

## *With Mary, Woman on a Journey*

Dearest Sisters,

On November 14, 2017, the Institute gratefully celebrated the 140<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first missionary departure of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. This is not only an event of the past, but it continues to illumine our present and constitutes the horizon of the Institute's future, which will continue to grow as long as it is missionary. These courageous missionaries left with Mary and succeeded in radiating love for Her in the hearts of many children, young people, and adults. The Virgin Mary was their Confidante, Mother, Helper, Teacher, and Guide. She dried their tears in the moments of nostalgia and encouraged them to keep alive the fire of God's love and zeal for the *da mihi animas cetera tolle* experienced at Mornese.

Mary Help of Christians has always been a silent but active presence in our Institute. Many young women have chosen to follow the call to Salesian religious life after having experienced Marian spirituality in prayer, in groups, in various encounters, but above all, after having met Daughters of Mary Help of Christians who 'spoke' to them of Mary with their witness and joy of the Salesian vocation.

In this Circular, with simplicity and trust, I share with you some experiences of Mary's life that I deem significant in order to continue *to walk with her, to meet and serve our sisters, and the young with a missionary heart and collaborate for their joy.*

### **A New Journey**

The image of Mary walking emerges with proof in the Gospels and continues to be the source of inspiration for the Church. Mary walks, leaves her house, perhaps much more than the women of her time. It is enough to think of her adventurous trips from Nazareth to Ain Karim, to Bethlehem, to Jerusalem, to Egypt. But her walking the streets of Palestine and to an unknown country like Egypt, is preceded and accompanied by an even more intense interior attitude. Her whole life is a journey, a peregrination of faith (cf. LG, No. 58).

Not only is Mary a woman walking, but she herself is the way that leads to Jesus, the One who is the final Way to the Father. Even more, she walks with us: "By her maternal charity, she cares for the brethren of her Son, who still journey on earth surrounded by dangers and difficulties, until they are led into their blessed home" (LG, n. 62).

It may seem a contrast, but the first image of Mary presented in the Gospels is that of a home. Mary, however, does not feel closed in between four walls. In that house she lives a strong inner dynamism and her heart is open to the surprising novelty of God.

It is there that the Angel Gabriel *came to her* (cf. *Luke* 1:28). The Word of the Lord that Mary always meditated on in her heart, filled her days with light, and reaches her in her simple domestic everyday life. He comes to her gratuitously, as an absolute and explosive novelty.

In God's salvific plan, the Annunciation opens her heart in wonder, arouses questions. In fact, her first reaction is disturbance, not through disbelief, but by astonishment at the unheard-of proposal of becoming the Savior's mother. There is an excessive disproportion between the magnitude of this announcement and the possibility of fulfilling it. Aware of her littleness, Mary approaches the mystery

with trepidation and discretion. How can she accomplish what God asks of her? And then, the angel's reassurance: "The holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God" (Luke 1: 35). Then the yes of love blossoms, the yes of unconditional trust. All is not clear, but she knows she can trust Him. She only has to abandon herself to the superabundant and gratuitous grace that is given to her.

Mary follows a true and proper interior journey; she lives in a listening process, an opening that flows from consensus and radically changes her future plans. Henceforth, the orientation of her existence will be centered on the novelty of this announcement full of mystery, but pervaded with joy. The first words addressed to Mary are, in fact, an invitation to joy because God has filled her with grace. Her virginal maternity becomes possible only on this horizon.

If we look at Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello, we become aware that in their life, the strongest change comes from an announcement. For Don Bosco, the announcement is part of a dream-premonition at nine years of age. He receives it from Jesus Himself and is accompanied by Mary. With her, his mission that at first frightens him, becomes possible. Mary reassures him, takes him by the hand, places her hand on his head, affirms that the young are the specific area of his missionary commitment, and calls for a remarkable inner change: "Make yourself humble, strong, robust".

Mary Domenica, in the experience of great weakness after her typhoid illness, is given a mandate: "I entrust them to you". This is the moment in which, even for our Co-Founder, life changes direction, opens unexpected horizons to her that are unknown and surrounded in mystery.

This mandate is also given to us today. Our vocation, like that of Mary of Nazareth, like that of our Founders, is rooted in the foreseeing love with which God surprised us one day, and indicated to us a radical change. In living this call, we feel accompanied by her who is the mother and teacher. She for first, lived in total availability to God and to His surprises. She will not tire in accompanying her daughters along the same road.

I invite you to meditate with renewed awe on the grace of our vocation, the novelty it brings, and the calls that daily reach us. They are the way to meet God who asks us to generate life in today's young people. He calls us to the impossible, given our poverty and littleness, but He assures us of the abundance of His grace and inundates us with joy, a joy to share in a mission of encounter and of service.

## **To live the encounter and serve**

Walking with Mary revives in us her way of *being and serving*; it is to discover in her gestures and in her choices an unheard-of style that amazes us so much and urges us to constantly look at her to make our life 'new', make her dispositions ours. Only then does life acquire the Marian dimension typical of the identity of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. All of us, in fact, are called to prolong the mission of Mary over time, which is foreseeing and maternal help, especially among young people (cf. C 4).

If we look at her, who is actively present in the history of the Institute and in our lives (cf. C 44), we believe again in the revolutionary power of tenderness and affection: exquisitely human values that vibrate in the heart of the "Attentive Lady", as defined by Pope Francis, who leaves her village to help others "without delay" (cf. EG, 288). The icon of Mary's meeting with her cousin Elizabeth is of great theological intensity.

Two women, two mothers who guard an ineffable mystery, a wonderful miracle, an unmistakable joy, and in this mystery, they live a deep encounter that becomes communion and solidarity.

Mary becomes for all of us, the teacher of life and shows us the value and fecundity of encounter. In fact, her first decision after the annunciation is the journey she undertakes with determination, with daring, and with full freedom. It is certainly not without effort and sacrifice along the mountainous roads leading from Nazareth to Ain Karim. It is a journey totally oriented to live the experience that explodes in the beautiful and unparalleled song of the *Magnificat*.

There are many aspects this Biblical page presents to us and certainly are the object of contemplation in the time that prepares us for the solemnity of Mary Immaculate.

The *encounter* between Mary and Elizabeth, with all it expresses, can "speak" to our everyday life and transform it, making it a service rendered with joy.

While I dare say the *yes* of the annunciation comes in a private way, the encounter with Elizabeth happens in an open space and within a family, thus rich in affection, tenderness, humanity, blessing, and listening. *Announcements and Encounters* are the suitable atmospheres for the advent of God even today. In this light, there comes to mind the meaningful experience lived in encounters with numerous sisters, lay adults, and young people who feel Mary's presence and sincerely invoke her. At the same time, I perceived in these people the appeal, at times unheard or disdained, that invoke proximity, listening, humanizing relationships, understanding, tenderness. Gestures that can soothe so much suffering and wounds because they are small fragments of God's love.

With simplicity I share with you what I have at heart, in the awareness that it is not possible to exhaust here what I have experienced in the various encounters. I am convinced that the Holy Spirit will find space to put into your life "daily" announcements, sometimes impossible to understand, but which become possible to accomplish through the grace of God that does not abandon us and makes us available for the encounter with others.

In all of us, there is the desire for community relationships, for environments that shine with an authentic *Marian face*, and this can radiate to the social and ecclesial realities in which we work. Now, how can we make real our filial relationship with Mary and *be with her and like her*, missionaries who bring life? Every day, we are called to go toward Ain Karim, that is, daily places and situations like the community, the young, the ever-new challenges of the context. In the face of this reality, Mary teaches us to not "live in haste", but to go "with solicitude" to serve God in those in need, especially young women often deprived of their dignity, abused, unrecognized or unvalued in their specific potentials; frequently prevented from being an incisive and significant presence in social, economic, political, and ecclesial life.

We cannot afford slowness. Mary does not hesitate, does not delay. Her attitude invites us as well, to put ourselves into play with courage, going against the current; like her, bringing what we have that is most precious and that we ourselves have received: Jesus, His Gospel, His predilection for the poorest, the excluded, those rejected by society, the forgotten.

Sometimes, they are geographically very distant, but often they are people who are close, with whom we share values, hopes, labors, successes and failures. Every encounter is a challenge that lets us evaluate the quality of our relationships and calls us to share what we are and have. Whether it is people from the same community, young people, neighbors, immigrants; it is in each case a meeting with different cultures and mentalities, before which we are called to approach on tip toe, with respect, listening, understanding, appreciation.

Pope Francis invites us to live the *mystic of encounter* as the 'Gospel Place'. To live the encounter 'mystically' however, we need to insure time for God and vigil so that it is not too full of things, of activities, of words. It is a time of listening in an attitude of deep "sympathy"; where there is concern for the world and for the human person; where dialogue becomes authentic service; where acceptance, respect, mutual help, understanding, forgiveness, and joy build true communities, where there is a common commitment to live authentic, gratuitous human relationships (cf. CIVCSVA Document, *Scrutate* # 13).

We all need to look at these aspects to overcome the culture of indifference, individualism, self-referencing, and contribute to a culture of encounter that becomes a lifestyle in the footsteps of Mary. How can we live the different encounters of the day as "new annunciations"? How can we make Mary's style actual in our communities and with the young, so that our encounters are not superficial but rather awaken life and hope?

## **Collaboration for the Joy of the Young**

Receiving daily annunciations and creating encounters as life events allows us to go along the roads of joy like Mary.

When we reflect on joy in the Gospel, our thinking spontaneously runs to Cana where there is a wedding party: a place of joy in which love celebrates its feast (cf. John 2: 1-11). It is an event in which Jesus works His first sign: the wine is not enough and behold, the six jars filled with water are overflowing with wine of the highest quality, thanks to Mary's solicitous intervention; the attentive, wise Mother, able to let herself get involved and engendering co-operation. There are many guests, but she is the only one who realizes that the joy of the feast is in danger. She sees and understands the discomfort of the hosts. Thus, with discretion and realism, she intervenes: "They have no more wine" and she decides to confide in her Son with maternal insistence to save the joy of that wedding.

Mary is not the only protagonist, nor are the servants, but together they are an indispensable presence for the success of the feast.

This is the Marian style of intervention and, for us, a motive for reflection on the 'empty jars' waiting to be filled with the 'good wine' that transforms life and fills it with hope. Today, many young people are like the 'empty jars', weighed down by meaninglessness, by solitude, abandonment, without reference points in a context marked with relativism and lack of values.

We ask ourselves: how can we put 'new wine' in their life; how can we fill the 'jars' with joy and hope so that sadness, discomfort, mistrust in life will disappear?

The proximate Synod on the theme: *The Young, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment*, is a providential gift to accompany the young on their life journey; so that they can discover their plan of life and realize it with joy, open to the encounter with God and with every person, thus participating in the building of a new humanity.

In his letter to the young on the occasion of the presentation of the Preparatory Document for the XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Bishops' Synod 2018, Pope Francis concluded with this declaration addressed to the young: "Through this Synod journey, I and my brother Bishops wish to become even more, 'collaborators of your joy' (2 Cor 1:24). I entrust you to Mary of Nazareth, a young person like you to whom God turned His loving gaze, so that she will take you by the hand and lead you to the joy of 'Here I am' that is total and generous (cf. Luke 1:38)".

It is a journey that involves us as educators called by charism to arouse life and communicate joy. It is an appeal to enter courageously into the complexity in which young people live to understand them in their real needs, expectations, dreams, desires for happiness. Not alone, however, but with the same young people, seeking *together* appropriate ways to re-create spaces where life can flourish.

In GC XXIII, the young people present told us: "Trust us enough to plan these changes together: consider us as hardworking partners and not just recipients, creating spaces for dialog in order to live the commandment of love in the family spirit...We ourselves are the key to reach those young people. Help us to feel that we are not guests, but children in the house of God, in your homes (*Acts CG XXIII*, n. 18). These affirmations have inspired the choice of the sub-title of the Acts of GC XXIII: *With the Young, Missionaries of Hope and Joy*.

How many times have we reiterated that young people are not just recipients of our educational action, but are fully involved with us in their own path of growth and seeking their life project!

Joy, love, fullness of life express the goal of our educational mission. It is the space to "announce" the good news in various cultural, social and religious contexts. And this news is good because it is a source of joy and hope, especially in the most difficult situations.

We are aware that with the strength and light of the Holy Spirit, we must make these values shine in our life, to be educators capable, not only of loving, but *making them see* they are loved with the face of joy.

This is why it is essential to let Mary accompany us. Let's take her home, enter into a deeper relationship with her, because with her help impossible roads become feasible; and that is what we want for our communities and for the young people.

These are the paths of hope and joy that, despite the daily struggles, make us "women on the journey".

Dear Sisters, I express my deep gratitude to you for your life given in the spirit of the *da mihi animas cetera tolle*, attentive to persons and situations most in need of support, comfort, gratuitous love.

Mary helps us to be sensitive to the migrants who today in many parts of the world are without a home, without future horizons, without the experience of a trustful and generous welcome.

As Institute we are called to concrete action with evangelical, courageous, creative choices, also regarding the role of women, broadening spaces for a more incisive feminine presence in the complex society of today, characterized by plurality and globalization.

Pope Francis encourages us in this regard: "There are many, many women who, in the daily tasks carried out with dedication and conscience, sometimes with heroic courage, have placed and still place the fruit of their genius, their precious traits in the most varied, specific, and qualified skills combined with the real experience of being mothers and formators "(Pope Francis to the participants of the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, June 9, 2017).

The goal towards which all our pastoral work must be directed, especially in the process of vocational orientation, is the education of young women to discern God's plan for them in their lives and to accept this as their mission. It is a journey that makes them open and aware of the important issues of our times, and capable of contributing with competence and a Gospel spirit, to the building of a new society more in keeping with the aspirations of the human heart (cf. C 72).

I conclude with wishes for the holy feasts of the Solemnities of the Immaculate and of Christmas. I want to extend to all your families, the Rector Major, Fr. Ángel Fernández Artime, and all the Salesian conferrers, the members of the Salesian Family, and every person who shares our educative commitment and hope, or who is living in moments of difficulty.

May Mary, the Virgin of the 'yes' and the Mother of the Incarnate Word, intercede for us in this time of grace so that peace, justice, and hope may triumph for all peoples.

God bless you!

Rome, 24 November 2017



Affectionately, Madre