

## *Communities Listening to the Cry of the Poor*

Dearest Sisters,

I felt deeply questioned by the message of Pope Francis who, at the conclusion of the Jubilee of Mercy, desired to institute the *World Day of the Poor* which will be celebrated for the first time on November 19, 2017. The theme of this day is: “*We do not love with words but with facts*”, recalling the First Letter of St. John (1 John 3:18). The intention of the Holy Father regarding this is that every Christian community in the whole world, and thus, our community as well, would become more and more a concrete sign of the charity of Christ for the last and the neediest. An explicit reference is addressed to those who, by vocation, have the mission to support the poor: consecrated persons, associations, movements, volunteer realities, so that in the Church, through the celebration of this day, a tradition that is a concrete contribution to evangelization in the contemporary world will be established (Cf. *Message for the 1<sup>st</sup> World Day of the Poor*, 13 June 2017).

There is a significant synchrony with what GC XXIII entrusted to us. It is the commitment to an effective sharing of goods to be a prophecy of fraternity in today’s world of growing poverty, inequality, injustice, and where there are always new emergencies and challenges (Cf. *Acts GC XXIII*, n. 73).

The Document “*Guidelines for the Management of Goods of the FMA Institute*”, elaborated by the Administration Sector with the contribution of all the Provincial Bursars of the world, and that has arrived in every Province, is an important help to live the vow of poverty in this historic time, as a *choice of love*, in the solidarity of sharing at the service of the mission.

I want to say a special thank you to the Economer General, Sr. Vilma Tallone, and to her collaborators for having offered with competence and love, these guidelines elaborated in the light of the Salesian charism and of the Church documents: *Guidelines for the Management of Goods of Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life* (CIVCSVA, 2 August 2014). I invite you to study them, value them, and make them the subject of sharing so that they may become an experience of daily life.

Dear Sisters, as you can see there is a wealth of solicitations that we wish to accept with a ready heart; a heart that possesses only one wealth, the beatitude of those who choose to be disciples of the poor Jesus, tasting the joy of conversion to a moderate lifestyle, for a renewed choice of poor youth.

### **Disciples of the Poor Jesus**

Article 18 of our Constitutions offers us the evangelical perspective of our being disciples of Jesus: “In order to follow Jesus with greater freedom of heart, and moved by the Holy Spirit, we willingly embrace evangelical poverty. In this way, we become sharers in the mystery of self-emptying of the Son of God who, being rich made Himself poor that we might become rich through His poverty. We imitate Mary, the humble handmaid who surrendered everything to her Lord. In loving abandonment to the Father’s Providence, we place ourselves unreservedly at the service of the neediest young people, becoming for them a sign of God’s gratuitous love. We proclaim thereby that He is our only good, and that all created things are given to us only to increase our capacity to love” (C 18).

Following Jesus means learning from the Teacher, living like Him, feeling ourselves embraced by the Father who lovingly watches over His every creature and does not let them fall from His

hands. This means having confidence in the future where God dwells and waits for His children.

But how did Jesus live? What was His heart like? His heart was meek and humble, poor and free. Jesus lives the beatitude of the poor in spirit, the first of the *Magna Carta* that He left as a heritage to His disciples: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven" (*Mt* 5: 3).

Above all, it deals with poverty of the heart: a heart closed-in on itself cannot be open to God and cannot be totally available to the mission among the young, especially the poorest. That of Jesus was total poverty: The Son of God, by incarnating Himself, we can say, stripped Himself of His divinity, accepting the limitations of the human creature and taking them upon himself, to bear the burden of all sins on the cross, where the radical poverty of Jesus reaches its maximum, the gift of life. There is no greater love than one who gives his life for his friends.

Jesus is born poor; lives an itinerant and nomadic life; brings the proclamation of freedom and salvation to the poor, fulfilling in Himself the passage of Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord." Rolling up the scroll, he handed it back to the attendant and sat down, and the eyes of all in the synagogue looked intently at him. He said to them, "Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing." (*Luke* 4,18: 21).

Thus, His mission is not to leave things as they are. He came to give joy to the poor, freeing them from various slaveries. What displeases the Lord the most is not poverty in itself, but the lack of dignity, the degradation, and the different kinds of slavery that take away the freedom to be fully human.

Jesus who was born and lived poor, multiplies bread for the hungry crowd. In the Eucharist, He Himself becomes bread: bread that nourishes love among us and opens us to universal fraternity.

He goes so far as to identify Himself with the little ones and the poor: "Every time you gave even a glass of water in my name, you gave it to Me" (Cf. *Mt* 25: 31-40). Pope Francis never tires of reminding us of this message of Jesus and he invites us to see the poor as the 'flesh of Christ'. Our trusting abandonment to the Father's Providence does not exempt us from the fatigue of procuring our daily bread and also of providing for the poor and together with them. "Give them some food yourselves" (*Luke* 9:10-17) is a command that sees the disciples of Jesus searching for the most opportune ways of meeting the needs of the little ones and the poor, involving them in this search.

Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello, as we will see later, have left us a shining example of life and concrete choices in this field. Our Founder said to choose the "politics of the Our Father", that is, of invocation and fraternity, together with the young and the laity. In effect, the Our Father is the prayer of the poor that Jesus Himself taught His disciples. It contains the words of the poor who turn to Him and recognize themselves as brothers and sisters. It is a prayer expressed in the plural: the bread we ask for is 'ours', it implies sharing, participation, and shared responsibility. In this prayer, we express the need of overcoming every kind of egoism in order to access the joy of reciprocal acceptance.

Following the poor Jesus is still today a prophetic choice that says a lot to the people when they see us coherent in daily evangelical choices and in our personal and community lifestyle. From the re-assumption of this poverty and from solidarity with the poorest that breath of newness will radiate, which today's world expects from consecrated life.

## **Which Lifestyle for us today**

We often hear about conversion, change of mentality, new lifestyle to build a more just and fraternal society. The frequent use of this language can make us become indifferent and lessen the value of a challenge that closely touches us.

I think that poverty as a lifestyle is the gratuitous, unconditional giving of what *we are and have*, taking on the same sentiments of Jesus who gave His whole Self, His very life on the cross. This requires an attitude of deep faith, of humility, of love; a sense of belonging, a way of thinking, of witnessing to real choices of moderation in daily life. Choices that can sometimes be uncomfortable because they call into discussion our way of living, our habits, and, sometimes, even our indifference toward those in need.

The Constitutions point out the lifestyle of the first Christian communities to which we look to let ourselves be transformed by the Lord Jesus and by the demands of the Gospel (Cf. C 25). They teach us that poverty is a choice of love and not a constraint caused by contingent situations. It is in this light that we wish to evaluate if ours is a “way of life that is moderate and unpretentious, according to the Salesian style of temperance, joy, and simplicity” (C 23).

Moderation is not to be understood only in the economic sense, the way it is often interpreted, but rather, it deals with *the way of being and of acting*: moderation in words, in gestures, in judgments, in daily choices.

Moderation is the privileged way of solidarity. There is a marvelous interweaving between moderation and solidarity. The road was already taken by Jesus and we desire to place our footsteps in His, making the experience of the *communion of goods* at the service of the mission into real, inculturated, and verifiable journeys. These goods are the fruit of a wise and coherent self-limitation, both personal and community. Goods multiply and grow if they become an expression of solidarity and of confident abandonment to Providence (Cf. GC XXIII, n. 64).

I can affirm that in my visits I recognize a deep and authentic need of placing in common with the poor, all that we are and have; to let ourselves be ‘disturbed’ by them; to be that part of the *out-going, missionary Church* which considers its only wealth to be that of belonging to Christ and desirous of serving Him in the person of the poorest, the most forgotten, the rejected, the exiled.

I have met so many sisters who are happy in their vocation because they are poor, oriented to the essential, seeking only what is useful for a decent life and completely free and available for the mission!

I am convinced that all this needs a personal and community conversion lived with joy and hope. The encounter with the poor transforms us if we know how to discover in them the presence of Jesus and humbly listen to the mysterious wisdom that God wants to communicate to us through them. They have a lot to teach us (Cf. EG, n. 198).

Formation of the heart is important for listening to the poor, extending our hand to them, meeting them, looking them in the eye, embracing them to make each one feel the warmth of love that allows them to overcome their solitude. Their hand extended to us is also an invitation to leave our certainties and comforts aside, and to recognize the value of poverty in itself (Cf. *Message for the 1<sup>st</sup> World Day of the Poor*).

Are we ready to review our lifestyle, our way of living and of witnessing moderation in the Gospel spirit and in the Salesian charism? How can we help ourselves live it in synchrony with the poor Jesus and taste the beatitude of the poor in spirit?

Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello left us a precious witness that is still actual today. Let us remember them, confident that we will know how to understand them and translate them into life, to be a prophetic sign for the world of today with its challenges and its expectations.

With a father’s heart, Don Bosco, goes to the outskirts of Turin and through the streets of the large city looking for lonely young people, immigrants, stragglers. He chooses to live in a personally precarious situation in the Valdocco zone, and establishes the Oratory under the sign

of real poverty, sharing the work, the dramas, and the hopes of the poor people. He makes choices of poverty, but acts with resourcefulness and creativity to respond to the hopes of the young and to promote their life through education and not through welfare.

At Mornese, Mother Mazzarello discovers poverty in the faces of the girls lacking affection, care, work, instruction, and of meaning to give to their life. This poverty puts the creativity of her love into motion, which cannot be released without the choice of evangelical, joyful poverty in solidarity. There is a very timely recommendation in the words of Mother Mazzarello to the first Daughters of Mary Help of Christians: "For charity's sake, my daughters, even in the midst of the comforts that the Congregation will offer you, be poor, poor in spirit, using what you are given and what you are granted, without any attachment to the things themselves that you use...use them but with a spirit ready to suffer even the consequences of their lack and insufficiency" (*Cronistoria* III 266). She also feared that a comfortable life would weaken fervor and that the desire for an ever more comfortable life could enter into the house of Nizza Monferrato as well. This is why she recommended that they live "with a true love for religious poverty, so loved and practiced by our Jesus, by our Mother Mary, and by our Economist and special protector, St. Joseph" (*Cronistoria* III 299-300; *Constitutions, Appendix* 285).

Mary Domenica's words move us because they flow from her heart like an inexhaustible font of goodness, and consolidate us in the conviction that Salesian riches are the poor young people to educate and nothing else!

### **The Choice of Poor Young People**

The charismatic choice lived by our Founders is recalled in the Constitutions right from the first article. In the context of world impoverishment, we are especially concerned about the poverty of young people today, subject to not only traditional poverty, like not having the means to study, to grow humanly in environments of healthy and warm relationships, but by the new poverties like the lack of meaning, little desire to live, solitude, absence of ideals and interests, indifference. Their greatest poverty is *educational poverty*. Pope Francis insistently invites us to go out, to frequent the geographical and existential peripheries where the young are deprived of educational care both in the family and at school, and in other social environments as well, including the digital worlds they inhabit and where they create their world of relationships.

In every context, the Gospel message can be a beacon of light for the young who, in this way, can perceive a reality of closeness and proximity. This requires that our witness express the joy of the *da mihi animas cetera tolle*, reveals that we are inhabited by God; that we love the poor and that we care about the world, beginning with those who live 'without dignity' in degrading human and social environments.

I am convinced that only educational passion, complete dedication, the ability of companionship and care expressed through humanizing relationships can make them glimpse a different horizon.

According to our Founder, no young person is ever unrecoverable. The condition to redeem them is that indicated by the 'noble Lady of Johnny Bosco's dream at nine years of age': "Make yourself humble, strong, robust". Don Bosco's predilection for poor and abandoned youth does not derive principally from his abilities but from the mission God had indicated to him. Through the maternal intervention of Mary, Don Bosco understood this mission. She indicated to him the field where he was to work, that is, poor youth. Later, in the decisive moment when he had to choose the proposal of the Marchioness Barolo who had asked him to continue to collaborate in her works, abandoning the street boys, Don Bosco chose the latter because they were needier.

This teaches us that it was not the works that determined his choices, but the mission received from God, that is, the love of predilection for abandoned, lonely, poor young people. The fundamental mission and priority is always that of being signs and expressions of God's foreseeing love toward them, according to the maternal style of love that gives, shares, and lets itself be converted by the young themselves.

The pastoral conversion singled out by Pope Francis to the whole Church asks us to return to the origins of the Salesian mission to re-discover the fire of the *da mihi animas cetera tolle* that animated it and review our actual presences and choices in this light.

We can ask ourselves: which passions motivate us in our choices; what consequent options do we make; which actions do we propose; how do we live the *cetera tolle*? The criteria, “we have always done it this way” is no longer valid. When Pope Francis invites us to ‘go out’, he wishes to indicate that we must abandon a way made up of re-assuring certainties that close us in a comfortable egoism. We must open ourselves to the whole world. We do this beginning with the young who have fewer opportunities for being reached, accompanied, and followed.

Our educational mission in the style of prevention centered on relationships, guides us, not only to do good to them, but to share life with them and learn from their situation, even placing ourselves in their point of view.

Dear Sisters, I want to express my gratitude to you for your daily efforts in the schools and in the oratories, in hospitality centers, and in other works in favor of poor youth. I thank you for your active solidarity regarding the migrants and for your presence in mission lands, in the degrading zones of the city outskirts. We are aware that we are participating in the Church, in the one mission of Jesus, networking with all those who have the education of the new generations at heart, and co-responsibly with the laity and the young people themselves, and with planning that allows us to give solidity and continuity to the mission.

The multi-cultural and multi-religious reality that characterizes every part of the world must not intimidate us in proposing our Christian vision, as long as we do it with conviction and coherence, with respect for other faiths and cultures, and in a serene and constructive dialog. We are all sisters and brothers and we inhabit the same Planet under the same sky. Therefore, we must overcome the tendency to indifference, and to exclusive preferences for some cultural group.

Our way of educating the young must be transmitted with our life witness and with the words that count the most, that is, love even in little things. Herein lies happiness, not in possessing and in having. Cultivating a poor heart in the young as well means helping them to open themselves to gratuity and to gratitude, to know how to enjoy the small joys that are scattered along our human journey and of which we are often not aware. In a word, this means to accompany them along the lines of a humanism in solidarity, able to build the civilization of love.

May God bless you and Mary, Mother of the missions, be for everyone a precious companion on the journey of this missionary month.

Rome, 24 October 2017

Aff.ma Madre

New Provincials 2017-2018

Preprovince “Mary, Mother of the Church”  
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America

Province of "Our Most Holy Savior"  
*Sr. Roxana María ARTIGA*

CAM

Province of "Our Lady of the Angels"  
*Sr. Ena Veralis BOLAÑOS*

CAR