

***With gratitude we live the time
of welcome and encounter: "I entrust them to you"***

Dearest Sisters,

As every year, the World Feast of Gratitude is a beautiful opportunity to reach you and tell you a profound thank you for making increasingly visible and authentic our being a family, the way it is presented in our plan of life (cf. C 49).

A characteristic aspect of Salesian spirituality is showing true gratitude which is much more than a feeling or an emotion. It is a journey born from love which requires a humble and poor heart. It is a journey that gratefully recalls one's history, that of the community, of the Institute, of the Church, and of the reality in which we find ourselves. Celebrating the Feast of Gratitude, therefore, is a gift that comes from the Holy Spirit and that is to be discovered in all its richness so as to treasure it in the present and recognize it as light that illumines the future.

I have a dream that can become a reality with everyone's collaboration: express signs and gestures of gratitude in daily life. This enriches our personal and community life and makes us meet each other with respect and joy. It will be a marvelous weaving that will reach **Bellflower, California** where, on April 26, 2019, we will celebrate the **World Feast of Gratitude**, organized by Mary Immaculate Province in the United States. The theme chosen: *Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free* (Emma Lazarus) is taken from the writing placed at the base of the Statue of Liberty that recalls the phenomena of migration, a challenge today as well. The proposed slogan: *I entrust them to you* is in full harmony with the theme. In fact, the mandate made to Mary Domenica Mazzarello is an appeal to take care of the young women of Mornese: the poorest and those who were alone.

Both the theme and the slogan are located in harmony with the repeated and heartfelt appeals of Pope Francis to welcome *without fear*, our sisters and brothers in situations of hardship, children in difficulty and looking for a better future. As educators we cannot disregard this appeal. It is to be welcomed with the same heart that vibrated in Mornese, a condition to commit ourselves to being *communities open* to a 'new' call: *I entrust them to you*. Indeed, new is the educative passion that we want to nurture in the communities to generate *new life*. This is what I would like to emphasize in this circular, offering only a few points that I leave for each one to study and share.

I interpret all of you, dear Sisters, with my heartfelt thankyou to the Provincial Sr. Rosann Ruiz, and the sisters of the Province for their courageous proposal, full of humanity. It helps us to look with God's eyes at the *crowds journeying* toward horizons of hope and is well represented in the place chosen for the feast.

I also united my thankyou to the Vicar General, Sr. Chiara Cazzuola, for the letter sent to all the provincial communities in which she offers indications for assuming and making this journey concrete with a 'Salesian heart'. I think it is a marvelous gift to be able to share and together offer to the people, and they are many, who await being received without fear as sisters and brothers, inhabitants of the same 'common home'.

“It is I, do not be afraid”

At the meeting *Free from fear*, Pope Francis highlighted significant Biblical episodes through which God speaks to us even today. They orient and guide with the same gaze of compassion the migration phenomena that increasingly assumes planetary dimensions (Cf. Homily, February 15, 2019).

The Israelites, terrorized because they are being followed by Pharaoh’s army, are encouraged by Moses who invites the people to not be afraid because the Lord is with them: “Do not fear! Stand your ground and see the victory the Lord will win for you today” (Exodus 14: 13). In the long and tiring pilgrimage in the desert, the people of Israel are urged to *look beyond* the adversity, and not succumb to fear, but to trust fully in God’s action that always brings salvation.

Pope Francis continues, recalling the scene of the tempestuous sea, and the boat battered by the impetuous wind, putting the frightened disciples at risk to the point that they did not recognize Jesus who is walking on the water towards them. He reassures them: “Courage, it is I, do not be afraid!” (Mt. 14: 27).

They are two very current biblical references: they tell us *not to be afraid* in the face of difficult situations that can endanger our security, but to believe that fear disappears when we abandon ourselves to the presence of the Lord of history. If this were not the case, the risk of entrenching ourselves in our fragile human security and in the reassuring *routine*, it becomes inevitable for us to retreat into the narrow circle of people who are known and loved. These are attitudes, the Holy Father underlines that mark defeat, increase dread and fear especially today when we are "faced with the arrival of migrants and refugees who knock on our door in search of protection, security, and a better future".

The awareness that we are all migrants on this earth helps us to overcome fears that, however, are legitimate and based on doubts that are fully understandable from a human point of view. Fear is in those who must welcome the ‘new arrivals’ for fear that they may ‘steal’ something that has been painstakingly built; fear is also in the ‘newcomer’ who lives the non-hypothetical risk of prejudice, rejection, discrimination, failure.

Regarding this, Pope Francis says that “having doubts and fears is not a sin. The sin is letting these fears determine our response, conditioning our choices, compromising respect and generosity, fueling hatred and rejection. The sin is renouncing the encounter with the other, the encounter with the diverse, the encounter with the neighbor, which in fact is a privileged occasion for encounter with the Lord” (Homily January 14, 2018).

This is why “we need the impulse of the Spirit so as not to be paralyzed by fear and by calculations, to not habituate ourselves to walk only within safe confines” (*Gaudete et exultate*, n. 133).

This historic hour, so complex and disquieting, asks us to conquer with the strength of trust every form of fear to open ourselves to welcome and encounter. We speak a lot of this today. However, we do not want it to remain only words, slogans for the moment, or just sterile affirmations. We work and commit ourselves so that *reception and solidarity* may become a *habit*, a life orientation, a supportive and lasting mentality.

I would like our communities to ask themselves the question: how can we develop personal and community attitudes open to welcome and encounter? What choices can we make in synergy with institutions, associations, movements, ecclesial bodies at various levels so that the joy of being recognized in their dignity as children of God and of looking at life with hope and serenity may be restored to so many brothers and sisters, especially minors?

To welcome and meet the other is to meet Jesus. He himself tells us: "Truly, I say to you, all you did to one of these least brothers of mine, you did to me" (Mt 25:40). If this word of Jesus is the key to interpreting the history of our times, we should begin to thank those who give us the opportunity for encounter, that is, those who knock on the door of our heart and of our homes, giving us the

opportunity to overcome fears and dread, to welcome and meet in the person of the other, Jesus in person (cf. *Homily*, 15 February 2019).

This is not utopia, it is a mission that we live as Church, pilgriming on the earth and mother of all, with renewed missionary ardor. It is a mission-vocation that restores the joy and marvel of the feast of encounter, of sharing, and of solidarity.

Let us help each other with courage and with trust to listen to the voice of Jesus, "Behold, I am at the door and knock" (Apoc. 3: 20).

Communities open to a 'new' call

The mandate *I entrust them to you*, from Borgo Alto in Mornese, extended itself throughout the world. It crossed seas and oceans, reaching unknown lands and, year after year, as a providential 'charismatic voyage' it lands today in our very diversified land like a 'new' call: *I entrust to you* the unaccompanied minors subject to various forms of violence. *I entrust to you* the young girls and boys deprived of their dignity as persons because they are exploited and violated. *It entrust to you* the many who are persecuted by various forms of power. *I entrust to you* every person journeying toward a safer future. *It entrust to you* the many who with courage and hope face the precarity of the unknown destinations to ensure their children a better life. And thus many more that you, dear sisters, can add, strong with the experience that challenges you every day and that you face with courage, but also with understandable doubts and difficulties.

I invite you to re-read the encouraging pages of the Cronistoria that tell how our Institute, since its origins, *made itself a migrant among migrants*. Let us remember the missionary expedition of 1877 which saw young, simple, inexperienced sisters, but rich in the passion of the *da mihi animas cetera tolle* breathed deeply in Mornese. They left for unknown lands sustained by a single purpose, supported by the indications of Don Bosco: to protect and accompany Italian migrants in America in order to keep them firm in their faith, rooted in their cultural identity, and open to welcome the fatigue and riches of new realities.

Our Founders, with the imagination and creativity of charity, were able to respond to the needs of so many brothers and sisters of their time without measuring fatigue and sacrifices.

As then, even today, the epochal phenomenon of migration challenges our conscience. We cannot ignore the cry of suffering humanity that asks for acceptance and willingness for encounter. With an open mind, I confess that I feel in this phenomenon, not only a sign of the times, but above all a call from God that speaks to us and tells us that something new is being born.

I am sure that no one intends to take refuge in the culture of indifference or the habits to which the media are training us but is committed to finding the profound reasons for multiplying gestures and spaces of humanity for those in need.

In this regard, it is worth recalling the appeal that Pope Francis made at the Angelus of 6 September 2015 and which still resonates in our hearts: "Faced with the tragedy of tens of thousands of refugees fleeing death due to war and hunger, and traveling towards the hope of life, the Gospel calls us, asks us to be 'near' to the smallest and most abandoned, to give them concrete hope...Christian hope is combative, with the tenacity of those who go towards a safe destination. Therefore...I appeal to the parishes, religious communities, monasteries, and shrines throughout Europe to express the concreteness of the Gospel and welcome a family of refugees".

The Pope's appeal was followed by an explicit invitation from me to the Institute, in which I urged "finding a way of coordinating action in synergy with competent persons and authorities. Everything stimulates us to make concrete gestures to welcome a family of migrants or unaccompanied minors, young people, mothers with children. The poor cannot wait! " (cf. *Letter to the Superior of the Vice Province and the Provincials*, 8 September 2015).

In many Provinces I found a profound echo of solidarity, which resulted in sustainable and shared choices. I sincerely thank you for what has been done in different ways and according to your possibilities. However, I think we can and should do more, certainly not in the line of welfare, but of justice and the educational proposal.

Perhaps in many of you the question may arise: "What does Mother mean by this 'doing more'?" The answer comes to us from the sisters of the United States who suggest as a first step: *to create greater sensitivity to the situations of the world, educating ourselves first and then others to the challenges of the poorest and most vulnerable*. I think this is a good starting point for a peaceful sharing on our lifestyle, on our efforts *to welcome and to meet each other* in order to 'learn' *to welcome and meet* those in need.

I dwell on the expression: "ourselves first and then ...".

The culture of encounter and welcome is an essential characteristic of the Salesian charism that was recalled by Pope Francis in the unforgettable meeting with the Chapter members on November 8, 2014 when he invited us to "broaden our vision".

In the numerous conversations I had with you in different parts of the world, I perceived in many communities a profound desire for authentic encounters, where the sharing of hopes and efforts is possible because everyone feels welcomed in the truth of her being, understood in her fragility, in her weaknesses without considering them a 'threat' to the tranquility of living together. It is comforting when gifts and various spiritual and apostolic experiences are shared and are valued for the path of growth in communion. And it is evangelical to recognize that we all have a great need for mercy!

I understand that it is not always easy to give quality to our encounters. They require a profound life of faith and a strong apostolic passion in the spirit of the *da mihi animas*, united with the *cetera tolle* (cf. C 6). I have encountered community realities of great human and Christian depth that have already set out on this steep but happy road with courage, without fear and dread! Their strength? Prayer, love of the Word, personal encounter with Jesus, openness to the new appeals of the mission expressed in gestures of humanity and solidarity. He alone can transform our heart into a place of encounter, of listening, of sincere welcome, and help us scrutinize with a 'contemplative gaze' the engaging and complex scenario of this world of ours.

Let us ask ourselves: are we available, according to our possibilities, to respond to the new appeals that come to us from sisters and brothers in need? Do we believe that only by living a constant and profound communion with the Lord Jesus can our communities become places *of welcome, of encounter, of genuine listening*? Are we convinced that we cannot presume to open ourselves to those who are 'far' if we did not first get involved in the life and needs of those who are 'close'?

With great confidence I entrust these questions to you in the certainty that you will know how to translate them into choices shared with those, especially the young people, who believe that this is a favorable time to open horizons of the future for those who have a burning need for hope.

... to generate new life together

Our educating communities, faithful to the charism that animates them, are called to be prophetic so as to be generators of life and of new life. It is under everyone's eyes that the phenomena caused by political and economic interests disfigure, mortify, and destroy the dreams of so many minors subjected to new forms of slavery: girls and children who are prostituted or recruited into pornography, slaves of inhuman work, enlisted in drug trafficking, forced to flee their land because they were persecuted, at risk because they find themselves alone and abandoned. No one must steal the future from those who look to the horizon of life with hope.

These are situations that burn up the future of too many innocents, of the 'voiceless' who have the inalienable right to 'be children', to grow up in a peaceful family atmosphere; to have an adequate education that makes them mature as persons and protagonists of their own future and of their Nation (cf. Pope Francis, *Message for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees*, 15 January 2017).

How to respond to this reality?

GC XXIII had questioned itself about these phenomena which were already emerging at the time and had stressed the importance of networking on behalf of migrants, inviting them to connect as a community with the different groups of the Salesian Family and with civil and ecclesial institutions to collaborate on projects that promote the prevention of this problem and the accompaniment of migrants, with particular attention to children, young people, and women, also through the formation of international communities capable of taking on this delicate and urgent service (cf. Acts GC XXIII, n. 66:10 ; n. 70).

I warmly thank those who have committed themselves to giving substance to this appeal. There are realities (communities and families) that, without making a fuss and with an evangelical heart, have opened the doors of their home, overcoming mistrust and bureaucracy, responding to the dreams and expectations of so many children who, more than anything else, need a family that welcomes them. These are answers that become a *prophecy of humanity* in a society that, to this day, presents considerable difficulties for inclusion.

My heart feels the compelling need for the globalization of solidarity and tenderness to continue to extend without delay finding space in our educating communities open to welcoming migrants, poor and fragile people, women and girls in difficulty, so that everyone can find acceptance, attention, affection and thus have the opportunity to look to the future with hope (Cf. *Letter of Convocation of General Chapter XXIV*). Aware of what this path entails, I hope that in all educating communities the certainty that holiness can shine today in the extent that we welcome the ‘cry’ for help and hope of those who are ‘voiceless’ and who touch our consciences deeply. Then we will be able to say that we have lived the time of gratitude as an Institute in the joy of solidarity received and given.

A special thanks goes to the elderly or sick sisters for being a precious support with their daily offering and prayer. I feel in deep communion with you, dear sisters, and with every person open to live with gratitude the time of *acceptance* and *encounter*, letting the mandate resound in daily life: *I entrust them to you!* The Family of Nazareth, who lived the experience of emigration, accompanies us and keeps alive in us the awareness of regarding ourselves migrants with migrants.

On the occasion of the World Feast of Gratitude, I thank each of you, each community, the laity, the young people, each group of the Salesian Family for their gift that makes the charism flourish throughout the world. Together we have enormous potential thanks to the Holy Spirit who continues to regenerate us to bring new life to the poorest young people. My intense joy at this time would be to receive a large number of new missionaries, willing to give their lives unconditionally where the Holy Spirit sends them.

Many young people in many parts of the world are waiting for us, and thus I need you! I count on each one committed to the assiduous cultivation of the vocational culture with a missionary heart! I thank you in advance for your generous response and I am sure you will give it to me!

I conclude by wishing a Happy Easter to you, your families, the Rector Major Fr. Ángel Fernández Artime, the Salesian Confreres, and the members of the Salesian Family. In a special way, I wish to reach all the people who collaborate with us in giving hope and trust to the young in every part of the world. And for these young people I reserve an embrace of friendship and deep affection joined to the wish that the ‘new’ times may arrive for them rich with God’s blessings.

May the Risen Lord be your strength and your joy!
Rome, March 24, 2019

Affectionately, Mother