

## *With the Young we touch the chords of life*

Dearest Sisters,

The annual appointment for the World Feast of Gratitude is an opportunity to reach you with my gratitude and to feel we are an open *family* ready to receive every event as a gift of God. In Him, we make ever more radiant our communion and our passion for the *da mihi animas cetera tolle* for the young people of the whole world.

This year, we will celebrate gratitude day on April 26, in Asunción, in St. Raphael the Archangel Province, Paraguay. *With the young we touch the chords of life* is the first part of the slogan that will be the background of the feast. There follows a second part that explains the modality: *witnessing the joy of following Jesus*. The slogan precedes the theme: *In living the response to God's call with joy and hope, we awaken the plan of God in every young person*. It is a theme that places us in full harmony with the journey of the universal Church and is in continuity with the consignment of GC XXIII. In addition, it keeps alive the awareness of the importance of vocational animation for all young people.

I thank the Provincial, Sr. Leandra Romero, and the sisters of the Province for the proposed theme and slogan. At the same time, I express my thanks for the Vicar General, Sr. Chiara Cazzuola for the letter sent to the whole Institute with the proposal of the Province of Paraguay and some concrete indications so that we can live it with a sense of belonging, especially with those who share the Salesian mission.

The Theme and slogan introduce us into the journey of the proximate Bishops' Synod and recalls the recommendations that Pope Francis addresses to consecrated life to listen to the expectations and hopes of the young. They provoke us as FMA, to make vibrate together – FMA, young people, laity – the chords of hearts that open to God's plan.

So that this may happen, our hearts must be, in their turn, touched by the beauty of following Jesus and witnessing to this choice with a fraternal life rich in light, joy, and thus, fruitful in the mission. This is the reflection that I wish to share with you.

Accomplishing in our life the message of the suggested theme is a gift that we exchange to truly say a reciprocal thank you to each other.

### **Witnesses of the beauty of vocation**

In the first encounter of Pope Francis (July 6, 2013) with the Seminarians and Novices, he affirmed: "This is the beauty of consecration: it is joy, joy". Thus, the beauty of consecration is joy and this consists in "bringing God's consolation to everyone". There is no charity in sadness, Pope Francis continued. Joy is not a useless ornament, but a need of human life. It is born from the certainty of feeling loved, from the confidence of being people who are saved, forgiven; people who have received mercy.

Therefore, the root of beauty is vocational joy; it is listening to the Word of God: "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete" (*John* 15:11), Jesus wishes this for His disciples. Sadness and fear must give way to the proclamation of joy.

To be witnesses of beauty, we must feel that we are consoled by God, loved by Him, called to console others with tenderness. Pope Francis states that there are consecrated people who are afraid of the consolations of God, of His tenderness. We must remain before Him, not as before a God who judges, but as a God-Father who looks at us with love and compassion. In calling us He says, "you are important for me", "I count on you". The beauty of vocation lies in feeling embraced by this gaze that He continues to place upon us.

We are not numbers for God, but beloved persons, to whom He entrusts a great mission: tell others that we are happy to follow His Son Jesus and that we want to share His love. He is the one who fills our heart with joy, gives fecundity to all that we are and do in His name.

To re-discover the beauty of the call of Jesus, we must go back to the memory of the moment in which we left everything to follow Him and we were ready for any sacrifice to fulfill our dream. Keeping this dream alive means living the call, that is, believing that God continues to look at us with love and relies on us.

Living our vocation fully means dilating our heart in spaces of ever wider relationships. Remembering the *call*, we find the strength to live that transformation of love that stops us from becoming 'comfortable' people. The question posed by Pope Francis in an encounter with consecrated persons challenges us: "Do you have a heart that desires something great or a heart made asleep by things, which end up atrophying it?".

*To desire* means conserving the restlessness of the search. The relationship with Jesus is nourished by this inquietude that does not leave us tranquil. The evangelical proposal of Jesus is uncomfortable. If we adapt it to our needs, it loses its authenticity and then we do not proclaim Jesus, we proclaim ourselves.

To proclaim Jesus means feeling enveloped by His love. It means being ready to change our plans, to stop saying 'we have always done it this way'. This expression is not a criterion of truth, but of commodity and, little by little, it can make us lose the freshness of the Gospel's novelty. The way of beauty that saves is the way of the Cross, even if this is not the last word. The last word is that of the Resurrection. Christ is risen: this is the great hope and also the root of our joy!

I would like each of us to ask ourselves: What am I going toward? Does my life make me happy, express vocational joy, warm fraternity, touch the heart of the young? With these questions, I also recall the conditions for vocational joy to spread around us in concentric circles: live the encounter with Jesus in prayer, in listening to the Word, in directing all that we are and have to Him, in charity towards others. Charity, nourished by a robust interior life, makes our life flourish and be the occasion for many young people to discover their vocation.

## **In the joy of fraternity**

Being witnesses to the beauty of the call is not only an individual commitment but is expressed within the community and with all those with whom we collaborate and are co-responsible with for the mission.

It is a journey that begins with love, becomes gratitude, impels toward the future, revives the dreams in each one's heart; a journey where, in the folds of daily life, with its challenges and difficulties, we discover the beauty of the gift together and find the strength to resume the journey with hope.

Pope Francis reminds us that "the joy of the Gospel fills the heart and the whole life of those who meet with Jesus. Those who let themselves be saved by Him are freed from sin, from sadness, from inner emptiness, from isolation. With Jesus Christ, joy is always born and reborn" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, n.1).

There is nothing more beautiful than a community whose members esteem each other, value each other, look benevolently at each other, help each other to witness to the Gospel of joy which, even when it is tried by hardships, misunderstandings, and failures, always characterizes our life and mission.

The young people themselves ask us: "To be witnesses of joy, happy with your vocation in daily life. So that each one of us can perceive the presence of God through your life, feel it accessible!" (Acts GC XXIII, n.16). This request is an appeal to our communities, so that they will always have the doors open and foster a *vocational culture* with their way of being.

Are we all convinced that the vocational dimension of education is the key for the vitality of the Institute and the guarantee of a future for the Church and for society?

Spreading the vocational culture is the task of all the members of the educating community, beginning with the coherence of life and the convinced assumption of the Salesian mission. Together, we can transmit the beauty of the various vocations, even in the diversity of expressions. In the people of God, every vocation is a vocation to sanctity.

Sanctity is shown in the joy that springs from a heart turned towards God. "Joy is the sign of a heart that loves God very much", Mother Mazzarello would say, and she recommended that the sisters and girls cultivate it.

Don Bosco's educational system must have deeply impacted the young Domenic Savio if he said: "Holiness consists in always being very cheerful". Cheerfulness is an unmistakable sign of a heart at peace and this tends to spread, involving young people and lay people in the mission.

In my numerous journeys and in the recent experiences of the Triennial Verification, I have noticed that in some contexts a lot has been done to involve the laity in an ever-greater educative co-responsibility understood as accompaniment of the young to discover their plan of life.

In other environments they are further sensitized to take care of the mission, to pay attention not only to the transmission of culture, but to the personal accompaniment of young people to discover the dream of God for each one. Among the various vocations, I particularly recommend making known and valued the different groups of the Salesian Family.

There are young people who are seriously motivated to live experiences of faith, of solidarity, of the gift of their life in an evangelical and Salesian style, but they do not always find good vocational accompaniment, or they do not have the courage to make the decision as a response to the call of Jesus. I repeat the importance of joyful witness to our vocation that was the gratuitous gift of God. This is the most credible and efficacious 'word' that has the power to invite, gather, and attract.

For some time now I carry in my heart some questions that I would like to share with you: do our communities allow young people to perceive a happy face, a youthful style that goes beyond age and professional skills, although these latter are necessary? Or do they appear like a work team, more than as a place of sharing, of fraternity, of joy in the common mission?

Regarding specific vocations as FMA, we ask ourselves: why does our charism, gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church, not attract young people enough to make them decide for a radical response to the call of Jesus?

I am convinced that we possess the potential to collaborate better, to make our environments real research laboratories, where together we form ourselves to be *artisans of vocational culture* and where we find the courage of the proposal, even if we are aware that it is not an easy undertaking today to dialog with "digital natives".

They are immersed and submerged in the scenarios of globalization, of relativism, of indifference. They are victims, sometimes, of a culture of waste; they live the consequences of a liquid, uncertain society, without solid foundations and therefore vulnerable. But precisely for this reason there must be released in all of us educators a strong, wise, and far-sighted initiative, an evangelical audacity similar to that experienced by our Founders.

Let us not be overcome by timidity or discouragement. "We must overcome the easy temptation - Pope Francis suggests - which leads us to think that in certain areas it is no longer possible to raise vocations. 'Nothing is impossible to God' (Lk 1: 37). Every stage of history is God's time, also ours, because His Spirit blows wherever He wants, as He wants, and when He wants (cf. Jn 3: 8). Any season can be 'Kairos' to reap the harvest (cf. Jn 4: 35-38)". (Message to the participants in the International Conference on the theme: Vocation Ministry and Consecrated Life Horizons and Hopes Rome, 1-3 December 2017).

## **We awaken God's plan in every young person**

I prayed the message of the Holy Father quoted above and in his reflections, I found new strength, encouragement, hope. I invite you to consider it as a point of reference for your sharing and choices, so as from the principles on which we generally all find ourselves, move on to action.

It is evident, underlines the Pope, that there are no magical answers regarding the pastoral care of vocations. One thing is certain: we are asked for a pastoral conversion, not only of language, but also of lifestyle, if we want to connect with young people on a journey of faith and vocational proposal. The message highlights important beliefs in which we recognize ourselves. The priority is undoubtedly prayer. The Lord says it clearly: "Pray to the master of the harvest to send laborers into his harvest" (Mt 9:38).

In this regard, I find opportune and concrete the proposal launched by the Province of Paraguay of praying in community the novena to Mary Help of Christians for vocations, accompanied by gestures of charity, especially among ourselves. It is these gestures that create the soil, the more credible *humus* for the proposal to be perceived and accepted.

It is in listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit that we can grasp some challenges, the Pope explains. First of all, *trust in the young people and trust in the Lord*.

All young people are worthy of trust, even those who in our eyes, seem distant, indifferent, resistant to any kind of proposal. Don Bosco reminds us that in the heart of every young person there is always a chord to make vibrate, a point accessible to the good.

This is true for today as well. Pope Francis stresses that many young people, even though belonging to the generation of the 'selfie', or to a culture that, more than fluid, seems 'gaseous', seek full meaning for their life, even if at times they do not look for it where they can find it. It is precisely among the young that we must express, as consecrated persons with the whole educating community, an irreplaceable attitude: stay awake to awaken young people, be centered in the Lord in order to help young people to center themselves in Him.

We are certain that Jesus continues to arouse in the People of God diverse vocations for the service of His Kingdom and asks us to be, *together*, proclaimers of the *Gospel of vocation* through a gradual and constant accompaniment of the young.

This service is a mission that distances us from possible kinds of resignation about the present and helps us to project ourselves into a future open to hope. Above all, it allows us to renew ourselves in Jesus' style of life to radiate the Gospel with our witness above all.

I leave it to you to elaborate other suggestions present in the quoted message. I pause to consider the urgency to intensify the Salesian mission as a true itinerary of faith that leads to a personal encounter with Christ, in ordinary daily life and in close relationship with the family. The theme of the family resounded with frequency in GC XXIII. The "*dream of home*", of family, of happiness, of future, and of meaning, that is present in so many young people who seek points of reference, challenges us and involves us as an educating community and as a Salesian Family (cf. *Acts GC XXIII*, No. 28).

*To be among the young, to inhabit their spaces, to make the chords of their existence vibrate, to meet their desires, to understand their sadness, and to listen even to their silences, urges us to give new impetus to the educational alliance with the family. To recognize its vocation as a generating womb, so that parents, even in situations of weakness and fragility, do not feel alone in assuming the mission*

of being the first vocational animators of their children, freeing themselves and their children from selfish perspectives, calculation, and power, many times also found in practicing families. This is what Pope Francis emphasizes.

It seems important to me, as educating communities and as Salesian Family, to put ourselves in synergy with the journey of the Church to give new vigor to the commitment of being 'family', rediscovering the beauty of the spirit that characterized Valdocco and Mornese, to the point of making these places vocational proposals open to the Church and Salesian dimension.

Connecting with the family requires us to recognize its irreplaceable mission and to support it. In fact, the family is the first environment where the vocation finds the right ground for maturation. While we believe in the value of the family and the importance of its mission, at the same time we understand the hardships and difficulties of finding ways to converge on the values to be shared for the good of the children.

It is not, however, only to find convergences along educational lines, but to offer ourselves to the younger generations, as FMA communities and as educating communities, a family environment that fosters a serene accompaniment of young people and the proposal of genuine values, of high ideals. Above all, an attractive environment, because it witnesses the beauty of fully successful lives, both in marriage and in religious life, and in other possible choices of life and service.

I make my own the final words of the message of Pope Francis that may be for all a spark: "May no one steal the joy of following Jesus Christ and the courage to offer Him to others as the way, the truth, and the life (Jn. 14: 6). Let us break our fears! The time has come for young people to dream and elders to prophesy (cf. Joel 3: 1). Let's get up! "Let's get to work" (cf. Ezra 10: 4). The young people are waiting for us. It's time to be on our way."

Mary, Mother of every vocation and Mother of the Church, accompanies us, sustains our fidelity, shares our fatigues, and our hopes. Let us entrust ourselves to her, certain that the road, sometimes difficult and tiring, is doable with her help.

I conclude by thanking you for the gift of your life and for the passion that you always revive in your heart, making the joy of the *da mihi animas cetera tolle* shine in the mission entrusted to you. A special thanks to the elderly or sick sisters. Their prayer and daily offering are for the whole Institute a precious gift that sustains the labors and joys of every day.

To all I promise my constant prayer so that, together with every young or adult person, with each family, we will succeed to *touch the chords of life* by witnessing to the joy of following Jesus.

I unite Easter greetings for you, dear sisters, for your families, for the Rector Major Fr Ángel Fernández Artime, for the Salesian Brothers and every member of the Salesian Family; for every person who collaborates in the field of education and in the proclamation of the Gospel of vocation.

With friendship and great trust, I want to reach young people. May the risen Jesus enlighten their existence and make it shine with joy and hope.

God bless you!

Rome, 24 March 2018

Your affectionate Mother