in the Community, among the girls, among all she approaches, because she knows, as the Holy Father says, "the art of loving", which is the very condition of peace.

In fact, the conciliar constitution, *Gaudium et Spes* tells us: "A firm determination to respect other men and peoples and their dignity, as well as the studied practice of brotherhood, are absolutely necessary for the establishment of peace. Hence, peace is likewise the fruit of love, which goes beyond what justice can provide".⁵⁹

⁵⁹ GS 78.

This conviction creates universal love which embraces all men of every nation and race. And it is the conviction that we must transmit to our young people in the oratories, schools, associations and clubs by means of our testimony and a true apostolate of peace.

An apostolate of peace which starting from the sense of God, of life, of sin, of grace, of providence, leads the girls to understand the fullness of peace, to desire and to become apostles of peace. Let us help them to know and penetrate the ecclesial documents, which speak of peace, especially the persuasive word of the Pope.

The efficacy of this our apostolate will be commensurate with the gift of peace that we shall have drawn from the Gospel sources, from the documents of the Church and the Constitutions. These sources, penetrated and lived, will enable us to possess peace and to become thereby bearers of it and thus will make us living responses to the invitation of the Pope: "Peace depends on you too".

(Cir. n. 568 - December 24 1973)

Programme of community life

Guided by St. Paul and by our Father, Don Bosco, we saw in last month's (May 1972) circular letter, how each of us could be positive or negative as a member of our own community.

Today we will look at the community and its functions as a whole.

I have received from one of the houses a beautiful programme for community life, which I pass on to you that it may become a guide for all our communities:

To love one another in order to become one with all;

To become one with all in order to praise God and bear witness to Him.

This programme sums up the union and charity of a truly fraternal community, according to Article 35 of our Constitutions.

To Know
one another

To Know one another. This is the starting point. In order to form a true community each one must desire to know every one of her Sisters and must strive to bring this about by interpersonal contact guided by that kindly disposition which intentionally seeks all that is positive in each one.

Taught by the Holy Spirit, little Laura Vicuña was capable of making and living up to the following resolution: "I will show interest in everyone, in each person".

To know one another does not mean physical recognition only, but implies knowing the aptitudes, qualities, capabilities and all that *good* that God has placed in each person.

To know one another is to go beyond appearances and purely outward manifestations, which, more often than not, are only the passing effects of quick reflexes or uncontrolled impulses of temperament, linked, perhaps, to special situations; it is even to look beyond past errors, since, as Mother Teresa Pentore used to say: "One fault does not make a life of faults". Charity should create the confidence within us that the Sister concerned has drawn experience from her failings and has taken the right path anew.

It could sometimes happen in the community that a Sister's mistake becomes the identity card which she must carry with her wherever she goes,... This is not only absolutely unevangelical but could pre-

vent the Sister from ever being able to renew her efforts and start again.

In the light of charity, however, to know one another is, in a way, to look at one another through the eyes of God; God who is a loving father recognises the *mark of sonship* stamped by baptism on each one of us.

Community life offers extensive possibilities for getting to know one another. Working together affords us the opportunity of discovering gifts of initiative and great potentialities in certain Sisters, while time passed together, especially at table and recreation, offers a more relaxed and personal contact.

Article 38 of the Constitutions exhorts us in this regard, "To give particular importance to the time set aside for recreation", just because it is a time most favourable to the spontaneous union of mind and heart and to the practise of fraternal charity". In the same way, Article 9 of the Manual invites us "willingly to take part in the community recreations, rendering them moments of true, cordial relaxation,... desired moments of fraternal encounter", while art. 20 urges "fidelity to the timetable as an expression of love for God and respect for the Sisters" and as a means of ensuring "order and concord in community life".

To love one
another

To love one another. The Holy Eucharist which we receive together every morning is the source of this love. From It we get the strength to love one another in Community as Jesus loves us. Let us learn well the lesson of love taught us at this sublime school of Charity.

We are a positive part of the community:

- if our love excludes no one;
- if we love most those in need of help;

— if we love silently and patiently without ever nursing resentment.

May the words of the Gospel quoted in last month's circular be ever present to our minds, If you love those who love you what reward have you? The publicans do as much, do they not?"⁶⁰

Love must not be restricted to a small group, much less to one person only; the charity of Christ is all-embracing.

Scientific and sociological definitions cannot be applied to community life because, as the Constitutions declare, such a life is based on the supernatural foundations of faith, hope and charity. fraternal charity in its true evangelical sense transcends technicalities, breaks through mechanics and diffuses itself in cordiality.

We shall learn to love and let it be seen that we love, as our Father, Don Bosco says, only when we have determined to free ourselves from selfishness and personal pretension.

To be as one

To become one with all. In order to become one with all it is important that we learn to listen to one another. The art of listening is the key to the establishment of mutual relationships, but it is a difficult art to learn.

If we are convinced that we are always right, that we are better than others, that we have nothing to learn from others, then we shall never be good listeners and never be able through listening to recognise our Sisters' gifts and to turn this knowledge to good account in community.

If we really want to be one with all it is of paramount importance that we learn to rise above

⁶⁰ Mt 5, 46.

petty jealousies, rivalries and desire of being noticed and that we learn to let some of our own projects die so long as good is being accomplished.

No Sister will then keep to the fringe of the community nor will others sit back without exerting themselves to bring any enthusiasm or action to the apostolate. There will be no more individual trends, or personality cults or cliques, but Sisters who are free, creative and completely involved in a united community; Sisters who are themselves detached before demanding detachment from others; Sisters who do not try to force others to follow their plans or their way of thinking but who respect the opinions of all and are able to accept the initiatives, remarks and ideas of others for mutual enrichment; Sisters who will not shut themselves up in their own little worlds but are ready to accept collaborations and contributions from all; Sisters who make no account of whether a certain type of work is superior or important. The Congregation is the Mother of us all and therefore we are all equal and all enriched by the same religious consecration.

If more delicate or loving attention is to be given to anyone it should be to the elderly and sick Sisters as laid down in Article 39 of the Constitutions, in order to express our sincere gratitude for the good they have done in the Institute, or in the case of the sick, to honour them as "members of Christ in whom the new consecration of suffering is being fulfilled", thus practising what is indicated in the Manual from Article 12 onward.

Testimony of
Fraternal union

This wonderful fraternal communion will produce an apostolic community which will truly witness to Christ before the world.

You have written telling me of your interest in the ways of bearing witness reported in the April

circular letter. I limit myself to relating two of these.

A community consisting of four Sisters and the Superior attends to parish work in the small town in which they live. The Community is called 'The Five Sisters' by the people, because they seem to be always united, always cheerful, always cordially ready to help one another and always at the service of everyone in need.

- The Sisters say "We will work together", and the people comment, "How much they love one another!" That town produces a vocation every year. The words of Jesus are being fulfilled: Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them".⁶¹

- Another community, in which there is a complex variety of works, bears evident witness to the family spirit, which can be sensed even from the entrance. The Sisters work seriously with eagerness, calm and in a very relaxed manner. There is a great deal of work, but it is very well organised.

The Superior is the life and soul of all the activity in the house, yet each department is the responsibility of an individual Sister. Collaboration is encouraged in frequent departmental and plenary meetings.

Difficulties and sacrifices are not lacking: there are moments of tension, but everything is settled swiftly, often through a joke or a fraternal witty remark which breaks the tension and tends toward still greater union. This house also produced good vocations.

I know, to my great consolation, that there are many communities bearing evident witness to Christ

⁶¹ *Mt* 18, 20.

and I am sure you could add to this consoling number.

Be like the bees; look for what is good in your community. If then you will be so good as to let me know what you find, I shall be pleased to share it with everybody.

(*Cir.* n. 551 - June 24 1972)

Community life - field of abnegation

The atmosphere
of our
communities

The subject dealt with last month (March, 1974), abnegation, leads us to longer deeper consideration of the area in which love of God and of neighbour becomes abnegation in a practical sense: the area of our communities.⁶²

We have already dwelt on the subject,⁶³ but it is so vast and vital that it will be helpful to treat it again more fully, with regard to the spirit of abnegation that it requires from each one of us.

I do not intend to give theological arguments, which would be so necessary for a sure enlightened basis to the subject; this I invite you to do privately or collectively by means of the reading of publications which are sound and rich in content. Neither will I speak of the 'aggiornamento' of the community: that can be the theme of another circular.

On this occasion rather than present you with thoughts, I wish to set you a sample of exploratory questions, which can help us to delve deeply, even to the very roots of self, so as to arrive at the roots of our communities. These questions are not intended to be a denouncement of evils, still less an expression of pessimism.

⁶² Cf *PC* 12.

⁶³ Cf *Circular*, May-June 1972 and December 1973.

I still have before my eyes the sight of my dear Sisters met in my travels: good, generous, Sisters, sometimes even heroic, who, unaware, are a leaven of fervour, a breath of hope, a perfume of charity in the places where they live. Their lives, woven more of actions than of words, testify as to how it is possible and beautiful to live well our community life. No pessimism, therefore, but hope!

Even through the dark clouds of the present time the Spirit of God is opening up on our horizon a vision of trustful hope. But so that this vision may become reality, the barriers which form an obstacle in us to the advance of God's grace must come down. His grace would have us taste, even in this life, the inexpressible joy of "that they may be one", with God and the creatures that Jesus desired in His prayer to the Father.⁶⁴

A courageous
and sincere
exam

Therefore, it isn't simply to reading that I invite you today, but to a recollected silence, and then to a courageous, sincere examen. I put myself in your midst and I question myself with you. Let us place ourselves before Jesus present in the tabernacle and question ourselves with that loyalty that comes from a humble prayer of confidence in Jesus, the Way, the Truth and the Life.⁶⁵

Questions

Let us take a glance around and ask ourselves, first if in our houses:

- is our community only a gathering of persons, or is there a fraternal communion of minds and hearts?
- Am I a bridge which unites, or a barrier which separates?
- How can it happen that there are in our houses

⁶⁴ Cf *Jn* 17, 21.

⁶⁵ Cf *Jn* 14, 6.

Sisters who, taken one by one, are generous and self-sacrificing and yet do not succeed in being united among themselves?

And now, to come to more personal questions, let us begin with what is conducive to this life of union in the most intimate part the sphere of our judgments, thoughts and affections. We shall see what contribution we give this union also by our interior deportment; finally, let us see the benefits which come from this collaboration in the building of this fraternal communion. Every question must find an answer in keeping with the Word of God.

Personal questions

- Do we regard our Sister with a kindly eye or does a certain bitterness arise in our heart if another succeeds better than we, gets more praise or sympathy? Let us meditate on the Word of Jesus: "The lamp of the body is the eye. If your eye is sound your whole body will be filled with light. But if your eye is diseased, your whole body will be in darkness. If then, the light inside you is darkness, what darkness that will be!"⁶⁶
- Could it not happen that we enter the intimate sanctuary of a Sister and judge and condemn her very intentions, going by appearances only? Yet the word of Jesus is categorical: "Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not and you will not be condemned".⁶⁷
- Does it not happen that for days, and may God forbid, for months, we keep in our hearts the remembrance, the resentment of an offence, and we have not the generosity of a wide, full, sincere forgiveness? But has not Jesus in the Gospel told us clearly: "Forgive, and you will be forgiven (...)

⁶⁶ Mt 6, 22-23.

⁶⁷ Lk 6, 37.

because the amount you measure out is the amount you will be given back?"⁶⁸

- Could it not happen that on a presumed sense of superiority, or groundless prejudices, we foster in ourselves a spirit of opposition, of contradiction that disturbs the peace of the community?

St. Paul exhorts the Philippians: Be united in your love with a common purpose and a common mind. There must be no competition among you, no conceit, but everybody is to be self-effacing, considering the other person better than himself".⁶⁹

Am I with
Jesus?

When Jesus tells us the great, comforting truth: "Where two or three are gathered in My name, there am I in the midst of them",⁷⁰ interrogation becomes more searching:

— if I am not in communion with my Sisters, even if I am most self-sacrificing, can I be sure I am with Jesus?

- if we are not interested in what concerns the community, but only in what regards ourselves, are we with Jesus?

- and if laziness, passivity and indifference prevent us from having that creativity which can be a leaven for good:

- if we isolate ourselves from the common life and close ourselves in small groups, bound together by natural sympathies;

— if we act independently of the timetable, if we judge it childish to submit our views to Superiors, if we do not put ourselves out to help one who is more tired than we,

⁶⁸ Lk 6, 37-38.

⁶⁹ Phil 2, 3.

⁷⁰ Mt 18, 20.

Can we say with St. Paul that “we lead a life worthy of our vocation (...) doing all we can to preserve the unity of spirit, just as we were all called into one and the same hope when we were called”?⁷¹

- if love of country or province degenerates into nationalism or provincialism contrary to “*that they may be one*”;
- if we descend to compromises, if we approve, even by silence only, the diffusion of ideas, of manifestations contrary to the Magisterium or the directives or spirit of our Institute, are we sure that Jesus is in the midst of us as promised?

Of course, as the Gospel prescribes, we must continue to love those who err, but we can never approve erroneous ideas or facts: our love must be without bitterness, but enlightened. Discussions can be good, enriching, but for coherence, we, consecrated religious, must work on a basis of solid principles: the permanent values of our Christian life and of our religious consecration, which we have freely made.

The list of questions could continue but each one will add those that apply to herself. It will be likewise very helpful to read attentively in private the wise directives of St. John Bosco on fraternal charity given in the Manual. We will find in these pages, inspired by Scripture, much practical wisdom, and many guidelines for today.

Reach the roots of our community defects

If in our meditations, in our visits to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, we strive to get to the roots of our community defects, we will be in the best dispositions to find the remedies, and then be able to build together a living community of fervour and charity.

⁷¹ Eph 4, 14.

Naturally each one must strive to see her own failings, not to look around to detect the faults of others.

I will finish with the words of St. Francis of Sales to the Sisters of Fontevrault: "Correct your defects, while they are small; if you wait until they have grown it won't be easy to cure them. It is easy to channel a river at its source, when it is small, but later it becomes uncontrollable".

May our Lady Help of Christians, whose month we begin, animate and help us all to become, in our communities elements of peace and unity so as to transform them into a true communion of life.

(Cir. n. 572 - April 24 1974)

A realistic look at our communities

Let us look at ourselves, at our communities with realism. Not, however, with that realism which comes from intelligence alone, but from the heart, and above all from faith, and which therefore, never exceeds limits in a critical pessimism, but which always opens out in confidence and hope.

Let us therefore seriously reflect together on the way I, we, have lived the values of person, community and union.

Is it not true that despite all the good programmes, the repeated affirmations of respect for persons, of community communion, of union with all, there are still here and there, some illnesses in community life, some discontented persons and some slowing up of the works?

A careful and sincere diagnosis of the evils that still exist

Do we want to make an attentive and sincere diagnosis of these ills? The force of reasoning will not be enough: we must invoke the Holy Spirit

with Faith: "*Send forth a ray of your light*". As light makes us discover the dust in a room, so does the Holy Spirit reveal the weak points of our situations and give us vigour and strength to renew ourselves: "*Send forth your Spirit and they will be created*".

I read from a detailed review made in a community: "We should know how to accept one another better, as we are, with our good points and our defects, appreciating the good there is in everyone, not passing absolute judgements sometimes in an aggressive way; we should express ourselves without personalism or egoism, otherwise we shall never bring about union of hearts".

Perhaps other assessments could echo this. Something indispensable is therefore necessary, something fundamental, if so many good projects of fraternal unity are to pass from theory to practice.

Am I mistaken if I think that perhaps we all need a little humility? I know that some no longer give a willing ear to the mention of this virtue and I know that others stress more its exterior semblance than its substance.

Humility in the
mystery of Christ

But if there is one authentically evangelical virtue, it is really humility. All the mystery of the Son of God is a mystery of charity in humility, and does not all the mystery of the religious life draw its value and efficacy from conformity to Christ? "Our complete dedication to God makes us participate more profoundly in the life of Christ in the Holy Spirit".⁷²

If, today, therefore, humility is not acceptable to someone, is it not perhaps, because she has missed its true meaning?

⁷² C 1975 6.

Have we never thought that before humility is a behaviour to be assumed, it is a person to be loved and imitated? Only by meditating on Jesus and on the mystery of His life, can we learn what humility is and its true value.

In relation to
the Father

Jesus lived in a continuous, untiring contemplation of the Father's greatness and was completely penetrated by it. He refers everything to Him and attributes to Him all the merit of the plan of redemption.

If He states that He is the Master, the Way, the Truth and the Life, he confesses: "I have not come of Myself, it is the Father who has sent Me";⁷³ "what the Father has told Me is what I speak".⁷⁴ In all, with the sincerity of love, He acknowledges His indebtedness to the Father.

All His life is subject to the Father, the long mysterious shadow of the years of Nazareth, the narrow limits of His apostolate during His public life and His excruciating death on Calvary are a continuous repetition of "I always do the things that please Him".⁷⁵

In relation
to men

Jesus, humble before the Father, also presents Himself to men with the basic characteristic of meekness and humility of heart. He, full of grace and truth,⁷⁶ does not show off His wisdom, offers His word, but does not impose it, does not seek popularity, lives among fishermen as one of them.

He willingly remains in the shade and willingly submits to Mary and Joseph. Though He is God, He bows down before John in Baptism; He tells

⁷³ *Jn* 7, 28.

⁷⁴ *Jn* 12, 20.

⁷⁵ *Jn* 8, 29.

⁷⁶ *Jn* 1, 14.

the apostles that He is among them as one who serves; He allows Satan to tempt Him in the desert and when He works miracles, He brings into relief the faith of the one favoured rather than His own power.

Though omnipotent, He submits to constituted authority, while declaring to them that He is the Son of God, and in the our of Gethsemane He does not hide His fear, He shows Himself in all His human weakness; He falls on the way to Calvary and confesses His anguish in His agony: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"⁷⁷

Therefore when Jesus wished to indicate to His disciples a way of perfection, He did not say: "Learn of Me to work miracles", neither explicitly, "Learn of Me to pray", to be simple, prudent but presenting Himself as Model and teacher said: "Learn of Me, for I am meek and humble of heart".⁷⁸

The teaching of Jesus alone can make us discover true humility and His grace alone can liberate us from the counterfeit which is worthless for the human person and for the community.

Repeated declarations of our insufficiency, timid attitudes of inferiority can be far from evangelical humility, so also an impeccable correctness and irreproachable self-control, qualities very praiseworthy in themselves, could be merely an external veneer but not the humility which Jesus wants from us. The parable of the Pharisee and the Publican offers much food for meditation.

True evangelical
humility

What, then, is humility? It is the expression of a great love of Jesus illumined and dominated by His truth.

⁷⁷ *Mk* 15, 34.

⁷⁸ *Mt* 11, 29.

Humility is the splendour of truth in charity. It makes us adore the Father as Jesus did, saying: "You alone are Holy, you alone the most High", and with the psalmist it makes us repeat: "What is man that you should keep him in mind? You made him a little less than the angels; with glory and honour you crowned him".⁷⁹

This splendour of truth attributes to the eternal wisdom of God our life project which He reveals little by little, and does not permit Him to ask Him "why", but makes us repeat with Mary, the most perfect of all the humble: "Be it done to me according to your word".⁸⁰

This same splendour of truth makes us see in God the giver of every good; through it we feel it a duty to put all the gifts of mind and heart which we have received from Him at the disposal of the Superiors and the community and we acknowledge and appreciate His gifts in our Sisters. It is of this that the Constitutions remind us: "Each one of us humbly and simply recognises, in the spirit of the Beatitudes, the gifts of God as well as her own limitations, giving of her best, in availability to her Sisters".⁸¹

Humility not only makes us give all we have for the common good but it makes us love and serve all gratuitously, irrespective of the merits or gratitude on the part of the recipient.

Jesus again gives the example and teaches us: "The Son of man has come, not to be served but to serve"; "He who wishes to be the first among you must be the servant of all".⁸²

If we are convinced that in the community ours

⁷⁹ *Ps* 8, 5-6.

⁸⁰ *Lk* 1, 38.

⁸¹ *C* 1975 32.

⁸² *Mk* 10, 44-45.

is a gratuitous service it comes natural to descend from the pedestal of superiority, which more or less consciously we have built up in our relations with others, and put ourselves on the level of sister to sister, of imperfect person with imperfect person and in humility of heart let us learn to serve one another and to obey her who has been placed in authority.

The individualistic mentality will, then, vanish, and we will become capable of collaborating, of carrying on a discussion or an activity without allowing our ego to predominate but only and always for the glory of God and the common good.

We thus shorten the long discussions which often are but a waste of time and energy; experience teaches that it is far more advantageous to the Church and to the Institute to keep the discussions within the terms of reference of the study or problem in hand; that more time be given to prayer and more attention to charity. Our words will, then, carry more.

The habitual interior glance at Jesus and His life, makes us assume, little by little, His language which was so transparent in its simplicity. Our expressions won't lose their propriety and depth, rather will they be enriched by the quality, now very rare, of simplicity. Jesus always spoke in a language accessible to all "the things the Father had given Him"; He bore witness to the truth simply, without having recourse to dialectics.

From humility, regionalism and nationalism will also vanish. These are but deformations of true patriotism. In the light of truth we shall find the true paternal hand of God, who distributes His gifts to all peoples, and while we are grateful for that which He has given us, let us thank and adore Him for the gifts He has given to every other person, God resists the proud. Promising lives collapse and

are dried up because they have counted too much on self and have thus withdrawn themselves gradually from the beneficent influx of grace.

God, instead, fills the humble with good things and crowns them with victory.

On May 2 Father Leopold of Castelnuovo was beatified. There was nothing exceptional, nothing extraordinary about him, no outstanding discourse or action. He was a humble Capuchin entirely conformed to Christ, and like Him, entirely consecrated to the salvation of his brothers. Today crowds of people proclaim and invoke him:

Pius XI, on the occasion of proclaiming the heroicity of the virtues of Mother Mazzarello, said of her: "Her humility was so great that it invites us to ask ourselves what God sees in an humble soul, which, precisely on account of its humility, one might say, seduces Him, so as to make Him work in her and through her His greatest wonders".⁸³

We in our mission as educators and evangelizers need to humbly draw God into our pastoral action because only with His grace, can we have clear ideas, courage in action and that kindness which is a combination of strength and tenderness.

Some questions spontaneously spring to mind.

Let us ask
ourselves

- Have I studied Jesus' attitudes and expressions of in the Gospels humility?
- Do I adore Jesus in His profound humility, especially when He becomes my food in Holy Communion?
- Do I learn humble obedience from Him even when it costs me sacrifice?

⁸³ Cf PIUS XI P.P., *Discourse*, in *Quaderni FMA* n. 1 p. 8.

- Do I overcome the temptation to think myself better than others?
- Among the Sisters am I the one who serves or who wishes to be served?
- Do I co-operate with my Superiors and Sisters or do I easily keep aloof and criticize them?
- Do I trust in God's gifts: intelligence, physical energy, etc... more than in God, source of every good and of every gift?

May our Lady Help of Christians, who in the revelation-dream of his mission was John Bosco's teacher in humility with these words: "Become humble", teach us also this basic virtue of sanctity and apostolate.

(Cir. n. 592 - May 24 1976)

Understand and live our unity in Christ

We have all read this year's Strenna, "*To Bring Christ to the Young*", in the January circular, together with the commentary so paternally given to us by Very Rev. Father Ricceri. It stimulates us to be more sincere more practical and more persevering in our tension towards holiness.

We have, besides, reflected on the incomparable gift of grace, without which, even our most generous efforts cannot bring about holiness.

We become
holy together

We must now add that we cannot attain holiness on our own but only together with our Sisters, our young people and all those who come in direct contact with us.

As I have said before, only the life of grace can create true community-communion among ourselves and between us and the children.

In God's plan "by a gift of the Holy Spirit and

through the direct intervention of Mary we, FMA form within the Church a community of consecrated apostles".⁸⁴ We are not individuals but a community. In our profession we made a definite choice of a communitary life in which we can and wish to become saints together.

Therefore we made an implicit profession of faith in the effects of the life of grace within us. These effects are those created by Baptism which incorporate us with Christ Jesus that we may form one Body with Him, the Mystical Body of Christ that is the Church.

Our Father, Don Bosco, also reminds us of this in quoting from St. Paul: "Through grace the soul is incorporated with Christ and united with Him to all His members". In fact, the apostle makes this a basic theme of his letters, putting all its aspects, one by one, before us. "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members, though many, are all members of the body, so also is Christ. (...) Now you are the Body of Christ and individual members of It".⁸⁵

We are all of us, then, involved in the defence, development and growth of the Mystical Body of Christ. St. Paul again tells us: "Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow in every way into Him who is the Head, into Christ from whom the whole Body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love".⁸⁶

Therefore, each of us has a special function, respon-

⁸⁴ C 1975 1.

⁸⁵ 1 Cor 12, 12, 27.

⁸⁶ Eph 4, 15-16.

sibility and gift of grace. In the strength of this each can transform and build herself in Christ and give to others an effective contribution in their transformation and upbuilding in the Body of Christ.

I wanted to remind us all of these fundamental pillars of community life, so that we may not build it on fragile psychological reasoning, which is of short duration, nor on technical strategy which collapses at the first impact of inevitable difficulties, but on theological reasoning which renders possible the construction on a rock of supernatural certainties. These alone, while giving soundness and stability to communion also give strength to our bonds of fellowship.

Understand and
live our unity
in Christ

An attentive re-reading of Father Ricceri's circular of last April (1977) — *'The Hidden Evil of Individualism'*, could persuade us still more of the necessity of our living together in the Mystical Body. I found this confirmed in a conference given by Mons. Pollano at our International Institute *'Sacro Cuore'*. "In one way or another everyone is a channel of the Spirit, and the Spirit who can enter others of Himself, and does so in a vertical manner, also wishes to enter us horizontally through others. Pentecost is not only a top-to-bottom operation, but one also from person to person. We must therefore become aware that to be community means to be bearers of a spirit who wishes to smile, give, love and become visible through our Human nature".

We cannot, then, retire within ourselves, isolate ourselves, act and live as though we were alone. With such an individualistic outlook we risk 'wrecking the whole plan of salvation'.

I have never forgotten an episode of many years ago which shows this reality incarnated into life. There was in the College of Conegliano a portress

called Sr. Margherita Genta, whose biography has already been printed.

She was portress for forty years and is still very much remembered for her charity towards everyone. To my request for a favour she answered with her unalterable kindness: "I will willingly do what you want, but let us first pray together because at this moment we are having a Latin examination". "WE are having...". She had so identified herself with the pupil who was taking the examination that she herself felt all the examination anxiety.

In a simple, but none the less effective, way she had given me a lesson in how to live the Mystical Body in a practical way.

Unless we make a renewed effort every day to see with the eyes of faith a member of Christ's Body in every person we have to deal with, if we cannot say with conviction even to those who cause us suffering, "what I do for you Jesus takes as done for Himself", we shall never form communion, but only a technicality of the common life.

To make a success of dialogue, of collaboration for an accurate interpretation of the service of obedience and of authority, for concordance and unity in plurality, there must of necessity be at the foundation, faith in the presence among us of the Risen Jesus who unites us all in Himself by the Spirit and by grace.

The root-grace
of community -
communion

The root of community life is grace which is our communion with God, as is also, clearly underlined in Art. 28 of our Constitutions. There it is stated that "our religious family finds the most significant reason for its existence in the communion with the Trinity". Only if we live this communion in depth, will there flourish in our communities the blessed family spirit which help us "to tread the path of love not only in important matters, but chiefly in

the ordinary circumstances of life".⁸⁷

At this point the discourse our Father, Don Bosco, made with such realism and so many wise counsels on charity becomes revelant. I invite you to read it in the first few pages of the Manual. It could make our community a truly educating community in the fullest sense of the word. In fact it could create an atmosphere of supernatural certainties in our houses from which there would spring that joyful enthusiasm which is the result of authentic educative work which, in its turn, becomes effective.⁸⁸

The Eucharist is the chief, authentic source of the family spirit. This is the truly great grace of communion which builds up the community and gives it the interior leaven of warmth and of joy.

Daily Mass for us and Mass as often as possible for the girls will give us an increasing conviction of our failings, shortcomings and limitations. These demand continual personal conversion and continual indulgence toward everyone, because no one can consider herself better than others. It will enlighten us with the word of God, insert us into the death and resurrection of Jesus and step by step will transform us in His life.

Mary, Mother
of Grace,
guide and model
of community
communion

Who will be our guide in the work of community-communion? No one is better able to do this than our Heavenly Mother, who with St. Joseph allowed herself to be penetrated by the atmosphere of divine charity emanating from Jesus in the little house of Nazareth.

You will have read in the *Notiziario* the well-thought-out homily given by Father Egidio Viganò, the Rector Major, on his first visit to our Generalate. Among other things he said that our Congregation

⁸⁷ C 1975 31.

⁸⁸ Cf C 1975 64.

was born and grew because our Lady willed it and that it will be renewed in the measure in which our Lady again takes the place given her by our charism.

(Cir. n. 611 - February 24 1978)

An updated community

In this pre-capitular climate, which becomes ever more hopeful, because signs of the special assistance of our Lady and of the Holy Spirit in the preparatory work are ever more evident, we finish the reflections made on the community over the past months, by asking ourselves this question: Is ours an updated community?

It would be useful to read the April-September circulars and to look up the *Acts of the XVth Chapter* on community and apostolic life before giving an answer. We should thus have a clearer idea of the perennial values on which religious and community life is based, and the indispensable means of realising wisely the updating required by times and places.

With great, perhaps too great facility, because it is fashionable, we speak of 'aggiornamento' and openness, but it may well be that we are not equally prepared to seriously set about the preparation involved.

Jesus in the Gospel admonishes us: "And indeed, which of you here, intending to build a tower, would not first sit down and work out the cost to see if he had enough to complete it?"⁸⁹ This divine teaching is set by St. Luke between two categorical

⁸⁹ Lk 14, 28.

Is ours an
updated
community?

statements of Jesus: "Anyone who does not carry his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple";⁹⁰ and "Salt is good, but if the salt loses its taste how can it be seasoned again?"

It is good for nothing but to be cast out".⁹¹

The constructions to which the Divine Master calls us are raised with the strength of His grace and the wisdom of the Cross rather than by subtle reasoning and technical equipment.

Art. 7 of the Constitutions [1969] specifies that the FMA "consecrated to God and living in the likeness of Jesus Christ embodies in the environment in which she lives, the spirit of the Beatitudes and collaborates so that the building of the earthly city may always have its foundation in the Lord and tend toward Him.

In this way she realises her own personal vocation to the full, so that, although certain rights and values, which no doubt, are to be highly appreciated, are renounced by the profession of the evangelical counsels, this is more than counterbalanced by the resulting purification of the heart and spiritual freedom. Thus by its very nature, this profession is a great aid to the real development of the human person".

The updated
community

Having premised the evangelical conditions and the prescriptions of the Rule which cannot lead us astray regarding 'aggiornamenti' let us say that the first areas in which the renewals hoped for by Vatican II and XV th General Chapter should be evident are our Communities.

A greater attention and respect for the person should make a mutual sense of confidence more

⁹⁰ Lk 14, 27.

⁹¹ Lk 14, 34-35.

evident, reciprocal relationships more fraternal, community information more habitual, more cordial, participation in planning and actuating the various activities more active and real, also the periodic check up of same to avoid errors, improve the various sectors and co-ordinate the different initiatives.

Authoritarian impositions and adolescent contestations no longer find place in an evangelical and updated Salesian community. Neither individualism nor centralization should any longer exist.

The thought and example of our saints

They never did exist in the spirit and practice of Don Bosco who established a family climate of consultation and dialogue from the beginning of his work. We read in the *Memoirs*: "Don Bosco frequently called the assistants, the teachers, heads of study, the Catechist, the Prefect, discussing with them what they had observed in the house. This continuous interchange of ideas and observations encouraged those who had to stay in the midst of the boys, and kept the Superior in touch with everything".⁹²

His recommendations were insistently these: "We work together and we rejoice together; therefore let there be unity among us".

"In the second place there must be unity of spirit and will. What is the spirit that should animate this body? My dear sons, it is charity. Let there be charity in correcting and tolerating one another; never complain about one another; charity in sustaining one another; charity above all, in never speaking ill of the members of the Society.

This is a most essential thing in our Society; because if we wish to do good in the world it is

⁹² MB VI 395.

absolutely necessary that we be united among ourselves and rejoice in the reputation of the others".⁹³

Let us animate ourselves to do good, to practise all the rules, to love and esteem one another as brothers. Let us pray that we all form a single heart and soul to love and serve the Lord.

I recommend to the rectors of houses that they hold meetings of the members as frequently as possible to treat of their own affairs and of those of the boys".⁹⁴

We read of our Saintly Mother Mazzarello, in Maccono's biography: "She was vigilant that community life should not take on a rigid character or worse still, a coarse or sullen one, but that it should be as in fact, it was, pervaded by sweetness, amiability, cheerfulness and joy according to the spirit of the founder. In fact Cardinal Cagliero writes: "Close to her heart was the desire that the family spirit should reign in the Community, and that the same bond of unity, charity and solidarity should among Superiors, Sisters and assistants... knowing full well that this was also the desire of the paternal heart of Don Bosco".⁹⁵

In her method of government, prudent, maternal, respectful of persons, she questioned and listened to her counsellors, the Sisters, even the most humble and illiterate, so much so that Don Maccono gave this testimony "She acted with such simplicity and humility as to appear more an elder sister than a Superior".⁹⁶

Let us model
our communities
on their spirit

May the thought and example of our saints help us to model our communities in their spirit. The

⁹³ *MB IX 574.*

⁹⁴ *MB IX 356.*

⁹⁵ *MACCONO, Santa I 289-290.*

⁹⁶ *Do 243.*

animating and unifying centre of these should always be the local Council and where it really functions, the Sisters are helped and in their turn bring a contribution of experience to the Council.

There is never more family life as when there is this unity; the heart is comforted, energies multiplied, people become spiritually and professionally more mature and the community becomes truly educative and apostolic. There is no longer a flight from daily duties in search of more congenial occupations, because one believes in the efficacy and incalculable of even an obscure work greatness. Our Father, Don Bosco, warmly recommended: "Let us renounce individual inclinations and let us try to form a single body. Let no one refuse any appointed task, even when it is tiring and goes against the grain".⁹⁷

Accomplished only for the glory of God, and in perfect accord with His will, persuaded that, as Don Bosco says: "God does not look at the kind of job, but at the motivation of he who does it";⁹⁸ a person's work not only produces peace of spirit, but also creativity, whereas independence gives an artificial and provisional character to what is done even with much exterior noise.

In fidelity to the rule and to one's duties which become its daily dynamism an updated community becomes a suitable instrument for the opening up required by the times and by the Church.

Our Sisters, steeped in piety, rich in humility, in charity, penetrated by the spirit of the founder in the past hundred years, have opened and closed works according to the exigencies of place and the needs of the times with the simplicity proper to the

⁹⁷ *MB X 1071.*

⁹⁸ *MB VIII 829.*

Institute. They have obeyed with true fidelity and worked with generous dedication and the power of God has fructified their work.

There remains for us but to do likewise in that dynamic fidelity which, while it binds us to the past, makes us, as the Church desires, attentive to the *signs of the times*.

The ecclesial
conscience
of the FMA

The XVth General Chapter has stimulated our "ecclesial conscience" by bringing into light by means of the 'Acts of the Chapter' the ecclesial character of our Apostolic mission received *through the mandate of the Church*, as a participation in its *salvific mission*. It said "the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians express their ecclesial conscience with the spirit of Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello, giving themselves, according to their specific apostolic activity, in the parishes, suburbs, missions preferably to poor children, according to the methods proper to the Institute; collaborating in Catholic associations in parochial and diocesan consultations, and in other national and international church bodies, with temporary or permanent functions".⁹⁹

The Manual specified the ways and norms of his collaboration in the work of the Church in the '*Dispositions Regarding Apostolic Life*' which we would do well to re-read especially in the section that concerns us.

The Chapter also gave precise indications for a theological and Salesian basis of our religious life and for living, in an ecclesial dimension, our vows, community life, spiritual life. Where these directives and dispositions have been carried out, results have been evident in the life and work of the

⁹⁹ Acts' CGC FMA. *Apostolic Life*.

Sisters, of the young people, who have been formed to assume their obligations in the local Churches. But the field of our mission is taking on ever more vast and more urgent proportions, because so many young people, dazzled by erroneous ideologies, being exploited by material cultures and civilization are often abandoned to themselves.

Updating
ourselves in
fidelity to
Don Bosco

Today more than ever we need to update ourselves in fidelity to Don Bosco, and to believe in the present day validity of his educative system and in the charismatic strength of his spirit.

Should we not, perhaps, ask the Lord's pardon for having allowed ourselves to be taken in by new educative orientations and for having overestimated the means offered us by modern progress, neglecting perhaps, the supernatural spirit which is the soul of our Salesian educative system? This danger, which was already feared by that great teacher in the field of education according to Don Bosco, Mother Emilia Mosca, who gave to her teachers and assistants this warm recommendation: "I want you to remain attached to Don Bosco!"¹⁰⁰

The Council and the Holy Father Paul VI, have repeatedly exhorted religious "to be faithful to the spirit of their Founders, to their evangelical intuitions, to the example of their sanctity, finding in it one of the principles of renewal in progress and the most secure criteria of that which every Institute should eventually undertake".¹⁰¹

Studies, meetings, days of reflection in these years have had as an aim to give a Salesian, updated aspect to our Youth Pastoral, but if faith is to penetrate

¹⁰⁰ GENGHINI Clelia, *Un anno di assistenza sotto la guida di Madre Assistente: Sr. Emilia Mosca*, in *Quaderni delle FMA* n. 11.

¹⁰¹ *ET* 11; cf *PC* 2.

the entire life of the girls, we must live and testify among them to faith in words, in values, in all our actions and in our way of life.

This faith, brought to life in the Sisters and in the Communities is the 'aggiornamento' of which the girls today have urgent need, because beyond their somewhat disconcerting expressions, there is, in them, a profound, if unconscious need for God. When an educator helps them to discover God, and makes them see and hear Him in their lives, they will rarely withdraw themselves from her influence and the grace of God will intervene to reveal the mysteries of His love for us. This is the greatest and most fundamental discovery of an existence, the one capable of orientating and sustaining in the vicissitudes of life.

May our Lady help us to realise these miracles of grace, which are those of a true salvific mission as our educative apostolic action should be.

(Cir. n. 578 - November 24 1974)

The Salesian family spirit

The community
in the light
of theological
principles

Post-chapter evaluations have greatly stressed the formation of true Salesian Communities and, thank God, we are already seeing good fruit.

We must be grateful to our Salesian brothers, who by their words during retreats, in various courses, have given us the theological, ecclesial, Salesian foundations of community life.

We are particularly grateful to the Holy Father, who often refers to the community as the Mystical Body of Christ.

We need but study paragraphs 18 and 21 of "*Redemptor Hominis*" to understand the dimensions our charity must have in community life.

What richness and value our community life acquires in the light of *Redemptor Hominis!* Some Sisters are making a very fruitful study, comparing various articles of the Constitutions with passages of the Encyclical.

Not less fruitful is the work being done, especially in Latin America, to integrate the study of the Constitutions with the Puebla Document, particularly the parts which deal with consecrated life, community and evangelization.

Gradually, as "with one heart and one soul we reach out toward the fulness of God's love and that of our neighbour... each one of us lives in God, and God, who is love lives in us".¹⁰²

However, as we have said in another circular, the spirit of the evil one tries in every possible way to prevent us from being united. But we can overcome him by making a resolution not to live "*according to the flesh* (our desires, our tastes, our opinions), *but in the spirit*", (according to the Gospel and Constitutions), trusting in the power of the Holy Spirit, who can change us and who wants us to change, pouring the charity of Christ into us Himself.

Salesian Family spirit

In our Salesian communities, charity takes on the characteristics of the family spirit, that is made up not so much of theory as of concrete, practical, simple actions, in ordinary everyday situations, and in our interpersonal relationships.

I stress this family spirit in the practical circumstances, because this is the realism that our saints exemplified, and is a very Salesian characteristic that perhaps, we are, in part, losing and must recover.

¹⁰² C 1975 29.

Let us reflect.

— Is it not true that we may be capable of giving elevated talks on charity, documenting them with scriptural texts, and

- we do not make the effort to collaborate in our communities?
- we may not accept those who have a different mentality or tastes?
- we do not give our Sisters that peaceful word, or show them a cordial welcoming attitude?

— Is it not true that at times, even with best of intentions, we get ourselves involved in unnecessary initiatives, so that the burden of work creates tensions, and we find no time to be together in recreation for peaceful sharing of ideas and relaxation?

At Valdocco and Mornese where there was certainly plenty to do, they avoided this danger, and were able to be closely united among themselves and uplifted by the serene, lively happy recreations.

If we re-read our Constitutions and Manual, from the point of view of community, it will help us to recover various values that are specifically Salesian, but which have been somewhat toned down, and we shall be able to revive them, taking into account the changed requirements of our culture today.

Living with the girls

A **specific Characteristic** given to our communities by Don Bosco is that of **living with the children**. If we are losing this we are no longer Salesian communities.

The fact that in some of our houses we rejoice, because there is *peace* for days on end, because there are no children to *disturb* us, shows a sad lack of concern for the *da mihi animas*, which

made so many of our Sisters consume their lives generously and happily among young people.

Here are some statements taken from a conference by Don Colli: *'The Salesian Community at the Service of Youth'*. They will enlighten us and makes us reflect.

"Young people are not an appendix, added to Don Bosco's educational work. They are an integral part, they are a constituent element... This is the aspect that makes the Salesian community different to any other religious community that is consecrated to the education of young people.

The presence of young people at the heart of the Salesian community not only determines the structure, conceived totally for their good, but also the rhythm and style of life.

The fact that our vocation demands not only a life consecrated to the young people, but lived with them, gives an unmistakable mark of youthfulness to the Salesian house. This atmosphere which is lively, happy, full of inventive freshness, threatens to disappear when we no longer have the custom of living with our young people.

The classic place for meeting on the personal level, is the playground in a Salesian house.

The boys surrounding Don Bosco on the playground during recreation time were many, but each one of them knew that he was present to Don Bosco. A continual dialogue went on with all of them and with each one of them in joy and spontaneity. Something similar happened at Mornese.

Because the educators shared in their life, the young people were brought to a more intense participation in the life of the Salesian house, they felt that it was their house. The participation went from the minimum-response to their educational

needs, to the maximum — sharing in the life and apostolic fatigue of the Salesians.

Don Bosco was convinced that God sent vocations to the house.

(Cir. n. 630 - October 24 1979)

Remembering Mornese

The date of this circular fixes for me a dear and much desired theme, a theme which is obligatory: *Mornese!*

A re-immersion
in the spirit of
the origins

On next August 5th, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians could have no other spiritual meeting place than the house which is the cradle of our Congregation.

While we shall all be there in spirit, we shall be personally represented by the Mothers of the General Council and the Provincials, who will represent every house and every Sister of the Institute.

These will be days of past memories, of prayer and renewed resolutions; days which we hope will crown that personal and community renewal which these months of preparation have had in view. May this August 5th then, mark the **re-birth in Mary and through Mary** of each one of us and of the whole Institute.

Our own saintly Mother, Mary Mazzarello will be awaiting us there, as also will be our father Don Bosco, so that we may receive a re-infusion of the true spirit of our beginnings and may take another look at the plan established for our Institute by our true Foundress, Mary Help of Christians, that it may fulfill her wishes in a better and more complete manner, regarding its aims for holiness and apostolate in the Church.

The '*Notiziario*' will give you details of the festiv-

ities taking place. Instead, I prefer to recall to mind with you the people, words and events connected with that memorable and blessed August 5th, 1872.

These form a clear fountain from which we may drink deeply in order to gain strength to renew our promise of ever greater generosity in fidelity to our vocation as Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

The birth of
the Institute

The '*Cronistoria*' gives a faithful account of the simplicity and humility with which the function was held at the moment chosen by God for the birth of the Institute.

It was August 5th, the day dedicated to our Lady under the meaningful title of *Our Lady of the Snows*, as if to symbolize the characteristic virtue of the new religious family about to be born into the Church, and it was also the anniversary of the dedication of Mary's great Basilica, St. Mary Major.

This was the day on which the holy Founder made a definite response to his intention of consecrating a '*living monument*' of gratitude to his Madonna by founding an Institute consecrated to her.

Present at the function were Don Bosco, who had arrived in Mornese the evening before, the Bishop of Acqui, Monsignor Sciandra, Father Dominic Pestarino and other priests of the little town and its surroundings.

Don Bosco had assured Don Pestarino repeatedly that he would be present for this occasion, and one day had confirmed this promise with the words: "Tell those good Daughters that I shall come and together we will confirm our great promise to live and die working for God, under the beautiful name of Daughters of Mary Help of Christians".¹⁰³

¹⁰³ MACCONO, *Santa* I 201.

The moment had at last arrived. There were fifteen in all and together they presented themselves at the altar, where the Bishop blessed the religious habit and asked them the ritual questions. The Sisters retired and dressed themselves in the brown habit and light blue veil, They then returned to the Chapel and the four novices, Corinna Arrigotti, Maria Grosso, Rosa Mazzarello and Clara Spagliardi approached the altar to receive a medal which was a replica of the one issued for the Consecration of the temple of Mary Help of Christians. It bore on one side the inscription 'Mary Help of Christians, pray for us' and on the other the facade of the Church at Valdocco; still one more assurance that the Institute is also a temple dedicated by Don Bosco to his Madonna!

As the Bishop distributed the medals he said the following words: "Here, my Daughters, is the image of her whom you are pledged to imitate. The Catholic Church proclaims this Heavenly Mother the sure Help of Christians. Love her! Imitate Her! Often have recourse to Her! No one ever had recourse to Her without having been graciously heard".

The novices responded with a prayer, "Most Holy Virgin, dear Mother of Jesus, powerful Help of Christians, true comfort of my soul, from this moment on I place myself in your hands. Protect me, defend me and help me to persevere in God's holy service" These words of the Institute's first novices are the consecrated seal of its marian character. The Daughters of Mary Help of Christians must be living copies of Mary — helpers of Christians with the help of Christians.

When the four novices had left the altar the Bishop turned to the remaining eleven Sisters who, replying to the ritual questions asked them, expressed their firm will to consecrate themselves

to God by religious Vows. Sister Maria Mazzarello was the first to pronounce the vows. She was followed by Sister Petronilla and Sister Felicina Mazzarello, Sister Giovanna Ferrettino, Sister Teresa Pampuro, Sister Felicita Arecco, Sisters Rosina and Caterina Mazzarello, Sister Angela Jandet, Sr. Maria Poggio and Sr. Assunta Gaino. They then received the crucifix as a seal of their consecration. went to sit with the other priests.

At this point Don Bosco humbly turned to the Bishop and almost pleaded with him to address a few words to the new religious. However, the Bishop resolutely replied: "No, no, you, Don Bosco, must speak to your Sisters"! He then rose and went to sit with he other priests.

Don Bosco's
Words

Don Bosco, deeply moved, began to speak. He stressed the importance of the action just completed, the sacredness of the vows and the obligations they imposed. He prudently hinted at the ill-will which they might meet and told them that all the works of God are sealed with suffering, but this would increase their holiness, because it would keep them humble.

The conclusion of this discourse is a complete programme of life and also a prophecy. He said: "Among the smallest plants there is one which is frequently referred to in the Sacred Scriptures. It is the sweet-scented spikenard. In the Office of Our Lady we say: *"Nardus meus dedit odorem suavitatis"*, (My spikenard sent forth an odour of sweetness). Do you know what must be done to spikenard to make it give out its aroma? It must be crushed, therefore, do not grieve at having to suffer. He who suffers with Jesus Christ will reign with Him for all eternity.

You now belong to a religious family **that belongs entirely to Mary**. You are few, without means, and

without human approval. Let nothing worry you. This will change quickly and you will not know where to put the many children who will come to you. And it will not be children only, such a large number of postulants will come that you will find it very difficult to choose from among them.

Yes, I can assure you that **the Institute will have a great future if you remain simple, poor and mortified.**

Glory in your beautiful title of Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and ponder often the thought that your Institute *must be a living monument* of Don Bosco's gratitude to the great Mother of God under the title of Mary Help of Christians".

When the ceremony was over the Sisters came silently out of the Chapel but they were aglow with interior happiness. At last, Sr. Maria Mazzarello broke the silence with a cry which overflowed from the joy of her heart: "Oh, let us become saints; we must become saints!".

The day passed with happy songs interspersed with grateful prayers. The saint's biographer declares: "The pure holy joy they experienced made them feel they no longer belonged to this world".¹⁰⁴

Before taking his leave Don Bosco spoke to them again during the afternoon: "you will acknowledge Sr. Maria Mazzarello as your Superior and as such you will listen to her and obey her. However, for the present, she will bear the name of Vicar, because Our Lady is the real Superior!".

These words of Don Bosco stress once again that since our Lady inspired the Institute it would and must be guided entirely by this good Mother.

¹⁰⁴ MACCONO, *Santa* I 205.

Now let us take a look at those who, among the first fifteen novices and Sisters are worthy of particular note. They are the pillars of the Institute and have a message which will be an inspiration as we lead our lives as Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

The first FMA

I will not speak to you of the *cornerstone* of the Institute, our own *Mother Mazzarello*, because all of you know her life and virtues well. Let us rather call to mind those other humble souls who presented themselves at the altar on that memorable day, clearly understanding the import of their consecration, which they subsequently lived to the full becoming the standard type of the true Daughter of Mary Help of Christians.

I shall begin with Sr. Maria Poggio who, as our Saint used to say, was the first Daughter of Mary Help of Christians to open a house in heaven. She was cook at Mornese and was outstanding for her humility and love of silence and sacrifice. She died on January 1874 scarcely eighteen months after her profession.

She was followed in a few months by Sr. Corinna Arrigotti. Attracted by the piety of our Saint, this Sister received the religious habit but was forcibly taken away by her father. Despite of severe trials she remained faithful and succeeded to return to the Institute where, after a few months, she became ill. She died exclaiming: "I die happy because I am a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians!" She could be considered a martyr of fidelity to her vocation.

Sr. Maria Grosso died in the April of 1876. She had grown up from childhood under the influence of our Saint and was clothed with the religious habit at the age of seventeen. Her motto was: "I will be all for God, with Mary Mazzarello". At

nineteen years of age she succeeded Sr. Felicina Mazzarello as Novice Mistress, an office which she fulfilled with much discernment.

She fell ill and to those novices and Sisters who were praying for her recovery, she said: "Why do you try to prevent me from going to heaven? Do not all of us long to go there?" She died in an act of perfect conformity to the will of God, repeating till her last breath; "*Fiat voluntas tua!*".¹⁰⁵

Sr. Assunta Gaino was heroic in her spirit of humility and penance and was on fire with love for God. During her last days she was able to give wonderful testimony of herself saying she that was more conscious of the presence of God than the presence of creatures. Asked what she had done to merit such a privilege, she answered: "I know of one thing only and that is, I have never, since my entrance into religion, neglected a single inspiration from God". She died at Nizza in June 1886.

On August 1st of that same year, our Saint's sister, Sr. Felicina Mazzarello died. Sr. Felicina possessed more than ordinary virtue, especially in her spirit of sacrifice and piety. She was the first novice mistress in the Institute and the first to leave Mornese to found a house in Borgo San Martino. She was Superior there and later became Superior at Chieri and in various houses in Sicily. As she lay dying she was asked for a few words as a souvenir. She said: "I leave you that which has been deeply engraved in my heart all my life: 'the pleasure of dying without anguish is worth the anguish of living without pleasure'".

Sr. Teresa Pampuro was Mother Mazzarello's companion right from the opening of her workroom in Mornese. She worked in Salesian houses with a

¹⁰⁵ Cf MACCONO, *Santa* I 338-340.

great spirit of faith and sacrifice seeing in every priest an '*alter Christus*'. Her observance of silence was perfect right up to her death, so much so that she was known as 'the angel of silence'. She bore witness to the spirit of Mornese by her exemplary life and her vivid memories of the early days. She died at Nizza in February 1908.

Mother Petronilla Mazzarello, our Saint's great friend, was the most authentic witness of the life and virtues of Mother Mazzarello.

She was the personification of the life of Mornese and kept the torch of that spirit alight right up to her death, reminding all, by her actions and words, of the sanctity of the first beginnings.

She lived to a ripe old age, as our saint had prophesied, and died in January, 1925.

Sr. Rosina Mazzarello outlived all those first sisters. She was cook in the Salesian house at Lanzo and died there in 1928 after giving great edification by her fervour and cheerfulness and by the unmistakable characteristics she bore of the primitive spirit.

May these great and lovable figures be present before us as torches to enlighten our path and spur us on. Times have changed, conditions have greatly altered but the living spirit of those dear Sisters and the virtues with which they permeated the house of Mornese making it a cenacle of divine love are still realities since all that is spiritual is beyond time and space.

May the centenary date of August 5th carry us all back to that authentic source of our original spirit, the spirit of Mornese.

Chapter IX

A HIDDEN BUT PRECIOUS FORCE

In the Salesian style of the "family spirit" Mother Ersilia has a special thought for the elderly and sick Sisters, to whom she, more than once, sends a message all for themselves.

She considers them efficacious "ausiliatrici" in every work and initiative of the Institute. Their life, in fact, identified with that of Christ crucified, is a richness for the Institute and the Church.

Most incisive is her reference to Mary, who on Calvary brought to completion the "fiat" of the Annunciation.

Singular "ausiliatrici" of the Congregation and of the Church

The centenary

I have addressed a circular to all the Sisters informing them about *our centenary*, encouraging them to pray and make firm resolutions for a real spiritual renewal.

But I feel the need of addressing a special word to you, dear sick and elderly Sisters, whom I consider to be singular helpers in every work and in every initiative of the Congregation.

In my heart I see you in the infirmaries of our Institutes, in the houses of retirement, in the beds of hospitals; I see the marks that illness has left on your suffering bodies; I intuit your secret pains, your possible loneliness and I listen to the generous offering that each one raises to the Lord.

Suffering - a new consecration

Truly, in you, dear Sisters, is accomplished "the new consecration of suffering" which makes your religious consecration more rich and resplendent.

I want to assure you that I am very close to you and that I consider your life today no less useful than when you had your health.

Jesus, who took upon Himself the mystery of suffering, unites in close intimacy with Himself those who are under the Cross. Mother Mazzarello said, as she looked at the crucifix: "He here and we here".¹

Your life, so identified with that of Jesus crucified, acquires therefore, a great richness and you can offer it for the Institute, for the Church, for the whole world.

Do not worry if you cannot always pray as you

¹ MACCONO, *Santa* II 117.

would like. God looks at the prayer of your heart and of your suffering body.

You can, from your bed, adore the Lord on all the altars of the world and visit in particular the tabernacles of all our houses. You can, with your offerings, participate in all the apostolic activities of our houses and be "ausiliatrici" to those Sisters who labour in material and intellectual activities, in assistance, in the various apostolic and missionary works.

You can help the Superiors, the provincials, Mother General and all the Mothers, and through the mystery of the communion of saints, extend your help to the Pope, the Bishops, the priests and the entire Church.

I know that you already do this with great generosity.

Your offerings and the religious expression with which you present them to the Lord touch us deeply. I wish to interpret all the Sisters of the Institute in telling you of our sincere gratitude, our affectionate thanks for all you have given us already and for that which you will give us during this centenary year.

You will be in the vanguard of our helpers and we count on you, on your prayers and offerings to obtain the spiritual and apostolic fruits that we hope for.

The list of initiatives, the programme of the ceremonies and the feasts will be sent to all the houses. I entrust everything to your fervour, to your generosity. If you will be our Moses, our Cyrenean, we are sure that fruits of sanctity will not fail in the Institute.

I trust that the necessary care and treatment will be available for every one of you and while I thank

the Superiors and infirmarians for what they do for you, I ask them to express, in their affectionate assistance, my thanks and that of the Congregation to you.

(Cir. - September 24 1971)

A perfect "yes" to the will of God moment by moment

Even though the liturgy does not celebrate today the feast of our Lady's Dolours, we cannot do better than recollect ourselves in filial meditation of this mystery.

It comes spontaneously to you, dear elderly Sisters, to draw near to our Lady of Sorrows and see yourselves united, rather identified with her on the way of the Cross.

The "*fiat*" of Calvary was for our Lady the culminating point of the "*fiat*" of the Annunciation: Is not your "*fiat*" to the crosses and illnesses of today the summit of the "*fiat*" of your profession?

Precisely because this "*fiat*" is more painful it is more precious, more acceptable to the Lord, and brings you many graces, which you pour out over the whole Institute, over the whole Church.

Precisely because I see each one of you, dear Sisters, in the light of this generous "*fiat*", which so enriches you, I come today to make a request of you in the name of the Institute.

The XVth
General Chapter

You know that the *General Chapter* is rapidly approaching and that in the provinces and at the centre there has been and continues a praiseworthy activity in preparation for it.

God will surely bless these labours and will render them fruitful for the good outcome of the Chapter.

Of you, dear Sisters, I ask a very special help. I know that you pray much and willingly offer your sufferings to the Lord for the Chapter but may I ask you to unite in a fervent crusade, which we can call the "Yes" crusade? *An ever more perfect "Yes" to God's will, moment by moment.*

The "YES"
crusade

What should the Chapter be if not a total 'yes' to the will of God, sought by all with purity of intention for the good of the Institute?

We need to know well this divine will, and to remove all the obstacles that could prevent us from accepting it.

You, dear Sisters, who are purified by suffering, are more clear-eyed to see and help us to see in the true light the perennial values of the Institute which God wishes to preserve, and also the new ways that He would have us open up for the good of the Church.

Your "Yes" which you will generously offer to the Lord will be transformed by Him into so many rays of truth for the Chapter.

Thus you too will be "*Capitular*" Sisters. Invisible, yet active, you will bring the fire of the Holy Spirit into the work of groups and assemblies, and you will contribute to that unity of mind and heart, which will ensure the presence of Jesus in our midst.

I thank you most cordially on behalf of the whole Institute and I thank the dear Superiors and infirmarians, who with their charity interpret our affection and thanks to you.

May our Lady comfort you with her maternal blessing and bring you with mine the affectionate greeting of all the Mothers.

(Cir. - September 15 1974)

Support in our initiatives

In times of particular importance I have recourse to you as to a sure support in our initiatives.

I am thinking just now of what the Salesian Bulletin wrote last April on our houses of retirement.

I come therefore to you, dear elderly and sick Sisters, to ask you to set a great spiritual movement in motion.

The "campaign"
for vocations

This month's circular announces a great campaign to be carried out in the coming month: *the campaign for vocations*.

You well know that the question of vocations is one of life or death for the Institute and is one of enrichment or impoverishment for the Church.

You, who love the Church so well would like to be in the front lines for the campaign in favour of it and the Institute.

The offering of your daily suffering, accepted with a love that is ever purer from the hands of the Lord, will be your first contribution to the happy outcome of the campaign.

But as it begins in the month of Mary, I will indicate three means of making it a fruitful Marian campaign.

Means to make
it fruitful

1. *The daily recitation of the Magnificat*

Lending your voices to all the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians you will raise for each one of them a daily song of praise and of thanksgiving to God for the inestimable gift of our Salesian religious vocation.

2. *The attentive recitation of the Angelus*

To obtain for all the Daughters of Mary Help of

Christians that they be living witnesses to a total donation to God, in the first verses kindly renew for all the Sisters their fidelity to the vow of chastity, at the second, fidelity to the vow of obedience, at the third, fidelity to the vow of poverty. Our religious witness is a magnet for other vocations.

3. The fervent recitation of the holy Rosary

With your Ave Marias make a round of all the oratories, schools and centres where young people are found in our houses.

Do this in Mary's company, that she may raise up many vocations, may help them cultivate sacramental piety, stimulate them through the example of their assistants and teachers and lead them to maturity.

My dear Sisters, the vocations are there; they are there because Jesus always attracts. We must prepare His way in hearts.

You, I am sure will do this so fervently that you will bring to the Institute and the Church a fresh blossoming of apostles.

With this confidence I thank you and assure you of a special remembrance from myself and all the Mothers. We are always near you in affection and regret that distance does not allow us the joy of meeting you more frequently.

May our Lady bless you for this campaign, and associate you ever more closely to her unconditional 'Yes'.

(*Cir.* - September 8 1976)

Anthology in praise of Mary Help of Christians

I have told you many times that you are the precious "channels of grace" in the Institute, enriched every day by your prayers and your "yesses" of generous adhesion to the will of God.

And every time that there is a necessity, a particular initiative in the Institute my recourse to you is spontaneous and full of confidence.

For the
re-launching of
the devotion to
Mary Help of
Christians

Could I not but do it on this occasion, on which the authoritative word of Don Bosco's VIIth successor, Rev. Don Egidio Viganò, invites us earnestly to work with all possible fervour for the restoration of the devotion to Mary Help of Christians to the place given her by our charism in the Salesian family?

You have read the '*Notiziario*' and the February *Circular*; you will read the next issue of the '*Notiziario*' and the next *Circular* and from them you will see the Marian ferment is already in action, thank God, in all the provinces.

I have just come back from Venezuela, and while I thank you for the precious support you have given me through your prayers, I can tell you that in the American Provinces I noticed the great desire there is to love our Lady and make her loved.

And then why do I write to you? That you may pray, that you may be generous with your offerings for the good success of this marian commitment. Indeed, I am certain that every house of retirement, every infirmarian, every dear elderly and sick sister knows how to find the best means to make devotion to Mary Help of Christians grow.

Special
contribution

But this time I ask you for a special contribution. You surely have in your hearts a wealth of memories that are a great treasure for the Institute.

I mean souvenirs and memories of special interventions of Our Lady who became your 'Ausiliatrice'.

- in the marian education given you by your mothers (who knows how beautiful prayers you many learned from her and still remember.
- in the story of your religious vocation
- in your apostolate among the children, the girls, the families.

What graces of Mary Help of Christians you can testify to! What beautiful memories of Superiors, Sisters, or young people who were specially devoted to Mary Help of Christians!

How many spiritual transformations, conversions and perhaps personal experiences of Mary's help! And besides, how many memories of feasts, novenas, of fervent months in her honour!

Could you not write all of this (if you can) or tell it to someone who can write it, or better still tape it?

The result will be a real anthology in praise of Mary Help of Christians which will help to animate the younger Sisters and also the girls.

It is such a beautiful activity that you will be rejuvenated.

And when the Provincials, the Superiors visit your houses, together you can prepare a little feast in honour of Mary Help of Christians and one item of the programme can be your Marian narratives, which can then be repeated in the various communities.

Thus you will still be performing a great apostolate, you toward will contribute effectively renewing the devotion to Mary Help of Christians, and all will enjoy her protection in an even greater way.

I thank you in anticipation for all the fervour you will put into this particular task; I greet you one

by one and I invoke for all of you the heavenly consolations of our Ausiliatrice.

(Cir. - March 7 1978)

A secret but inestimable power

Perhaps I am not far from the truth in thinking that our dear elderly and sick Sisters will be saying among themselves: "Now that we are approaching the centenary of the death of Mother Mazzarello and coming up to the Chapter Mother will surely write a letter just for us.

You have guessed right! I have had it in mind for some time now but I was waiting till nearer Christmas to send affectionate greetings also in the name of the other Mothers.

You have guessed right and you know the reason.

Centenary of the death of Mother Mazzarello and the XVIIth General Chapter

Many initiatives have been planned for the centenary with the aim of bringing about in the Institute a fervent spiritual renewal such as Mother Mazzarello would certainly desire.

The General Chapter will have to finalize the Constitutions, to present them for the approval of the Church and together we will assume the responsibility of observing them faithfully.

All this requires a lot of thought, study and organization and needs strong and expert workers.

You, my dear elderly Sisters, who, living the third stage of your life are so rich in experience, and you, dear Sisters, who through your sickness share more closely the Passion of our divine Lord, have your hearts and souls free from so many passing things and are open to the acquisition of true values, to vast horizons; you are a force, a secret but inestimable force in the preparation for the centenary and the Chapter.

You are like an engine in a machine, and you will be so much the more powerful as your prayers and offerings are rich in love. St. Paul says that love is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit; to obtain it, therefore, we must earnestly ask for it for ourselves and for the Sisters.

Here is the first thing I am asking of you: to make the dispositions of our Lady in the cenacle your own and *never to tire of invoking the Holy Spirit again and again.*

Invoke Him with Mary and with all the angels of our houses.

Your "*Veni Sancte Spiritus*" inflamed with love, will be the ones that will prepare the Pentecost in our Institute.

The fire of love enkindled in your hearts will spread through the community in the flames of charity that gave warmth to the life of Mornese and will give warmth to all our Salesian houses.

And here is the second request I make: in the 'Introduction to the Manual' we find the inspired words that Don Bosco wrote concerning *fraternal charity*, they are wise considerations, practical norms that experience and the light of the gift of Counsel suggested to Don Bosco to make charity triumph in our houses.

Read them attentively, reverently, and with the earnest desire that they be practised by all the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

If you feel you can do so, also take upon yourself, for a certain period of time, the task of praying and offering that one or other of these exhortations of our holy founder will be lived in the community.

The third and last thing is an *ejaculation* that I ask you to repeat very often, a short prayer that we have drawn up, including in it the words of Mother

Mazzarello herself: "O Saint Mary Mazzarello, who said: '*A Sister who truly loves Jesus will always be in harmony with all*', obtain that all the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians may be such.

Amen!

(Cir. - November 24, 1980)

Chapter X

SPECIAL FEATURES OF THE INSTITUTE: APOSTOLIC - EDUCATIVE

An educative presence among the girls, lived in the spirit of the preventive system, is what is specified for us in the sphere of the salvific mission of the Church. Mother Ersilia is, therefore, anxious that there should be a constant commitment to the vital study and assimilation of the preventive system in the Institute, so that everywhere the educative charism of Don Bosco may be realised and effectively practised in response to the various situations of the surroundings. It is a gift that has been given to us for the salvation of the girls.

Consecrated for the good of youth

Charity, “shed in our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us”, is “The first and most necessary gift that has been given”¹ in every Christian life and finds its completion in loving God above all things and our neighbour for love of Him”.² In addition, through our consecration, we are appointed “by a new and special title... to the service and honour of God”.³ Through the evangelical counsels and the apostolic life we have been united in a special way... to the Church and His mystery”,⁴ and made participators in His salvific mission.

Apostolic
community

Our Constitutions, when defining the nature of our Institute, read as follows: “The Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians is a religious congregation in which apostolic action and service belong to the very nature of religious life, in so far as it is a holy service and a work of Christian charity, entrusted to the Institute by the Church and to be carried out in her name”.⁵ And even more explicitly, Article 61 says: “The Daughters of Mary Help of Christians are called to follow Jesus Christ and serve Him in His members thus contributing to the redemptive mission of the Church. Every community of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians therefore, is an *apostolic community* participating in the solicitude of the Church that the splendour of God which brightens the face of Jesus Christ may shine upon all men”.⁶

¹ *Rm* 5, 5.

² Cf *LG* 42.

³ *LG* 44.

⁴ *LG* 44.

⁵ *C* 1969 1.

⁶ *C* 1969 61.

This is the specific aim for which our Institute was founded. It responds to the charisma received by Don Bosco for the good of the Church.

The charity which animated our saints urged them to enter the salvific mystery of Christ, viewed chiefly from the preventive viewpoint; to protect and save young people, especially the most needy, spiritually and materially. Our saints devoted all their strength and their whole lives to these.

Our founder and father never stopped repeating to those who advised him to be more moderate in his work: "As long as there is a breath of life in me I shall consecrate it to good works and to the spiritual and temporal advantage of young".⁷

Don Maccono, the biographer of St. Mary Mazzarello writes: "From her love of God was born a great love for her neighbour, especially poor girls whom she loved with great affection".

The particular character of our Institute is, therefore, apostolic-educative. This means for us that the education we must give must be an integral Christian education, the kind defined so well in *Gravissimum Educationis*: "This is not just a question of the maturity proper to the human person... but it aims chiefly at having baptised Christians, gradually initiated into the knowledge of the mystery of salvation, grow more and more conscious of the gift of faith which they have received... and be prepared to live their lives according to the new man, in justice, sanctity and truth and so reach human perfection, the stature of the fulness of Christ and give their support in increasing His Mystical Body".⁸

This is the task that is pointed out to us in diff-

⁷ MB XVIII 457.

⁸ GE 2.

erent words by the *Schema sulla spiritualità e L'apostolato delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice*: "Faithful to the spirit of their founder, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians shall base their educative work, not only on rational human principles, but above all on supernatural principles drawn from the springs of the word and grace of God, in the conviction that God is the only one who can educate and save efficaciously".⁹

Christian education, in fact, while it demands our active cooperation, still depends in its ultimate objective and transforming action, on the grace of the Holy Spirit active in souls. Clearly, our educative work must tally with the plan of God for each individual soul and at the same time be acceptable and in line with local and up-to-date requirements.

From these general premises, which can also serve as an introduction to the study we are going to make, we can draw some conclusions which we must practise in our lives.

From the
spiritual
view-point

By our very vocation as Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, whatever our sphere of activity, whatever the task on hand, we are and must be souls consecrated to the good of the young. The word *consecrated* is Don Bosco's. On the lips of our Father, who seldom used unfamiliar words, the word *consecrated* is charged with meaning. It implies that *our service of God*, our consecration to Him can only materialise in the total dedication of ourselves to this end.

That does not necessarily mean that we must all be dealing directly with young people. Sisters working in the house, those engaged in secre-

⁹ *Schema* 43.

tarial and administrative work and all the sick Sisters — these can and must co-operate in the Christian formation of the young people entrusted to us, by the generous offering of their hidden work, or their suffering and inaction and by their prayers.

The important thing is, as stated in Art. 61 of the Constitutions, that “the entire religious life should be penetrated by an apostolic spirit just as the entire apostolic activity should be animated by the religious spirit”. Prayer, obedience, charity, perfection in the fulfilment of duty, all this is a tremendous source of energy for the completion of the mission entrusted to the Institute by the Church.

How many of our Sisters, humble and out of the limelight, have thoroughly grasped this obligation incumbent on them by their vocation and fulfilled it completely! Choosing at random from the *Biographies of our Deceased Sisters* I have found examples in those humble sisters, who understood and really lived their apostolic vocation as Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

Sr. Isabelita Scapardini was a truly apostolic soul who gave herself up entirely to a life of work and sacrifice, especially in Andalusia, among working-class girls and oratorians. To anyone who tried to make her slowdown she would reply “Don Bosco never got tired of being with his boys”. Writing to the Superior General she described the children among whom she worked as *niñas pobres*, and called them her “joys” and her “pearls”.

She worked with the bigger girls until late in the evening, even when tired. She would listen to them, advise them and encourage them in their daily difficulties.

In her kitchen, Sr. Vittoria Minetti made it her

duty to share in the educative mission of the Sisters. "Even though I cannot teach I must still do good to the girls", and she offered her silent immolation for them.

"Even though I cannot teach, I must still do good Sr. Amalia Maggiorotti once met Don Rua jokingly made a pun on her name: Sr. Amalia, you must "ammaliare" the children and lead them to God!" Sr. Amalia made this her plan of campaign. Assistance, catechetics, workroom, school, hostels for working girls — she was engaged in all these works in succession and sometimes simultaneously, without ever 'counting the cost'. She was always surrounded by crowds of children and girls. It seems incredible that she could have attended to everything and yet the power of her zeal urged her on, carried her, as it were, and would never call halt!

Sr. Virginia Rossetto, a generous missionary and a truly apostolic soul, lived by her motto: "Suffer anything, even death, for the sake of leading souls to God!"

A Mexican Sister, Sr. Agrippina Landin, at her profession fully grasped the obligations of her vocation: crucified by the vows to save souls. As a sewing teacher and assistant of the boarders and oratorians, she dedicated herself to her task in such a winning way that she managed to bend even the most difficult characters. Her special favourites were the poorest and most neglected girls in whom she saw the supernatural presence of Christ.

During the 1913 Revolution, most of the Sisters left Mexico and went to the U.S.A. However, Sr. Agrippina, who was already poor in health, volunteered to stay where she was in order to continue giving spiritual help to the pupils and oratorians. Her apostolic zeal was quite heroic: ...Oh!, if only I

were lucky enough to give my life for the children I love!”

I could go on quoting examples of this kind, but I leave it to each one of you to go back to these genuine sources of our spirit. I shall now deal with the second consequence of the premise we began with.

From the
informative
view-point

It becomes increasingly necessary to create an apostolic atmosphere in the community. All the Sisters must be conversant with the problems connected with the activities of the house and with those of the children and girls attending it so that a genuine “educating community” can be established. Such a community will be aware of the common responsibility and all the Sisters will be geared toward the achievement of the same aim.

Regarding this point, one must realise what our father, Don Bosco did right from the beginning of the Congregation. Don Ceria writes: “One of the means used by Don Bosco to instil the proper sentiments into his sons and to consolidate the newly-approved Congregation, was to summon them often to hold meetings together.

At the meetings Don Bosco acted more like a father than a superior. He would make them acquainted with his ideas and proposals, make them more and more keen on his activities and avail of their help to give greater coordination to the community”.¹⁰

The local superior should keep her sisters informed of the apostolic work being done in the various areas of the house, the initiatives being undertaken, the results achieved and also those problems that could be of common concern, engaging all the Sisters in an active collaboration of prayer and offering.

¹⁰ MB XI 157-158.

The Sisters in Salesian houses have their own apostolate of prayer for the Salesians and the young people entrusted to them. In addition, however, they should be kept informed of the various initiatives and needs of our oratories, colleges and schools so that they can offer up their work for those intentions also.

In particular, the dear sick Sisters, "members of Christ, in whom the new consecration of suffering is being fulfilled",¹¹ should be informed of the needs and apostolic activities of the Institute. This will enable them, for their consolation and comfort, to share in a particular way in the apostolate of the Institute for the salvation of the world",¹² through the precious offering of their suffering and inaction.

There is a very praiseworthy tradition in some provinces of sending to the Sisters in Salesian houses and to the sick Sisters the programmes and dates of the various apostolic activities in our educational establishments.

Naturally, the Superior is the person responsible for bringing any useful information to the notice of the community. She will not do it for the sake of satisfying anyone's curiosity, but for the sake of the apostolate. The Sisters will be helped to select what really matters and to concentrate their interest and attention on that. They will not, in consequence waste time over trivial details. In this interest and attention on that. They will not, in way too the Superior will guide the Sisters as to how to give that sound direction which the girls expect to receive. Finally, the Sisters will reach that maturity which will make them true religious apostles, in other words, genuine Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

¹¹ *C 1969 39.*

¹² *Do.*

May Our Lady, Mother and teacher of Don Bosco, guide us all along the apostolic path which she traced out for us through our saintly father and founder.

(*Cir.* n. 532 - October 24 1970)

Seek the young people, know them

In my last circular (October 24 1970) I referred to the council documents, our Constitutions and the directions given by our holy Founders under the charismatic inspiration of the Holy Spirit. I brought out the apostolic-educative nature of our Institute and as a consequence of this, the specific objective of our vocation as Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, But that was only a starting point to deepen a vital facet of our religious life which is recognised in and by the Church as a life consecrated to God for the salvation of the young.

Vita aspect
of our religious
life

Article 3 of our Constitutions states this explicitly: The Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians is by its nature and vocation educative and missionary. Therefore, while the Daughter of Mary Help of Christians strives to realise the primary aim of the Institute, she must endeavour to fulfill its special purpose, that of cooperating in the salvific mission of the Church... She shall dedicate herself principally to the christian education of materially or spiritually needy children and young people, her preference being for the poorest". So we have been sent by the Church among young people, especially the most deprived, the poorest and the most needy; in this field the Church is counting on us. The Holy Father too, said so authoritatively to the members of the 19th General Chapter of the Salesians on May 21, 1965. Our Institute, like the Salesian Society, is, to quote His

Holiness: "A witness to the vitality of the Gospel and to the heart of the Church for the needs of the world especially the world of youth and of the working classes". And our Institute, like the Salesian Congregation, is invited to have confidence. In fact, the Pope stresses: "confidence in the aims to which your Congregation is consecrated: could they be more noble, more modern, more urgent and more in line with the apostolic programme of the Church today? You have made a good choice".

The sacred code of our religious life and the Holy Father's encouraging words urge us to go forward to meet the young, to seek them out and give ourselves to them with total dedication.

Let us take a look at our houses. Our schools in general, are still full, but is this so for our oratories as well? The oratory is the pulse of a Salesian House. A house is truly salesian according to whether there is a good oratory or not. Where there are no longer children there is no salesian life, because the specific mission of the Daughters of Mary help of Christians is no longer implemented. If, through lack of zeal, our houses become deserted by the young we are falling short of our mission in the Church as Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, even though there is more time left for prayer or other tasks.

Our first
commitment-to
seek the young

Our first obligation is to seek the young.

If our food supply were suddenly cut off and we were faced with starvation we would not just stand with our arms folded. We would pray and then do something about it. Now, our food, as Daughters of Mary Help of Christians as daughters of Don Bosco, is the young. If they diminish around us we cannot and must not resign ourselves passively, bringing forward a hundred and one reasons for the situation instead of facing up to our responsibility and keeping our objective firmly in view.

Let us begin first of all by raising the spiritual tone of the community, united in fervent, committed crusades of prayer, religious observance and especially of charity. Let us couple with this renewed spiritual pledge that of reflection and community study. Let us see together for what reasons young people are being drawn away from our houses; what initiatives we could set going to bring them closer to us. Let us study positive programmes of work to arouse their interest and let us all work together harmoniously in an apostolic and missionary spirit.

Soon after the house in Turin was opened, Mother Elisa Roncallo and Mother Daghero were disappointed because they did not know how to begin the oratory, a work for which they had been expressly called by Don Bosco. They decided to go up to the Saint's room and ask the question: "What can we do to have a large, flourishing oratory?" The Saint suggested to them with a good-natured smile: "Take these pictures and medals of our Lady and go for a walk through the streets in the area. Give every girl you meet a picture and medal. Ask them their names, if their mother and father are living, if they have brothers and sisters, where they go to school and so forth. Send your greetings to their mothers and invite the girls to come and see you. Tell them there will be games for them and a little present, Tell them that on Sundays, after the games, when they themselves will want to rest, they will be taken to Church for catechism and Benediction. They will come all right! Then say that if any of them would like to come to school, you would be glad to teach them for nothing".¹³

¹³ MAINETTI Giuseppina, *Madre Elisa Roncallo* (Torino, FMA 1946) 55.

Don Bosco's lesson, charming in its simplicity, teaches us to go out and meet the young, to dialogue with them and see into their environment, situations and interests. Love of souls will be our teacher as it was for Don Bosco and for those zealous Superiors.

The second commitment - to know the young people well

The second commitment by which we should all feel animated is to **know the young people well**. To know them as they are, positively, here and now. To know the oratorian, the pupil, the "figlia di casa" and so on: this child before us, all she is and all about her.

The servant of God, Don Rinaldi, said to the clerics of Foglizzo: "When you have to deal with a boy, you must watch him, try to find out his *good points* and his *inclinations* so as to direct and develop them. In addition to those there are *latent potentials* which we must develop and make fruitful by sowing the good seed in them. Then there are *bad tendencies* which will have to be uprooted, stamped out or re-channelled. This is the educator's mission. Study carefully the object of his concerns and efforts in order to use the appropriate means and obtain the best result".¹⁴

So let us study our girls in order to know them with their good and bad points. But let us do this with an understanding heart, faith and apostolic zeal. This knowledge must also extend to the family and social background of the girls because we all know how much, girls, particularly are influenced by environment.

They are just as much influenced today by the invasion and suggestion of mass-media and by the welfare and technical society in which they live.

¹⁴ VALENTINI Eugenio, *Don Rinaldi maestro di pedagogia e di spiritualità salesiana* (Torino-Crocetta, SDB 1965) 43.

Chief among the effects of these influences is the lack of depth and the stress on attendant problems leading to insecurity and to crises in moral values and in the faith itself.

Looking carefully we see that the picture of the young today is very complex. Hence, let us avail of past pupils and good catholics for information about environmental influences in our area, so as to meet local needs and offset existing dangers.

Create
a welcoming
atmosphere
in the houses

Let us be careful, above all to create a welcoming atmosphere and feeling of "at homeness" in our houses so that the girls will find themselves at ease, surrounded by sincere, deep kindness. This has to be the work of the whole community, from the Superior to the Sisters and the portress. We must all be conscious of our duty of warmly welcoming the children and girls who come to our houses, showing our care for them by our amiability, cheerfulness and goodness. We are all, according to Don Bosco, responsible for the formation of these souls.

If we are animated by the spirit of our saint, whose educative principles are as modern and valid today as ever, we too will be able to get the girls talking. We shall discover, beyond the sometimes disconcerting external forms and attitudes of modern youth, the deep needs of their souls and even the need they feel for support from mature people for the correct solution of their problems and for their formation.

Having recalled and meditated on these basic ideas, the following could be topics for our community meetings:

1. A check-up on our missionary-apostolic spirit in seeking the young;
2. A check-up on the attitude of the whole comm-

unity in welcoming girls and on the manner of treating them;

3. A check-up on the apostolic spirit of faith, goodness and understanding which we have to show when dealing with girls.

In houses where there are no young people because of the nature of the work being done, the check-up could be on the spirit of collaboration, prayer and sacrifice with which each sister co-operates in the salvation of the young.

And now, before concluding, since you will receive this circular before the novena of our Lady Immaculate, I invite you all to make it with the fervour of the early days of the oratory and of our Institute. The feast of our Lady Immaculate is, in fact, bound up with the beginning of the work of Don Bosco and the Institute. It has always brought an increase of operative marian piety even among our girls especially among the Sodalists.

May our Lady Immaculate renew us in our spirit of total consecration to God. May she shed her virginal purity in the souls entrusted to us and draw them to herself. And may we lead them to her in order that, being Consecrated to her, they bear witness to the grace of their baptism.

(Cir. n. 533 - November 24 1970)

Apostolic spirit

Continuing the topic of my preceding circulars, I saintly founder and father regarding our mission: saintly Founder and Father regarding our mission: we are and must be *consecrated* to the welfare of young people. This consecration implies the total dedication of ourselves. Therefore, our whole life, as *Perfectae Caritatis* expresses it, must be "pe-

Penetrated with
apostolic spirit

netrated through and through with an apostolic spirit and our whole apostolic work animated by the religious spirit".¹⁵

This *Apostolic Spirit* is what should urge us on, as I said in my last circular, to study the means and methods of approaching these dear young people, of seeking them out and attracting them. But this preliminary work of attracting souls must be followed by their Christian formation which is the very goal of our apostolic work. We can only achieve this Christian formation, which must come first in our list of priorities, by coordinating all our activity as a means to an end. We must be able to get across vital values more through the witness of our lives than by Words values in which the girls can see incarnate those ideals which they are secretly straining for and which they seek as the noblest fulfilment of themselves.

The first basic value we have to transmit to our girls is that of *our religious consecration* lived with intelligent, joyful and generous coherence.

Bear witness to
our Consecration

This witness of our life will make them conscious of genuine values far surpassing those which the modern world, through the means at its disposal, advertises as the chief benefits. In this way we shall appear in their eyes, as the Constitution *Lumen Gentium* says: "like a sign which can and must effectively lead all the members of the Church to fulfill the duties of their christian vocation with zeal".¹⁶

Let us make sure, then, that we live our consecration a hundred per cent, enjoy it and bear witness to it, aware of the immense gift which God

¹⁵ PC 8.

¹⁶ LG 44.

has given us in calling us to the religious life.

By our profession God invests our life: we become all His and every action of ours, like something sacred, aims at and ends in Him alone. We are, as Don Bosco said to the young Salesians, "sold to God".

Our vows, more than renunciation, are an enrichment, because freeing us from all impediments, they plunge us into the fathomless riches of God, help us "to advance joyfully in charity"¹⁷ and make us conform to the "type of virginal and pure life which Christ chose for himself and which His Virgin Mother embraced".¹⁸

Our girls want to see us bearing witness in full to the life we profess. Only on this condition will they open up to us completely because they will have found what they are looking for: someone with so much experience of God, such abundance of truth as to become their guide in life, the strength and measure of their experiences.

These will find many ways of expression and realization: dialogue, roundtable discussions, various devices... and the sister whom they feel is spiritually rich, who lives up to her principles and way of life while being at the same time alive to their problems, will be the concrete ideal by whom they will be inspired. Whether she is present or not, she will be the real soul and guide of their search.

Therefore, let us not minimise our religious life, deceiving ourselves into thinking we can be more acceptable to the girls. Some of these have affirmed: "We have seen you happy and strong in your faith and you have become a real meditation for us". If the Sister is really such, namely a truly consecrated

¹⁷ LG 43.

¹⁸ LG 46.

person, she will become a force, an ideal, a positive and permanent value in the eyes of the girls.

Our saintly founder and father was fully convinced of the conquering power of personal witness. We all know the words he said with the courage of the saints, to the minister Ricasoli: "Your Excellency, I should like you to know that Don Bosco is a priest at the altar, a priest in the confessional,, a priest among his boys, a priest when he is in Turin, a priest when he is in Florence, a priest in the houses of the poor, a priest in the palace of the King or of his ministers".¹⁹

The religious consecration, when fully lived, makes the Sister perfectly balanced; she listens, respects and faces up to everything with the eternal principles of the word of God. Self-controlled and open to others she can understand the girls' needs, take them to heart, take an interest in what the girls like, as Don Bosco teaches to do, so as to lead them on to love and achieve that high ideal for which we are training them. She is not dismayed by the forms and attitudes which girls today assume; rather, she can detect behind these appearances positive sides on which to build, to lead them to the goal which she never loses sight of: the salvation of their souls.

Educative tact
in St. Mary
Mazzarello

How many positive examples do we find in Mother Mazzarello's life of her marvellous ability in meeting, guiding and transforming subjects such as Corinna Arigotti or even Emilia Mosca who were anything but easy.

I should like to quote here, while exhorting you to read it in full in the life of our Saint, the truly educative tact, pervaded with apostolic zeal, which she used with two of the boarders who were jud-

¹⁹ *MB VIII 534.*

ged fit for expulsion: Maria Belletti and Emma Ferrero. The former had a background conducive to vanity, caprice and love of amusements and it seemed she could never be won over. However, Mother Mazzarello took Don Costamagna's advice to kindle a fire in the girl's heart because "if the house is on fire, everything is thrown out of the window". With endless patience, tolerance and understanding she satisfied her innocent desires and won her over, making her, not only a good christian but a model religious.

The second girl, Emma Ferrero, was the despair of everyone. She reacted strongly against her new surroundings which robbed her of her freedom and worldly relationships and amusements. "All our attention and care just made her more irritable still".²⁰ Yet, even in her case, Mother Mazzarello's prayer, patience and great love not only prevailed but changed her completely so that she became a religious.

These are the miracles which can be worked by those who live in contact with God and make their consecration the 'raison d'etre' of their life.

This is the first value which we have to personify to be able to influence the girls, we must also *transmit values enclosed in the Salesian spirit*. The means of doing this, according to Don Bosco, is assistance.

Reverend Fr. Pavanetti, in the precious "Quaderno" containing some of *his pedagogical conversations on the preventive System*, tells us: "The typically Salesian characteristic is assistance, which is a vital part of the preventive System. Don Bosco conceived the idea of assistance so that his pre-

Transmit the
values of the
Salesian spirit

²⁰ MACCONO, *Santa* II 119.

ventive system could exist". Assistance, as Don Bosco meant it, is "a loving dwelling together of fathers, sons and brothers to help themselves to live in the grace of God and aim at sanctity through the exact fulfilment of all their duties".²¹

It means, then, dwelling together, complete participation in the life and timetable of our girls; making their problems, difficulties, joys and sorrows our own. It means putting into action that *pedagogy of the heart*, as Don Bosco called it, based entirely on a great love for the young, a love which embraces everyone and yet goes out to each one in particular, to become a personal love.

This love will create in us that attitude of loving service which is the very essence of assistance. It will help us to discover the way into the hearts of the girls so we can work on them from within and exercise a truly formative and educative influence over them.

We have examples of Superiors and Sisters who coped with assistance exactly as Don Bosco desired. Just one example from these would suffice: Mother Emilia Mosca who, in her capacity as *Mother Assistant* has well incarnated Salesian assistance. The Servant of God, Don Rinaldi, could say of her: "Mother Emilia Mosca thoroughly grasped and practised Don Bosco's system in the education of girls. Try to be like her".

Let us re-read the precious diary left us by the late Mother Clelia: "*A year's assistance under the guidance of Mother Assistant, Sr. Emilia Mosca*. Let us read it not so much with an eye to the events and episodes recorded as to the spirit informing them. Above all, let us listen to her advice full of warning: "I want you to be real educators

²¹ PAVANETTI, *Il Sistema* 55-56.

according to Don Bosco and you should desire this as well. If you really do want it you will have to put your whole heart into it. No one more than an assistant or teacher can falsify the system of the Congregation if she introduces non-Salesian principles or methods, and the greater her degree of culture and efficiency among the Sisters and pupils, the greater the falsification will be. Be careful to keep close to Don Bosco!”.

The danger alluded to by Mother Emilia has increased in our day with the progress of modern pedagogy and especially with certain ideas which are gaining ground. But Don Pavanetti again asserts: “There is no question of the preventive system being surpassed or eclipsed. This remains true for various reasons: it is in keeping with the psychology of human nature which never changes, satisfies the real needs of the young and offers solutions which always are and always will be effective being our Lord’s own solutions, the spiritual and psychological efficacy of which experience has proven”.²²

Let us then, believe in our educative system, try more and more to acquire its spirit and to practise it above all by assistance.

(Cir. n. 534 - December 24 1970)

Privileged portion of our apostolate

In the preceding circular (May 24, 1971) we dwelt upon the necessity of encouraging the collaboration of the girls to render our work more effective. Today I should like to emphasise initiatives in favour of needy and forsaken children in order

²² PAVANETTI, *Il Sistema* 91-92.

that we may know all about the work many of our Sisters are carrying out with admirable generosity in the Institute and all of us may feel the urge of dedicating ourselves to this privileged portion of the apostolate.

Popular and
social works

I can see in my mind's eye the thousands of needy and forsaken children that I met during my journeys in the East and I think with emotion about the great variety of work undertaken by our dedicated sisters for the relief and the moral and material uplift of so many in need. I can see the magnificent work at Vyasaarpadi (Madras) founded by the lamented Fr. Mantovani and continued by the not-less-great Salesian apostle Fr. Schlooz. It is a true Social-Centre with a nursery, a school for mothers, a primary and evening School a clinic, a hospital and a leper colony. Our Sisters have been helping the Salesians there for the past two years. They have been occupied chiefly with the little ones and with teaching the girls needlework, typing and catechetics, as well as taking charge of the oratory. This year a community will be started there. This community will add to what is already being done the responsibility for the dispensary, the hospital and the school for training women in the duties of family life.

Almost all the houses in India have established oratories in the slum quarters of the cities, visits are made to villages, and dispensaries, even for lepers, have been opened. The schools too can be rated as social works in as much as they encourage culture in a country, where, because of the vastness of its territory, even the government cannot cope with every need.

In the College of Katpadi there is a well-organised social service centre in which the university students work.

In the heart of Madras, children are rescued from

the streets and a sectional professional school has been organized where these girls are offered the opportunity of learning a trade which will enable them to earn an honest livelihood. At Polur there are dressmaking classes for poor girls and at the end of the course each girl is given a sewing machine.

In China, the Philippines, Japan and Korea I was offered a picture of other not less important works for the benefit of the outcasts and the poor. In Hong Kong two of our Sisters make a daily visit to the Hospice for Incurables. This is a hospital for the poorest of the poor of whom many are abandoned even by their own relatives. The Sisters comfort them and prepare them for Baptism which they almost all accept before dying.

In Macau, besides the kindergarten and the free primary school for the poor fishermen's children who live in boats, a clinic is functioning. This is open to all for medical treatment and medicine.

In the Philippines, in Tondo, the poorest district of Manila, which is now known to everybody because of the recent visit of the Holy Father, the Sisters, besides their all important work of daily oratory and catechesis, are in charge of a very busy dispensary especially for young girls and mothers, to whom they teach every aspect of home-care. Unfortunately, a few days after my visit this great mass of huts was completely destroyed by a devastating fire. The Sisters, working side by side with the Salesians did everything possible to alleviate the distress of the poor people hit by this terrible tragedy.

Our other house in Manila is in the Balic-Balic district which is only a little less poor than Tondo. Still in the Philippines, our Sisters in the house at Canlubang go out to teach catechetism in the slum suburbs.

In Japan too, social work for the poor, orphaned and abandoned children is not lacking and there is plenty of catechetical instruction being given everywhere.

Much work among the poor is also being done in Korea. At Kwangju the Sisters assist in the school, give catechetical instruction and follow up the formation of numerous pupils. Our house in Seoul is in one of the most impoverished districts. At the moment our Sisters are dedicated to work in the kindergarten and to catechetical instruction in the slum outskirts as well. Soon a hostel will be opened to serve working girls seeking employment in the city.

All this is something of which, with great emotion, I was a personal witness. But as the other Mothers return from their visits to East and West they also speak of the crowds of girls who find in our houses food and assistance for social betterment, with the knowledge of the Gospel, the imparting of which knowledge is always the primary reason for our apostolic work. Work for the poor who are to be found always and in every place is flourishing everywhere. According to the words of Jesus, "The poor you have always with you".²³

I do not intend to describe all of the individual works. This you will find in the *Notiziario*. I limit myself to listing just a few of the outstanding ones:

- centres for imparting rudimentary knowledge to young people and adults;
- workrooms, professional classes for poor girls to enable them to earn a living;
- home economics classes for women;
- dispensaries and outpatient clinics;

²³ *Jn* 12, 8.

- charitable institutions;
- catechesis;
- whole day and daily oratories in the houses and in the slums on the outskirts of the cities.

Indeed, numbers of our Sisters under every sky are practising that norm of the Manual which says: "with the heart of the poor the Sisters shall go in search of those who are most deprived both spiritually and affectively, "giving precedence to that work which contributes to the advancement of human progress and the evangelization of youth, especially of the poor and abandoned".²⁴

Let us strive
to form the girls
to family life

But as that same Manual exhorts, all of us must be careful "to provide the young with a formation which gradually and soundly prepares them for family, social and professional life in keeping with the times, thus rendering them capable of assuming a responsible role in their own lives".

This is a fundamental duty of justice before being a work of charity it and it is a means of protecting the girls against the serious dangers which they meet with if they try to take their place in society, without the possibility of a due preparation.

Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello have given us an example of making "those among the young who are less gifted...²⁵ the object of... special concern", especially in class where we might easily be led to neglect them because they form a little obstacle to the progress of our work.

May the heart of the poor, which must always guide us in our work of education also guide us in the faithful fulfilment of art. 123 of the Manual which tells us, "In order that less-well-to-do youth may be

²⁴ M-R 1969 120.

²⁵ M-R 1969 122.

accepted in our schools and boarding schools the fees shall be... moderate". This is in keeping with our holy founder's command: "Seek souls and not money".

Daily Oratory

May our love for the poor lead us to offer ourselves generously for service in the daily oratory especially during the holiday period. Let us endeavour to arouse the sensitivity of our pupils in this providential apostolate. It is during the holiday period that many girls from poor families have no possibility of joining holiday camps and as a result roam about the streets lonely and abandoned. We all know the grave dangers they could encounter in the days in which we live. Perhaps their salvation is in our hands. What would Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello do in order to save them? Let us ask our Saints to inflame our hearts with their zeal.

A daily oratory, with a well-organized distribution of study, work, prayer, catechetics and entertainment, where the Sisters alternate in the work with past pupils is an apostolate truly blessed by Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello who opened their hearts to the poor of the whole world but began by giving themselves in charity to the poor nearest at hand.

(*Cir. n. 540 - June 24 1971*)

Priority of the Christian education of youth

Specific aspect
of the charism
of Don Bosco

Today I should like to listen with you to the voice of Don Bosco, to the words which he used to state clearly the aspect of our charism which he felt he had received from God for his specific mission in the Church.

Don Bosco insistently stressed:

"The Lord sent me to look after boys. I must there-

fore cut down on other work and keep myself fit for them".²⁶

"We must have as our primary scope the care of youth and any occupation that distracts us from this is not good".²⁷

"The aim of the Pious Salesian Society is to come to the help of *poor and abandoned youth*".²⁸

"As long as I have life, I shall consecrate it to the good of young people".²⁹

"When a boy comes to our houses, I am happy because I see in him a soul to be saved".³⁰

"A boy", Don Bosco often said, "more than we realise it, wants someone to broach the subject of his eternal life with him".³¹

With heart and mind always fixed upon his youngsters, in the delirium of his last days, Don Bosco cried out in Pietro Enria's presence: "Run, run quickly to save those youngsters! Mary most holy, help them... Mother! Mother!..."

And among his last lucid works there is his "arri-vederci" to his boys, given to Don Bonetti: "Tell the boys that I'll be waiting for them all in paradise"!

All these words (and they are but a few of many), which are so rich in human and supernatural love and concern for the boy's salvation, show clearly how Don Bosco, and we with him, are called in the Church to always give priority to the Christian education of young people.

²⁶ MB VII 291.

²⁷ MB XIV 284.

²⁸ XV 703.

²⁹ MB XVIII 457.

³⁰ MB VIII 40.

³¹ MB VI 386.

There will be circumstances, as the history of the Institute shows, in which we offer our strength generously for the good of many, other than the young, but our first mission is always among youth.

Our Constitutions show this clearly in articles 55 to 60. It is very important for each one of us to be intensely aware that through our profession in the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, *we are sent by the Church for the Christian formation of young people.*

This is the field in which we receive from God the graces to sanctify ourselves and save our souls; every other arbitrary, personal choice goes against the charism that the Church recognises as ours.

Our mission in
the light of the
Gospel

The inexhaustible wisdom and goodness of God raises up for every age and for every human need, new vocations that imitate the many aspects of the life of Christ, our Redeemer.

We are invited to contemplate and imitate the gentle figure of Jesus, the Good Shepherd.³²

I see from your letters that you are doing this with love, but I hope you won't mind if I ask you to turn your interior gaze to the episode narrated by Mark: "Jesus saw the crowd and was moved with compassion".³³

Only the interior touch of the Holy Spirit can help us to understand all the depth of meaning in that expression: "He was moved". It is not just a feeling, nor a natural compassion; it is the overflow of wisdom and pity; it is the contemplation of God in His infinite tenderness and deep understanding of the human situation, and the divine vision of every person in his wholeness.

³² Cf C 1975 57.

³³ Mc 6, 34-44.

“He was moved because they were like sheep without a shepherd”.

Jesus, with His divine glance, saw the enormous emptiness of truth in all these people. Only He could measure it; only He, who in the shadow of the cross could say to Pilate: “I have come into the world to bear witness to the truth”.³⁴

And Mark goes on: “And He set about teaching them many things”.

What things? Let us read again the truths that the Gospel puts before our eyes, especially in the Discourse on the Mount. There are words of comfort there:

“Come to Me, all you who are tired and overburdened, and I will refresh you”.³⁵ “Ask, and you will receive”.

There are also strong demands made:

“Strive to enter by the narrow gate”.

“Whoever wants to follow me must take up his cross”.³⁶

Some objections are foreseen:

“It has been said... but I tell you...”³⁷

“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away”.³⁸

When he had eased the torment of hunger for truth that had forced the crowd to follow him for hours, though they were unaware of this, He multiplied the bread and satisfied that immense throng”.

³⁴ *Jn* 18, 37.

³⁵ *Mt* 11, 28; 21, 22.

³⁶ *Lk* 13, 24; 9, 23.

³⁷ *Mt* 5, 22-45.

³⁸ *Mk* 13, 31.

When the meal was over, "Jesus went up into the mountain alone to pray".

Mark paints a vivid scene, rich in significance. The Heart of Jesus, the Good Shepherd is moved — it overflows with His truth. His love is also shown in a concrete way and the whole voice of creation is involved in His adoration of the Father.

The Saints modelled themselves on Him. One thinks of Don Bosco, of Mother Mazzarello, of Pope John Paul II, who fascinates the crowds, but first prostrates himself in deep prayer in the solitude of his chapel.

The contents
of our formative
love

I said that I would digress a little, but you realise that it was meant to help us realise more deeply the real content of our formative Salesian love.

The content is that which Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello drew from the love of Jesus, the good Shepherd, and which they passed on by the way they lived up to His love.

This is the whole substance of our youth pastoral action and is the aim of all our works for the young.

Thank God our houses are still full of children and young people, and we work hard for them, multiplying the means of formation, and, where necessary, material help too.

I think that no Daughter of Mary Help of Christians can say that she does not choose or love young people before all else, and that at the offertory of the Mass each day she does not renew the total gift of her life for them.

However, do we always love with the real "compassion" that Jesus had? or should we ask Him perhaps to make our hearts more sensitive so that we may feel His concern for every young person who comes to our house — no matter who

she may be? Do you think this kind of love is linked with our charism?

If we have made praiseworthy efforts to study the various aspects of our charism and the way to live them, have we also spent time adoring and thanking God, the giver of all good things, for having given to Don Bosco, to the Church and to the Congregation the inestimable gift of our Salesian charism? Have we asked Him to give us a real understanding of it?

In those moments when we are "*on the mountain in prayer*", we realise more fully that the strength of our consecrated chastity must overflow into the love of an authentic spiritual maternity, a spiritual maternity that breaks through all the barriers of diffidence, that softens rigidity overcomes jealousy and favouritism, and creates a warm atmosphere in which hearts can expand, make their needs known, and reveal their weaknesses.³⁹

I would like to quote Mother Mazzarello's example again. She was so concerned for the moral and spiritual welfare of the girls, that her conversation in the playground was pleasant and instructive and she was so motherly towards them that they shouted for joy when she appeared among them.⁴⁰

We are not always welcomed with cries of joy from our young people; if at times we experience disappointment, lack of correspondence, let us repeat the hymn of charity of St. Paul so as practise it.⁴¹

The smile with which Sr. Teresa Valsè answered the girl who spat in her face, can teach us how this hymn can sing an heroic note in living our formative Salesian love.

³⁹ Cf *DBL* Roma, 10 May 1884.

⁴⁰ Cf MACCONO, *Santa* II 109.

⁴¹ Cf *1 Cor* 13.

Missionaries of
truth in charity

In these times in which many family, social and religious values are being questioned, it will be formative love that will help us to form upright consciences in our young people.

Let reflection, prayer and zeal for the *da mihi animas* make us missionaries of truth, through love, wherever we go.

“Truth is the power of peace”. This truth in love will open up horizons of hope for the future through the young people.

“You are the hope of the Church, the consolation of the Pope!”. John Paul keeps repeating to young people, and he says it with the intense feeling of the Good Shepherd, who does not take short cuts to truth.

Jesus, Good Shepherd, who promised young John Bosco: “I will give you a teacher”, grant that each day as we renew our consecration to Mary most holy, we may learn from her, the Seat of Wisdom, her love for souls and her zeal for their salvation.

(Cir. n. 634 - February 24 1980)

The true source of christian formation

Catechetical
renewal in the
Institute

A singular coincidence brought right into the middle of the centenary year the *tenth anniversary of the Catechetical Renewal*, which was organised for the Institute by the unforgettable Mother Angela.

Let us regard this date as part of God’s plan to bring us to a greater awareness of our correspondingly serious obligation in the practical field.

In April 1962 our venerated Mother Angela taking to heart Pope John’s words: “Catechesis is the constant preoccupation of the Church”,⁴² dedicated the

⁴² JOHN XXIII P.P., *Nella festività della Cattedra di S. Pietro*, 22 Feb. 1962.

whole of her monthly circular to catechesis.

The following June she proposed to the provincials the nomination of a provincial *delegate for catechetics and annual refresher* and *updating courses* for Sisters engaged in teaching catechetics in parishes and oratories. The implementation of these proposals was destined to give a vigorous stimulus to renewal in catechesis throughout the Institute.

But the strongest impetus was to come from the *International Catechetics Convention* which took place the following year. This proved to be a true course of real study which lasted about a month. It was directed by qualified Salesians and opened up new horizons both in methodology and in catechetical content to participants from many countries in the world.

December 1962 saw the launching of *classes for lay catechists in the parishes*. There has been a great deal of cordial and courageous responsibility exercised in the implementation of this scheme throughout the whole Institute over the past ten years and much approbation and encouragement has been received from the hierarchy, national and diocesan commissions for catechetics and parish priests.

At this point we ask ourselves: what, then has been accomplished during this period? How has it been accomplished and what still remains to be done in the light of our centenary renewal?

This calls for an evaluation and a programme.

An Evaluation

A. Much has been done:

a) in the field of remote preparation of qualified personnel by sending, at the cost of great sacrifice, Sisters of all nationalities to our Institute of Pedagogy in Turin or to other institutes of higher

theological studies, Sacred Sciences and Catechetical Studies in various countries.

b) In the area of proximate preparation by repeatedly organizing annual refresher courses, periodic meetings and study days for particular categories of Sisters everywhere, and by making the weekly community instruction in catechetics more lively and practical in accordance with art. 72 of the Manual.

c) Regarding classes for catechists, which increased in number, at least at the beginning of the period, care has been taken to come to a better understanding of the purpose of these classes, so that the catechists might become qualified for service in parishes, primary schools and oratories.

d) Regarding organization both at provincial and local level, the diligent functioning of the Provincial Delegate and of the Sisters responsible locally; Catechetical libraries have been updated; suitably equipped catechetics rooms have been set apart, and the field of pastoral catechetical action has been expanded to distant, difficult out-lying areas, hospitals, prisons and true mission fields both in pagan and de-Christianised regions.

B. How far and in what way have we committed ourselves to form an authentic catechetical mentality in order to re-adjust to the catechesis of the council and of our Special General Chapter?

The following will serve as a guide in our evaluation:

a) The Conciliar Documents, especially, *Dei Verbum* (24-25); *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (109); *Gaudium et Spes* (62-b-g); *Christus Dominus* (12 a-c, 13 a-c, 14a-c); *Apostolicum Actuositatem* (9b, 10a, 29 a-c); *Ad Gentes* (17a-c, 19b, 26 a-d); *Gravissimum Educationis* (4).

b) The catechetical directories, the basic plans, or their equivalent issued by the national' episcopal conferences, as for example, *Il Rinnovamento della Catechesi* published by C.E.I.

c) The *General Catechetical Directory*, issued for the Universal Church by the Sacred Congregation for the Clergy. Since this has been translated into the principal languages of the world it is a guide for all the countries.

d) Our own *Constitutions* (art. 4 and 148).

e) Our *Manual* (art. 113-118).

f) The *Outline of the Spirituality of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians* (Apostolic life, III, IV, V, VI, VII, VIII).

A Programme

I think such a programme, aside from taking its theme from our centenary and the decade already cited should also be based on *the Bible Year* which has been promoted by the Holy See.

As a foundation for all of this we can take what our revered Mother Angela wrote in her circular letter of October 7, 1963, which I invite you all to re-read attentively:

“Let us teach catechism well! We must give importance to our proximate preparation, which should be made up of prayer, study and suitable reading.

Let us give Catechetics the first place among the activities of the Houses. May our catechesis be functional always, without respite” (Cir. p. 1-3).

On this foundation which is binding for all of us, whether we are occupied in systematic Catechesis in schools, oratories outlying districts or youth centres, or whether ours is that occasional catechesis to which each of us is called at any moment of the day, we can fix on definite objectives which will keep our individual and community objectives alive:

1. A deep study of Sacred Scripture in order that God's word may become, as it did for our saints, an ever more satisfying spiritual food and at the same time the primary source of our catechesis. Well-planned Community initiatives to introduce Bible readings, especially the Gospels to Children and young people so that this custom may enter the homes and people may learn by loving it to live it.
2. An attentive eye on the directives of the Magisterium, not only to keep pace with it but also to gain the security we need regarding the theological content of catechesis in times as uncertain as ours.
3. Participation in liturgical life by a truly interior life of continuous involvement, in order to an ever-clearer understanding of the meaning of the signs, actions and language of the liturgy in regard to the mystery of salvation and to live it really coherently in our daily lives. This, especially the Eucharistic Mystery, is the point from which all our catechesis should begin and to which it should return.
4. Continuous effort by the whole educative community to see that catechesis, liturgy, group and community life articulate with one another so that the young will form a true, unified conscience.
5. Frequent examinations to eliminate, at least in part, obstacles arising from occupations, timetables, complex organization and unprepared personnel, all of which prevent catechesis from forming the basis of all the apostolic action in the houses; is catechesis examinations in which our method of looked at with a critical eye and if necessary revised; examinations to help the sisters overcome, if need be, the mentality which still regards catechesis as teaching matter only; exam-

inations in order to convince ourselves still more that catechesis today, like all our pastoral activities, must be based on the person rather than on programmes: the human person and that of Christ, the Son of God.

As we review the programme of the past decade we must make sure that importance is given to Community effort in securing efficiency to the:

— Annual refresher courses in catechetics (lasting at least two weeks) for Sisters responsible for oratory and parish catechesis, run by qualified people with unified programmes arranged in cycles.

— One-day meetings for teachers of religion, especially those teaching upper grades, deepen the content of their material, to exchange experiences, and to propose methods and techniques which are truly valid.

— Classes for lay catechists involving both two-year and three-year courses with programmes and methods adapted to individual groups. These programmes should be taken seriously and must be solid, supported by the Superior and all the Community.

— Courses in catechetics for parents, programmed at the level of true evangelization and catechetical pedagogy to benefit their own children and train them as *catechist mothers* for the parish and the home.

Awareness of our
responsibility as
FMA catechists

A sincere awareness of conscience to see that our reality as catechist-Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in the light of our centenary does honour to the catechists, Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello. May our reflections on the ten years of actual graces which the Holy Spirit has brought even to us through the mind, heart and action of our venerated Mother Angela inspire us with great courage!

I conclude by once again quoting her clear, motherly and encouragingly Salesian words:

“I entreat you, Sisters, not to be discouraged should the implementation of my recommendations cause you suffering and at times even a struggle. Take heart, have faith and be sure of victory. Let us begin at once, today... We must not consider we have done all we could when we have scarcely opened one eye; rather let us look, with both eyes open wide at all that has still to be done.

Let us take courage and trust in our Lady”.⁴³ (Cf Cir. letter Oct. 7th 1963).

With this courage and with confidence in Jesus and Mary Help of Christians let us also look with trust at all the human means and techniques that science puts at our service to help us with our catechesis.

Above all, let us strive after affectionate understanding action between Superiors and Sisters at both provincial and local levels.

Thus will be encouraged that cordial and fraternal collaboration among the delegates and the Sisters responsible for the various sections of the pastoral care of youth, so that the diverse activities, harmoniously co-ordinated, may receive impetus and direction from catechesis.⁴⁴ This is what Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello would say to us to-day!

(Cir. n. 554 - September 24 1972)

⁴³ VESPA A., *Circular*, 7th Oct. 1963.

⁴⁴ Cf C 1969 148.

Essentially catechetical apostolate

We have considered together the necessity of founding our educational work on the witness we give of our consecration and on our total dedication. This we do through the most characteristic element of our educational method, namely, assistance. We must now penetrate more deeply the knowledge and love of our apostolate.

Why should we give witness to our personal consecration and surround the girls with understanding and care, if not to prepare the way for their encounter with our Lord? All Christian and Salesian education has this goal. Our work is, therefore, first and foremost, an education to faith.

Our first duty is that of presenting the gospel message to our girls, and of basing our educational work, not only on rational and human principles, but above all, on supernatural principles drawn from God's word and Grace. This work inserts us through the medium of our Christian and Salesian vocation, into Christ's saving mystery of love. Our apostolate is, therefore, "*essentially catechetical*,"⁴⁵ for catechesis is the foundation, goal and unifying factor of our whole educational work.

Catechetical
apostolate
fundamental
component
of our vocation

The catechetical apostolate is, therefore, a basic element of our Salesian vocation. Our holy founder, as a child and later as a student, seminarian, and young priest could truthfully say: "It is my joy to teach catechism to young boys, to be in their company, to talk to them. And the Congregation which he founded was initially, as he said himself, just a *simple catechism lesson*. A very elementary catechism lesson in fact, the *Sign of the Cross*, set

⁴⁵ Schema 4.

in motion the marvellous apostolate of Don Bosco. It is, therefore, signed and sealed as a catechetical mission. This catechetical mission was fused by Don Bosco in a masterly way with the work of education, imbuing everything with a distinctly Christian motivation. He thus succeeded in *catechizing through educating* and *saving souls* through promoting the general welfare of the boys and interesting himself in all the trades and jobs that constituted their daily duties.

From childhood, Mother Mazzarello also, was like Don Bosco, outstanding in her love for Christian Doctrine. As soon as she was able to translate her zeal into action, she began teaching catechism. And as soon as she had opened the little oratory, she made it the centre of her educative work.⁴⁶ This zeal for christian doctrine and for teaching it and instilling in the Sisters their duty of doing the same accompanied her all her life.

On her death-bed one of her most earnest recommendations concerned the catechetical apostolate which must really be in keeping with its aim of Christian formation.

Our Institute has always had, following the example of our holy founders a great zeal for catechetical activity. We could, at this point recall a great many examples of zealous Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, who saw in catechetics the *raison d'être* of their apostolic vocation. To mention an example, Sr. Ernestina Fresia. Her life and name is tied up with the great work she carried out in many suburban parishes in Livorno. These were considered real mission fields and the prodigious apostolic and catechetical work she carried out there was in her

⁴⁶ Cf MACCONO, *Santa* I 95.

the clearest manifestation of her vocation. In all this she was animated by a deep interior life.

The areas in which she worked were difficult and hostile, but her love for God and souls so triumphed and transformed them that she drew from them a band of enthusiastic, ardent girls who appreciated catechism lessons. Sr. Ernestina's vibrating transmission of a message brought those girls into immediate contact with God. It was the study of truth and life in the light of truth which gave magnificence to her words. Thus, for her, a life of consecration in conformity with the rule, together with catechetical competence constituted a marvellous way of life".⁴⁷

To create an atmosphere of *supernatural certainties* we ourselves must first be penetrated with them.

Hence, we have a double obligation.

Penetrate, taste,
live the word of
God

1. *We must penetrate, relish and constantly love the word of God* from which springs and on which are based these *supernatural certainties*.

We must, therefore, make a willing and continual study of the divine word and of revealed truths, so that our catechetical activity may be formed of Scripture, liturgy and theology, church history and christian sociology. In this way, young people will become convinced of their faith and strong in their witness.⁴⁸

I hope that this individual and community study, conducted by means of religious-catechetical instruction is being done in all the houses and by everyone. I also hope that you are continuing to hold every year, at the most convenient time those courses of catechetical updating promoted by our beloved Mo-

⁴⁷ GIUDICI M. Pia, *Il bosco canta* (Torino, FMA 1961) 237.

⁴⁸ *Schema* 45.

ther Angela, with great apostolic zeal. She had succeeded in making us sensitive once more to our specific apostolate through her exhortations, circulars, congresses and fruitful initiatives.

Such courses, as well as pleasing the participants, met the need for a more thorough preparation for the teaching of catechism. They are, therefore, very necessary today, particularly in view of renewal in catechetical activity which is taking place in the Church.

Carry out a real education to faith

2. We must work among *our pupils, club members, domestic helpers* toward a real education in faith which will help them adhere freely and resolutely to Jesus Christ and make Him the centre of their lives. We must do through a programmed catechetical activity in the schools, youth centres and youth movements. We will thus create in them that mentality of faith which will influence their ways of thinking, willing and acting, rendering them truly Christian.

In this work of catechetical formation the lines given by the Episcopal Commission in each country should be followed. In Italy, for example, the *documento-base* should be well studied.

We should make it our business to know about the catechetical renewal which is taking place everywhere and actuate it in a spirit of service to the Church by educating the present generation to faith.

From this duty derives the task of communiterarily penetrating the essence and content of our apostolic-catechetical mission. For us, Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and of Don Bosco, this must take precedence over every other activity.

A true work of evangelization

We must persuade ourselves again and again that it is not a question of mere teaching, of passing on notions and formulae. It is rather the transmission

of a living and vital truth which transforms life. It is a real work of evangelization. It is not a matter of getting the children to learn something, but of presenting Jesus Christ, of transmitting His message and thus bringing souls to that communion with the Father and the Holy Spirit which He has come to establish. Catechetics thus becomes structured around its living and operative centre, Jesus Christ.

It is absolutely necessary therefore to study, to penetrate and assimilate the Gospel and Christian doctrine in order to be able to transmit it in its integrity, without diminishing, distorting or watering down its demands. These demands impinge on the whole of life. Our catechetics must bring forth an awareness and lead each individual to make his response to the Word of God. Then Jesus our Saviour will really become the salvific event, present in the daily vicissitudes of men. And our catechesis will be a path towards that adult faith which constitutes the fulness of the Christian life.

But the content of our faith must be presented today in a manner suited to the times and the modern mentality, if it is to secure adherence and nourish a strong enlightened faith. It is necessary therefore, to keep up to date in that work of renewal which is going on in the Church. This renewal must begin with the catechist. She must listen to, meditate on, and live within herself the Word of God. She must feel herself a witness to and participant in the mystery of salvation which she is announcing. She must regard herself as a messenger, a mouthpiece of the Church in whose name and at whose service she works for the building up of the mystical body of Christ.

Methodological
updating

It is necessary to combine with our interior renewal that updating which leads us to seek and use the most effective means that modern catechetical me-

thodology offers, without, of course, making these means the be-all and end all of catechetical activity. This constant concern to adapt ourselves will help us understand the situations, environment, demands and real problems of youth. It will also help us to inject into this whole context the message of which we are all the bearers; and finally it will enable us to transmit the message with a language which synchronizes with modern culture and renders revelation meaningful to men of today.

The work asked of us is not easy, but if we are animated with a true missionary spirit then catechesis will become for us, as it did for Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello, our first and most desired apostolic activity.

All are called
to an opportune
catechetical
activity

All are called to be catechists, therefore every Daughter of Mary Help of Christians must exercise this fundamental aspect of her vocation in one form or another, if she wishes to fulfil the role our Lady asks of her in the Church. Therefore, in any situation, she should know how to find ways, even through occasional contacts, conversations or correspondence to carry out an effective catechetical activity. For every enlightening word (and not only religious lessons as such) on God, on Jesus Christ, on eternal truths is catechesis and religious instruction. And all the more so, if this word becomes incarnate in a vibrant strength which invests the whole life and aims at giving a christian colouring to the situations with which we come into contact.

May our Founder, Don Bosco, whose feast we are preparing to celebrate, impart to us his catechetical zeal and communicate to us those holy initiatives which he was able to devise to bring souls to God. May Our Blessed Lady assist us and guide us in every step we take with her maternal help.

(Cir. n. 535 - January 24 1971)

Pedagogy of the last things

In last December's circular, (1971) we discovered together our authentic mission in the Church; we saw how our holy founders lived its charismatic character and found that it was still much needed in the world of today which is speeding headlong towards secularization.

Now I would like to consider with you a special characteristic of our mission which is stamped with the seal of our Saints, namely the pedagogy of the four last things. Perhaps no other educator spoke so much about death to boys as Don Bosco did, yet neither did anyone bring so much joy to the lives of boys as he did.

Don Bosco's
pedagogy - that of
the four last
things

The truths concerning man's destiny formed a fundamental theme of his 'good nights' and his private talks with the boys. Don Caviglia wrote: "the reality of heaven, of paradise, of eternal happiness this was the great message Don Bosco repeatedly gave to others and to himself as being the central idea behind all religious behaviour, the supreme moving spirit of every good action and the reward of every effort and every sorrow."⁴⁹

But although Don Bosco spoke much about eternity he did not neglect to prepare his boys for life through his well defined programme of training them to be not only "good Christians" but "honest citizens" as well, seriously engaged in practical earthly realities. The more the eyes of the boys were directed upward the more they became aware of human values and generously attentive to the needs of others.

⁴⁹ CAVIGLIA Alberto, *Un Documento inesplorato*, in *Salesianum* 1949, 293.

We all know the work done by Don Bosco's boys when the cholera epidemic was raging in Turin. Without giving any specific orders, the Saint succeeded in leading them to heroism in the care they gave to people infected with the cholera.

The mind and heart of our holy Founder and Father were impregnated with the eternal truths. They were habitually present to him. This is why his conversations and writings frequently recalled the great realities awaiting us. We could make an anthology of these maxims. However, I limit myself to recalling just a few. They teem with Christian wisdom and act like wings lifting his own soul and those of his hearers heavenward.

"Every moment of life is a step towards eternity".

"All that we suffer in this world is nothing, but our happiness in the next will be eternal".

"Remember that the thorns of this life will change to roses at the hour of death".

"The past has gone, the future is not in your power, but the present in which to serve God and merit eternal happiness is all yours".

"A little bit of heaven will settle everything".

St. M. Mazzarello
lived in the light
of the eternal
truths

Our own St. Mary Mazzarello also lived habitually in the remembrance of the eternal truths. In the documentary biography by Don Maccono we read: "She was enamoured at the thought of paradise", and urged the Sisters "to ask for the grace to die while making an act of love of God and in the disposition of perfect contrition", so as to avoid the purifying flames of purgatory" which she herself greatly feared.

"She desired heaven continually... she used to speak of Paradise as if she already possessed it, and her fervour communicated this trust to others. "Take

heart!", she would often say, "work, sacrifice, suffering, life and death are nothing in comparison with the promised reward of heaven and eternal happiness. Here the toil, there repose; here suffering, there joy".⁵⁰

It was from these habitual dispositions that our Saints drew that continual tranquility and courageous trust which they so well knew how to infuse into their spiritual children, They were never anxious for immediate results. They had learned the art of waiting.

School of hope
and optimism

With eyes fixed on heaven, they became masters of time and difficulties failed to crush them. They did not yield to melancholic resignation, neither did they give vent to complaints or bitter criticism. They recognised the hand of God even in failure trusting in His operative love through every changing circumstance. With minds steadily fixed on God, their trust was unshaken.

This was the school which formed that band of souls, so richly optimistic because they possessed such a wealth of hope. The history of these hundred years clearly bears this out. We see our Sisters pass before us enveloped in the light of those supernatural truths which can transform the whole world and life itself.

Hope clarified their eyes and caused them to contemplate and love everything here below, from the smallest flower to the most daring conquests of science, because everything was regarded as a gift of God, a reflection of His goodness, beauty and wisdom. This enlightened trust increased their desire for things "above" and created in them a spirituality which was reflected in their apostolic work.

⁵⁰ MACCONO, *Santa* II 189.

The young were taught to see all passing things from the view-point "above" and to find "above" the answer to the great question of earthly life; to implore from 'up yonder' the strength to love and suffer, to stretch out to the great 'up yonder' where God has prepared a place for each one.

Mother Emilia
Mosca

There stands out before my mind's eye that great educator, Mother Emilia Mosca. Hers was a soul penetrated with the sense of the eternal. Thoughts taken from a little exercise book belonging to her bear witness to this as does the testimony of Sisters and girls she trained.

She used to tell herself and her teachers: "Let us satiate the thirst of those hearts entrusted to us with pure joy, sincere faith and calm hope; let us awaken these minds to divine beauty and undying trust".

She herself knew how to do this, as a past pupil of that time attests: "As she taught us, she seemed to transform the classroom into a royal palace of the good God. Everything, whether connected with the sciences or the arts, joined to remind us of our duties and to make us realise that one thing alone is necessary, the salvation of our souls and those of others".

Another says: "Oh, how her maxims penetrated into the depths of our souls; Everything passes! The short-lived pleasures of this world are not sufficient to fill our souls which are meant for God and thirst for God".⁵¹

The Servant of
God, Don Rinaldi

The Servant of God, Don Rinaldi, who did so much work for our oratory of Mary Help of Christians in Turin used to say to the young girls: "Do all

⁵¹ MAINETTI Giuseppina, *Un'educatrice nella luce di San Giovanni Bosco*, (Torino, FMA 1952) 190, 195, 207.

the good you can, do it quickly and do it well, not with ostentatious zeal, but cheerfully, briskly sincerely and diligently.

Be alert to the social needs of the times. Keep in line with fashion, but without dissimulation or impropriety. Always be ready to lend a hand in every work of charity; heaven will repay every thing”.

Mother Luisa
Vaschetti

That holy and energetic Superior of ours, Mother Luisa Vaschetti, also understood how to bring something substantial to all her conversations, seasoning them with shrewd but kindly wit and with that robust faith which gave her strength and light in her painful physical blindness.

“That which we sow we shall one day reap”.

“God knows all! This one sentence contains a volume of consolation”.

“Paradise will come and it is God who will be our paradise”.

“Be generous with the Lord! Do not be stingy, do not bargain with Him”.

“Difficult periods offer us great wealth. The Saints knew how to live their exile here calmly and peacefully”.

“Seek God alone and you will find Him everywhere, in every place and in every person. If you look at Him alone, every place and every person will please you”.

Such was the manner of life and the pedagogy of our Saints and of many chosen Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and they trained bands of dynamic young people to a correct value of this earthly life in the perspective of life eternal.

Let us read Jesus’ words on eternal life from the Gospel, both during our Community re-unions and in our groups with the girls. Such words as these

will foster hope, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand";⁵² or we will keep our waiting vigilant, "The Son of God will come at an hour when you are not expecting Him",⁵³ or spur us on to do as much good as possible while we have time, "Let your light shine before men",⁵⁴ "Walk journey while you still have light".⁵⁵

All the words of Jesus savour of eternity and while they illumine our minds with a light that never diminishes, spur us on to live our lives holily, joyously and faithfully.

Let this be our spiritual programme for 1972, a new year and a centenary year. Let us pray for one another that our Lady may take us by the hand and help us to live it in holiness of thoughts and of works.

(Cir. n. 547 - February 24 1972)

Revitalize the preventive system

The new way
of the Spirit

The *Strenna* of 1979 and the circular letter of the Rector Major: "The Salesian Educational Project stimulates all the Salesian Family to promote the re-discovery, *the deepening of and the re-launching of the preventive system*".

This invitation to re-vitalise the preventive system presupposes an attentive reading of the same, firstly in the soul of Don Bosco and then in his apostolic activities. It presupposes an effort to study deeper and better the interior life of our Father; the docility of the Saint in corresponding to the work the Holy Spirit accomplished in him, and to His

⁵² Mt 4, 17.

⁵³ Mt 24, 44.

⁵⁴ Mt 5, 16.

⁵⁵ Jn 12, 35.

designs; an effort comprising a loving study and a sincere desire to imitate our holy Founder.

It has been said that to know the friends of God one has to grow like them; to understand them one has to believe and sanctify oneself; then it is that one merits the light.

The mystical
experience of
Don Bosco

To know and to understand Don Bosco, one should penetrate his habitual union with God, fruit of his ardent faith enriched by the Holy Spirit.

The spirit of wisdom caused him to rise above all created things to God the source of all. It showed in his adoration, in his love and through an ever more intense participation in the same divine nature. It showed in the full development of his baptismal grace. His whole person became radically transformed, divinised to the extent that almost by divine instinct he thought and loved and acted after the manner of God.

It was from this continuous mystical experience that he drew the most efficacious help to dedicate himself in pure charity to all.

Studying Don Bosco from within, we discover the marvellous effects of his uninterrupted communication with God. We find him rich in many natural gifts but always immersed in the supernatural and he himself was able to affirm: "I have always gone on as the Lord inspired me and as circumstances suggested".⁵⁶

Precisely because he was penetrated with the sense of God and guided by His inspirations, Don Bosco was favoured with lights of clear discernment of persons, situations and times.

Like Jesus, who was ever in contemplation of the

⁵⁶ *MB XVIII 127.*

Father and yet at the service of mankind, Don Bosco, who kept his inner glance constantly fixed on God, and seeking only his glory, was ever in the vanguard of progress. The lights he received as fruits of his uninterrupted contemplation, stimulated him to develop printing presses, to found schools and oratories, to enliven their atmosphere with theatricals, music, singing and excursions, placing in the centre of all his educative activities the person of the boy created and redeemed by God for eternal life.

Only Don Bosco's mysticism can explain, justify and sustain his untiring and prodigious activity.

The picture which adorns the basilica in Turin, showing the figure of Mary help of Christians immersed in the light of the Trinity and ready to extend her maternal help to the Church in which our Congregation is inserted, offers us the key to understanding the mysticism of Don Bosco and his preventive System, which is a practical way towards realising our spirituality and our pastoral mission.

The "permanent
charismatic
nucleus" of the
preventive system

We must set out from this "*charismatic nucleus*" of the preventive system. It is not, as the Rector Major says, merely a pedagogical method, but a living synthesis of spirituality, pastoral mission and pedagogy"⁵⁷ the whole concrete expression by which our spirituality may be regarded.

If we put the preventive system into action, we shall realise our vocation as consecrated apostles, which is what we are asked by Art. 1-5 of our Constitutions, thus overcoming that painful dualism, which, in some of us, is created by that continuous and fatiguing living among our young people and the urge of one's own sanctification and life of union with God.

⁵⁷ Cf C 1975 1-5.

It can never be a question of sanctifying oneself 'despite' this close contact with youth, but rather of becoming holy 'through' this situation and by means of this mission.

Fr. Enrico Bouquier, an authentic Salesian and writer of various, valid pamphlets on Salesian pedagogy, says: "Behind this Salesian spirituality, so vigorous and so crucifying at depth, so amenable and joyous in its manifestations, there is a mystery".

To discover this mystery is to discover *the mystique* in Don Bosco. It is to discover Mother Mazzarello, "*a soul of the Holy Spirit*".

Was it not from the Holy Spirit that the spark of our vocation emerged which caused us, with Don Bosco, to follow Christ the Good Shepherd who loved the young, and which made us signs and bearers of that same love to our youth?

Our mission should be nothing other than an overflow of our interior communication with God in various forms of charity towards the young whom we wish the salvific action to reach.

"To save souls", "to promote the greater glory of God" was the great desire of Don Bosco, It was the sole scope of his work. "All else" he used to say "must be regarded as a means". "Our goal must be to make our boys good and to save them for eternally".⁵⁸

Vatican II in its *Gravissimum Educationis* proposes as the goal of education: "Act so that baptised souls are gradually initiated to the consciousness of the mystery of salvation, that they may assume a greater awareness of the gift of faith they have received, that they learn to adore the Father in spirit and truth, that they are prepared to live their lives

⁵⁸ Cf MB XVII 16; VI 68.

The Pope's
proposal
to youth

according to the new man, and thus arrive at the perfect man — the stature of the fulness of Christ”.⁵⁹

“Seek Jesus, love Jesus, bear witness to Jesus”, was the commission that John Paul II gave to the young people at his audience on November 8, 1978. On the following Wednesday, November 15, he referred back to it: “To the eternally young Christ, to the eternally risen Christ, to the Christ who communicated in the Holy Spirit His ineffable life in the Father, we must turn, in order to lay the foundations of and to ensure the hopes of tomorrow which you are constructing..

Jesus Christ must conquer... entrust yourselves to the grace of the Lord who cries out from within you: Take courage! The victory over the world will be Christ's.

Would you like to take sides with Him and undertake with Him love's battle, animated with invincible faith and strong courage?

You won't be alone; the Pope who loves and blesses you will be with you”.

If Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello had been present at this audience, how their hearts would have been stirred with emotion and zeal at these words of the Pope — words authentically inspired by the Holy Spirit — how they would have accepted the challenge, rather an invitation to make of all the youth that throng our houses and our centres into a great army inflamed with love of Christ, ready at a sign from the Pope to take their part in every battle for the sake of the kingdom of God!

And we?

- How have our communities been affected by our Holy Father's discourses to youth, coming so in

⁵⁹ GE 2.

harmony with the re-launching of the preventive System?

- How have we shared them with our young people?
- Have we stirred up in them a holy enthusiasm which would cause them to live this task, which has come to us from the Chair of Peter?
- It is not the enemies of the Church who occasion fear, but rather the lazy and indifferent among her own children.
- If sometimes we are inclined to look for the causes of the breakdown of our enthusiasm outside of ourselves, let us rather turn inward and there make a sincere search for the cause.
- When our passion to save souls weakens, is it not due to lack of interior contemplation? Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello were formidable workers, but were, at the same time, authentic contemplatives.

It is neither number nor the age that give vitality to our zeal. Where the flame of God's love is alive the Church grows, even if on account of hard circumstances it cannot manifest itself, and it also grows where illness or the weight of years make a physical donation impossible.

There are dear, sick Sisters and revered elderly Sisters, who, because of the richness of their interior life attract to themselves young and old and are a ferment in Christian life and sanctity.

May Our Lady, *teacher and guide* of Don Bosco in the ways of the Spirit, spur us on, to live an intense interior life, because from such a fountain, there flows a fruitful apostolate among the young confided to our care.

(Cir. n. 621 - December 24 1978)

"Goodness raised to the level of a system"

Living sources
for the
implementation
of the
Preventive System

I trust that the Rector Major's commentary on the preventive system, given at Casa Generalizia and sent to every community will have inflamed us and will help our project, which aims at bringing Christ to youth, so as to create in them a great *desire for sanctity*.

From Don Bosco's *Memories of the Oratory* to the *Chronicles of the Institute*, from the biographies of the first Salesians and FMA to the brief biographical sketches of our recently deceased Sisters, we have a continuous series of models, who, in a vital, simple and concrete way teach us how the preventive system is implemented.

In short, they teach us that *our educative project* is "*goodness raised to the level of a system*".

The definition is beautiful, captivating, open to comforting hope, but a close examination shows it to be very demanding. It makes us seriously ask ourselves: What is this education synonymous with *goodness*? How can it be attained? How can one preserve it? The text of the Rector Major, which reports the talks given at Mornese, gives a clear answer to our question.

It is a book, which, as I have already said, should become a frequent point of reference in the various situations of our life as FMA, *consecrated apostles*.

I mention some expressions and give some examples so as to come to short reflections and practical applications.

"The heart of the Salesian is so made that he feels within himself a kind of interior passion, an inclination, a taste for, a joy, an enthusiasm, a capacity for sacrifice, which urge him to be among the young.

Don Bosco said: "It is sufficient that you are young

for me to love you". For his boys his labours, his sacrifice: for them all his possibilities, his gifts of nature and of grace; for them his entire day, and even at night, during which in his dreams he lived with and for his boys.

He lived for them and with them in constant donation made up of amiability, understanding and goodness.

Teacher of
goodness

At his priestly ordination Don Bosco had chosen his model and master. Among the resolutions of that very significant occasion there was this: "May the charity and sweetness of St. Francis of Sales guide me in everything". He had made this a rule of life, especially in relation to his mission.

He was conscious that nature had given him a strong temperament, unyielding, inclined to quick, even violent reaction, and taking the great Saint as model, he entered upon a constant exercise of dominion of his natural impulses until he became like him, good, amiable, patient.

St. Francis de Sales wrote: "To live according to the spirit is to love in the Spirit" and not according to the flesh, which makes us love those who treat us well and who are to our liking.. Instead to love a harsh, rough person, who shows himself indifferent, is to love according to the Spirit because the flesh has no part in it.⁶⁰

The world of youth in which Don Bosco lived, offered continuous occasions for loving in the Spirit, and he reached the point of permeating with goodness his every word and action in such a way as to envelop with the warmth of his affection all the boys so that each one felt he was loved with predilection.

⁶⁰ Cf FRANCESCO di Sales, *Lettere alle Suore* (Roma, Ed. « Pro Sanctitate » 1970) 80.

Perhaps the most beautiful testimony of the love of Don Bosco for his boys is that written by Don Albera, who as a boy had the happy and personal experience of it: "Don Bosco loved us in a unique way, entirely his own; one felt the irresistible attraction of it. I felt as if imprisoned by an affective power, which nourished my thoughts, words and actions. I felt that I was loved as I had never been loved before... He enveloped us all entirely, almost in an atmosphere of contentment and happiness. Everything in him had a power of attraction; he worked on our young hearts in the manner of a magnet, from which it was impossible to detach oneself, and even if we were able we wouldn't have done it for all the gold in the world, so happy were we with this singular ascendancy over us, which in him was the most natural thing in the world, nothing studied or forced about it; and it could not have been otherwise because from his every word and act there emanated the holiness of union with God, which is perfect charity. He drew us to himself, through the fulness of supernatural love which burned in his heart. From this singular attraction there gushed forth the conquering influence over our hearts, In him his many natural gifts were rendered supernatural by the holiness of his life".

Don Caviglia, who from his deep love for Don Bosco, knew how to draw deep and genial concepts about the spirit and educative system of the Saint, affirmed that goodness should be the object of a fourth vow for the Salesians and said: "The Salesian without goodness is not a Salesian even if he observes the rule".

Mother Mazzarello too, naturally inclined to resentment, anger, and danger of favouritism, became a Salesian full of goodness.

Our models of
goodness

It has been said of her in fact, "the attraction of her simple genuine goodness, of her unreserved and impartial dedication, impressed everyone, even those Sisters who were superior to her in culture, and all were caught up in her enthusiasm attracted by her faith, by her example".

Vocations among the girls increased in number and improved in quality inspite of the tremendous difficulties of the beginnings".

Let us also recall the dear figure of Sr. Teresa Valsè Pantellini, *artist of the preventive System, living image of the Heart of Jesus.*

She knew the delicacy of goodness especially towards the poorest and most emarginated girls. It was she who was always first in welcoming them; she treated them with kindness, respect and patience. She had insight into their spiritual state, their tastes, their aspirations and she never spoke of their shortcomings.⁶¹

"Sr. Teresa is a saint"! a girl exclaimed one day, after she had, with others, tried her patience to the last degree.

Her goodness however, did not come "*from the flesh*" but "*from the Spirit*".

To someone who asked her, on that occasion, if she hadn't felt annoyed, she confessed: "Oh, yes! I would have struck out right and left, but the thought that Don Bosco wouldn't have done so, made the agitation die within me".⁶²

Educators
according to the
Spirit

To live in the Spirit entails this concrete self-control, patience, goodness and pardon.

Today more than yesterday this "*life in the Spirit*"

⁶¹ Cf L'ARCO Adolfo, *Ho scelto i Poveri* 67-69.

⁶² *Do* 73.

is necessary for us, Salesian educators, because today more than ever, girls who need to be *loved in "the Spirit"*, as Sr. Valsè did, after the example of Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello, come to our houses, especially to our oratories and youth centres. confusion of ideas, products of mass media.

Behind certain disconcerting attitudes, there are always sad stories of broken families, and experiences, fruit of a misdirected liberty, disorientation and confusion of ideas, products of mass media.

These poor girls thirst for goodness and understanding, even though they don't say or show it.

Precisely towards these our Lady urges us, repeating to us the words said in a dream to Don Bosco: "They are my daughters! Take care of them!"

Our personal interest in each one of them, (how much the Holy Father insists by word and example on respect and love for every single person) our friendly presence, serene understanding, living with them, which does not mean simply companionship, but a testimony of our joyful life of grace, will give the possibility of positive interventions to discover the true meaning of life and its authentic values and to direct them wisely to free choices so as to make them participants of our efforts and apostolic labours.⁶³

The *Documento-Stimolo* of our pastoral in the pages in which criteria, choices, conditions for our apostolic-action are indicated, offers us a concrete examination on how the goodness of the preventive system can be implemented. An attentive re-reading of them, transformation of them in prayer before the tabernacle, an exchange of views on them in community is a practical means of animating

⁶³ Cf *M-R* 1975 56-61.

all of us to be *good in a "Salesian way"*, and to warm with goodness the atmosphere of the houses.

We shall thus discover the true aspect of Salesian assistance, which is not supervision, or control, but affectionate participation in the life of the young people and an animation which stems the asceticism and mysticism which form the FMA to sanctity.

Sanctity, source
of our apostolic
efficacy

This sanctity envelops the young people in goodness and enables us to cheerfully meet the sacrifices of the playground, the school and the various sectors of our pastoral action. It is, however, but an overflow of the goodness which is first lived with our Sisters in community.

"The first object of our mission is the community", the Rector Major says. All that we do to bring about union of hearts in the community increases the efficacy of our pastoral action. This is the first field of our asceticism and mysticism.

Don Bosco had outstanding physical, intellectual and moral qualities, but his exceptional moral stature was due to his sanctity. In him there was not merely a natural fascination which could subjugate and captivate, there was the man entirely devoted to God's will, ever immersed in his presence and therefore, possessed and guided by Him.

The irradiation of divine grace, which penetrates to the very depths of the spirit, while it increases in the saints more and more every day hunger and thirst for God, extends their capacity for loving, makes them come out of themselves, and stimulates them to offer the delicacy of charity, drawn from Him, to all who approach him. They thus offer in their human contacts, the most accessible way of going to God. He who loves a saint is drawn unconsciously, to love God.

We would all wish to be such a happy instrument for God's glory. We can! God gives us the grace!

Some questions
for a revision
of life

Let us reflect:

- Does my goodness, like that of the Saints, spring from a motive inspired by faith, by habitual union with God, who transforms me with His grace and thus makes of me a ladder to help all who approach me, ascend to Him?
- In the light of the Holy Spirit, have I arrived at the conviction that goodness is not made up of occasional gestures, but of a daily sacrificial donation, marked by indulgence and firmness and never by weak condescension to that which is contrary to the requirements of duty?
- What concrete efforts do I make to overcome my temperament in community and with girls, so as to arrive at that truly evangelical goodness, which does not behave according to whether persons are to my liking or whether things are going according to my way of thinking?
- Is there always in me the sincere and humble will to see good in everyone, even in those whose mentality differs from mine? Am I the first to build a bridge with a word, with an attentive listening, a serene acceptance even when it is not requested?
- Do I have recourse to prayer with faith, asking Jesus to make me gentle and humble in heart like Him, and may our Lady help me to share her sincerity in calling herself a "humble handmaid"?
- Let us conclude with an autographed prayer written on a picture by Mother Linda of happy memory:

For herself and all the FMA she asked the Lord:
"Put into us those affections that made you profoundly humble, which made you prefer insults to praise. . .

Grant that we may act in such a way that we reject all that does not serve for your honour. . . all that

smacks of vanity, ostentation and self-love.

Grant that we may learn to be really humble of heart...".

(Cir. n. 623 - February 24 1979)

The girls - collaborators in our mission

In the preceding circulars we traced in broad outline our specific mission with the young.

Following a preliminary stock-taking of our specific vocation and the consequent obligations, we realised the necessity of apostolic zeal for the Christian formation of these souls.

This, in brief, is the programme we have proposed for ourselves following Don Bosco's footsteps.

If we are really faithful in carrying it out and in using all the means we recognise as valid, we shall be able, like Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello, to make the girls valuable collaborators in our apostolic work. It is an outstanding mark of Don Bosco's genius as an educator, that he could win and utilise the collaboration of his boys.⁶⁴

Utilise the
collaboration of
young people

This was Don Bosco's technique, as Caviglia puts it: to make his boys "righteously aggressive" and transform them into "missionaries among their companions". Dominic Savio is a brilliant example of this. Don Bosco himself affirmed: The first thing he was advised to do to become a saint was to strive to win souls for God". This thought accompanied him everywhere. During free time he was the soul of the recreation; but whatever he

⁶⁴ D. Bosco, *Opere e scritti editi e inediti, Il Magone M.* (Torino, SEI 1965) 171.

said or did was always aimed at the moral good of himself or others.⁶⁵

This apostolic spirit — affirms Don Caviglia — was an ideal shared not only by the best boys but by all of them... the work of correcting, urging, persuading, inviting, which Don Bosco entrusted to his best boys and which completes, when it doesn't replace, the work of educating the individual, which Don Bosco made the basis of his System”.

That little rogue and rebel, Michael Magone, was won by this *collaboration between the boys themselves*, and so were countless others.

Even the *sodalities*, especially that of the Immaculate Conception, were *run by the boys themselves*. These were real training grounds for the apostolate and nurseries, as Don Bosco said, of ecclesiastical and religious *vocations*. The Congregation itself began with young oratory boys, as Don Bosco himself testifies: “All other Congregations were helped in the beginning by gifted and intelligent people. They played their part in assisting the Founder, or rather associating themselves with him. This has not been the case with us: All Don Bosco's helpers were his pupils. This cost me very hard work which lasted non-stop for some thirty years. There was this advantage however, that as they were all educated by Don Bosco they have the same methods and systems”.⁶⁶

These results were due to the patience and to the intelligent formative work of our Father who gradually interested and won the active collaboration of his boys using his customary tact and caution.

⁶⁵ Bosco Giovanni, *Il Beato Domenico Savio* (Torino, SEI 1950) 68.

⁶⁶ MB XIII 221.

St. Mary Mazzarello too, had pedagogical insight which she received from the Holy Spirit. She could tap the resources of the girls, get them responsibly involved in their own formation, and creating in them the proper disposition for making decisive choices. It is enough to quote as examples Mother Emilia Mosca, Sr. Corinna Arrigotti, Sr. Maria Bellett and Sr. Emma Ferrero.

The collaboration of the young, a powerful means of formation

Such active collaboration in the sphere of education is more topical now than ever, and must be availed of in our oratories, boarding schools, and all the works of our Institute. It is a powerful means of formation, a real preparation and practice for that responsible collaboration—both social and ecclesial — for which we must prepare the girls.

If the genuine educative community, solidly and efficiently united, materialises in our houses, the girls will be able to give their support and train themselves for the duties awaiting them.

We have, thank God, consoling evidence of the work being done in our houses to get the girls to participate in the various moral, spiritual and material concerns. Well-prepared group work, always maintaining a spiritual outlook and lovingly supervised, is already yielding consoling results. Particular mention should be made of the active collaboration of the senior girls in recruiting new oratorians, getting through to their families, in catechesis, assistance and in carrying out various initiatives. Let us encourage and support this initiative and activity and use it to the full.

In our boarding schools it is consoling to hear how the senior pupils can sometimes replace the Sister assistant; how they organise the recreations and keep them going; how they are called on to lead groups and become promoters of charitable, apostolic and missionary works.

This fervent collaboration does not remain confined to the girls but overflows to their families; it is a real apostolic leaven and soon spreads to surroundings and local churches, multiplying the original good.

Nor can we forget the direct work of many of our oratorians, pupils and past-pupils in their parishes and out-lying areas carried on with admirable dedication and lively apostolic spirit. Many parish priests express their gratitude for their active, generous contribution especially in catechetics and various parochial activities.

The *Notiziario* and the *Da Mihi Animas* report these activities from time to time. Let us read them with interest so as to get new ideas for ourselves.

However I know that much more is being done than is actually reported, and I should very much like you to send in accounts of what is being done on all sides with regard to this apostolic collaboration. These things do us good because they make us more conscious of the lively, active presence of Our Lady in the Institute. It is her Institute and it is continuously receiving the grace to carry out the objectives for which God has destined it. Such reports do good to the whole Church, as they answer to what Christ says in the Gospel: "So let your light shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven".⁶⁷

Let us then arouse in our girls an increasingly active collaboration which will also be a very effective means of personal formation. In so doing we shall respond to the example and teaching of our holy founders and to the expectations of the Church, which through the Council declaration on

⁶⁷ Mt 5, 16.

education, invites us to prepare our girls “for service to spread the Kingdom of God, so that through leading an exemplary apostolic life they may become the leaven of salvation for the community of man”.⁶⁸

May our Lady Help of Christians assist us to be aware of and actuate better these duties of our apostolic vocation. Let us also remember art. 66 of the Constitutions: “...They will prepare them (the girls) to live their vocation of Christian women worthily, both in the family and in society at large, since, through baptism, they are called to holiness and to the apostolic work of spreading the Christian spirit in the world”.

(Cir. n. 539 - May 24 1971)

True liberal education

We saw in the circular of February (1972) how the pedagogy of our saints was influenced by those great truths which enlighten and guide human destiny. These truths give a correct bearing to life and transfuse it with joy because they open it up to eternal expectations and transform and strengthen human values.

I trust that by carrying this *pedagogy of the four last things* into our personal lives and our educative mission we shall gain a fresh incentive to press on towards the fulfilment of our Centenary programme: *Rebirth with Mary*. The faithful Virgin who was so completely enveloped in the light of the eternal truths. May such a *Rebirth* mark for us a further step on the path of holiness and be a pledge of ever greater fidelity to our educative work and method. This method finds fulfilment in the so-

⁶⁸ GE 8.

called *liberal education* on which so much emphasis is placed in our times.

Liberal Education

Liberal education is, in fact, much spoken of today. For some of us, perhaps, there could be danger that faith in the system left us by Don Bosco be either shaken or diminished. Hence I should like to consider the work of liberal formation with you, as it was carried out by our saints, faithful to inspiration received from on high for their mission among the young.

It is well known that *liberal education* places the accent on strict collaboration between teacher and taught. Thus the work of education becomes a mutual interaction between one and the other. On the basis of this principle ways and means are sought out together; an effort is made together to gain knowledge of the potentialities of each, to secure liberation from all that might impede the complete realization of the capacities of each, and to progress together towards the attainment of the place destined for each one in society and in history.

Now let us turn to Don Bosco. Is it not true that his educative action carries the *hallmark of liberal education* in the truest sense?

Christian sense
of liberation

Let us first of all determine the christian interpretation of liberation.

True christian *liberal education* is that brought about by Baptism. It is a dying to sin and all that leads to it and a living for God in Christ,⁶⁹ a strengthening of sound human values and a developing of baptismal gifts and graces. It is education leading towards that true and complete liberty which conduces to the fulfilment of one's christian vocat-

⁶⁹ Cf *Rm* 6, 11.

ion with an enlightened and responsible conscience.

The first and most important liberation then, is deliverance from the passions, from egoism and from all that threatens the fulness of spiritual life and the development of those interior riches placed in us by The Holy Spirit at our Baptism.

Typical liberal education is that taught and practised by Jesus, the teacher who liberates and saves. In the proclamation of the beatitudes He called on His disciples to liberate themselves from personal ambition, attachment to temporal things, self-seeking, and from the judgments of men.

The beatitudes are a code of true christian liberty. In fact, the whole Gospel is a school of liberal education. In it Jesus makes continual appeals to our liberty and, according to the dispositions of each one, to our collaboration.

The Paschal Mystery, through the death and resurrection of Christ, is eminently the mystery of liberation because it is the mystery of our salvation.

The liberating
pedagogy
of grace
mind

Our holy founder and father did nothing more than model himself on our Lord and interpret the Gospel in his life and mission. The foremost and greatest pre-occupation, or rather passion of our Saint was that the young should lead a full life of grace, liberated from all that might stifle, tarnish or paralyse it. If Don Bosco's method has been called the *pedagogy of the four last things* with still greater reason can it be called *the pedagogy of grace or of the Sacraments*.

Apart from his own educational practice, we have Don Bosco's many affirmations on this point. Here is one from among the many: "Let them say what they like about various educational systems, but I find no sure foundation except in frequent confession and communion and I believe it is not too

much to assert that where these two elements are absent morality disappears".⁷⁰

In his deep studies on the Saint, Don Caviglia tried to enter into Don Bosco's mind. He writes on the point we are considering: "This sacramental pedagogy is truly and intrinsically formative... Its primary motive, without which we should never understand its true meaning, is... Don Bosco's concept, his conviction of the value of the grace of God in a soul and the work that it can accomplish".

This work is really one of purification and power; the educative work of true *liberation*.

Don Bosco did not accomplish this work through impositions but through the greatest possible liberty, in true *inter-communication* between himself and each individual boy in an encounter with God.

Is not all this valid for our youth today, both in substance and in method? If we wish our young people to become human-christian personalities in accord with the aim of our educative practice we must lay foundations on the liberating work of grace in an environment of free acceptance.

In the work of forming his boys to piety Don Bosco took the line of leading them to that *conviction* of mind and faith which is opposed to empty sentimentalism and sterile routinism. In this way piety, according to the mind of the Saint, inspired a sense of duty, influenced conduct on all occasions and became the source of that joy which reigned in the Oratory.

The young saints who grew up in this environment of joy in God's service were able to say with

⁷⁰ CAVIGLIA, *D. Bosco, Opere e scritti editi e inediti* (Torino, SEI 1965) VI 179.

Dominic Savio: "our way to sanctity consists in keeping cheerful". Was not this cheerfulness the result of power emanating from interior liberation? We are all persuaded that our young people today are seeking a convinced faith and a piety which does not extinguish but rather strengthens the joyous liberty of the children of God.

Don Bosco's pedagogical tactics, summed up as reason and loving-kindness, transformed his boys. Don Giovanni Turchi states: "Don Bosco formed his boys' characters and inspired them to do good; they followed his instructions joyfully".⁷¹

The liberating
education
practised
by our Saint

Our own Saint too knew how to give a real liberal education, not from educational culture it is true, but through the intuition which comes from the light of the Holy Spirit and her faithfulness to the preventive system. It will suffice to recall her tactics with Emilia Mosca who taught French at Mornese. She gave her every consideration, placed her trust in her and laid upon her no obligations whatever. By degrees this kindness won Emilia over completely and soon she freely detached herself from worldly ties and expressed the desire of becoming a religious.⁷²

She exerted the same influence on Emma Ferrero whose conduct at one time gave our Saint a good deal of pre-occupation. Emma was led to true conversion and asked insistently to be admitted as a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians.⁷³

The same pedagogical tactics were used with Corinna Arrigotti and Maria Belletti. Both were won over to piety and to the religious life. Of the vain conceited Maria Belletti Maccono writes: "In order to

⁷¹ MB VI 288.

⁷² Cf MACCONO, *Santa* I 222-223.

⁷³ Cf *Do* 118-120.

gain the young girl's confidence, Mother began by allowing her to do exactly as she pleased (so long as sin was not involved), even in regard to dress. Then she spoke to her of God's love seeming to ignore the girl's vanity and haughtiness".⁷⁴

These are typical examples of difficult girls and their story can be a source of encouragement to us today when so many young people want to appear liberal-minded. Let us endeavour to make our Saint's tactics our own and we too will achieve the liberation and radical transformation of these souls.

Don Rinaldi,
Master of
Salesian pedagogy
and spirituality

The Servant of God. Don Rinaldi, *master of Salesian pedagogy and spirituality*, also has lessons for us concerning *liberal education*. I limit myself to a few significant points: "As we try to form our young people let us beware of falling into the error of expecting them to be all alike. We should certainly require to be good and orderly in a general way but let us avoid infusing the same mind into them, the same way of acting, of thinking, writing and speaking".⁷⁵

Young people, in these days especially, demand that we should respect them as persons and, if at times they withdraw themselves from our influence it is in order to defend their liberty.

Don Rinaldi grew up in Don Bosco's school and assimilated his spirit, having always before him the example of his holy teacher: "With what great efforts and endless charity he corrected and educated!... What effort he made to attract and recall boys to goodness! Those phrases we hear read from Don Bosco's life; that freedom he gave the boys to visit him in his room; that ever-open door;

⁷⁴ MACCONO, *Santa I* 354.

⁷⁵ VALENTINI E., *Don Rinaldi* 47.

all this could be true of his sons today. Know then how to seize upon occasions, find ways and means of saying the good word, of giving a correction".⁷⁶

All this confirms Don Bosco's saying: "Education is an affair of the heart". An understanding heart will lead us to discover ways of approaching the young people of today inspite of their sometimes disconcerting behaviour and attitudes, even their opposition.

Let us not give our youth restricted horizons. Let us not be fearful to set them great and high ideals. Let us draw them to the springs of grace and the Word of God and help them to understand and enjoy these mysteries in order to live these strong, freedom-giving truths with convinced faith. We should then have the consolation of seeing around us young people who are free, joyous fearless, and generous in doing good.

(*Cir. n. 548 - March 24 1972*)

⁷⁶ VALENTINI E., *Don Rinaldi* 42.

Chapter XI

DISCERNMENT AND CARE OF VOCATIONS

In dealing with the subject of vocations, Mother Ersilia allows a particular apostolic preoccupation to transpire. She feels it is a real vital problem which touches the very life of the Institute and the Church. Therefore she stresses the duty of every Sister to cooperate in every possible way towards the development and maturation of vocations.

She invites us to make the Institute known and urges all to work with unity and confidence in the common effort to communicate to the girls the joy of a life spent for God in the service of youth, especially the poorest.

Vocation - a way of love

The subject is far too vital and real for us not to identify ourselves with it. It touches each one of us and the life itself of the Institute.

Vocation, like all other spiritual realities, is never *an accomplished fact*. It is, then, our business to search ever more deeply into its value and demands.

Then too the Institute is always in need of new recruits in order to live and work, recruits who will continue Don Bosco's *charismatic* mission in the Church. It is therefore, the duty of each one to co-operate in helping new vocations to open up and blossom. The initiative is certainly God's but each one of us, through her own self-giving in the fulfilment of a vocation lived in love, exercises a very forceful attraction.

Therefore, dear Sisters, allow me, by identifying myself with each one of you, make a few reflections which stem from the mystery of our vocation.

It is a mystery because it is rooted in the ineffable design of love and mercy on the part of God towards us and through us to many souls.

A vocation is
a call of love

"You did not chose me but I chose you..."¹ The history of our vocation starts with this gratuitous choice. Vocation is a unique and unrepeatable call. God calls each one by name. That is, each one is called in the totality of his being. The manner of God's calling is never repeated.

If we could get a panoramic view of all vocations we should be struck with wonder. It is sufficient for us to open the *Bible* and read how God called the patriarchs and prophets in the *Old Testament* and the apostles in the *New*. No two of these calls

¹ *Jn* 15, 16.

were identical. The same happened to us. Some have testified with emotion that God's call was heard in early childhood; others were called at a more mature age. Some, unexpectedly with the involvement of a radical change of life, and others through persistent and prolonged urgings. God reached some through the channel of pain, while He spoke to others through the attraction of a soul already consecrated to Himself.

There are moments of light and motion which draw irresistably, or forces which overthrow and uproot. God knows how to treat each one of us.

Is not that moment in our lives ever present to us when we felt the grace of God's call in our innermost souls? Let us recall it in the silence of prayer that we relive it and renew it within us. Let us recall it in order to thank God for this great gift of His love.

A vocation is
a response to
love

The divine touch illumined our lives with a new light. The thought of God began to dominate us. Gradually God became the centre of our affections, our highest interest and the source of our greatest expectations. A great need for prayer began to make itself felt within us. Moved by an interior impulse our life of piety became intensified through a more frequent use of the Sacraments, a greater participation in the Mass, and through spiritual reading and meditation.

It was in this union with God, guided maybe, by some enlightened priest, that we said our interior "yes" to God, a "yes" to God, a "yes" that was the response of love to His call.

Then, divine light becoming still more clear in the soul, directed us by various ways to choose the Congregation in which we could best realise our response to the divine call. Undoubtedly it was our Blessed Lady who took us by the hand and led us

to her own Institute, of which she is the inspirer and the guide.

From the moment in which our tears and those of our relatives were fused in our offering to the Lord, the path of our religious vocation began to unfold.

Vocation is a style of love

Aspirantate, postulancy and novitiate enlightened us on the essence of our consecration to God and on our specific mission in the Church and presented us with a special way of responding to God's love. The Constitutions and the traditions of the Institute revealed to us the special features of the Daughter of Mary Help of Christians, who as such, increases the "variety" and beauty of the Church and manifests "the manifold wisdom of God".²

We carry in our memory very clearly that solemn day when, approaching the altar we freely and spontaneously consecrated ourselves to God.

The vows, received and approved by the Church in union with Christ's sacrificial offering, bound us to God for time and eternity. The crucifix and veil were the exterior signs of our consecration as spouses of Christ.

Vocation is a path of love

By our religious profession, we are consecrated "with an undivided heart to the total love of God".³ This love, "image and sharing of the union of love joining Christ and His Church",⁴ has indissolubly united us to Christ permeating our very being to its most hidden depths, "with mysterious likeness to Him".⁵

These are marvels and mysteries which we shall comprehend only in heaven.

² PC 1.

³ C 1969 10.

⁴ ET 13.

⁵ Cf Do.

However, they point out a path for each one, the path of love. We are spouses of Jesus, but of Jesus Crucified. Therefore we must follow Him on the narrow way He himself has trodden.⁶

In the recent audience of November 21st last, the Holy Father turned to his hearers, who were for the most part lay folk, and exhorted them to maintain a spiritual independence with the world. He added: "In this context, self control, the ascetic spirit, manliness of christian behaviour must no longer seem to us to be pious out-dated admonitions, but exercises of christian struggle, all the more necessary today in that we are hemmed in and attacked on all sides by the amorphous or corrupt world".⁷

If this is true for all Christians, how much more significant is it for us, who, although in the world, must not be of the world. Our total consecration to Christ obliges us to follow Him with that crescendo of love which should make us a living witness in the Church of "It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me".⁸

In the measure in which this stupendous way of love is realised so much the more will it identify with our configuration with Christ and our happiness will increase beyond measure. Free and liberated in the love of Christ the things of earth will disturb us no longer, and with St. Paul, we shall be overcome with joy even in our tribulations.⁹

Love is the source of perennial youth. If love grows, then, in spite of the passage of years we shall always remain young in spirit. This can be proved by looking at the many Sisters who, although advanced in

⁶ Cf Mt 7, 13-14.

⁷ PAUL VI P.P., *General audience*, 21st November 1973.

⁸ Gal 2, 20.

⁹ Cf 2 Cor, 7, 4.

years or sick, are radiant with the serenity and the holy contagious joy of perennial youth. We shall not find in these, initial exuberance or excessive enthusiasm, but sincere conviction, stability and peace. Such are the fruits of an ever ardent and vigilant love.

Pathway of
Fidelity

It is impossible for my pathway of love in response to God's call to be without thorns if I have promised to walk in the footsteps of Jesus crucified. As I look back I see myself in houses, fields of apostolate and situations of environment where trials, struggles and difficulties have not been lacking. But God was always at my side with His grace in spite of my lack of co-operation and my weakness. At the very moment in which I placed my hand firmly in His there opened up to me new and far-reaching horizons.

Fidelity to God sustained and strengthened me and I experienced the truth of the divine words: "I will never fail or forsake you".¹⁰

Then there resounded in my heart the psalmist's words: "The Lord is my light and my help; whom shall I fear?"¹¹ and tasting the joy of victory once temptation and struggle have been overcome, "I trusted in your merciful love, O God; my heart rejoiced in your saving help".¹²

Such things as these appear on the horizons of all souls. Today there is the danger that they appear still more frequently, clouded by ideologies that would empty religious life of the richness of its content. But if we trust ourselves to our Lady we shall in truth experience the veracity of Don Bosco's words, "I have known doubtful or mistaken voca-

¹⁰ *Heb* 13, 5.

¹¹ *Psal* 27, 1.

¹² *Psal* 13, 6.

tions completely put into place through the intervention of May".¹³

Vocation is a permanent call

God continues to call us. By His grace He can make us new again: Behold, I make all things new",¹⁴ and He will create in us the generosity of a total and definitive "yes".

One of the most consoling realities in the Institute is the decided opening up of many Sisters to the love of God, their unconditional surrender to His will and their joyous, generous self-giving in their own particular field of labour.

Some have had to make heroic efforts to face up to the truth and accept that which they had hitherto refused. But how joyful is their life today! These happy facts are being multiplied in these times when all are intensifying their efforts to obtain a deeper experience of the Constitutions. Thus the words of Jesus are proved: "If you continue in my word you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free".¹⁵

(*Cir.* n. 570 - February 24 1974)

Crisis of vocations

Crisis of vocations

A of vocation crisis is not something entirely new in the life of the Church. At present it afflicts all religious institutions in a greater or lesser measure.

It is not enough, however, to take note of it, still less, having looked at the situation, to conclude, with passive resignation, that all Institutes are experiencing the same trial. We must study with

¹³ *MB* XII 578.

¹⁴ *AP* 21, 5.

¹⁵ *Jn* 8, 31.

love, courage and also hope the causes of the crisis and identify clearly the real reasons.

I will point out here only some of the most direct and immediate causes which disturb the preservation and development of many forms of apostolate which are the fruitful climate of vocations. You can seek others and study them personally and communally.

General causes

There are, of course, general causes, those that attack family life today, and have withdrawn esteem and credibility from consecrated life.

Commission I of the Chapter studied and set in relief the profound changes that revolutionize society at various levels today, and the plan of formation presents the situations which are verified in actual socio-political life and which therefore, influence our mentality.

We therefore become conscious:

- of the increased esteem in which material values are held to the detriment of faith and morals;
- of the decline in the cohesion of the family which often does not offer true models of behaviour;
- of the absence of testimony of a life joyous in faith and charity on the part of the consecrated;
- of the atmosphere of excessive liberty and independence which often urges the young people to behaviour not only autonomous and arbitrary, but to the refusal to take on precise and definite obligations.

There is, of course, in the young people who are good a desire to give themselves to charitable and apostolic works, for which willingness to serve and disponibility are not lacking, but what is not often forthcoming is stability and durability in taking on obligations for God and the Church. That is, one

does not find the illuminating fullness of the "*Sequela Christi*" in that kind of life which the Son of Man embraced when He came into the world to do the will of His Father, and which He proposed to the disciples who followed Him".¹⁶

Specific causes

Having taken note of the principal causes of the vocation crisis, let us reflect on those which specifically regard our own Institute and by implication, each one of us.

- How is it that provinces, houses, which were once real gardens in which numerous vocations enriched the postulated and novitiates bloomed, have lost their fecundity today?

- Why has life of certain communities lost the fascination and the power of attraction they once exercised on the heart of young people?

It is in order to recall the admonition of *Perfectae Caritatis*: "Let religious remember that the example of their lives is the best invitation to embrace the religious state".¹⁷

We cannot resign ourselves to seeing the sources of the religious life dry up when the Church herself tells us that the Religious state, "though it does not belong to the hierarchical structure of the Church, belongs inseparably to her life and holiness".¹⁸

Which of us, through her baptismal consecration, which makes her a member of the Church, does not feel the duty of increasing the vitality of the religious state, so that the life and sanctity of the Church may grow?

Faced with the vocational crisis which obliges the

¹⁶ LG 44.

¹⁷ PC 24.

¹⁸ LG 44.

closing and amalgamating of novitiates and the restricting of tomorrow's prospects in various fields of apostolate, *let us carry out a sincere, humble review in the communities and provinces so as to become conscious of the responsibilities which weigh upon us all.*

The picture of this sad reality could become for us the problem of a drought like that which threatened many harvests this year: without the beneficial rain of vocations the apostolicity of our works will languish and the vitality that sustains them will die.

Perhaps we are not yet aware, but in the course of the next few years the problem could assume preoccupying proportions. We must shake ourselves in time and hasten to repair.

There are vocations still today, and as I say, there are provinces which happily give proof of this.

God does not
cease to call

God still calls, every day to the *sequela Christi*. But are our communities, are we, individual Sisters, capable of receiving the young people called and of causing their response to grow?

Do we all, young and old, unite in trying to create in the community that climate of faith, of fervour, of collaboration from which that diffusive joy, that affable goodness which are the most authentic evidence of a life lived in God and for God?

The young girls are more impressed by the interiority and the richness of our spiritual life which gives wisdom to our words and a divine human warmth to our relations with them than by intelligence and other abilities. Many times I heard girls pronounce this phrase: "I felt God was in that Sister!" That is what strikes the girls. The Sister perhaps, does not notice this effusion of grace in her own life but her habitual contact with God through faith, her generous adhesion to His will give her a simplicity and serenity of spirit

which are the reflection of God living and operating in her.

In every Sister possessed by God, there is, as it were, a spiritual instinct, a real gift of the Holy Spirit, which makes her flee promptly from that which does not lead to Him, and makes her accomplish with joy even great sacrifices to do what He wishes. Open to every healthy renewal, sensitive and available to the various exigencies of her mission, she is always anchored in the strength of obedience in which her love of God and of the Church find security and liberty.

She does not lose time in reading or shows, I do not say harmful, but merely useless, and she does not justify them with too facile and equally weak pastoral motives.

She hasn't got an exaggerated anxiety for ever greater promotion, she understands the nobility of every task entrusted to her by obedience and does not seek arbitrary evasions with the girls and laity.

Instead, her soul is animated by a strong, sincere desire for pleasing God, for giving Him glory, for supplying for the lack of love for Him of many brothers; her heart burns with the missionary ardour of making Jesus known and loved, and of extending His kingdom to the greatest number of souls, without counting the cost of the fatigue and sacrifice entailed.

Fascination of a
life of witness

These profound ideals create in her an interior unity which gives peace, freshness of expression and joyful trust. In approaching this Sister — a real "specialist of God" — the girls who feel the divine call find in her a model according to the evangelical style and are moved by her example to follow Jesus.

It is not sufficient, however, that there be one "Sister-specialist of God", it must become the

entire community. Then the young girls called by God can truly breathe an atmosphere of grace and experience that which the revered Don Serié said: "On the forehead of every religious should be written: 'God loves me and makes me happy' "!

It has been historically shown that Don Bosco, Mother Mazzarello and many of our Sisters, precisely through their intense union with God, merited that prodigious springtide of vocations which is one of the marvels of our origin and, in great part, of the first century of our Institute.

Their sanctity inspired confidence and helped people to be generous in following their path so clearly outlined in precise, concrete and stable ideals.

"*Perfectae Caritatis*", in emphasizing the fact that the virtue of those consecrated is the best propaganda for vocations, leads to the conclusion that the virtue of those called is, perhaps, the generator of other vocations. A vocation lived in the fullness of love, in the practice of the Constitutions, in donation to our brothers, gives life, almost through the natural process of fruitfulness in the spirit, to other vocations.

Later we shall see some concrete lines to follow so as to be always *living signs of God*. In the meantime it will be of great advantage to us in daily meditation or in our time before the tabernacle to test our intimate relations of faith with God.

Some aims presented in the *plan of formation* may be of help:

- "To strengthen and to perfect profound personal encounter with God the Father and, therefore, the vital synthesis between action and contemplation.
- To strengthen growth in faith, hope and charity, to live in greater fullness the vows and community life according to the specific mission of the Institute in the Church.

- To study the salvific role of Our Lady as “Auxiliatrice” in the history of salvation. Imitation and endeavour to make her known and loved.
- Ability to look with realism and with faith to meet with serenity the difficulties and difficult moments which the life of an FMA presents.

And to conclude, let us ask ourselves:

- Have I the vivid sense of the presence of God, and is dialogue with Him and with our Lady habitual with me?
- Do I study my personal rapport with Christ so as the better to resemble Him?
- Do I consciously and responsibly endeavour to practice the vows as a part of “*Sequela Christi?*”
- To live for God, to consume myself for Him — is that really the interior attitude which accompanies and gives colour to my community and apostolic?

From this review will surely flow a renewed will, and the grace of the Holy Spirit will make it fruitful of good also for the young girls who approach us.

(Cir. n. 596 - October 24 1976)

A vocational campaign

The hunger
for God

The recent Congress in Philadelphia — which I trust, you all followed in true ecclesial spirit — began its laborious study days with the theme “*The hunger for God*”, which gave direction to all the other themes developed during the succeeding days.

An attentive reflection on this universal problem of God’s hunger will bring us to the conviction that we religious are particularly called to answer for its solution. In the same Congress in fact, “*the*

hunger of the Spirit and vocation” was treated. The point was made that the priestly and religious vocation has been expressly appointed by God to satiate the hunger of the spirit, which alone has value and which is the greatest of all the cravings of man”.

Persons consecrated to God should ever more take into account this expectation of humanity in their regard in their efforts to correspond generously to the exceptional mission which God entrusts to them.¹⁹

The hunger of the spirit is none other than the hunger for God, His charity, His justice and His peace. And it is this hunger that must be satisfied.

Called to
satiare the
hunger of our
brothers

Our Holy Father, Paul VI, speaking of religious, has frequently called them *God's specialists*. We are, therefore, the first called upon to satisfy the hunger of the spirit of many of our brothers with the bread of the knowledge of God, of His word, and of the channels of grace.

Our Constitutions also remind us of this obligation: “The Holy Spirit, who has caused our Institute to come into being speaks to us even today. He gathers us together and consecrates us in the Salesian Religious life in order that He may send us forth to proclaim the Gospel in the spirit of our Constitutions”.²⁰

And this obligation to proclaim the Gospel — *Evangeli Nuntiandi* — tells us is a social service rendered, not only to the Christian community, but to all humanity”.²¹ Therefore, in our life as *consecrated apostles*, it is our first obligation which must act as leaven to every commitment.

¹⁹ Cf *L'Osservatore Romano*, 6th August 1976.

²⁰ C 1975 5.

²¹ EN 1.

The Constitutions very opportunely underline this: "While proclaiming the Gospel of Salvation, we wish to be visible signs of that love which unites our brothers among themselves and with the Father, so that the world may know God's glory on the face of Christ".²²

If today hunger for God is more strongly felt then more generous and more ardent should the religious be to satisfy it.

Let us reflect a little together on this truth with sincerity and a real sense of responsibility.

Evident drop
in vocations

The religious professions in our Institute ten years ago were 427, this year they were 109. These ten years which have been characterised by a growth of hunger for God in the hearts of so many young and adult people have seen in our Congregation a decline in *God's specialists* in the world.

The average age in the houses and provinces is no longer marked by young strength, and if there are consoling indications of an improvement in the vocation situation, it is still not, sufficient to fill the empty places and meet the demands of the work and the ever increasing requests of the local churches.

If there are no new shoots appearing, the tree wears out and dies. Thus it is in the Institute. Its vitality diminishes, its range of influence is restricted, its intensity decreases and it insensibly moves toward impotence and silence.

It is therefore, urgent to re-awaken and focus attention on the vocation problem in every community, but not with the fleeting flash of one day, with a meeting, feast, or other initiative of the kind but as a *serious commitment* of at least one year,

²² C 1975 56.

marked by prayer, study, deep reflection, coordinated and efficacious action.

We are about to close the centenary year of our missions, which opened immense fields of apostolate for many of our Sisters.

Vocation
campaign

I think there is no better way for crowning the centenary than by taking into account the urgent need for numerous, good vocations to preserve and intensify the presence of the Institute in the Church, and thus multiply the number of apostolic souls that can satisfy the hunger of spirit of so many young people who throng our houses.

The end of the mission year will mark for each of our houses, for every province, for all the congregation the dawn of a real vocation campaign.

I will treat of the subject of vocation during the coming months, and I shall be grateful to all the Sisters who will send me their reflections and their projects on this subject, as well as the causes that they think have brought about the drop in vocations, and the proposals they consider necessary to remedy the situation.

Even though other themes could be important for the internal vitality of the Institute none is more urgent and to the point.

In every province programmes have been drawn up for the implementation of the Chapter. It will be easy in their development to bring the attention of the Sisters to the grave problem of vocation shortage and study with them ecclesial and Salesian documents which throw light on and stimulate the search for and care of vocations.

The problem of
vocations is a
problem of the
Church

The vocation problem affects the whole Church, therefore it calls upon all of us as baptised and as consecrated people.

Perfectae Caritatis No. 24 invites priests and Christian educators to make real efforts so that by means of well-chosen vocations the Church may receive new developments in proportion to the needs of the present times.

“The duty of increasing the number of priestly vocations falls on the whole Church”.²³

Now we can apply that statement to ourselves. *The duty of increasing the number of vocations in the Institute falls on each and every FMA*; it interests the entire body of the Congregation, not only the Superiors, as a duty of their office, or those Sisters directly engaged in the vocational sector. A general *mobilization of the whole Institute is necessary* if we wish to maintain the level already reached.

Insensibility and indifference to the vocation problem could be a symptom of decadence and would weigh heavily on our common responsibility before the Church and the Institute.

Problem of
the Institute

“If we feel ourselves a living part of the family, if we love the Congregation, if we wish that, renewed and reinvigorated, it may continue in time the mission to which God has called it, we cannot be disinterested in that which strictly conditions her fruitful survival: the problem of vocations”.

If the first century of the Congregation has seen a continuous growth and development we wish that the second, with the help of Mary Help of Christians, ever present in the Institute willed and blessed by her, *may respond ever more and ever better to the expectations of the Church*.

I said: we wish. But each one of us must say: “I wish”. Our will will become ready, generous and sincere in the measure in which we will discover

²³ OT 2.

ever better in meditation and in prayer the gift of grace that God has given us by calling us to the Salesian religious life. From the happy day on which by the most varied ways, each one heard in the secret of her heart the Lord's "If you will", we began a mysterious journey of grace along with Him, and if on our part, there has been weakness and instability, on God's part the power of His love and fidelity has never waned.

If in the passage of years the sensibility of the first enthusiasm has diminished, faith can become ever more alive and give us the joyous consciousness that God is so intimate to our soul as to become the centre, the life, the most vital and profound reality of our being.

Only in heaven can we know fully the marvellous fabric of grace that the Lord has accomplished in us through our vocation, how He has strengthened our will with His power to carry out our mission, the light He has given us in gradual spiritual discoveries, also in those blessed purifications that led us to true liberty and maturity of heart.

Let the vocation campaign be, therefore, before all else, a campaign of prayer and reflection to discover for ourselves the greatness, the richness of the divine call.

The Circular of February 1974 could be helpful reading and also an attentive meditation on the first nine articles of the Constitutions.

As an introduction to the considerations which we hope to make next month, every province will count how many vocations have come from our houses in these last decades, and every house should draw up statistics of the vocations it has given to the Institute, and if in these last years there has been a diminution, begin to study the cause.

Cause of the
drop in vocations

Have we not, perhaps, given much more time and creative attention to recreative activities than to catechesis and prayer in the oratories, youth centres, and boarding schools? And in the schools have we not been more preoccupied with culture, programmes, examination results than with Christian formation?

Let each Sister question herself honestly on the contribution of prayer and action she has given for the increase of vocations and ask herself sincerely, before God, if she has always given to the girls a joyful testimony of her own vocation and if she has considered it a personal duty to interest herself in vocations.

We shall thus take the vocational problem by its deepest roots and the conscientious examination of the internal causes will surely be of internal benefit to our communities, will renew them and make of them joyful witnesses of faith, hope and charity.

May our Blessed Lady, whose nativity we have celebrated with filial fervour this month, bless the dawn of this, our renewed commitment and make us numerous, fervent, "**specialists of God**", in the Church in imitation of Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello.

(*Cir. n. 595 - September 25 1976*)

Prayer, the pattern of vitality in the Institute

I again return to the vocation theme. I think from what we said in the last circular that we are all convinced that the work for vocations cannot be based on a purely human foundation.

It is not a question of a technical, scholastic work, one of option, as we might say today, purely a cultural matter. By its very nature a vocation is something which surpasses the limits of a mere

Vocation a
super-human
event

human event: it absolutely cannot be limited to choices which involve personal liberty only. The word *vocation* means a call on the part of another.

Even though bound up with so many unpredictable circumstances of persons and surroundings, vocations come from God, are a pure gift from Him. Did not Jesus say in the Gospel: "You have not chosen me but I have chosen you".²⁴ It is God who chooses. It is the Holy spirit who arouses the mysterious breath of grace.

Every vocation is, therefore, a gift of God to the individual soul, for its sanctification and for the good of the brethren; for the building up and enrichment of the Mystical Body of Christ, which is the Church.

The criterion therefore, that vocations must be asked for, implored in prayer, remains unchanged. "The harvest is great, but the labourers are few. Pray, therefore, the Lord of the Harvest that He may send labourers into His harvest".²⁵

Prayer
the pivot

For the vocation campaign therefore we must above all, consider prayer as the pivot. We have prayed already, but we must still pray, pray more and better. Let us pray, above all, with great faith, with humility, and with perseverance as Jesus counsels us in the Gospel: "Ask and you shall receive, seek and you shall find, knock and it shall be opened to you... If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give Holy Spirit to those who ask Him".²⁶

In the Special General Chapter it was already fixed

²⁴ *Gv* 15, 16.

²⁵ *Mt* 9, 37-38.

²⁶ *Lk* 11, 9-13.

that in all the Institute Saturdays should be distinguished by the offering of special prayers and sacrifices for an increase of vocations.²⁷

Prayer initiatives, can also be multiplied at all levels and on all occasions. With the participation of the girls, interesting research of scriptural passages can be made, and thus present those great persons called in the Old and New Testaments, from Abraham to the apostles, who have generously answered yes.

The conciliar documents, *Lumen Gentium*, *Perfectae Caritatis*, *Optatam totius*, *Gaudium et spes*, *Ad gentes* etc. and the pontifical documents, especially the messages of Paul VI on the occasion of vocation days, offer rich material for celebrations of the word and for personal and community prayer.

Every community can carry out its programme of prayer to obtain *labourers* for the Lord's *vineyard*. Prayer is good, but will acquire efficacy in the measure in which we offer in ourselves as authentic models of prayer.

The religious life is *Sequela Christi*, not because we externally repeat the acts of Jesus, but because we have pledged to enter vitally into His mystery, to penetrate and assimilate the riches of His relation with His Father and to participate with Him in His plan of redemption.

The root of
our personal
prayer

The assiduous meditation of the word of Christ in the Gospel is the most efficacious means of discovering the divine Master, of entering into intimate relations with Him and of participating in the mystery of His prayer. Here is the root of our personal prayer, which develops a growing attraction towards the person of the Word Incarnate, makes

²⁷ Cf *Acts GC XV FMA* 58.

us live in His company, follow His teaching, and be transformed by His grace.

Without personal prayer, assiduous and vital, even the most beautiful liturgical and communitary celebrations become sterile, just as a flower withers when its root is cut off.

Without personal prayer, one no longer directs but is directed by the events of life; one is governed by agitation, hurry, preoccupations. The practices of piety become languid, full of distractions, cold and dry, and while we easily lose time in useless words and entertainments we could reach the point of considering as loss of time the moments given to prayer. We have so much to do, we say, and in the meantime we neglect to do the most important thing: "to praise, thank, and invoke the good God, forgetting that we are, before all else, as the Holy Father has underlined in his discourses, the professionals of prayer and that faithfulness to prayer or its abandonment are the test of the vitality or decadence of the religious life".²⁸

The spirit of
prayer attracts
young people

Young girls observe: they are either attracted by our spirit of prayer or they question the choice we have made of making God the centre of our life. I asked a Sister: "How did you get your vocation?" She answered: "Watching Sr. Teresa pray was better than a sermon for me".

And another: "I was deeply impressed by conversations with Sr. Maria. Whatever subject was being discussed, she always knew how to interiorize it. She did it with simplicity, sometimes in a witty way, but always with such wisdom as to reveal great union with God".

He who prays well makes of his day a continuous

²⁸ *Et* 42.

longing for God, living every minute with Him, so as to live in greater love with all.

I think the book: *Il lievito nella pasta*, has been sent to all the Houses. In it Sr. Lina Dalcerra presents the message of Maria Casella, an oratorian of Turin, of how work is transformed into prayer. Does not Lina Dalcerra's "A Soul led by the Holy Spirit" echo Don Ceria's *Don Bosco con Dio*?

It is in keeping with true Salesian tradition not to allot to prayer a part of our day, but to clothe every occupation in the spirit of prayer, transforming it into a real act of cult, into a lived liturgy, that is an element of the purest Salesian tradition.

We must thank the Lord that the desire to perfect the spirit of prayer and prayer itself, is alive in all the Institute.

Let us be guided by the Constitutions which from Art. 43 to 54 outline our itinerary of prayer: personal, liturgical, sacramental, marian, with all Salesian characteristics, nourished by the indispensable atmosphere of silence without which it is impossible to establish a deep contact with God.²⁹

If we are souls of prayer, we will know how to help the girls discover the inestimable riches of grace and vast spiritual horizons.

"It is in the silent dialogue with God that the living stones of which His kingdom is formed are prepared and the chosen instruments who promote collaboration with it".

In order that a vocation may blossom it needs the supernatural warmth of prayer: as vocation is, in fact, a gift of God, He reveals Himself in our meetings with Him. It is the life of eucharistic-marian

Eucharistic-
marian
piety,
source of
vocations

²⁹ Cf C 1975 43-54.

piety, and conversion of heart by means of the Sacrament of reconciliation, which, little by little prepare the young girls who are called to answer "yes".

If catechism, participation in the Mass, and frequenting of the sacraments are neglected, we cannot hope to get vocations. We must be ever more convinced that the Eucharist is the source of vocations far more than any initiative discourse of ours. It is not meeting with us but meeting with Jesus with the faith and enthusiasm of a youthful heart that ignites the spark of vocation.

Because of this Don Bosco stated that vocations would diminish in the oratory if piety were neglected.³⁰

Let us help the girls to know the truths of faith, to meditate on the word of God; let us lead them to the altar, to communion, to visits to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament if we wish to lead them to lasting commitments of purity and consecration. This is the highway indicated and followed by our Saints.

Testimony of
young people

The testimony of many young girls in our youth centres confirms this even today. I choose some expressions written last summer, after days of meditation on the word of God followed by experience of prayer:

- Lord, I discovered you in the Eucharist, I discovered your love, your friendship. Before this I deluded myself in thinking that I knew you, but in reality, I prayed from force of habit. Now I understand the place you hold in my life. Thank you, Jesus, teach me to know you better so that I may love you more.
- Lord, before the tabernacle my faith became

³⁰ Cf *MB* VI 501.

more lively and I discovered at last that I can speak openly to you and tell you and ask you the most intimate things. Speak to me, Jesus! You alone have the words of eternal life!"

• The long time before the tabernacle taught me that when Jesus passes and says to me: "Leave all and follow Me", He invites me to be like the trees which shed their leaves to allow the sun to pass through. The nearer I come to Him the more I succeed in seeing all with the very eyes of God: I see that the things to which I am still attached are so small; I feel that I am made for joy, but that true joy can be found only in God.

Let us, dear Sisters, try daily to deepen our prayer experience, especially in meditation, at Mass, at Communion and also in the midst of pressing occupations, in the frequent, intimate contacts with God in the centre of our soul: we shall thus be able to communicate it by means of a mysterious radiation to the young. This strong joyful prayer-experience will be the means which God can use to repeat the gift of His call.

Our Lady Immaculate comes to meet us with her dear, beautiful feast, the feast of purity, of total donation to God, of perfect consecration. Let us invoke her from the depths of our hearts for our dear young people so that she may sow among them the desire and irrevocable will to give themselves entirely to the Lord so that there may flower on the stem of her total consecration to God many holy vocations.

(Cir. n. 597 - November 24 1976)

Vocational environment

Consoling
confirmation

The feedback from the last two circulars is so consoling that it gives me the certainty that our Lady is blessing and fructifying our vocation campaign.

It made me aware of the earnestness with which the campaign was inserted into the individual pastoral projects, at provincial and local levels. The other Mothers and I were delighted with the various plans the houses have drawn up to make the community more efficient in vitalizing prayer, in appreciating every individual person and in bringing about that fraternal collaboration so as to realise an effective educational action.

May not the letters which I have received these days from various provinces be a consoling answer from Heaven?

"I am delighted to tell you that a past pupil of our school has at last obtained her parents' consent to enter this year".

"I give you the good news that there are three vocations in our technical school".

"Following on a day's recollection two girls confided to me that they are seriously thinking of entering the Institute".

Your joy, dear Sisters, is the joy of all, because to offer to Jesus a young person in the flower of youth and purity ready to consecrate herself to Him is the most beautiful thanks we can give for the gift of our vocation to the Lord, to the Church and to the Institute.

Let us continue, therefore, with great confidence in this holy undertaking. Let us continue to pray and pray well. For many Sisters, especially if ill, and for those who have not direct contact with youth,

this, united to their personal sacrifices, will perhaps, be the only, yet most effective means of cooperating in the vocation campaign.

For the majority of the Sisters, however, it is not enough; we must enter into the heart of the problem, work and act. No one can or should retire behind the curtain and say that it does not concern her. We all have a vast work to do: *to promote, discover, cultivate vocations.*

The question arises: "Where do we look for them? How can we promote them? How can we foster them?"

Where vocations
are sought

We must seek them and harvest them in our houses, in our field of work. It is there and not elsewhere that we must labour to discover and cultivate new vocations.

The times seem past when parish priests and other priests sent us vocations as a wealth generously handed over to others, often without even knowing the Institute.

Ordinarily, and for the most part, *the vocations that the Congregation needs to fill the vacancies which occur must come from our houses.*

Is not youth the specific object of our charism? Is not this the field of labour that the Church has assigned to us?

Let us keep therefore, to our work among them, let us specialise for them without squandering our energies, except in very important cases, in other sectors which also may present wonderful possibilities for apostolate, but to which, according to the charism received from God, other Congregations have been called.

Thanks be to God we still have the schools, the oratories and the professional centres crowded with young people. Are we not, therefore, privileged in

the vocational field by comparison with other Congregations whose work is not for youth?

The experience
of our Saints

Today we are called to repeat the early experience of Don Bosco, under the guidance of St. Joseph Cafasso, after the failure of his outside collaborators.

He was persuaded that the surest collaborators and those who would continue the work which he envisaged had to be found and chosen among his own boys.

Outstanding dreams in the life of our holy Founder, gave him to understand that this was the path to be followed. Thus the oratory and some other houses of the early days became promising hives of vocations.

Don Giulio Barberis, in his chronicle of August 12, 1876, makes note of this confidence of Don Bosco about vocations: "We do not go to look for them, we look for them without moving out of the house. Youths come into our environments; they like our style of life and they ask to stay; to us remains only the thought of choosing".³¹

On February 3, 1868, Don Bosco, on closing the conference to rectors, said: "Let us think of increasing our personnel but to do so we must all take on the obligation of getting new confreres. The rectors should win and hold the confidence of those boys whom they foresee will in future be able to do great good. I tell you from experience and can assure you that if a boy, during his studies has unlimited confidence in his Superiors, and has found in him a father rather than a rector, he will open his heart to him and will do as he advises him to do.

³¹ MB XII 329.

He will love the house, and even without knowing the Congregation, he will practise its rules and knowing it will embrace it, never to leave it".³²

"When a rector finds a boy of simple manner and good character, he should try to make him his friend, address a good word to him; ask him for his prayers assure him of his; invite him to go to communion often. At the end of his course he can advise him to choose that vocation and place which he judges advantageous to his soul, and which will be most beneficial to him at the point of death".³³

"It is of great advantage to us — Don Bosco said to Don Barberis — to receive in adolescence the greater number of those who become Salesians. They grow up becoming accustomed, without noticing it, to a laborious life; they know the organization of the Society; they become good assistants with unity of spirit and method. When a man of great learning and authority enters the Congregation if he is not a saint and if he does not know how to adapt his will to that of his Superiors he can do more harm than good".

Don Bosco really teaches us to suscite, follow up, and form vocations in the environment of our works.

And St. Mary Mazzarello inculcated prayer for vocations very much and never lost sight of those who showed signs of being called. Without annoying them with too many counsels, she knew how to say at the opportune time and place, the suitable word, so that all felt drawn to love God and many, to abandon all and follow Him more closely.

She knew with simple words and ways how to infuse the true spirit of piety and such was the

³² MB IX 69.

³³ MB XVII 262-263.

fascination of her presence and of her words that many followed her in the religious life. Suffice to recall such names as Mother Emilia Mosca, Sr. Corinna Arigotti, Sr. Maria Belletti and Sr. Emma Ferrero.

Gathering
vocations
among our girls

Also today the Institute must obtain vocations in the areas where it works without counting too much on other sources. Mary Help of Christians attracts into our houses many young people between 14 and 18 years of age. In the formative apostolic groups they open up to piety and to the ideals of the Salesian life.

There are, also, groups of past pupils, another field of apostolic work, all our own, perhaps more open, because more mature to the vocation problem. Among our past pupils, if followed with interest and bound more closely to our family, beautiful solid vocations can come.

It is in these fields that we must work with intelligence and confidence, with solidarity among ourselves, with enthusiasm and sincerity of love towards God and the Congregation.

It is here that we must sow with patience, perseverance, with delicacy so as to walk and guide others to walk in the ways of God with the greatest respect for the individuality and liberty of each person.

It is here that the Sisters who are true *specialists of God* are revealed through their influence on the girls.

It may be troublesome to be the alarm-clock of providence and the outrider of the Lord. On the subject of vocation and consecration there is still in some Sisters too much timorous silence, because, perhaps, here and there the figure of the religious is no longer held in the same consideration as formerly. But we must not allow ourselves to be brought to a stand still, or frightened by the expres-

sions of those who despise religious because they do not want to recognise and honour God.

“The apostles — The Acts tell us, went away joyful because they were counted worthy to suffer for the name of Jesus”.³⁴

In our conversations with the girls, we must depart from the generic and stimulate admiration for the virginal life which does not close the heart, but leaving it undivided, opens and expands it to the needs of the Church and the world.

The Sister who lives and vibrates with her ideal in perfect joy is in a position to enkindle in others the flame which heats and needs to spread.

The Sister who loves Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello, who knows the history of the Institute, all interwoven with interventions of Mary Help of Christians and with the luminous example of many Sisters, cannot but speak of them with enthusiasm just as a girl could not but communicate to persons dear to her the joys and glories of her family.

Some years ago there was, perhaps, in some places, a wave of exaggerated anti-triumphalism, which led to the diminution of esteem for one's religious family.

But, thank God, after the Chapter, in every province, there is evidenced a growing desire to know the origins of the Institute, to draw directly from the sources, to utilize also for conversation with the girls the rich material of books, photos and films available in the Salesian family.

A fresh new wave of Salesianity is entering the Communities which are taking up again the aspect of common life and Salesian welcome.

³⁴ Acts 5, 41.

The Salesian
stamp of our
houses

Let our houses again become *houses for young people*, and let not their absence be regarded with relief but with nostalgia by the Sisters.

Don Bosco said with great satisfaction: "With us the boys are regarded as sons in a family, they make the interests of the Congregation their own. They say: our chapel, our oratory, our missions etc. ... Whatever belongs to the Salesians they regard as 'ours'".

A Superior, speaking to me of a youth centre said to me: "The girls really feel at home. In the places we have put at their disposal they have put up charts, brought books, guitars etc. ... they made a little kingdom of it and would even sleep there if that were permitted.

The bigger ones help as assistants in the oratory: some are catechists, others prepare the liturgical celebrations, others become stage managers or producers.

And as they feel at home they think spontaneously of what would be needed or of interest in the surroundings; they bring chairs and benches; they sweep, prepare the stage, they gather material for the missions; sometimes you see them dry the tears of the little ones, say a good word to those causing annoyance, calling them to order: All unconsciously they are living already, without having studied it, the Salesian method of education".

That is the consoling proof that our playgrounds, our chapels, the halls of our schools, the various youth centres are the ideal ground on which vocations are to be cultivated.

We shall see later how these have to be cared for so as to reach maturity. In the meantime the masterly letter written by Rev. Fr. Ricceri for January-March 1974, the numerous circulars of Mother Luisa Vaschetti of April to October 1927, of Jan-

uary 1928, of. February and April 1931, of April and November 1936, of July 1937 and October 1939, that of our Reverend Mother Angela of March 24, 1956 and that of Don Albera of May 15, 1921 on the subject of vocations can be of light and stimulus to us.

Revision

We can thus carry out a sincere examination:

- Is our house still a house for youth?
- Do they really feel it is their own?
- Are they at their ease there?
- Do they find there centres of interest which attract and form?
- Do they feel themselves loved and desired collaborators in our mission?
- Do they find the Sisters, each in her own work, happy to meet them and serene and joyful in welcoming them, with the basic scope of causing Him to grow in the hearts of all?

Our houses are our Lady's, watched over and protected by her; and Don Bosco said: "It suffices that a youth enter a Salesian house for our Blessed Lady to take him immediately under her special protection".³⁵

Let us have faith in this protection of Mary for our young girls and let us collaborate with her in guiding them on the ways of the Lord.

(Cir. n. 598 - December 24 1976)

Vocational orientation

From September till now we have tried to study the situation of the Institute regarding vocations.

³⁵ MB XVII 114.

We have suggested various means for producing a suitable environment in the houses and we emphasised that every one of us must be forerunners of God since, meeting him in faith and love is the only way to trigger the spark of vocation.

How can we prepare for this meeting? How can we help the girls to cultivate a vocation deep within themselves?

Vatican II gives the answer: "*By Catechesis*".³⁶ This reply is so much in harmony with our Salesian vocation that we feel the words of Fr. Ricaldone are meant for us personally, "If you really love the Congregation help and work in the catechetical sector". These words remind us of those other words which are a stimulus to this duty of ours. "You well know that catechesis is the work above all others, the Salesian activity par excellence. On Catechesis depends the life of the Church, the salvation of civil society and of each individual soul".

Synod of Bishops

This year the Church herself invites us especially to reflect on Catechesis. As I already stated in the last circular the Synod of Bishops will, this Autumn (1977) discuss the theme '*Catechesis in our times with special reference to Catechesis for children and young people*'.

In some dioceses the year has been designated 'The year of Catechesis'. In all of them the '*Preparatory Document*', published for the use of the Conference of Bishops is the subject of study and reflection, and is also used as a stimulating text by many catechetical groups.

Our Institute is deeply committed at all levels to this important event in the Church by the theme chosen. Provincial and local communities are off-

³⁶ GE 4.

ered an excellent opportunity for a responsible revision of our manner of catechising and also for carrying on freely our campaign for vocations. This is still the object of our endeavours for this year.

The Church causes us to reflect — “Vocations direction is primarily offered by catechesis which aims at forming a mentality of robust and conscious faith and transmits *a vocational vision of the Christian Life*. In fact the believer can recognise the call of God only by a fundamental decision, calculated at the level of faith, to seek the will of the Father and become a disciple of Christ. Therefore he must see that this christian experience is lived and constructed in dialogue and hence, vocational in relation to God”.³⁷

If in catechesis we present the Christian message with a lively sense of fidelity to God and man, we cannot help but present salvation as a continual call to a life of communion with God and a free response by man to this call.

If we point out this relationship between God and ourselves clearly, the young girl will understand that her ‘*plan of life*’ will be valid only in the degree in which it becomes the response to a divine call, is enabled gradually to discover her general vocation to be a Christian and to make herself also available for the specific call to a life of religious consecration.

Catechesis

- presents the Christian life as a call and a response in dialogue with God. It points out specific vocations as concrete expressions of the common vocation of faith in and love for Christ.

Religious life
a dialogue with
God

³⁷ CEI, *La preparazione al Sacerdozio ministeriale. Orientamenti e norme* (Roma 1972) 322.

- It places the young girl in a position of facing up to an awareness of the call of God and of giving a committed response.
- It helps families to create an environment of faith in which the children understand that life is a vocation to serve God and others.

The task of the Catechist is not an easy one, due to the rapid changes in society, which bring new situations and mentalities. But if we are burning with the fervour of Don Bosco's "*Da mihi animas*" we shall find the fatigue of keeping up with modern times and the girls of today much lighter.

The catechisms published during these last years help us. They are being prepared in every country under the care of the episcopal conferences and I trust that everywhere the most effective means will be found to make the Sisters fully conversant with them and able to use them to the best advantage in their preparation.

In general, starting from the catechism for younger children, the basic dynamics are always those of '*call and response*'. This is proposed and developed along the line of the biblical covenant. The call is a gift of grace which is made visible in Jesus. From the accounts of the Gospels and the simple, narration of the miracles, of the Passion, death and Resurrection it is always evident that Jesus continues to call us to live with Him, in order to go with all the saved to the Father.

Baptism, in addition to being a call of God the Father to a life of grace, is a great call from the Church, to embrace, as sons of God, those special vocations which form the wealth and variety of the Church itself.

It is therefore very important that early in life, the young should, become aware of reality that baptism is a call that commits them for life. I recall

with what grief a girl said to her mother after a day of baptismal celebration: "Why did you never tell me about the great things that happened to me at baptism? How happy would it have been to know I was a child of God and how much better I would have been!"

The talk about baptism and on the early Christian community allow the young person to be more aware of his capacity of corresponding to the call of God in the Church. It is also possible, in language suited to age to speak of this response as consecration to God.

Vocational
catechesis

The vocation of Abraham, David, Samuel and the Apostles and the rise of the first Christian community serve as an aid to comprehension and sum up the sense of vocation well.

The text of catechism provided for the pre-adolescent gives a special discourse on vocation. Girls of 12 to 13 years of age are not yet able to make a definite choice but are seeking the meaning of their own lives. To propose ideals is not to exploit them unduly, but to help them develop their plan of life in a responsible generous manner, always placing them in a position of hearing the word of God.

'Let us help each girl personally to discover her own identity', the Manual exhorts us, "and gradually to become aware of the plan God has for her".³⁸

How many FMA owe the happiness of their religious life to a zealous sister who, in simple catechism lessons opened up for them in adolescence a luminous horizon of faith with an ideal of total self-giving to God and others. It is not enough to say that God is calling, one must know the ways and times of His calling and help the young girls

³⁸ M-R 1975 59.

to keep their hearts ready to answer yes, both in hours of Thabor and Calvary.

It is obvious that we must speak to them about every type of vocation in the Church because each of these has a wealth of value we must put before them honestly. This does not, however, impede us from giving the girls systematic catechesis on the religious life, especially to those who are that way inclined.

We know how explicit Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello were in this regard. Going back to Don Bosco,³⁹ our Constitutions point out, "One of the strongest demands of our educative system is vocational guidance of those young girls open to personal meeting with Christ, who are disposed to a greater commitment to the furthering of God's kingdom".⁴⁰

Vocation catechesis commits the young person to an ever clearer discovery of who she is, to build up personal identity and to clarify with greater assurance her plan of life, according to the human and christian values which gradually become deeper and more serious.

It is not a case of speaking to a girl about a "special call" immediately, but of helping her to become more and more aware of the grace of baptism, of the obligation to grow which it demands and an ever more attentive and generous response to the divine action in her.

Every form of catechesis for adolescents must have as scope to enable the girls to make their choice of vocation.

This accounts for the fact that vocation is far from being a marginal subject in catechesis. Of what use

³⁹ Cf *MB XI* 266-267.

⁴⁰ *C* 1975 61.

would all the programmes be and all our well-structured lessons on topics that arouse lively interest, if these are of no use to the girls in developing a real plan of life leading to the highest of all values, the will of God?

Schools for
catechists -
Ideal place
for vocations

Effort is being made in our houses to promote groups with a marked ecclesial commitment. Among these the schools for catechists are outstanding. These were promoted by our dear Mother Angela under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

When Vatican II insistently reminded the laity that, because of their christian vocation, they were called to fulfill a specific apostolate in the Church; that the young especially should feel that the call is directed to them and accept it eagerly and generously,⁴¹ Mother Angela accepted this invitation in the name of the young people and opened up the way to a more authentic renewal in the field of catechetics. Thus there came into being the schools for the preparation of catechists.

We all know what Don Bosco did for the training of catechists for the Oratory.

He himself states: "I selected them with the greatest care... whenever I met any with the necessary qualifications. I must admit that at the start I had to work very hard to train them along my lines, but the best among them proved very valuable".⁴² They were of *great help* in the oratory in the first place, but later also in the parishes, in dioceses and in the Church.

Don Bosco's discourses to them were systematic and formative. He wished them first of all to be witnesses themselves. His biographer writes: "On

⁴¹ Cf AA 1, 33.

⁴² Cf MB III 436.

Thursdays Don Bosco used also to call a meeting of his catechists and others on the oratory staff. After reading some chapters of the regulations, he would exhort each one... to give good example to all the boys by zealously performing their religious duties".⁴³

How many priestly vocations, especially Salesians came from that group of catechists! It is a fact that Don Bosco gradually communicated to them in an impressive manner his own sense of apostolate and, without putting himself forward in an explicit way he became their model.

Let us read what the memoirs say regarding this: "Although these young catechists did not board with Don Bosco, they found his zeal contagious. Some were at his side from morning to night, watched his every step, were edified by his example".⁴⁴

I should like a little of the same thing to happen to our young catechists. I hope that gradually they come to realise the urgency of our apostolic commitment in the Church today and feel, as baptised persons still more responsible with us in the christian formation of the young. Seeing the spirit animating us the fatigue we face up to with faith, serenity and love, they may begin to think that ours is a beautiful and exhilarating life. They will then ask themselves whether it is not worth while to choose a consecrated life committed to a service so precious in the Church today.

The Constitutions state: "We help these young girls to discover the authentic values of religious consecration by our witness, through our prayer, self-denial and humble active service lived joyfully and with fraternal charity. By making them sharers in

⁴³ MB III 176.

⁴⁴ MB III 197-198.

our pastoral activities we offer them an experience of life which could mature a Salesian vocation".⁴⁵

As our dear Mother Angela predicted, the classes for catechists could become a real nursery for vocations. Many concrete examples are proving this true.

The essential is that according to General Chapter XIV deliberations:

- "The function for the classes for catechists be stabilized";⁴⁶
- The responsibility for such classes be entrusted to trained Sisters who are Salesian witnesses;
- The whole community shall accept them completely and support them in an atmosphere of trust, optimism and prayer.

Where there is a "school for catechists" *all the Sisters* — at various levels — should be responsible for their formation.

The *General Catechetical Directory* makes us reflect — "the mission the catechist is called on to develop demands an intense Sacramental life, familiarity with prayer, a deep appreciation of the grandeur of the Christian message and its capability of transforming one's life".⁴⁷

We must sustain this serious obligation step by step. Through it the catechists meet God, who reveals Himself with ever greater demands and the young persons who wish it may experience a fuller self-giving to Him. The positive response to an eventual call to religious life will in this manner be prepared for. The model is constantly present to the young girl in the alive witnessing FMA, as

⁴⁵ C 1975 61.

⁴⁶ Cf *ACTS GC XIV FMA, Deliberazione XXI.*

⁴⁷ SACRA CONGREGAZIONE DEL CLERO, *Direttorio Catechistico Generale* (Torino, LDC 1971) n. 114.

well as the complete apostolic community. Everything reflects Christ, and a Christ reveals the mystery of the Father and His love. He directs the young person through His divine pedagogy to discover the essential elements of her own vocation and the stages of the path to be trodden in the community of salvation".⁴⁸

(*Cir. n. 600* - February 24 1977)

How to guide a vocation

Once a good, promising vocation has been singled out there is the delicate and pleasant duty of following it up. At times, the painful though not unfounded impression is given that promising, and in some ways stable vocations have not matured because of inadequate care.

A vocation
requires a
guide

It is true that the call comes from God, but it is also true that a vocation needs to be helped and given spiritual guidance. Therefore, the first duty of those who discover a vocation is to place the young person in the secure hands of a spiritual director. Ordinary, simple friendship, although useful and advantageous, is insufficient and sometimes could become devious.

During the years of adolescence and youth when sentiment prevails, the girl must be helped to anchor herself on faith, humility and the constant use of the Sacraments if she does not wish to collapse under the inevitable difficulties.

Unfortunately, the scarcity of priests in some places, makes the choice of confessor difficult. Therefore, we must all have clear and sure ideas regarding the guidance of a vocation. Father Giovenale Dho of

⁴⁸ Cf *RdC* 91.

the Salesian Superior Council, expressed this very competently at the vocations studies held last January in the Generalate [1977]. With his kind permission I take a few basic points from his conferences. They offer wise direction in the care of vocations.

A religious vocation is a gift of grace, but it is also an event which is linked to all sorts of causes, influences and conditioning.

Deepening of
motivations

It is the gift of the Father who calls with sovereign liberty, and allocates to a particular mission in the Church. This call is not a mysterious voice, God reveals Himself by means of signs, such as the word of God, precepts, attitudes, the aspirations of the person and the actual environment in which she lives.

The basic dynamics of vocation guidance rest always on spiritual formation because, vocation is a fact that even if translated into psychological experience, is essentially a mystery of grace, which the interested person and her educators should approach with *humility and respect*.

Therefore, it is fundamental for true formation, to guide the young person to a gradual deepening of the motivations that underlie her plan of life.

It is not enough that the determined lifestyle (religious life) satisfies her aspirations, the motivation is still purely at a psychic, subjective level.

Whoever wishes to adopt the life of the FMA just because she likes teaching, work in the oratory, to sacrifice herself for others, has not yet acquired valid motives for this choice. Even should there be a cover of faith, the motive-power of her life is still directed towards a self-satisfaction which determines her conduct. She has still to reach the point of choosing because of the values of religious life itself.

Faith alone
is the
motivation

The choice of a life of consecration is justified only on the basis of *a vision of faith, and of other values which are viewed only on the basis of faith:*

- the intention of passing one's life in seeking the will of God and of making this will the norm of one's life; in being preoccupied for the kingdom of God, the true centre of one's life;
- the aspiration to follow Christ, chaste, poor and obedient, more closely;
- preoccupation to be available in charity to others.

Whoever wishes to follow the religious life for what it is objectively should be moved by the wish to realise such values.

Religious life is not just another profession, but a life programmed entirely on faith.

Only when the young person is able to see her aspirations and the demands of realism in the light of faith, when she recognises the call of God in them, and going beyond self-satisfaction and the search for personal fulfilment, asks: "What is God's will?", will she reach the point of discovering the substance of religious life.

The work of formation is to guide the young person called towards a right intention and the explicit will to dedicate herself totally to the service of God. This is to guide the person in weighing up her actual motives and to cause these to evolve at the level of faith.

Guide to a
right rapport
with God

There are many methods of formation to encourage the maturing of motives of faith. We must collaborate in order that the person studying her vocation may place herself deeply and habitually in right relationship with God. She will thus put herself well on the road to Psychological maturity in relations with herself and others.

Only intimacy with God can bring interior freedom to the person, and render her capable of renunciation, self-abnegation and true self-sacrifice.

The focal point in the work of formation is, then, to create the conditions that make the deepening of dialogue with God possible, the interiorization of the figure of Christ as the ideal for arriving at the decision to give oneself totally to Him.

The good qualities of stability, will-power, piety and generosity, although of great value, are not in themselves signs of a vocation that is specifically religious.

Every girl should be followed up according to her own personal rhythm, and be encouraged to take, in her own situation, the steps necessary to recognise the will of God and to carry it into effect in her life. Formative action should then be personalized and differentiated.

On the basis of her temperament, her living experience, her interior aspirations and the socio-cultural conditions in which she lives, the young girl should be helped to read the will of God.

Ways of
discovering a
vocation

There are a number of ways in the spiritual order to discover one's own vocation: *the ways of meditation, liturgical prayer, participation in ecclesial and Salesian life and of practising apostolic charity.*

Meditation, the way of entering one's heart to find God, brings the ability to look at oneself from God's angle in order to view one's life and its context and thus develop one's personal vocation.⁴⁹

In *liturgical prayer* the young person learns to live her relations with God as a member of the Church and to perceive her mission in it. She prays, not

⁴⁹ Cf *Plan of Formation delle FMA* (Roma, FMA 1975) 55-56, n. 1, 57 n. 2.

in her own name, but in the name of all men and all things and this will be to the advantage of her maturing vocation.

The path of *ecclesial and Salesian experience* leads to the practical living out of the life of the Church and of the Institute according to the specific task of one's own vocation.⁵⁰

Example of
Don Bosco
and Mother
Mazzarello

These are the ways Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello used in guiding vocations.

St. Mary Mazzarello examined the inclinations and habits of the young people showing signs of vocation. She would give them much encouragement, trust them, and correct them in various ways, according to temperament and circumstances. She could distinguish wilful faults from character weaknesses, was easily moved to compassion but honest and firm when correcting. "We do not expect to find people without defects", she said, "but we do not want them to make peace with them".

Everything was geared toward gaining their confidence and in this manner she was able to inculcate good thoughts and christian virtues. She worked with faith and trained the young people not to work for human motives but to please God.⁵¹

Don Bosco, who insisted on knowing how to discover and stimulate vocation, excluded the creation of suggestions or emotions and invited instead, the bringing into play of a pondered and free choice by the subject.

Don Bosco did not want "forced volunteers" even by psychological methods. Vocation and decision must stem from elevated, solid and fundamental motives, capable of filling, not for a moment only,

⁵⁰ Cf *Plan of Formation delle FMA* (Roma, FMA 1975) n. 4, 57 n. 1.

⁵¹ Cf MACCONO, *Santa* I 361.

but definitely, the heart and soul of the young person.

Those young people who wanted to make sure they were making no mistake, were to choose a regular confessor and open up their hearts to him. They were to make frequent use of confession and communion, be modest and obedient and think of what they would wish to have done at the moment of death.

Lively and radiant ideals, but which are at the same time well-grounded and essential should, according to Don Bosco, give the go-ahead to a vocation.

In a conference given on February 8, 1877 he ended with the habitual recommendation to take care of vocations and suggested three ways of doing this:

- speak often of vocations;
- talk a good deal about the missions;
- provide reading matter based on the vicissitudes suffered by missionaries.

He told the young people the motivations required, in explicit terms: first prayer, second knowledge of the great needs of the Church and the large field of labour prepared for these who wish to do good while working for the glory of God.⁵²

Knowledge
of the Institute
and its Mission

When caring for vocations it is absolutely necessary to make the young people aware of the life and mission of the Institute.

Rather than becoming attached to a person, whose work is not, for this reason to be belittled, or its beneficial influence to be discarded, whoever shows signs of vocation must learn to know and love the

⁵² Cf BRAIDO Pietro, *Il Sistema preventivo di Don Bosco* (Torino, PAS 1955) 380-382.

work towards which she is directing her choice. Individual vision is restricted, we must be deeply persuaded of this. It is the Institute that gives or can give the security for which the young people are seeking.

On the other hand, vocations are God's gift to Institutes, not to persons. A clear vision of values is needed and, together with this, detachment and spirit of generosity.

Instruments in
the hands
of God

The Sisters in closer contact with the young can be instruments in the hands of God for germinating vocations and this will happen, as we have said so often, in the measure in which they show themselves to be *God's specialists*. For this very reason the sisters must never presume either in principle or in effect, to act on their own. There is plenty of room for collaboration but, along those correct lines which eliminate exclusiveness and reserved areas of action.

Every vocation is a gift of grace on the part of God and of correspondence on the part of the subject. However, within the scope of its complete development in a special direction, attentive care is required on the part of those whose duty it is to express a responsible judgment.

Therefore, the recommendation of dear Mother Linda in her circular of December 24, 1944, is more valid than ever. After having exhorted us to speak to the young about vocation, she added, with that wisdom which is the fruit of great maturity, "It happens not rarely that certain timorous or uncertain souls really need a word to help them first to find their bearing and then to make up their minds.

We must not let them find this help lacking and when anyone realises that the good seed is about to germinate she must direct the young person to

the Superior of the house, and to a Salesian confessor if at all possible, in order that direction and help be continued.

God's grace and the experience of the Guides God has chosen will do the rest".

Dear Sisters, the wise and ample instructions we have received should make us reflect. The response to God's call commits the whole person to a thorough reorganization of her life, not for personal satisfaction, self-fulfilment or some good to be accomplished, but only from the commitment to God's will. In order to help young people effectively to give their personal response to God, should we not review the motivations of our own way of acting, and purify them from everything that is not a pure search for God's will?

The generous moment by moment response to the God who is constantly calling, will multiply the lights and gifts of the Holy Spirit for fruitful care of vocations.

Let us be guided by our Lady who was able to "commit herself whole-heartedly and impeded by no sin, to God's saving will",⁵³ making herself available to His plan in everything and cooperating without reserve in humility and faith in the redemptive work of her Son.

(*Cir.* n. 601 - March 24 1977)

Experiences in the field of vocations

You will ask me: is there still some material left for another circular on vocations. My answer is that material is increasing under my hands and, happily, it is you, my dear Sisters, who are making it grow.

⁵³ *LG* 56.

Many letters have reached me in response to the last circulars and I cannot refrain from telling you how moved I am to *find how much you have taken the vocation problem to heart* and what a salutary stimulant it has become to the communities. Our Lady is truly always with us. It is she who inspires, guides, admonishes and encourages us.

Therefore, I decided to let you write this circular, my dear Sisters. I shall simply transcribe some of your thoughts, synthesising where there is repetition.

I give precedence to our dear sick and elderly Sisters who are acknowledged in the spirit of the gospel and the constitutions to have a privileged position because of their evident conformity to Christ.

They write:

Initiatives to
encourage
vocations

“We are all in *spiritual movement* in the vocation campaign. Besides the Marian Crusade you suggested, every Saturday we choose a different aspect of charity to practise during the week. We want to be *forerunners* of Jesus in the hearts of the young”.

“Be assured that your cry of distress has found a strong echo in our hearts. Our enforced inactivity and the infirmity of our age are the daily gift for vocations that we present to God at every Mass”.

“Each week every Sister picks a province for which she prays and, using the elenco she extends her prayers to every house and every work in that particular province”...

“We have placed a picture of our Lady depicted in an attitude of self-giving, in the Chapel entrance, to remind us of fidelity and joy in our consecration”.

“I felt that September’s Circular was addressed to

me personally. Your voice is for me a continual stimulus to follow every good inspiration”.

“I offer the Way of the Cross and commit myself to be silent, silent, silent”.

“I want never to complain again. When difficulties and trials come, I shall say, ‘Thank you Lord’, send many good vocations”.

“Mother, for vocations I accept the painful conditions you know about”.

“I want to be more optimistic. I shall put on rose-coloured spectacles in order that many good people may be attracted to the religious life”.

“I shall be the first to greet the Sisters even if they do not respond to my greeting, and I shall quickly overcome my resentment”.

“I commit myself to look for and prefer always, whatever promotes unity of hearts in community”.

“I shall make efforts to accept disappointments with a flash of humour in order not to burden my Sisters”.

“I offer my painful deafness without complaint in order that many young people may listen to God’s call”.

There are many more nose-gays of this type which perfume the pages of the history of our Institute, but I think it will also be of interest to read pages in which both young and mature sisters analyse the causes of the falling off of vocations, suggest possible solutions and present their own experiences.

Let us listen to them:

Causes of the
drop in vocations

“It seems to me, Mother, that if we practised religious poverty better, there would be much more joy in our houses. The girls of today will watch a Sister intently to see if she is really poor and vocations seem to turn more to the poorer instit-

utes than to those where well-being and comfort are found”.

“Are not a real sense of sin and an appreciation of the sacrament of reconciliation to be found lacking? Are we not afraid to speak to our girls about ‘the four last things?’”.

“According to my thinking the causes which influence the number of vocations could be: neglect of the practices of piety and allowing ourselves to be engulfed by activism; neglect of the monthly conversation with the Superior; a lessening of the love of sacrifice and mortification and its prevalence over faith”.

“In some houses a good deal of time is given to sports and T.V., but much less to catechesis and formation to piety. This is why the faith of our girls is weak and does not help them to make a christian choice, let alone the choice of religious life”.

“In many places the associations have been suppressed and not replaced by others which would help the girls spiritually; I note also that the beauty of virginity and the religious vocation is no longer spoken of to the girls”.

“If we were more united in our work and not enclosed in our own special sector we should be far more tranquil, less preoccupied with specialization and more with collaboration. The girls would then see our life as the type responding to true christian and religious ideals”.

“In some communities there is not the spontaneity, freedom and simplicity of family life. Who or what is the cause of this? I think, Mother, that it can be attributed to all of us. Superiors and Sisters should review their way of living out the practice of authority and obedience in the light of Mornese and Valdocco. The girls are more struck by the atmos-

phere and climate of community-living than by the behaviour of individual Sisters.

“Simplicity and serene goodness in the relations between Sisters and Superiors would create in our communities that family warmth which so greatly attracts vocations”.

“If we could only strengthen the power of the vows within us and live joyfully the detachments that the Sequela Christi exacts, the young would be bound to feel that our life is really an encounter with the person of Christ”.

“We must not consider our vocation apart from belonging to the Institute. If we ourselves do not live with the freshness of love for our religious family we shall never be able to get the young people to know it and love it”.

“I think that if our Congregation is willed by our Lady, if she has done everything, if Don Bosco wanted us to be a living monument to Mary Help of Christians if the Constitutions have highlighted the marian spirit of the Institute, we shall obtain vocations in the measure in which love of and trust in our Lady once again takes on the quality and intensity of the beginning”.

“If Don Bosco said vocations would come from the application of the preventive system, is it not because we are failing to use this system that we fail to create a vocation climate in our Houses? “Plans of work are useful in helping us to collaborate. They make us aware of the realities in which we work, but we must penetrate them more and become inflamed with zeal, we shall then really help the girls in their formation”.

“We must be more forgetful of self in order to be more available to the girls, closer to them, trust them and give them responsibility. Our availability

and happiness will speak louder to the girls than many conferences”.

Suggestions for following up vocations

“It is we ourselves, who by example and words can help the girls to detach themselves from comforts, and from slavery to well-being. We shall then be able to help them understand the real meaning of life”.

“If we highlighted the positive aspects of today’s young people more, we should be able to hold a more effective dialogue with them. According to me, the great secret is also those few words whispered in the ear as Don Bosco intended and practised”.

“Cordial interest in the Past Pupils and keeping in touch with them could develop the germ of vocation that perhaps was sown during their student life”.

“Enlightening parents on the meaning of religious life, speaking to lay teachers about it also and organising vocation-days, could increase the number of vocations”.

“When Mother Angela Vespa was Superior at Nizza she often took the last year students apart in order to enlighten them in the planning of their lives. She used to read them letters in which past-pupils recounted their experiences and made them feel the need to pray much. The pupils were very interested in these gatherings because they were given the opportunity for spontaneous and fruitful dialogue”.

“A great deal of knowledge is not necessary in order to direct vocations, but much virtue is required together with the light of the Holy Spirit. I have in mind Sr. Giuseppina Ranotto of the house of Vallecrosia. She had had only a very simple elementary education, was deaf and almost always in the laundry, which was situated away from the

house. There was nothing to take her among the girls, yet she was the confidante of all those who had a vocation. In one of her last letters she speaks to a Superior about the young people who had entered the Institute during the current year and told her also of those she had in view, and she speaks of the certainty she had that our Lady would seek out others”.

“Greater participation in the life of the local Church would be a witness of charity and apostolic work and would create a climate of greater understanding and good will towards the Sisters and thus encourage an increase in the number of vocations”.

I conclude by reporting, almost in full, the letter of a young sister who does not give us many reflections, precious though these may be, but she shares her personal experience with us.

“I am not very experienced at the moment so I limit myself to telling you how my own vocation came about and developed. Some years ago the magazine *Primavera* published over a period of time some articles on religious vocation, I read them, re-read them and more than this, meditated on them in conjunction with some good books. Some Daughters of Mary Help of Christians have, without realising it, helped me overcome my prejudice that a life of obedience meant a depreciation of the person. I preferred the FMA to other Sister I knew because I felt quite at home with them. They were always with us at recreation, either encouraging the game or chatting familiarly with us. They often spoke of their Institute and so I began to know and love it too. However, I should have liked someone to speak to me especially of the religious life, of its commitments and of the vows and to put some books on the subject at my disposal.

I remember that when I made a vow of chastity with the consent of my confessor, I should have

liked some Sister, without my asking, to have helped deepen my understanding of what it means to choose God exclusively and totally.

I have to say that in my vocation, deprived of any element apart from the ordinary, Our Lady had the fundamental role.

After my consecration to her, I confirmed that it was really our Lady who had led me to Jesus. Now I cannot but thank her for all she has given me in the Institute she willed and blessed”.

This, then, dear Sisters, is the circular you yourselves have written. The sincerity with which you have expressed yourselves confirms the truth that vocations increase in the measure in which they receive from us and the community stimulants to a life of total donation to Christ and others.

The girls ask us: “How can you love God so much? How did it become your ideal to give up everything for Him, and for ever? How is it that you are always happy?”.

Article 8 of the Constitutions outlines the programme of a consecrated life carried to the point of being truly a “sign” and therefore, a witness for those who see us and especially for young people. “By our consecration to God we lay ourselves completely open to the action of the Holy Spirit, and by the continual purification of heart we testify that the capacity to love, the need to possess and the freedom to regulate our own existence find their deepest meaning in Christ, our Saviour.

By our religious profession we offer our gifts of nature and grace to the Father in the Institute, and the Institute, while welcoming us into a community of love, makes us sharers in its life and mission”.

Dear Sisters, do we really want vocations? Let us then be enlightened, guided and transformed by the Constitutions. Do we read them frequently?

Do the Superiors make them the subject of good nights and conferences? Does each one of us personally use them for meditation and verification?

In the measure in which we probe them in the light of the Holy Spirit that inspired them, will the girls see in us the fruits of the Spirit which are in the words of St. Paul: "Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control".⁵⁴

(Cir. n. 602 - April 24 1977)

Sanctity - the atmosphere of vocations

The subject of this circular was suggested by a page I read from Fr. Matteo Crawley, the apostle of the consecration of the home to the Sacred Heart.

He replied to a Superior who asked him to pray for many vocations, that he would rather ask the Holy Spirit to raise up some saints among them, beginning with the Superior herself.

To a priest who had said that he had tried by every manner and means to rechristianise his parish, without apparent results, Fr. Matteo replied: "Have you yourself tried to become a saint? Begin with this!"

The power
of sanctity

These frank, decisive answers made me think about those parishes and institutions where fidelity to Christian and religious values are flourishing notwithstanding trends to the contrary. The reason which springs to the lips of those who benefit by this fervent, piety-saturated environment is; "That priest is a saint"! "that Sister is a saint"! The sanctity spoken of here has no extraordinary

⁵⁴ Gal 5, 22.

or prodigious qualifications, but is a sanctity which lives in the simplicity of the evangelical beatitudes day by day, without striking an attitude or making a noise. It is like the heat that rises from an underground furnace and spreads all through the house, bringing a sense of well-being and stimulating energies.

Sanctity is a force that can transform and vitalise even today, because its source is God. It is the force that our Communities and each one of us needs urgently.

I think of the difficulties encountered and stressed in the fulfilment of our mission today: "Personnel is scarce, insufficient for our needs. Valid strength is lacking!".

This is undoubtedly a painful reality which proves the need of pursuing the vocation campaign indefatigably and without respite. But let us try questioning ourselves: "Is this scarce personnel holy? Are the Superiors holy? Are the Sisters both young and elderly holy? Are the healthy all holy? And what about myself, personally? Am I sincerely committed to becoming holy? Let us listen to our holy Father, Pope Paul VI: "The greater lack of religion, secularism, worldly seduction and hostility to christianity are today, so much the more aware, vigilant, solid and loving must be our efforts to equal and overcome these difficulties".⁵⁵

Only a saint can make this continuous loving effort.

If only we
were saints

Recent statistics give the number of religious as about one million four hundred thousand. If only we were all saints!

It is not enough for us to be updated, qualified, organised. We must be holy in order to radiate grace in the world. This is the most serious, most keenly-felt urgency.

⁵⁵ PAUL VI P.P., *General audience*, September 4th 1974.

During the unforgettable audience he gave us during the centenary year of the Institute, Pope Paul put the serious question: "Will your Institute know how to respond to the expectation of the Church, in this distressing time? He concluded: "There is only one response, my daughters... Sanctity!"

Therefore holiness is not optional; *it is an obligatory choice* that we made on the day of our religious profession:

"By our profession of the Evangelical Counsels, community life and apostolic mission, we desire, with Mary to follow Christ more closely for the glory of the Father, witnessing to His love by our commitment to personal holiness through our service to others".⁵⁶

What God wants for you all is to be holy.⁵⁷

The Church calls
all to Holiness

In Chapter V of the Conciliar Constitution, *Lumen Gentium*, which I invite you all to read in its entirety, holiness is presented as a universal vocation: "All Christians... are called to the fulness of the Christian life and to perfection of love, and by this holiness a more human manner of life is fostered also in earthly society".⁵⁸

It illustrates the multiform practice of holiness, points out ways and means, and in Chapter VI it treats explicitly of holiness in religious life.

To be a religious, then means to be seriously committed to walk the path of holiness, But how can we tell if we are really on this path? What, in practice is holiness?

Let us begin by stating what holiness is not. Holiness is not perfectionism, excessive attention to form, or a pseudo-spiritual life lacking the solidity of works. Neither is it the absence of temptation

⁵⁶ C 1975 2.

⁵⁷ Cf *Thess.* 4, 3.

⁵⁸ LG 40.

or struggle, nor a passivity which flees from effort and sacrifice.

Pope Benedict XV defines holiness as: "conformity to God's will, expressed through the continuous, exact fulfilment of the duties of one's state".

St. Francis of Sales, putting us on our guard against imaginary zeal which often feeds secret vain self-esteem, suggests an easy way to holiness: "seizing every opportunity we meet to make a great act of love".

If we wish to define what a saint is in precise, concrete terms we might say that it is he who gives himself to God completely and without reserve, and who for God's love gives himself to others without exception.

Holiness in our
Institute at the
beginning

"Don Bosco is a Saint"⁵⁹ and a master of Sanctity, of deep solid sanctity. This is borne out by the words written by the cleric Giulitto, when he was admitted to final profession: "the edifice of Sanctity must be founded on humility, built with obedience and roofed with prayer".⁶⁰

Don Bosco wanted holiness from his direct collaborators and on this holiness he based his confidence for the good progress of the Congregation. "Never despair of improvement even if there seems to be disorders in the houses, as long as holiness and activity exists among the Superiors of the Congregation".⁶¹

Don Bosco's first great undertaking was to become holy himself and to help others become holy. This undertaking was so impelling and powerful that it overflowed to his sons who were presented with holiness in an encouraging form. We quote from a sermon given on April 8, 1855: "It is God's will

⁵⁹ MB X 588.

⁶⁰ MB X 1286.

⁶¹ MB XIII 398.

that we become holy".⁶² This aroused such enthusiasm in the hearts of many of the young people that it is not surprising to hear Dominic Savio say: "God wishes me to be holy; I must become holy; I have an absolute need to be holy, and I shall not be happy until I am holy".

Don Bosco supported the yearning of this young boy by leading him along the path of *the exact fulfilment of ordinary duties, friendship with Jesus, and apostolate among his companions*. The oratory at Valdocco became a school for holiness.

So too was the house of Mornese. By word and example Mother Mazzarello spurred Sisters and girls on to holiness. Her formula was very simple and practical: "True religious piety (which she regarded as sanctity) consists in fulfilling all our duties at the right time, in the right place and solely for the love of God".⁶³

Her letters form an anthology of invitations to holiness: "We must become saints. - Make daily efforts to become holier and you will always be happy. Be recollected and humble and you will become a great saint. — Infuse a good spirit in the postulants and make them all holy. — If you want to be holy do it quickly, there is no time to lose. — Become holy yourselves as well, together with all those good girls. — Let us not forget that our one aim is to become perfect and holy for Jesus".

The path of the Institute over the past hundred years has given proof that our Mother's words were efficacious. It was, for the most part a path to holiness.

...today

But if there were saints yesterday, by God's grace, there are saints today. Is it not true that as we

⁶² MB V 209.

⁶³ MACCONO, *Santa* II 57.

look at the lives led by certain of our Sisters we say to ourselves: "That Sister is a saint!"

And what about our girls? Starting from the Servant of God, Laura Vicuña, enthusiastic young people have graced our houses. The chain of generosity is still unbroken.

The Sisters still testify today to the interior life, the thirst for God, the humility and generosity of many among the young girls who pray with us and collaborate with us in our apostolic activities. During these days a Superior, very moved, told me about a young girl who confided in her: "I want to become holy, what must I do?" My thoughts go back to the last visit of Paul VI, then Archbishop of Milan, to our house in Via Bonvesin, As he passed, giving his blessing, a girl detached herself from the group of pupils, approached him and whispered: "Your Eminence, pray for me that I may become holy!"

This incident made such an impression on the Holy Father that he remembered it over a distance of years and a few months ago he mentioned it to a group of girls at his audience. He told them about the episode and encouraged them all to be generous.

Last June, during the Diocesan Process concerning the virtues of the young engineer, Alberto Marvelli, two of his resolutions were highlighted: "Time is yours, O Lord!" Let me not waste it in what is useless, but may every moment be justified by useful employment". The second was as follows: "I have an intense desire to become a saint by means of the life God has reserved for me".⁶⁴

Therefore, in this epoch, so painfully marked by incidents of hatred and violence, the fruit of erroneous ideologies which try to suffocate promising

⁶⁴ *Da Civiltà Cattolica*, February 5, 1977.

youth, there are still open and generous young people who long for an ideal of holiness. So we must still believe in the practical possibility of becoming holy and of stimulating the young people of modern times to enthusiasm for holiness.

During last January's spiritual Retreat Monsignor Castillo many times stressed that we are committed by our religious profession to live in the spirit of the beatitudes. This means to live according to the fundamentals of the Gospel; to live holiness. He said that our unalterable commitment to holiness will transform our life, and this is the first service we are called on to give to the Church and the Institute.

I hope that in future circulars we may study how to carry out this commitment and look at the obstacles in its way. In the meantime, I invite you to love reading the lives of the saints. Among the resolutions that the Servant of God, Fr. Rinaldi made on the day of his priestly ordination is that of 'never to let a day pass without reading the life or works of some saint'. He never broke this resolution!

May the lives of the saints help us to absorb into the realities of our daily lives what we read and study in sacred and spiritual books. May the saints' example encourage us and make us say with St. Augustine: "If these and those why not I?" May Mary most Holy, teacher of holiness, take us by the hand and lead us along this path.

(*Cir. n. 603 - May 24 1977*)

Chapter XII

THE SERVICE OF AUTHORITY IN THE INSTITUTE

In this historic period in which there exists a crisis of obedience and authority, Mother Ersilia feels it necessary to give some guidelines for a service of authority carried out in the spirit of Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello.

Convinced that good spirit, communion of hearts, is in the hands of the superiors in the individual communities, she addresses them directly at least once a year.

She gives precise directions so that they can live their service in the spirit of the preventive system, with a capacity for listening and dialogue, with a will to favour communication, participation, co-responsibility, in an evangelic atmosphere of apostolic donation, in constant seeking for God, in faithful adherence to His design of salvation.

The Superiors - instruments of the love of God

On reading the many letters I have received in response to the last circulars I feel the desire of communicating to you the thoughts of my heart. In the first place, I wish to express my lively gratitude to God. We have in the Institute many Sisters who are very dear to Him and draw His blessings on us. They are Sisters who write their thanks, their experiences and their observations with great simplicity and with a desire to promote the good of the Institute. They are young and elderly; some of them work hard from morn to night; others are being consumed on a bed of suffering, offering their life for the Church, the Institute, for the whole world.

The consideration of this gives hope for the future of the Congregation, gives assurance of its vitality through the existence of such generous members, and confirms our faith in the continued guidance and presence of our Lady.

Good Mother that she is, she is aware of the lacune that exist in the religious life of some communities; she knows one by one the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians whose minds need light, whose hearts need warmth, whose wounds need healing; She sees the distortions that can be introduced into our Salesian life, but she always loves us, all of us, even the most defectives, because she sees us in the heart of God, and wishes each one of us to be a true spouse of Christ.

Instruments
of God's love

Our Lady uses you, dear Superiors, *as instruments of her love in helping our Sisters, especially the most needy*. Is she not, perhaps the Superior of the house? and each of us her vicar?

Well then, let us kneel in prayer before the Madonna and listen to what she suggests to us.

To be an instrument of the love of God and a reflex of Mary's maternal love, the Superior *must love every Sister very much*; Love her as she is, and by word and treatment show that she sees in each one of them the *daughter of God*.

In the measure in which a person feels herself surrounded by this human and divine warmth she finds it easier to correct herself, she improves, and in her turn, brings affection and faith into the community.

Principles of
Salesian authority
faith and heart

True Salesian authority is based on affection and faith.

Authority is not above nor below, but at the centre of the community.

If in the past emphasis has been placed on forms of imposition, in the real Salesian spirit the accent must always be put on listening, on familiar participation and on the co-responsibility of all.

A Superior is the custodian of the spirit of the Institute: therefore she does not impose her own ideas, does not make decision on her own, consults her Council, listens to the Sisters, (without excluding anyone or showing any preference); by the considerations and prayers of all she is helped to discern better what the will of God may be.

She is not ambiguous in her direction, but clear and precise in her decisions: this is a great help for the smooth running of the community.

To love as our Lady loves doesn't mean maternalism; it means to guide, that is to suggest, to exact even in little things. It is rather to enlighten with secure directions according to the Constitutions and then allow that space of confidence to help the Sisters mature personally in union with the community. We must not, however, be guided by the ingenious certainty that all the Sisters are capable of using their liberty perfectly. Our own experience will tell us how easy it is to make mistakes.

Foresee, be
vigilant, correct

Conscious therefore, of each one's limits and of the errors which can be made, the Superior shows her affection to the Sisters by foresight, vigilance and correction. Hasn't fraternal correction, perhaps, fallen into disuse? Is it not regarded as a failure in respect to personal liberty? Could not this be the sad reason that led some of our dear Sisters to painful defections? Is it not this that allows arbitrary interpretations of the rule to take root in the Sisters and in the communities, which lead to self-sufficiency, independence and secularism? A correction made calmly and in a friendly way, at an opportune time, is a proof of true, sincere affection.

The
"conversation"
a special meeting

The Constitutions offer us a special opportunity to listen to, be interested in the health, the work and all that concerns our dear Sisters and to give them directions: in the monthly "conversation".

The re-reading of the talks that I gave to the Capitulars may make you more conscious of this. The monthly "conversation", if made as Don Bosco envisaged, is the key of the serenity, the harmony, the fervour of a community.

Where it is neglected a general discontent is created for which remedies are sought invain, because the substitutes for it do not bring the blessing of obedience.

It is by means of the "conversation" that the Superior, knowing personally the Sisters' state of health, and their work, can, on an understanding with the provincial, redistribute the charges, having recourse if necessary to re-dimensioning; re-organizing the work so as to avoid wasting of time or overburdening some Sisters. She can give to all the necessary time to perform their practices of piety. Finally, she can find out if all disposed for the spiritual and moral good of the Sisters and for

their well-being, so as to avoid exhaustion that can have harmful consequences.

One of the most precious fruits of the "monthly conversation" is a growth in faith.

If a Superior tries to copy the love of the Madonna, she cannot but feel the need to grow in faith, in the knowledge and love of God so as to transmit it to the Sisters. Her words to the Sisters should be the echo of what the Holy Spirit has said and brought about in herself.

Growth in the
life of Faith

Only if one burns can one enkindle a fire, and how many Sisters say that the monthly meeting with the Superior reanimates them in piety and re-energizes them in charity and zeal.

The greatest gift one can give a Sister is to open new horizons of Faith for her and help her to see and to live in this light all her life. Only thus can existence be unified.

Unfortunately, one meets Sisters, even those intellectually prepared, whose certainties are on a psychological, emotive, or rational level only, without solid theological foundations. They seem closed to the supernatural vision of things and, while they sometimes speak eloquently on spiritual matters, they cannot accept a trial, a humiliation, a contradiction and they get discouraged to the point of abandoning even their prayers.

Love is by its very nature exacting, but allow me to tell you: our Lady's love, because it is the most perfect, is most exacting.

And it is exacting like this with us especially in the task of forming the Sisters that God has entrusted to us: they are souls consecrated to Him, whom we must make *grow in holiness*, so that they may be light and salt for the brethren and may evangelise them with their life and with their words. We must not be discouraged: He gives us day by day sufficient grace.

Danger of
Permissiveness

Of course, *we shall have to render an exact account to God* if through indifference we have not provided spiritual helps for them, or if through a wrongly understood permissiveness, we have not uprooted, or even prevented that which could weaken their faith, and by consequence that of the pupils.

In some houses the time for prayer is measured and even shortened and the time spent in front of television, sometimes until late at night is not counted at all. Time cannot be found for daily spiritual reading, but it is readily found for up-dating in every field (perhaps not entirely necessary), without any control of the publications and books that enter the house even when they are sometimes obviously contrary to the teaching of the Church. This permissivism, which can be extended to other sectors (and every Superior can and must be accountable) gradually introduces into the community the grave danger of laxity in the observance of the Constitutions, in the areas of piety, fraternal communion and apostolic zeal. How can the Sisters feel the joy of their consecration, and how can the pupils find in them the *specialists of God*? Will they not accuse us one day of being the cause of real lacune in their faith?

Allow me to tell you, not without sorrow, observations that reached me from persons in various countries in which our Institute is held in high esteem. They are sadly surprised in seeing that the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians — who were distinguished for such a love for young people as to exclude every other preoccupation — begin to feel and show such lively interest in the cut of the habit, with intent to make it more modern, more tight-fitting, shorter etc, arriving even to a school-girl attitude in what regards dress.

"Is the Sister", I was asked, "so ashamed to be seen as a Sister, that she goes back to the secular style of the young lady?" I leave comment to you, but let

us all recall the responsibility we took on in the Chapter, to wear the religious habit with that *simplicity, modesty and poverty* which extends also to footwear, and personal linen etc. Experience shows that young vocations are choosing by preference to enter those orders where there is no affectation or superfluity, but where there is poverty, sacrifice and real love of God.

Responsibility

Dear Superiors, I have poured out into your hearts what I thought our Lady herself would have said. It is her love full of mercy that reminds us that as authority is, before all else, a service we render to the majesty and infinite love of God, and for Him, to those He has entrusted to us: it is therefore a service which *brings with it a responsibility that has eternal consequences.*

At the end of the rite for the consecration of virgins composed by St. Ambrose, the Bishop, turning to the Superior, pronounced these words: "Accept, in the name of our Blessed Lady, first Superior whose place you occupy, these virgins consecrated to God. They are entrusted to you that you may return them to Him without stain. Their Heavenly Spouse will ask you to account for them at the last Judgment. We have, never-the-less, confidence that our Lady will help us to understand better how beautiful, how great our mission is, that she will accompany us step by step and obtain for us the gifts and the light of the Holy Spirit.

(Cir. January 1 1977)

Service for the realization of consecration

I again come to chat with you, dear Superiors, to share with you consolations, anxieties and hopes. The return of the visiting Mothers brought us the desired news of the life of your communities, the

inevitable difficulties, but also the consoling news of the exemplary lives led by so many of our Sisters and the flourishing condition of the works, due to fervent apostolic zeal.

I feel the need of thanking all our dear Sisters, but especially you, dear Superiors, as I know well that the animation of the community costs far more now-a-days owing to the scarcity of personnel and the increased difficulty and demands of the religious and social climate in which we live.

I became more aware of this through the replies received from every province on the evaluation of the post-capitular work.

With this more concrete and well-documented vision before us, let us consider some matters and address a few questions to ourselves.

I begin with a proposal arising from an oft-repeated difficulty: "There's too much to be done. I cannot follow everything. I have scarcely time to pray".

Pray more
pray better
pray always

Do not think that I take the problem at the top only, if recalling the circular of December (1977), I invite you:

Dear Superiors, pray more, pray better, pray all day. Be the most prayerful people of the community.

The circular of September (1977) will give you the deep motivation for this proposal and convince you that prayer does not merely put you in a vertical position, but helps us to examine situations and problems in God's light, with calm, balance and strength to find the best solutions.

Pray also to have the strength and the interior consolation in the crosses that God sends with confidence to those who represent His authority. Pray always better and give your prayer the nourishment of solid reading on ecclesial, spiritual, Salesian subjects, to fill the interior voids that can come also to you, and to be able to give substantial nourishment to the Sisters in your various meetings

with them, especially in the monthly conversation. Thank God there prevails in Sisters of every age a real thirst for courses of spirituality especially of salesian spirituality. The Lord will bless copiously those superiors who do not leave the publications that come from the centre locked away in the presses, but strive to make them available in translations (which can be difficult in certain languages), so as to make our Mother, the Congregation, better known.

That which is well presented is always better loved. The careful reading of the *Constitutions*, of the *Chronistoria*, of *Forward in the course of a century*, of the *Letters* of Mother Mazzarello, of the *Circulars* are bringing about real conversions in our dear world and have become a source of fervour and a strong bond of union in all the Institute.

This reading, combined with prayer, is a great help to give to your authority the character of true service, which is a service to sisters who are realising their lives as consecrated apostles.

Constitutions and
service of
authority

The analytical index of the *Constitutions*, under 'Superior' offers you the possibility of recalling every day the various articles that can help you in your delicate task and above all, in acquiring that "formative capacity" so necessary for a Superior. The documents I have consulted reveal how easy it is to slide into a permissive-style authority or to stiffen in an imperative style. This is not Salesian authority, which is amiable and firm at once, and always directed to help the Sisters grow in a religious climate of reciprocal respect and of warm, familiar spontaneity in coherent fidelity to the vows professed.

This however, can only be obtained if at the basis of community relationships there is sincerity and loyalty.

Good Superiors, let us endeavour to tell the truth

to ourselves first then to the others.

Last January (1977) I spoke to you about the duty of correction: I now add that we must never speak or act on an impression, never be satisfied with *hearsay*, but always to go to the root of things so that we may never blame the innocent.

And let there never be preferences. Attentions and physical and spiritual care should *always be for everybody*. Painful illnesses can be prevented and cured and spiritual errors avoided by a vigilant maternal interest.

Recently we had the case where a very depressed Sister was completely cured by the patience and affection of her Superior, who freed her from an inferiority complex and made of her a courageous and zealous animator of a youth group.

Instead, the case of a Sister who left the institute and writes the following, is sad: "True, I was at fault by not corresponding with my vocation, but the atmosphere in which everyone lived as she liked, in comfort and pleasure, where the monthly conversation no longer existed, encouraged me, instead of stopping me in my lack of correspondence".

Shall we, dear Superiors, ask ourselves a few questions?

- What are the real motives, the deep causes of certain confusions, of the absence of apostolic enthusiasm, of community joy? Have we tried to detect them and then to prevent, to help?
- What have we done, Sister by Sister, to lead each one to the unifying centre of her life, which is the convergence of all in God?
- Do we review the timetable of every single sister so that it will not happen that anyone has not sufficient time for prayer? Is the organization, perhaps at fault? Can it be improved to avoid

confusion, worry and multiply time and energy?

- Are lay staff employed where necessary? Today the necessity may arise, but on taking them on all the criteria suggested by our religious-educative mission should be used.

- Now we collaborate more with Catholic groups and frequently make our environments available to them. Do we take care to prepare the Sisters so that they may be cordial, spontaneous and thoughtful in their interventions, and always bearers of their vocational values, without assuming attitudes and expressions that taste of worldliness and that the lay people themselves do not use?¹

Sense and value
of community

What precisely have we done so that the Sisters may have a clear sense of community — an essential element of our Salesian identity — beginning with the encounters of living faith in the hours of community prayer, the word encounters, in the collaboration of co-responsibility, right on to the relaxing time at table and at the cheerful animated recreations?

Have we given the conviction that not just one, but everybody can help the Superior?

And for the less approachable characters — have we encouraged the community to a competition in evangelic charity?²

The new experiences granted by the Chapter, either in the area of prayer or of apostolate, with what attentive care have they been followed?

Have the prayer-experiences resulted in the spiritual transformation of the Sisters, evident in good, humble relationships with the community, and in their active participation in the practices of piety indicated by the Constitutions?

¹ Cf *M-R* 1975 57-167.

² Cf *C* 1975 31-33. 149-150.

Could well-intentioned zeal, but no longer enlightened by the light of the charism, have led several Sisters to do away with time tables, times of silence, especially that after night prayers and all reading at table? When do we now read, at least the Salesian publications?

With what preparation and frequency, with what criteria do we assist at television programmes, and are sport competitions organised for the girls?

In forming the educating community do we propose, in practise to drop the norms of the preventive System, or do we replace Don Bosco's method by that of no rules, through a misunderstood respect for the liberty of the Sisters and girls, and do we thus reach without even being conscious of it the point where the value of Salesian assistance is lost and the validity of our educational system is smashed to the ground?

Do we faithfully transmit to the Sisters and in having them transmit what is received in various meetings at which we participate?

While esteeming as a gift of God the equipment that science and reason offer us do we recognise them for what they really are, an introduction to *supernatural values* on which all the community and apostolic life of the Congregation rests?³

Is there not a danger, in some places, to find ourselves at variance with the Constitutions on account of certain situations that are taking root;

- going home too often and without reason?
- independence in going out.
- presumed liberty in acquiring and possessing through the use of money, not according to the spirit of the Institute which requires a single safe?

³ Cf *Circular*, December 1977; *M-R* 1975 66-72.

- personal creativity which, not taking the values of the past into consideration, lead to dangerous deviations from the Salesian charism?

We have put the questions together, dear Superiors, questions laden with responsibility because we shall have to render an account to God and the Church. If we have kept the Sisters in the community and in the works the charism and the spirit for which God has raised up our Institute.

But our questions are, thank God, also laden with hope.

Before all else to the various questions we have asked, many Superiors can give consoling answers, and then because in the Congregation there is a general sincere desire to commit oneself to the holy journey towards sanctity.

Salesian means
of formation

Take courage, then, good Superiors, and in your efforts to *sanctify yourselves first* so as to help the Sisters to sanctify themselves, besides prayer, of which I have spoken, give great importance to the simple means of formation suggested by the Rule, because they have a special blessing from God.

Let us be faithful to the *monthly conversation*; it is a Salesian value which we have to discover more. It is not just a general conversation treating of programmes, of various problems; it is not simply informative, but a personal formative meeting.

The Sisters must be enlightened and the Superiors must prepare themselves in order that the colloquy may be rich in faith and heart. It will then be desired and truly formative.

The good night, given in a simple easy style, on a variety of subjects — short, — will really be according to Don Bosco's spirit. Look up what I wrote on presenting Don Valentini's book: *Le buone notti di Don Francesca*.

Let the *conferences* be providential moments of

illumination, interrogation, listening, of making the community reflect and grow. Let the Superior give everyone the liberty to express her thought, while always keeping her own place of centrality and unity.

The *recreations*, too, are little formation helps if they are held together, are cheerful, sprinkled with fraternal exchanges of thought and pleasant jokes. The Superior, always present at recreation and animator of the general enjoyment, can be an effective animator to sacrifice.

The language
of life

Be with the Sisters as much as possible, especially at community acts. Speak to them in the language of the heart, of faith, but especially in the language of life.

Some time ago I met a Sister and seeing her so happily transformed I asked her the reason and she replied: "For the past five years I've been with a Superior, who speaks little, but attracts everybody with the simplicity of her example and her virtue".

To the language of piety, of charity, of truth always unite the language of obedience; ready to carry out the directives of the superiors and work in harmony with the councillors, a harmony which should be a visible help to growth together in sanctity. This would be of enormous benefit to every community.

Lastly, today, more than ever, let us speak in life the language of poverty.

Let the Sisters be seen to be really poor in dress, in the objects for their use, the places where we live. Nothing superfluous, no secularized affectation, no privilege and no exemption. Let people see us sincerely poor in accepting with detachment and disposing according to obedience.

Certain feminine vanities, certain expensive commodities, certain superfluities which, with the most

varied justification, are infiltrating some houses and as Mother Mazzarello would say, bring the world into our houses, would soon fade out if the Sisters saw reflected in the Superior an essential poverty serene in its austerity.

And now I conclude with the words, authoritative and encouraging that the Pope addressed at Christmas to the Sacred College:

“The grace of God is always at work in the hearts that accept it and awakens in them wonders of generosity, light, strength, fidelity and apostolate. In the panorama of the Church (and we can say the Institute in the Church) there is a whole world of life spread out before our eyes that tells us that we can look to tomorrow with assurance, confidence, sped forward on our destined way by the provident goodness of God”.

(*Cir.* January 1 1978)

In the light of the preventive system

Let us try to start out from some supernatural certainty that will direct and sustain our every interior and exterior movement.

“In God we live, we move, and have our being”: I, the Sisters, the girls, the whole of society.

If this certainty, asked of the Holy Ghost, does not enter into our ordinary life, no one of us will be capable of living the preventive system.

The Rector Major has said: “The soul of the preventive system must be sought in our life in the Spirit, because only with it can we bring Christ to others”. “If the Lord does not build the house, in vain do the builders labour”.⁴

⁴ *Psal* 127.

Rapport with
God

— Setting out from this certainty let us evaluate our rapport with God.

- in my life is the desire of God and His glory above every other desire?⁵
- am I concerned about nourishing my soul spiritually?⁶
- Is the time of prayer a vivid encounter of faith and love with God for me, so as to habitually lead me to refer to Him in every circumstance during the day?⁷
- In practise do I believe more in God and in what He can do for me than in my own ability and human support?
- Does my life, even with its defects, allow those who approach me see that I do not seek myself but only God and His interests in souls and that I am ready for every sacrifice for His sake?⁸

With every Sister

— In relationships with my Sisters as Superior I practise the Preventive System if I keep the following norms in mind:

- to give my attention to the Sisters before the works.
- Give priority to helping the Sisters so as to multiply their capability and for the smooth running of the works.
- Love together with them as much as possible, at table, in chapel in recreation and visit the house frequently so as to meet them at their work.
- Know them well in order to help them with foresight.

⁵ Cf C 1975 6.

⁶ Cf C 1975 44.

⁷ Cf C 1975 29.

⁸ Cf C 1975 7.

- Know them fully — in their physical, moral and spiritual make-up.
- Know each one's state of health, her capacity and resistance at work: take account of her fatigue, her being up late, her sleep, her food her medicine: follow all this directly or indirectly in such a way as to prevent in time illnesses and upsets which could become incurable.⁹
- Know individual temperaments with the various inclinations and reaction. Take note of the personal competence of the Sisters, appreciate them and seek out the most suitable ways of helping each one in her human and religious formation.
- Know each one's occupation with its relative difficulties and teach them to work with order and responsibility, and as far as possible, see that each one has adequate equipment.¹⁰
- Seek always to listen and understand, to correct with kindness and when pardoning to always infuse confidence; show interest in everyone without partiality, and without binding anyone over-affectionately with self. Don Bosco enjoyed the affection of his sons, but lifted it to God.
- Be concerned that above all every Sister be conscious of her consecration to God and live serenely the choice she has made of Him and of the Institute.¹¹
- In line with the plan of formation and the documents on pastoral, have special care for the formation of the young Sisters.
- Try to support the particular action of the Holy Spirit in every Sister, guiding her to intimacy

⁹ Cf *M-R* 1975 165.

¹⁰ Cf *M-R* 1975 74.

¹¹ Cf *C* 1975 97.

with God so that she may thus communicate it to the young people.

- Give practical directions for meditation and help to live the practices of piety, to lift up her heart to God during the day and accept willingly the sacrifices required for the practise of the preventive system with the youth of today.¹²
- Show comprehension as well as convictions to help strengthen the life of consecrated-apostle or even to restructure it in those Sisters who stop short at the horizontal level.

With the
community

To be an animating presence in the Community it will help to keep the following in mind:

- The knowledge and formation of the Sisters is an effective means of building the community.¹³ Knowing everyone, it is easy to teach how to collaborate without inferiority or superiority complexes, but fraternally and simply, renouncing opinions, points of view so as to evaluate and collect different proposals and initiatives.¹⁴

- The best Superior is never the one who does it all herself, but she who knows how to collaborate with her councillors, with those responsible in the various sectors, with the various co-ordinators.¹⁵

Her method of consulting, accepting, proposing, rectifying, will always have a tone of discretion and fraternity. This humble, yet firm tone becomes contagious: all the Sisters will express themselves freely and collaborate generously.

The atmosphere of the environment grows in warmth, serenity and security.

¹² Cf C 1975 52.

¹³ Cf C 1975 96.

¹⁴ Cf M-R 1975 2.

¹⁵ Cf M-R 1975 170.

- The Superior can bring a special contribution to the building of the community if she prepares the conferences, the good nights, the meetings, the monthly conversations, from which the Sisters should always draw some spiritual-moral advantage.¹⁶

- A great means of cementing the union of all in the house is to act in such a way that the community feels a part of every work to which the Sisters are dedicated: from the kindergarten to the past pupils union, from the parochial work to that engaged in at the periphery.

For every work the community prays, is interested and enthusiastic and offers some sacrifices generously.

The Superior delights in informing everyone beforehand, in following up with an account of the procedure and expressing merited appreciation. In every meeting she will find opportunity to encourage, to teach, to point out how much good can be accomplished when the community works together, all collaborating for the attainment of the same Ideal of the *da mihi animas*.¹⁷

With
the Institute
and with
the Church

The local community is but a cell of the provincial and of the world community, which in its turn is inserted into the universal ecclesial community. To give every sister an ample breath of the ideals the superior will help them all not to remain in the narrow local horizontal goals.

She can effectively do this if she first knows well the history of the Institute, past and present.

Every publication from the centre, the *Notiziario*, the Circulars, the General Elenco of the Sisters of the Institute with the various historical references are appreciated in community if they are well

¹⁶ Cf *M-R* 1975 168.

¹⁷ Cf *M-R* 1975 169.

presented beforehand, evaluated, then offered for reading.

The Biographic Memoirs, the Cronistoria, especially with all the rich bibliography of the Institute can thus become bread that is appreciated by the Sisters for the nourishment of their souls.¹⁸ With a far-seeing heart and eye, the Superior will not only favour the ordinary reading of Salesian books, but before every date that recalls our Saints or figures or facts of the Salesian Family, she will look up the appropriate pages with a view to building up enthusiasm in the Sisters and girls for the Institute.

One of the greatest responsibilities of the Superior before the Church and the Institute is to preserve the charism and make it grow.

The esteem, the love with which the Superior receives the teaching of the Institute becomes a school of formation for the community and her affection and respect for the provincial — to whom she cordially turns to submit requests of commitments, initiatives and programmes to which she faithfully adheres — leads the Sisters to have the same attitude towards the Superiors.¹⁹

Thus her example causes the Family of the Institute and that of the Church to grow.

The Superior must also carry on for the magisterium of the Church what I said about the magisterium of the Institute.

She will present and appreciate the words of the Pope, of the episcopal conference, of the Synods and of the conferences of religious; She will have the relative documents presented and commented on by experts, so that the Sisters will be brought up to date and filially interested in the directions of the Church.²⁰

¹⁸ Cf *M-R* 1975 26-27.

¹⁹ Cf *M-R* 1975 171-172.

²⁰ Cf *M-R* 1975 79.

With a maternal, Salesian, theological heart every Superior will practise the preventive system, always listening to the Spirit and following His teachings with docility, those made known to her interiorly as well as those He indicates in the signs of the times.

Dear Superiors, I have said poor, simple words, to you, drawn from my own and your experience and from the Wisdom of the Manual of the Constitutions and the Manual.

I will finish by warmly inviting you to read the book that reports the talks given us by the Rector Major at Mornese and to meditate deeply on the **'authority and animation'**.

It will give you much light, much encouragement for the application of the preventive system in your communities.

(Cir. January 1 1979)

The Congregation is in the hands of the Superiors

In your hands, dear Superiors, the Institute must keep the features that characterise it in the Church, and it will do this in the measure that you yourselves will know how to organize, say, and act, but above all in the measure you yourselves know, love and reflect the spirit of the Institute.

The expression of a Sister is significant: "The way my Superior lives helps me more than all the words she says".

It is really like that: We badly need models who incarnate the teachings we receive. Perhaps we ourselves have experienced this through the exemplary life of a Superior. I will descend to a particular: it does more good to the Sisters to see a document of the Church or of the Institute practised in life of a Superior than to hear it presented very well in a conference.

This often happens: a document is received and is explained to the Sisters with intelligence and warmth. Then all is finished. Not even an echo of it is heard in the good night, in the monthly conversations, in the reviews nor in the maternal reminders when a Sister does not act in conformity with what has been said.

How many abuses less would be introduced into the houses, to the detriment of the spiritual growth of the Sisters, and of the success of the apostolate if, as soon as an abuse arises, the Superior intervenes.

With assurance and in a maternal way she points out what is in contradiction to the words of the Pope, especially when he speaks to religious of the serious problems of the Church and of the world: what is not in keeping with the Constitutions, the circulars, the various documents sent out by the formation and pastoral sectors.

It is beautiful and right to trust the Sisters and we must not be stingy with words of esteem and encouragement, but it is also wise to be aware that no one of us have reached perfect maturity. If to our reminders we hear a Sister answer "I didn't think of it" let us find out if this is a matter of a passing distraction or a habit due to superficiality. This should cause us anxiety because it could become a menace to discipline.

Value of
discipline

The Rector Major in the Acts of the Superior Council of September 1979 pointed out how Don Bosco wanted the Salesian to live a strict discipline of religious life. To someone who objected that observance was tiring, he answered with all sincerity: "do you think to go to heaven in a carriage?". And "however genial he always was, Don Bosco never passed lightly over faults of discipline".²¹

²¹ MB VI 306.

The Holy Father, John Paul II states precisely: "Fidelity means the cult of the great discipline of the Church... a discipline (which) does not tend to mortify, but to guarantee the right order which is proper to the Mystical Body".²²

How can it be thought that everything is well in a community where the Sisters do as they like and make free choices contrary to the Constitutions? And what can be said of a Superior who never has a clear line of acting (I do not say imposing) to propose and continues to ask the Sisters in various circumstances: "what do you wish us to do"?

Each of us on our profession day chose a way of discipline which is not imposed by the Superiors, but is a free answer of our bridal love to the infinite love of God. For this reason religious discipline is none other than a great love of God translated into life day by day, action by action.

Take courage, dear Superiors, and even if the circumstances make you suffer, be conscientious custodians of discipline in your communities.

Truth - the
strength of peace

"Truth is the strength of peace". This is the programme that the Pope sets before us this year.

We desire for our Sisters the great gift of peace: Let us help them therefore to live without too much calculation or with incorrect interpretation the words of Jesus: "I am the Truth. For this I came into the world to give testimony to the truth".

Speak the truth kindly, speak it affectionately, speak it at the opportune moment, after having prayed, but always speak it to your Sisters. Only if we live in conformity with the truth will we have

²² JOHN PAUL II P.P., *First Radio-Message «Urbi et Orbi»* 17th October 1978.

sisters strong in virtue and witnesses to peace and joy which are born of the truth.

In these months we have in hand the outline of work in preparation for the General Chapter. I will not repeat what I wrote in the circular of December (1979). As we read those pages we will become aware that they were written that meditating on them and practising them, in view also of the revision of the Constitutions, we may grow in maturity and form for ourselves a solid patrimony of ideas as a basis for our lives.

That that may happen, the Sisters need to feel that you, dear Superiors, value greatly this offering which has come from the centre, and that you accompany them in the study and research.

There is no need for a lot of intellectual preparation to do this: a little preparation will suffice provided it is united to love of the Institute, of the sisters, great faith and much humility. Then the Holy Spirit will find in us the doors open through which to pour His gifts of wisdom and counsel and will Himself speak through your words.

Regard all the work-programme for the Chapter as a great help that the Congregation offers, in a special way to you, Superiors. It opens a solid, blessed way to be followed for the formation of the Sisters.

The nuclei of ideas that you find in the outline, the truths presented in the Church documents and in those of the Institute offer many starting-points for your community and particular conversations, for useful reflections and above all, for giving strong motivations for religious life.

But according as the ideas are assimilated, even without any reminders, secular and even banal subjects will vanish from conversation, the quality of choice in reading matter will soar as will that of television programmes.

Little by little the superficiality, spiritual laziness,

and individualism will give place to the taste for serious things, to the obligation of working for the needs of others. The more a person is animated by strong spiritual ideas, the more he is transformed from within so that these ideas take hold of his way of thinking, feeling and loving.

Let us propose to ourselves in our formation of the sisters and of the girls to give more ideas than exhortations. It is easier to give good advice more difficult to present clear, strong ideas. It costs us much more because it involves the formation of right ideas within ourselves by means of study, prayer and life itself, but this effort undoubtedly gives more strength of motivation to those to whom we transmit them.

Then we shall have Sisters with clearer and more precise convictions on the mystery of the Church, the charism of the Institute, on the religious life as a participation in the salvific mission of the Church, on the Salesian Spirit, which before being discussed has to be faithfully lived.

We shall have Sisters open to the great horizons of the kingdom of God, less adolescent and more mature in responsibility.

Sisters who may have few words but many deeds, capable of holding with the girls conversations rich in substance, which from an educational viewpoint are worth more than a lesson or a book. Thus they teach the girls the art of conversation, rather how to be able missionaries of the word.

**Incidence of
conversations**

But where does one train for these constructive conversations, lightened by pleasant witticism? In the community.

How are our conversations? What is their level at table, at recreation?

Not all the Sisters have the same communicative ability, but the Superior by her example, her inter-

est and direction can help and bring about in the community a level of real Salesian conversation: cheerful, deep, acceptable and formative.

These conversations, however, are prepared even in the morning, in meditation, in the silence during the day, in the ability to reflect on what one sees, feels and reads, above all by looking at things and valuing them in the light of God.

You will say to me that these things should be said to the Sisters also: you are right. You tell them! You can read these words of mine to them: "truth will be the strength of their peace".

Remember what Buzzetti said to Don Bosco: "A word from Don Bosco is worth more than a promissory note!"²³ And do not forget the affirmation left us by Don Bosco: "Perhaps our Congregation was that which had the most Word of God"²⁴ It is a singular grace which God has given us. We must take account of it with joy and a sense of responsibility. Let us constantly meditate on this word from Heaven received from Don Bosco for sisters and girls, and recall frequently the consoling words that the Madonna said in a dream: "If you will be my devout sons, I will be for you a loving Mother"²⁵ Confident therefore in her power, go forward, dear Superiors, and with sincere will and, in spite of difficulties, be courageous and enthusiastic.

Mary, today as well as yesterday, will do everything.

(*Cir.* January 1 1980)

²³ *MB IX 727.*

²⁴ *MB XVII 305.*

²⁵ *MB VIII 281.*

The art of governing in Mother Mazzarello

The annual letter — habitually addressed to you — could be omitted this year, so abundant are the messages Mother Mazzarello is sending us for her Centenary, words which, first assimilated by you, then become “Mornesian animation” for the community.

I thank you sincerely for all you are doing to actualize the MM 81 proposal, which is already producing good results and restoring to our houses the genuine Salesian stamp.

But as every fruitful animation stems from good government, I thought to give you in synthesis some thoughts, which you can read in their entirety in Maccono, part II, Chapter VII: *Mother Mazzarello's art of governing*.

Mother
Mazzarello's
government

— Mother Mazzarello never regarded being Superior as an honour but as a cross given her by the Lord, which she carried with humble, strong, generous resignation, with zeal and prudence.

— She fulfilled this office like a saint, all intent on her perfection and that of the Sisters, seeking to infuse into them that zeal which devoured her...

— To be obeyed without making it weigh, she exercised her office as a real mother. She didn't use sentimentality, in fact she was rather resolute, but she had such a persuasive way that she was obeyed by all without obedience becoming a burden... and this with such a maternal, simple good manner that the Sisters embraced the hardest sacrifices and obeyed with such resignation of will, of judgement, of heart, that it seemed it didn't cost them anything.

— When I entered the House of Mornese — a Sisters says — I got the impression that I was joining a

family, where in work and prayer, one walked directly towards Heaven.

— Hers was an energetic government, resolute but loving: she treated us with frankness, yes, but she loved us as a real mother; she drew us to good, to duty, to sacrifice, to Jesus but gently, without violence. She saw everything, she foresaw the good and weak points of all her daughters, and was always ready to provide for physical and moral needs according to circumstances and possibilities.

— She distributed the charges to the Sisters with maternal criterion, measured to their strength, physical and moral, with the will of God, the good of the Sisters and of the Institute always in mind.

— She used the greatest care in finding out the dispositions of each one of the Sisters, keeping in her heart as in a tomb the shortcomings and faults which she discovered. She treated all with such kindness that each one believed she was the Benjamin, but she never showed even the shadow of preference for anyone.

— She was for her daughters a loving model of all the virtues.

— She didn't command anything of which she did not give the example.

— She knew how to help the Sisters overcome their difficulties; she showed that she understood the sacrifices the Sisters were making, knew how to sympathise, tolerate, show esteem and had such a benevolent patience, affectionate and maternal, that she inspired confidence and love in all.

— There was extreme poverty in the Congregation but in spite of it the greatest order and most perfect joy reigned there; the weight of authority was not felt.

— She was strong and gentle at the same time, and

solicitous to follow in everything the directions of Don Bosco, even when she had other views.

— She had, in her government a great diffidence in self but a no less great confidence in God. Diffidence in self led her to seek advice from the Superiors and her Council and often, of sisters and novices, and on some occasions even of the boarders. Her confidence in God never allowed her to be deviated by human considerations.

— She never lost courage and knew how to infuse courage and great confidence in the Lord.

— No matter what difficulty turned up her first thought was to turn to God, to Mary Help of Christians, to St. Joseph and especially to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament... and when she needed some special grace she recommended the Sisters to take turns before the Blessed Sacrament.

May our Saint obtain for all the Superiors of the Institute, besides her virtues, the gift of good government, on this her centenary year.

(*Cir.* January 1 1981)

Basic plan of spiritual work in the community

The Centenary of Mother Mazzarello has provided us with a wealth of deep studies on her personality; preparation for the Chapter has stimulated in us a greater desire for knowledge of the history, charism and spirit of the Institute, and the various documents and words of the Rector Major are a mine from which we can draw for years. I exhort you, dear Superiors, to draw up an organised plan of spiritual work in your communities, based on the sources I have mentioned.

Combat
Superficiality

Be always on the alert to combat superficiality — superficiality in ideas, sentiments and behaviour. *If a spirit becomes superficial, it loses its sense of values, its sense of prayer and the enthusiasm of real charity.* Gradually a dangerous interior void is created, which even if concealed by praise-worthy exterior activity, can but postpone the surprise of hopeless collapse, because the house not built on the rock of faith and humility does not resist the impact of trial.

Today the world in which we live needs hope badly, but if it meets sisters with a strong amiable spirit who give joyful witness of belonging to God and the Institute it is impressed and often attracted. Whatever their age and occupation the Sisters can transform the girls into missionaries of and bearers of hope.

Rediscovery of
the Spirit of
Mornese

At the close of the Centenary year I would like to ask you to make the letter of the Rector Major, "*Re-discover the Spirit of Mornese*" the subject of your conferences, good-nights and personal encounters.

Pause, in a special way on the *salient features* of the spirit of Mornese. There, in a word, is all that God wants from us; there is the animation programme of a Superior, all the richness of our salesian vocation, there is the whole secret of being an authentic Daughter of Mary Help of Christians. True, God has called us to follow Him even to Calvary, but He has promised us His joy, that intimate, profound joy that the world cannot give us and which is always the sign of a soul that loves God very much.

This joy and holy cheerfulness has always been a characteristic of our religious family from the time of Mornese and has attracted many young people to share our life of consecration and apostolate. To return to the spirit of Mornese means to return

to this holy cheerfulness in community, with the girls and, above all in our hearts making grace triumph over nature.

The Lord will bless your endeavour to bring about a stronger Spiritual animation: the will to make a sincere evaluation of the personal practice of the spirit of Mornese will grow in the sister and will strengthen our girls in their christian life and give us the joy of seeing the flowering of good vocations. This committment will also become a prayer acceptable to God, for the good success of the Chapter.

An hour in the
Cenacle for all
the Congregation

In my circular of February 2 last (1981), which I invite you to re-read, I recalled *that the Chapter is a special moment in the salvation-history of an Institute:*

It is not a convention and neither is it an important congress, but a spiritual assembly of people who, above all personal opinion, seek only to know the will of God in the light of the Holy Spirit so as to transmit it to the Institute.

It is therefore, a time in the cenacle for the whole Congregation. All together and each of us personally assumes the responsibility of fervently praying for the light of the Spirit on the Chapter assembly. Let us ask Him to infuse into our hearts true supernatural charity; it will not then be hard to keep the resolution that we want to take of *passing the months of the Chapter without the least deliberate sin against charity.*

The constant supplication to the Holy Spirit: *Veni Sancte Spiritus* and the prayer of Don Bosco: O Mary, most powerful Virgin will entwine themselves fervently in our days. Where possible some hours of adoration can also be made especially in the houses of retirement and of formation.

Thus, while the capitulars bear the fatigue of study and discernment for the good of the Institute, all

the Sisters will work with them offering prayers and commitment to charity.

This union of spirit and of heart will surely make us experience the consoling promise of Jesus: "I am in the midst of you".

(*Cir.* August 15 1981)

Chapter XIII

THE RULE GOSPEL OF THE RELIGIOUS LIFE

The revision of the Constitutions finalised in this post-conciliar period and the occurrence of the centenary of the giving of the first printed constitutions at Mornese, induced Mother Ersilia to give some directions on the rule, a most precious help towards the preservation and living of the spirit of the Institute.

She exhorts to a constant loving fidelity in the certainty of arriving at the realization of the salvific designs of God and of strengthening the unity and vitality of the Institute.

The Constitutions - "book of life"

The new Constitutions have already reached many houses or are about to do so. These were worked out by the Special General Chapter with great love and care, following the Church's directives and aiming at continued fidelity to the spirit of our holy Founder.

This is a very important event in the history of our Institute, which calls for special reflection.

Here at the Mother House the feast of the Immaculate Conception was chosen for the presentation of the new text of the Constitutions. The novena, with opportune references to our consecrated life, was in itself an intense preparation. In the afternoon ceremony of December 8th, the priest, having brought out the significance of the act he was about to perform, gave out the Constitutions from the altar, saying as he did so: **"Do this and you will live"**, to which each Sister answered, **"Amen"**.

"Do this
and live"

These words of the priest, so timely and so significant, truly expressed the real, deep meaning of the distribution ceremony. Indeed, the Constitutions, after the Gospel, are our book of life. By practising them with love and living according to their spirit, we are sure of reaching the very sources of life; that life in which each one of us fulfills her vocation completely; that life which the charism of our Saintly Founder has transmitted to the Institute, making it share in the inexhaustible vitality of the Church; that life which must circulate in each Community and activate its spirit and work.

Therefore, each Daughter of Mary Help of Christians, each community, the whole Institute will draw nourishment from the blessed text of our holy Rules. For us they are the express, concrete will of God, which must guide us, moment by moment, act by

act. By conforming ourselves to the Rules we are conforming ourselves to Jesus Christ, uniting ourselves to Him, making ourselves one with Him, and through Him entering into the very life of God. We are living in times when false maxims are trying to subvert peoples' minds and hearts not excluding religious. What a grace it is for us, what a source of security and peace to have an infallible path to follow — a path we know God has traced out for us for our sanctification and to enable to do that good to young people that the Church expects from us.

Let us, therefore, accept the new Constitutions as a gift from our Heavenly Father. Let us invoke the light of the Holy Spirit so as to penetrate their spirit, assimilate it and make it life of our life. So we shall achieve, through a full interiorization of the principles informing them, the genuine, perfect spiritual character of the Daughter of Mary Help of Christians.

The specific Ideal
of our Vocation

Indeed, the Constitutions present to us in all its completion, the specific ideal of our vocation as religious and FMA. Through the Constitutions, our consecrated life is revealed to us in all its aspects: theological, spiritual, ecclesial, apostolic, and communal. All these aspects are illuminated and verified by references to scripture, council documents and Salesian writings.

These Constitutions form a real little treatise on asceticism. Accordingly they must become our private meditation and spiritual formation book. A careful, devout and constant reading of them will help us penetrate the spirit of our dear Institute better, acquire its characteristics and fulfil more and more in the Church the mission to which we have been called, thereby enriching its vitality.

Let us receive the Constitutions with deep gratitude, thinking too of those who have worked at the

compilation of them. This work was neither short nor easy, though we all contributed either directly or indirectly through the questionnaires. Hence it is the work of the Chapter, the work of the Sister editors and the work of all the FMA: an expression of the unanimous love we all have for our dear Institute.

However, as we know the new text of the Constitutions is '*ad experimentum*'. The old text still remains, for the moment, the one *approved* by the Church. But as the spirit animating both texts is identical, it is our filial duty to practise the new Constitutions faithfully.

(Cir. n. 525 - February 24 1970)

The Rule, concrete expression of our charism

The Holy Father, in exhorting us to celebrate the holy Year in a way that would bring about *conversion*, indicates the *love of the Church* as the way essential to arriving at this end and adds: "To you, Religious, who are already committed to the Church with the golden ties of complete love, goes the invitation to find this love again, to strengthen it, and to kindle it again at its original source.

Our Insertion
In the Church

The Pope makes us ever more aware that our religious life is part of the mystery of the Church, of which it is an emanation, a blossoming; he associates us, in consequence with its salvific mission and expects us to be the image and participation of that union of love which unites Christ with the Church.

Our Religious life is in the Church, from the Church and for the Church. From it, in fact, it draws its *raison d'être*, its end, its origin, enclosed in the *charism* communicated by the Holy Spirit to our Founders.

The more our Institute revives within itself this charism, the more will it in a factual way, show its love for the Church, and respond to its expectations.

Expression of
our love for
the Church

Now, the identity of the Daughter of Mary Help of Christians, concrete expression of the charism of our Institute, is enshrined in the Rules. The means therefore, with which we can express our unconditional and total love for the Church, is above all, the faithful, loving, observance of the Constitutions, which thus assume their true ecclesial dimension.

The Constitutions, in fact, bring into focus the characteristic traits of our spiritual Physiognomy, and the special area of our mission, outlining the reality of our existence and of our task within the Church.

The more our observance becomes identified with the ecclesial reality which informs it, the more will we be Church; the more we identify with its needs, the more lively and stimulating will the obligation of our observance become. The spirit of the Rules, translated into life, preserves our Institute and causes it to flourish; keeps alive and vital the charism of the Founders, and expresses the gifts given by God to the Church. Failure in the observance of the Rule, instead, renders these gifts useless, betrays the charism, impoverishes the Church.

This grave responsibility is felt, especially now when we begin the preparation for the coming General Chapter.

Months ago the General Council consulted all the provincials on the choice of theme to be treated. The replies, though varying in form, were unanimous in content: the religious formation of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, so that she may be able to measure up to the requirements of

To purify and
deepen the
Religious life

her mission with more efficacy at the present day.

This unanimity of choice is an indication of the need of deepening the religious life, of purifying it of what could weaken it, renewing it in the strength of faith, enthusiasm of hope, and fervour of charity.

Taking into account, therefore, the ideas coming from all our world and having heard the opinion of the Reverend Rector Major, Don Luigi Ricceri, the following concrete formula for the Chapter theme has been drawn up:

The formation of the Daughter of Mary Help of Christians towards a gradual attainment of her identity as a consecrated-apostle, working today among youth in society and in the Church with the spirit of Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello.

Directives for the study of the theme will be sent to all the houses. They will serve as guidelines for the study which the Sisters will carry out according to the arrangements of the province.

This study will be a real help to the other task to which the Chapter calls us, to which I referred in my last circular: the revision of the Constitutions. The General Chapter of 1969 gave us, in the modified rules, the result of deep meditation on the basis of the Conciliar documents and the genuine sources of our salesian life, and placed on us the obligation of verifying the validity of their principles and norms in our lives during the intervening years. The approach of the next Chapter requires of us the presentation of our personal experience in observing them. It wouldn't be possible to give an upright judgment on the Constitutions without having first conscientiously studied and practised them.

The Holy Year will therefore, find us committed to this serious examination of conscience, which will greatly help towards the conversion and reconcilia-

tion to which the Holy Father calls us: "the fervour project", as he so felicitously described it in the audience of 26th September last.

Fervour
in action

Every Sister, in deepening her knowledge of the Constitutions, will keep in mind that they are:

- *a source of spirituality* from which instruction, strength and consolation can be drawn;
- *a guide* to the realization of our specific vocation in the Church;
- *a means* of preserving and transmitting intact the spirit of the Institute.

They cannot, therefore, be bound up with incidental situations, still less for demands for the accomodation of individuals and arbitrary innovations. That would compromise, not only our characteristic features as Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, but also our mission.

(Cir. n. 566 - October 24 1973)

Significance and value of the Constitutions

The 3rd of next September (1979) will be the centenary of the happy day when our Sisters of Mornese received the first printed copy of the Constitutions. Let us re-live this long-awaited day with them by re-reading the *Cronistoria* (Vol. III p. 77) and thanking God for the *Congregation*.

Don Cagliero, to give importance to this event, established that the distribution should be made from the altar.

Having presented in outline the content of the Constitutions which had cost Don Bosco so much, he exclaimed with the strength of his apostolic ardor: "What is this book, Sisters? It is the Gospel for religious, on which you will be judged at the

Gospel of
Religious

moment of death... If a copy were kept in the tabernacle you would understand more clearly that Jesus lives in the Constitutions as He does in the consecrated Host. (...)

Happy the religious who lives her rule as she lives her communion!”.

These and other words, burning with zeal, were an implicit, vibrant invitation to regard that booklet as sacred, to read it not merely superficially, but to the point of penetrating its essence under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, who enlightens without measure those who open themselves to Him with humble, docile hearts.

How this invitation was accepted by many of our Sisters who found in the Constitutions the book of life, a school of faith and of love, is recorded in the History of the Institute and is still recorded today.

Fidelity to the Rule in some places and in some situations has demanded real martyrdom of our Sisters, but they have not sought suspect justifications to exempt them from observance and they have given proof of truly heroic perseverance.

The Church, our Institute and society itself benefit from such courageous witness.

There is a need for this fidelity which is authentic holiness, it is hidden but fruitful pastoral action, that nourishes the roots of all the good. If many Sisters, with a nature like ours, with their own limitations or defects have succeeded in witnessing to fidelity even in extreme situations, not allowing themselves to be intimidated by words, actions or attitudes showing lack of esteem or even contempt, why shouldn't God give us the same strength if we ask Him for it with humility and faith, in the time of need?

Fidelity to the
Constitutions

The renewal of the Congregation will come about only through sincere fidelity to the Constitutions.

Every arbitrary interpretation weakens the links that bind us together and leads to a break-down of communion that is certainly not willed by God.

The humble practice of our Constitutions, allows us to bring about God's plan for our Institute in the Church and in each one of us, it frees us from illusions, and favours a true spiritual balance; it gives the guarantee and certainty of being in God's will and unifies us at the deepest centre of our being.¹

In this regard I would want to find the most convincing human and supernatural reasons to encourage all to a more courageous fidelity, to thus seeden in a more profound and apostolic manner.

The Lord answered my great desire in a more valid and authoritative way than I could ever have hoped for. The precious book by the Rector Major, *Non Secondo la Carne, ma nello Spirito*, which has been such a wise guide to us during these months, concludes with a meditation on the *Religious - apostolic project in the Constitutions*. Fathe Viganò calls the Constitutions a book of life of spiritual directives, situated at the highest level of religious life, that of the charism, and which orientates the meaning of our profession towards a stable form and throws light on our fidelity.²

Is not this a providential gift for the commemoration of this coming centenary? Let us thank the Lord and let us listen attentively to this VIIth successor of Don Bosco, just as if we were listening to the testament, that Don Bosco, when he was dying, confided to Don Bonetti for us: "Tell the

¹ Cf C 1975 5.

² VIGANÒ, *Non secondo* 233 etc.

Sisters that if they observe the Rule their salvation is certain".³

The provincials would provide a great gift if they could have at least this chapter of the book translated and a copy given to every Sister so that they could have it in hand for 3rd of September.

They will all meditate on it and pray it in the Holy Spirit. I can serve already as a remote preparation for the next General Chapter, in which the Constitutions, in the light of the experiences made during this time will be set down in their definitive form.

Stimulus of
correct
orientation
for youth

One fruit that, fortunately, can come forth immediately from our respect for meditation and living of the Constitutions will be a new strength of persuasion that we shall all acquire in forming our young people to fidelity to daily duty.

There is, unfortunately in many of our young people a loss of the real meaning of life, a lack of responsibility, a sense of resignation or disgust or even rebellion in the face of every norm that asks for effort or renunciation.

And yet, as we said last month, so many young people are still sensitive to education for sacrifice, but they turn for help from those capable of motivating, and often of recuperating or-educating them.

They look for those who can show them how to live the great values of life and know how to help others discover them.

In our environments, they are calling out for Sisters who are joyfully faithful to their profession, who know, through personal experience, how to guide them through the pedagogy of the will, as Pope John Paul II puts it,

- to a readiness for sacrifice and renunciation,

³ Cron V 201.

- to the commitment to form their own characters seriously;
- to acquire that interior strength that helps them to overcome difficulties, not give in to laziness, and be faithful to their promises and their duty.

Many today feel vulnerable and lost and this is understandable given the more concrete and immediate awareness of what is going on in the world and of the consumer mentality that progress has created. Therefore, it is now much more necessary to return to teaching the spirit of sacrifice and courage.⁴

What did our Holy Father do in Italy, Mexico and Poland but continually re-vitalize, in his large-hearted way, the faith, courage, and Christian hope of the crowds of people, especially the young?

What does he continually celebrate but the love, the fraternal service that we must all give, for love of God, to all mankind.

In the Rules we are stimulated:

- to guide young people by our positive interventions, towards free choices, helping them to understand how the accomplishment of their own duty always has its effect on the world-wide situation;
- to give them a gradual, solid formation so that they may carry out in a responsible way their own duty in life;
- to form within themselves a mentality of faith to the point of embracing the whole world in God;
- to guide the young people who are open to it to live more and more with Mary, to consecrate themselves to her... to be ready for a possible divine call.⁵

⁴ JOHN PAUL II P.P., *Agli Alpini d'Italia*, 19 May 1979.

⁵ M-R 1975 59-71.

Fidelity
obligation of
vocation

Let us renew ourselves in our joyful and generous fidelity to our Rule and many young people will be attracted to our way of life.

Oh, if we had more vocations we would not experience the suffering of so many families who want our presence for the moral and spiritual good of their children.

We should not be forced to give so many sorrowful, negative answers to Bishops and parish priests, especially in places where the number of priests is diminishing.

If we make a real effort to live our profession with renewed fidelity "with Mary and like Mary"⁶ — and I hope that since last month (June 1979), we have already begun a serious renewal of our life of poverty — the Lord will give us the joy of offering the Church many Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, consecrated for full-time education and evangelization of young people.

(*Cir.* n. 628 - July-August 1979)

Adhesion illumined by faith and vivified by love

The grace of
the Holy Year

The grace of the Holy Year, singularly enriching for the spirit, should not and must not pass by unnoticed. Linked with our response, by reason of the place we occupy in the Mystical Body of Christ and the mission entrusted to us by the Church, is the response of many of the faithful, especially of youth, whom we are in duty bound to prepare adequately for the great event.

In some communities initiatives are already planned, which, I trust, aim at helping people enter into the spirit of the jubilee, so that they may bear

⁶ C 1975 2.

the desired fruit in souls. That is a consoling sign of vitality and adhesion to the directives of the Church.

Such initiatives and programming can be multiplied in a variety of forms, with a view to impress souls to answer to the exigencies of the people and of the surroundings. While we think of these however, it is the will of God that this effort towards spiritual renewal should urge the entire Congregation in the direction of a well-thought-out programme which will lift everyone to the level of a definite response to the expectations of the Church?

Study and
observance of
the Constitutions

Now, I think that such a programme should be brought about by living its by means of *deepening our understanding and observing the Constitutions* which point out the way, and are for us the expression of the will of God.

Our holy founder and father, Don Bosco, frequently comes back on the observance of the Rule which he considers the only way to preserve the life of the Congregation⁷ and of assuring perseverance in vocation: "When does one begin to doubt one's vocation? When one begins to transgress the Rules".⁸

He sees in them a sure means of sanctification because they mould us in the spirit and mission for which the Lord willed our existence in the Church. In fact, he says: "They are entirely suitable to sanctify a young person who aspires to belong entirely to Jesus, and who wishes at the same time to spend his life in the service of his neighbour".⁹

In the same letter with increased emphasis he repeats: "Hold your Rules in high esteem, meditate

⁷ Cf MB XII 80-81.

⁸ MB XII 472.

⁹ DB L 8 December 1878.

on them, but remember it would be useless even to know them by heart if you didn't practise them".

Our holy Mother, Mary Mazzarello, who from her first meeting with Don Bosco recognised his great sanctity, insistently repeated: "Don Bosco has given us the Constitutions and Don Bosco knows what Mary Help of Christians want from us", and she recommended: "Be exact in the observance of the Holy Rule: you know that this alone is sufficient to make saints of us. Jesus does not want anything else from us".¹⁰

Blessed Don Rua, who has been called the personification of the Rule, said with a conviction born of living experience: "Our houses must be sustained not only by the foundation of piety but with strong walls: the observance of the Constitutions".

May these words of our Saints renew in us the love, esteem and practice of the Constitutions. Of course, the Rule is not the end but the means to attain perfection, and obviously a purely exterior, material, mechanical observance will not sanctify us; it would be a body without a soul. That which vivifies the Rules and makes them productive of sanctity is the Gospel which inspires them and in the light of which they should be pondered, meditated and assimilated.

Adhesion to
faith and of
love

Therefore, we must be vigilant that our adhesion to the Rule be enlightened by faith and vitalized by love, because it is not the attitude of a servant who feels the weight of obligations which are imposed, nor the purely human vision which can make of them an object of destructive criticism which will open up to us the way of a spiritual, loving, interior observance of the Rules. Only an unfettered soul illumined by faith sees in the Rules

¹⁰ *MML* 24, 9.

a means of fidelity to God, to His will, to His designs of sanctification for us; only a soul capable of catching in them the breath of the Holy Spirit, which inspires and vivifies them even through the human limitations of their format, will discover in them the word of God. The articles, thus seen, become the voice of God, signs of His will, and by observing them, they bring us to that interior liberation which is their scope.

Then the Rules become a powerful means for our sanctification and an inestimable gift of God, through the Church, which "following the impulse of the Holy Spirit" has confirmed them with its approval.¹¹

In the light of this faith with which they should be received and read, no distinction should be made between big things and small, because it is the measure of our love, the interior fire of observance, which will make them great or little.

The Rule, modelling us on a spirit, creates interior unity, impresses on us the features of a true Daughter of Mary Help of Christians, in whom are reflected those particular aspects of the Gospel which characterise her, and gradually conform her to Jesus Christ.

Let us thank the Lord for the spiritual helps to sanctification which come to us through the Constitutions, and let us ask pardon of Him, if we have not always esteemed, loved, and practised them as many of our Sisters have done.

(*Cir.* n. 565 - September 24 1973)

¹¹ Cf C 1969 157.

IDENTITY OF THE FMA

At a time when the world seemed confused because of an accentuated crisis of identity, Mother Ersilia, without realising it, outlined with sobriety of touch, but in a clear, strong way the identity of THE DAUGHTER OF MARY HELP OF CHRISTIANS.

We shall try to focus on its most significant traits, which will find ample confirmation in the renewed Constitutions.

Identity of the Daughter of Mary Help of Christians

The Daughter of Mary Help of Christians discovers in the charismatic foundation of the Institute

and in the singular, explicit intervention of Mary the CALL to form part of the “living monument” erected by Don Bosco

in gratitude to Mary Help of Christians, to “bring the evangelical message to girls” materially or morally most in need.

She finds the essential value of her being and her most profound reality in full INSERTION IN THE CHURCH, which makes her a participator of its “mystery” and its “life”, uniting her to the salvific action of Christ the Good Shepherd.

She revives in herself “the ideal of woman contemplated by God”.

“her IDENTITY - A WOMAN CONSECRATED, APOSTLE, SALESIAN”, realising herself

- in the “truth” of her being and her activity;
- in “Joy”
specific element of her spirituality and “characteristic instrument of her educative mission”;
- in “perennial youth of spirit”,
“freshness and generosity”
which makes her “inventive in apostolic activity, serene and optimistic in difficulties”, capable of escaping that “ageing in spirit symptom of mediocrity”.

She regards as "the most urgent ecclesial service",
As first commitment
of her gift of self to God
the constant search and practice of SANCTITY:
way of interiority,
of intimate and habitual union with God,
The life of Christ within her
revelation with Him of the Father's love

LIFE OF GRACE

- lived in the "heroism of the daily round"
in the light to the Word of God
and of the last truths,
in simplicity of spirit,
docile to the transforming action
of the Holy Spirit;
- sustained, in the following of Christ crucified
by a balanced and fortifying purification,
love of the daily cross
and total dedication
to the apostolic action of assistance,
the "most demanding and privileged area
of the salesian life";
- sealed by insertion in Christ with the vows,
expression of total gift of self to God
and to the souls of youth;
- revealed in the irradiating splendour
of chastity,
"Mary's virtue" and constructive force
of her personal pastoral action.

She lives the "primacy of PRAYER
over all other activities",
in constant search for God,
in intimate contact with Him,
which makes it an "instrument"
of her life and action,
and fructifies her apostolic work

of which it is the unfailing source.
 Prayer which is nourished
 by the presence of God,
 by the liturgical, sacramental and marian life,
 in an atmosphere of joyful openness
 to God and to the girls.

MARIAN SPIRITUALITY

marks her with special features,
 transforming her life
 "in Mary, with Mary and for Mary".
 In "contemplation
 of the very sanctity and mission"
 of the holy Virgin,
 she endeavours to become with her and like her
 "Ausiliatrice" among the girls.

She lives COMMUNITY LIFE

in fraternal communion with her sisters,
 in a fusion of "mind and heart"
 in the serenity of the ambient,
 — a meaningful testimony for the world —
 presenting the "family spirit"
 precious heritage of Don Bosco
 and unmistakable feature
 of the "spirit of Mornese".

She realises her specific

EDUCATIVE APOSTOLIC VOCATION

in a "total consecration" to youth.
 With the joyful enthusiasm of "DA MIHI ANIMAS"
 she aims at the integral formation of the girls
 by means of personal witness,
 catechesis, the Sacraments,
 eucharistic and marian devotion,
 and that "pedagogy of the heart"
 — "goodness elevated to a system" —
 enclosed in the Preventive System
 "synthesis of spirituality, of pedagogy and of
 pastoral".

She looks to Mother Mazzarello
who realised in herself
a "sanctity simple and sincere"
of duty and the situations of the moment,
"seen with the eye of faith"
and "in apostolic zeal for youth".

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