

## *A living Temple of gratitude to Mary with the young*

Dearest sisters,

The year 2018 that we have just begun presents itself rich with experiences that leave an imprint of light on the journey of the Institute. The Triennial Evaluations of GC XXIII have begun at the level of Interprovincial Conferences and we are all united in a journey of discernment and docility to understand what the Holy Spirit is asking of us today and to be increasingly with the young, missionaries of joy and of hope. In this search, we are in full harmony with the journey of the Church in preparation for the *Bishops' Synod on the Young, the faith, and vocational discernment*.

This year we also celebrate the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the consecration of Mary Help of Christians Basilica in Turin. For us FMA this is not only an historical event, but also a new call to rediscover the reasons why Don Bosco built this Temple to Mary and wanted our Institute to be deeply connected to it.

### **Consecration of the Church of Mary Help of Christians**

The Basilica of Mary Help of Christians was born from the filial affection of Don Bosco for the Mother of God and from his courage in facing an enterprise marked by great hope and enormous difficulties. He was convinced that the Madonna wanted that temple. She herself had indicated to him the spot where it would rise and where in 1863, Don Bosco began to pay for the excavations with only eight cents!

Seeing the stunned look of the contractor at such a laughable sum, Don Bosco told him, "Be tranquil, the Madonna will think about providing the money needed for her Church". Until the end, he never attributed any merit to himself and on the day of its consecration on June 9, 1868, he said with humble faith: "I am not the author of these great things as you say: it is the Lord, it is Mary Most Holy who have deigned to use a poor priest to accomplish these works. I have put nothing of my own in this. *Aedificavit sibi domum Maria (it is Mary who built her house)*. Every stone, every decoration is a sign of her grace" (BM IX, 246-247).

Don Bosco wanted the consecration of Mary Help of Christians Church to include a week of celebrations, an event of great religious and popular resonance, and at the same time, an educational experience for the boys in his schools. Invited to the solemn consecration, in addition to the numerous Church and civil authorities, were the young people of the first houses of the Congregation: Valdocco, Lanzo, and Mirabello. Many of them participated in song, sound, theatrical performances, and gymnastics (Cf. G. Bosco, Remembrance of a solemnity in honor of Mary Help of Christians, pp. 22-23).

We marvel that 450 boys were involved in that event. They sang the Marian antiphon at Vespers: *Maria succurre miseris*, composed by Fr. John Cagliero. There were three choirs: one was in the presbytery with about 150 tenors and basses that represented the Pilgrim Church. Another choir was around the dome with about 200 sopranos and contraltos to represent the Angels and the Church Triumphant. The third of about 100 tenors and basses were in the orchestra and symbolized the Church that yearns for eternal glory.

The entire Basilica was filled with harmony, so much so that as Don Bosco listened, he was moved by the singing of the boys and he whispered to Fr. John Anfossi who was near him: "Dear Anfossi, doesn't it seem that we are in Heaven?"

From that time, this House of Mary is for many people yet today a center of attraction, of the radiation of faith where the presence of Mary is experienced, she who loves us, who receives us, who intercedes for us, and who guides us to Jesus, Her Son.

## **The Institute of the FMA: living monument of gratitude to Mary Help of Christians**

The foundation of our Institute takes place four years after the consecration of the Church dedicated to Mary Help of Christians. It was not enough for Don Bosco to build a stone temple to Mary; he wanted to build a *temple of living stones* to prolong in time his song of gratitude to Mary. He himself confirmed this on the day of the foundation of the Institute: "Now you belong entirely to a religious family that belongs totally to the Madonna...Consider a joy your beautiful title of *Daughters of Mary Help of Christians*, and often think that your Institute must be a living monument of Don Bosco's gratitude to the Great Mother of God, invoked under the title of *Help of Christians*" (*Cronistoria*, I 306).

Don Bosco connected our Institute very closely to the temple he built at Turin in honor of Mary Help of Christians, as the Rector Major, Fr. Louis Ricceri, reminded us in 1968: "Consider this centenary as a family interest because in reality, the Basilica is a bit your House, because it is the House of your Mother, of your true Superior" (Turin, Homily of 31 May 1968).

Every stone of this Church was 'a thank you to Mary', and every FMA was to be "a thank you to Mary". In Don Bosco's mind, the monument is the symbol of an identity, the synthesis of a charismatic patrimony that reveals typical aspects of a spirituality and a mission. The monument leads us to remember to be the sign of a greater reality. As the Plan of Formation reminds us: "Each of us is the **living memory of Mary**, the Virgin of the Magnificat...sign and witness of the love of God for the young" (*Rooted in the Covenant*, p. 30).

Don Bosco desired the Institute to be a living monument, dynamic, pervaded by an interior tension of growth, of a power for missionary expansion. During the phase of maturation of the founding idea, he explained to Fr. Francis Cerruti, "See, the revolution uses women to do great harm and we, through them, will do great good!" (*BM*, X 600) That living monument was to have a transformative dynamism in the Church and exercise a deep influence on society through the education of the young girls.

The celebratory event of this year therefore, helps us to rediscover the joy and beauty of our vocation, that is, to be: "a response of salvation to the profound expectations of the young" (C 1). Our experience of filial affection for Mary, Mother of humanity and of the Church, becomes a call to be with Her and like Her "helpers" among the neediest young people (Cf. C 4). Only if we are rooted in Jesus can we fulfill the mission for which we were raised up by the Holy Spirit for the lives of many children, adolescents, and young people.

Certainly, Mary is "*actively present in our life and in the history of the Institute*" (C 44) and guides us as Mother and educator. Let us nourish for Her the grateful and filial affection that was so alive in Don Bosco and in Mother Mazzarello and let us endeavor to *transmit it to the young people*. Just as Don Bosco said to tell others what Mary worked in the life of the faithful, we encourage you to share in community as well as with the young people, the experience of Mary's presence in your life and in your mission.

The event we celebrate this year is an appeal to 'take Mary into your home', to re-discover her in the light of the Gospel and in the Church magisterium, *to qualify the evangelization of the young and to encourage in them adhesion to volunteer groups and to ADMA*, so that they may encounter Jesus guided by His Mother, the first disciple and the first missionary of the Gospel.

With the awareness that Marian shrines are privileged places to meet Jesus and Mary, I suggest above all this year, to promote pilgrimages for the young and the families to the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians in Turin or to Marian places accessible to your communities in the various Countries.

With renewed trust, together we invoke the special intercession of Mary for *vocations*, also for our Institute. If we make a re-reading of faith of our vocational experience, we will discover how much Mary is present and how much she helped us to discern the will of God, to be courageous in overcoming difficulties to follow Jesus. Today, she helps us to live the 'pedagogy of taking care' and of accompanying the young to discover the dream of God for their life.

## **Journeying with the young toward the Synod**

The presence of Mary, Mother of the Church, helps to keep alive in our Institute the ecclesial horizon which is characteristic of the Salesian charism. Accepting the proposal of the Synod of Bishops on *Youth, faith and vocational discernment*, we feel challenged, as bearers of an educational charism in the Church, to reawaken apostolic creativity in all the educating communities for a new vocational fruitfulness.

At the level of the universal Church, our Institute has been involved both in participation in the Preparatory Commission by a teacher of our Pontifical Faculty of Educational Sciences "Auxilium", and with the participation of Mother, some Councilors, and collaborators in the Sectors in the World Congresses and the Synod Seminars organized by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life and by the International General Superiors Union (UISG).

These meetings reflected on "horizons and hopes" regarding the relationship between Vocational Pastoral and Consecrated Life. Every pastoral action of the Church, as the Pope reminded in his message, is oriented by its nature to vocational discernment, as it helps each person to discover and realize the project of life to which God calls them.

Vocation ministry is closely related to evangelization and becomes a true itinerary of faith that leads to a personal encounter with Christ.

Aware that vocation is always a gift of God, the call and the response to this vocation can resonate and be felt only in prayer. Praying and offering for vocations presupposes, first of all, being joyously faithful to one's vocation, creating conditions and spaces in which it is possible to listen to the call of the Lord. Those who truly pray for vocations work tirelessly to create a vocational culture (*cf. Pope's message at the International Congress on the theme: Vocation Ministry and Consecrated Life, 1 December 2017*).

At the Institute level, this year the Youth Pastoral Sector, offered significant proposals to accompany the Provinces in studying the Preparatory Document of the Synod and in involving young people and educators in the Synodal event.

In the Provinces, there is a lively movement of participation in the initiatives organized in the dioceses and a commendable commitment to make the Document known and in promoting the response to the online Questionnaire among young people. We also rejoice that in some countries there are FMA who are part of the diocesan Commission in preparation for the Synod.

Through various communication channels, young people are informed about the Synod and meetings are organized to focus on the challenges and hopes of the youth world, especially regarding the experience of faith, discernment, and vocation animation.

The Synod event is taken up by the Provinces as a privileged opportunity to reawaken and consolidate the need for a vocational culture and this in collaboration with the Salesian confreres, with the various groups of the Salesian Family, with the diocesan communities, and with other religious Congregations.

The meetings with various groups of young people and lay people become moments, not only of reflection on synodal issues, but of active concretization of what Pope Francis does not cease to remind the Church: *listen to all young people, search together with them, for unimagined answers to the challenges of today, the discernment to perceive the voice of the Lord in their lives.*

The triennial evaluation of GC XXIII, which takes place during the year 2018 in the Inter-Provincial Conferences, is in harmony with the Synod of Bishops, especially because it helps us to verify our being missionaries with young people and because the Provinces will present experiences of vocational animation that are being implemented at the local and/or provincial level.

We thank you for the prayer that accompanies us constantly and we ask you to intensify it during this triennial Evaluation period.

May Mary Help of Christians guides us in this new year to insert ourselves boldly in the journey of the Church, nourishing in us the passion for life and the integral growth of young people and helps us to be creative in the mission of accompanying them to welcome the call to the joy of love and of life in fullness.

We greet you with affection, invoking upon each one of you the blessing of God and of Mary.

Rome 2 February 2018

Mother and the Council Sisters