

With Mary Help of Christians Our Lady of difficult times

Dearest Sisters,

We are still in the climate of Easter lived in solidarity this year with the whole human family so painfully tried by the *coronavirus*. We have felt close and we still are, to those who were stricken with the virus and among them, also some of our sisters in Italy and Spain, to those who take care of them according to their competence, to the families, the numerous young volunteers who make themselves available with their time and energies, their creativity and courage to bring relief and comfort. We are in communion with all those who have reached Heaven and who now enjoy the fullness of Easter. This has been for us an Easter of deep faith, of essentiality, and of solidarity lived 'at home', but with the heart opened wide to the entire world.

We are living the experience of 'remaining' in the heart of contemporaneity, as the theme of GC XXIV emphasizes, within our possibilities, accepting the 'present darkness' that covers the whole world, but at the same time, glimpsing the light of the Resurrection. The upsetting revolution, the news of this time of God - the *Kairós* - is that the Risen Jesus is alive and is for everyone the true and only hope. We are convinced that a bud of new life is about to bloom. To discover it, our whole being must 'remain' waiting, alert, ready to welcome the newness that will ask us to be reborn.

The unexpected situation of these recent months has impeded the realization of the World Feast of Gratitude as it was planned. However, I can say that the journey of preparation for 26 April was still intense on the part of all of you, of the educating communities, and of the many people involved in the educative mission in the various sectors. What is important is to transform every instant of our existence into a joyous hymn of adoration and praise (Cf. C 8).

From the many messages that have reached me, and for which I am very grateful, I have noticed that the *tree of life* has blossomed, that it is flourishing with good fruit thanks to the deep roots of the charism, to our docility in remaining grafted onto Christ, to the participation, the sense of belonging, to the many gestures of solidarity offered in the family spirit.

I entrust my thank you to Mary, asking her to bring it with the tenderness of her Motherly heart. She has been the vigilant and active presence in these months of preparation for the feast and will continue to be so. She accompanies us on the journey and helps us to be enterprising in looking 'beyond' and witnessing to an unwavering trust in God's fidelity.

With the faith of Don Bosco and of Mother Mazzarello, we are certain that Mary is a constant presence, attentive and considerate, above all during this time of emergency. She sustains us, comforts us, gives us hope! In these months we are closed in our houses, and she is here with us, the Mother who reassures us and helps us to remain open, to be creative in reaching in various ways, the young people and the people who walk with us in the mission.

This is why I chose the theme of this Circular: "**With Mary Help of Christians.**" I am convinced that *looking* at Her, *receiving* Her in our home will fill us with hope and make us feel close, Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, lay adults, and young people, to the sufferings and needs of humanity.

With Mary in an unprecedented time in history

The reality we are living and that worries us for the present and the future, brings us back to the trust and faith of Don Bosco in Mary Help of Christians. Our Founder always turned to her in the certainty that the Mother grants the necessary graces to her children and even obtains miracles.

It is moving to remember the words pronounced in that distant 1862 to Fr. John Cagliero, “Our Lady wants us to honor her with the title of Mary Help of Christians. The present times are so sad that we really need the Most Holy Virgin to help us to conserve and defend the Christian faith” (*MB* VII, 334). In various circumstances, Don Bosco suggests invoking her by praying the Novena as an irresistible means in the certainty that Mary intervenes efficaciously in the history of humanity redeemed by Jesus. Mary is the ‘Mother of the Church’ and as such is present. We must be convinced of this in the depths of our heart and make her ‘work’. She who is active and caring, will not cease to help us and sustain us.

There were sad times yesterday and difficult times today. In this hard trial, we all have the possibility of praying more, of approaching calmly the Word of God to face the situation with the heart of a believer. We are called to live with Mary and like Mary, this page of history, internalizing the stages of her life, certainly not easy, lived in fidelity to the requests of God, and thus rediscover her attitude of hope, to penetrate events with the same faith that accompanied her to her supreme ‘yes’, when she exclaimed, “How is this possible?”.

What is happening now raises strong questions: "Why? Has God forgotten his people? " "Has He failed to fulfill His promises?" No, God has not forgotten His people! This is the time of faith, it is the time to believe that even if it is still dark around us, the dawn is slowly advancing.

Pope Francis recognizes that the drama of the pandemic has crumbled many certainties, but Jesus says to each one, “Courage. Open your heart to my love. You will feel the consolation of God who sustains you” (Homily of Palm Sunday, 5 April 2020).

During these days, it is not difficult for me to contemplate Mary alongside her suffering people. Hers is a presence wrapped in silence, but rich in a universal maternity that knows how to love with a humble heart, able to understand the hard trial of this time because she herself, at the foot of the Cross, was touched by suffering, by the loss of what was dearest to her. Today as well, Jesus gives His Mother to all of us. “Woman, here are your children. The face of my passion is in them. To all of them you can say that Easter has erupted into history. This is why hope does not falter. It continues to shine and to give new light to this unexpected time. The time of tears will end and the song of Alleluia will resound once more.”

Yes, dear Sisters, we can and we must witness to the hope that something new will be born, but nothing will be as it was before. It is one of the phrases that is heard repeated in this period and it is an unknown factor that deeply affects us also as educators. We are disconcerted, but not discouraged; restless, but not crushed; surprised, but not disappointed. Indeed, we wish to collaborate with young men and women in the birth of a new world, what the Spirit is about to generate.

To the question if it is possible to speak of hope in this mysterious ‘Saturday of silence’ that all of humanity is living, Pope Francis responds, “The women go to the tomb at dawn. There the angel tells them, ‘*Do not be afraid*. He is not here; He is risen.’ Before a tomb they hear words of life...And then they meet Jesus, the author of hope who confirms the message and says, ‘Do not be afraid’. *Do not fear, do not be afraid. This is the message of hope*. It is addressed to us today! These are the words that God repeats in the night we are living. On that Saturday, Our Lady prays and hopes. In the challenge of suffering, she confides in the Lord. On that Holy Saturday, a fundamental right is acquired, *the right to hope*” (Homily of the Easter Vigil, 11 April 2020).

We are called to courageously proclaim this conviction of faith both among us and to those we are able to reach. It is a gift from Heaven, which puts a certainty into the heart: God knows how to turn everything to good, because even from the grave He brings out life.

We welcome Pope Francis' invitation to be *women of hope* in our communities: "We don't give in to resignation, we don't place a stone on hope. We can and must hope, because God is faithful. He did not leave us alone, He visited us: He came to our every situation, in pain, in anguish, in death. His light illumined the darkness of the tomb: today it wants to reach the darkest corners of life. Sister, brother, even if you buried hope in your heart, don't give up: God is greater. Darkness and death don't have the last word. Courage, with God nothing is lost "(Homily cited above).

Mary is there on that ‘Saturday of silence’: pray and hope! With her we want to open paths of hope that no one and nothing can steal from us.

With Mary open roads of hope

“Let us be aware of Mary’s presence in our lives and entrust ourselves entirely to her” (C 4).

As in Cana, Mary sees the urgencies of humanity, realizes the delicate moment that we are experiencing, and with solicitude is beside us, invites us to a believer’s understanding of reality, urges us to have courage in decisions, to be solicitous like her to fill the ‘empty jars’ with ‘the good wine’ of hope (cf. *Circular In Preparation for General Chapter XXIV*).

Dear sisters, I believe that in everyone there is the desire, the personal and community commitment, to take Mary into our ‘home’ and with her exercise the ‘therapy of hope’ so much needed today; to be sparks that warm the hearts of the nearest sisters, the young people, and all the people we meet and, ‘virtually’, those scattered across the five continents; small lights of hope that reach the poorest, those who are suffering heavily from the situation created with the *coronavirus*.

In a moment of prayer, invoking the Holy Spirit, I asked myself how our Institute, each of us, can be an Easter message, to prepare a new tomorrow that is already here today. We all met the Risen Jesus and something changed within us. I give you these brief reflections that are the result of many encounters re-read in the light of the moment we are living. I share them with the affection and trust I have for each of you.

- The haste that dominated our days has given way to a time in which to pray more calmly, to listen to God who speaks to us, to share his Word that feeds fraternity and transforms the isolation into which we are forced, to a space of sincere communion, perhaps re-conquered. Undoubtedly a tiring time, but full of unprecedented challenges.

History is the teacher of life! May we not let this opportunity escape us to grasp the beauty of the essential, to rediscover the value of moderation that helps us to live a sense of right measure in all we do and consume. Think of the many families that today suffer solitude, do not have the necessities of life, and suffer hunger. Let us thank Providence for what is given to us and, if necessary, let us distance from us any kind of claims, of dissatisfaction, and share with those who have less than us with a generous heart.

This is the time for a renewed journey of conversion of the heart (cf. C 46 & 101), to grow in charity according to the spirit of the Gospel. The heart is our field of conversion and we must begin and continually begin again to rediscover the value of our being together, based not so much on doing and on projects, although necessary, but on relationships filled by God’s presence that is tenderness, mercy, forgiveness, a wealth of humanity and creativity proper to love.

- The unheard of situation we are facing, and that sometimes weighs on us, is an invitation to a different way with better quality to relate among ourselves, to take joy in little things, to make our best selves emerge, spreading gestures of real humanity in gratuity. It is time to rediscover the beauty of affection, of tenderness given even with only a glance that, at times, is worth much more than many words. It is a time to nourish the daring of the *da mihi animas cetera tolle* finding creative ways to reach the young entrusted to us, to experience the joy of saying thank you sincerely, for the gift the others are for us, even when our days are tiresome. I think that when we lose the sense of gratitude, we also lose the freshness of love, the love that we draw each day in the Eucharist where our heart encounters the Heart of Christ Himself (cf. C 40 & 49).

- To find the ‘courage’ to look ahead’. It is not easy to think about ‘after’ the world crisis provoked by Covid-19. Pope Francis, through gestures and messages, and with realism, is accompanying all of humanity, believers and non-believers, to convert their way of living to a way that is more human and fraternal.

In a recent interview on the present emergency, he responded by offering precise indications on how to face the 'after'. For me and I think it can be for all of you as well, his words are the object of reflection and meditation.

From his expressions there transpires a certainty that from this epochal crisis there is the possibility of a real transformation. It is the message of hope that we wish to take from his heart as father and pastor. The Pope explains that 'care for the future' is important, which even in the uncertainty of this moment, asks us to give space for the creativity that only the Holy Spirit is able to arouse. It is the creativity of the Christian that must be expressed in opening new horizons, in opening self towards God and towards every person. This is not easy when we are closed in at home, but it prepares us for better times. "Take care of yourselves for the future that will come," says the Pope. He then refers to pastoral conversion, to that of the economy and of ecology, to a Church that is increasingly more missionary and flexible.

He speaks of the tragedy that deprives young people of the wisdom of the elderly and the elderly of the future energies of young people. To the question: "What do you want to say to young people?", The Pope replies: "Have the courage to look ahead and be prophets. Your prophecy is reflected in the dream of the elderly" (cf. Antonio Spadaro. Commentary on the interview by the British journalist Austen Ivereigh: *Pope Francis and the coronavirus crisis. The courage to look ahead*, 8 April 2020).

“Youth, I say to you, arise”

The choice of theme for the 35th World Youth Day (WYD): *Youth, I say to you, arise*, today takes on particular significance due to the pandemic that hit the entire human family. If we re-read the spiritual path proposed to young people for the next WYD, it surprises us how God makes Himself present and prepares young people themselves to become missionaries of hope, enterprising in dreaming of a difficult but possible future. They are the brave explorers called to work for a better tomorrow, now feared because unknown. They are the sentinels of the morning announcing the dawn to come, as Saint John Paul II called them. It is a demanding 'pilgrimage' that presents itself, all uphill, but which surprisingly, step by step, makes them meet with Mary and with her "get up and go quickly" where need calls.

Youth, I say to you, arise (WYD 2020); *Arise! I make you a witness to what you have seen!* (WYD 2021); *Mary got up and went quickly* (intercontinental WYD at Lisbon 2023). The three stages are joined by the verb "to arise" which expresses attention to what happens and readiness to respond to it. It pushes us to go where God calls to 'awaken life', to be signs of resurrection.

In preparation for the Lisbon meeting, Pope Francis explains his choice to the young people: "For the two years preceding it, I invite you to meditate on the passages: Young man, I say to you, arise! I make you a witness of the things you have seen! [...]. Do not ignore the voice of God that urges you to get up and follow the paths that He has prepared for you. Like Mary and with her, be the bearers of His joy and love every day."

The message for WYD 2020 that I urge you, dear sisters, to consider, is a significant *lectio divina*, on a scene where Jesus encounters a funeral procession. A widowed mother who accompanies her only son to burial (cf. Lk 7: 13-14). Jesus sees pain and death, has mercy, approaches and 'touches'. Finally he says to the young man: "arise" and life is reborn!

The Pope invites young people to identify with this reality, unfortunately present also today, and to take action: "Yes, you young people too can approach the reality of pain and death that you encounter, you can touch them and generate life like Jesus [...]. If you feel within the heartbreaking tenderness of God for every living creature, especially for your hungry, thirsty, sick, naked, imprisoned brother and sister, then you can get closer like Him, touch like Him, and pass on His life to your friends who are dead inside, who suffer and have lost faith and hope."

It is a strong appeal because, writes the Pope: "If you know how to cry with those who cry, you will be truly happy, you will be bearers of hope in this world. You can say to your brother and sister: 'Get up, you're not alone'."

In this time of the pandemic, the young are called to avoid becoming resigned, to not stay on the sofa, but to be daring, to communicate through the means of communication messages of resurrection, of life, and of salvation that Jesus continues to bring today. In other words, he asks them to take care of others, to put themselves at the service of those who have no voice to ask for help. The way of 'service' is the one closest to Jesus, who today is suffering in many children, young people, adults, and families.

"Look, says the Pope, at the *real heroes* who come to light in these days: they are not those who have fame, money, and success, but those who give the best of themselves to serve others, and you will gain! Because life is a gift that is received by giving oneself. And because the greatest joy is to say yes to love, without ifs and without buts" (Homily on Palm Sunday and XXXV World Youth Day, 5 April 2020).

These are words that challenge us too, our educating communities, every person who in this time suffers and feels the weight of uncertainty for tomorrow. I feel them as a pressing invitation to believe in the possibilities of so many young people willing to "arise"; to put us in full harmony and closeness, for now not physical, with those who wish to 'illumine the future' and 'contagion with hope' every corner of the world and thus be in the Church, the 'today of God'. Let us entrust this hour of suffering to Mary and let her be the one to keep the gaze of our heart open to the dawn of the new day. May she keep alive in everyone the certainty that this experience can transform the present into a future of more solidarity, more fraternity, a more human and Christian face.

I am close to you and I thank you, dear Sisters, for the sense of responsibility in scrupulously observing the norms indicated, thus avoiding possible risks of contagion. I share with you the discomfort of not being able to carry out the normal educational activities, of not having direct contact with the children, young people, and families. It is a distance that can make our closeness stronger with everyone and asks us to share the joy and the hope of the Resurrection of Jesus.

I thank you for your creativity in overcoming difficulties and for your resourcefulness in inventing new ways for the mission, to express solidarity, to 'go out to encounter' in spite of the material closure. Thank you for believing in the future!

I am happy to share with the whole Institute, the blessing of Pope Francis I received on the occasion of the audience he granted me on 14 March 2020. I assured him of our daily prayers for all his intentions, our fidelity to his magisterium, and our love for the Church. The Pope emphasized the importance of the missionary spirit of the Institute.

Allow me to remind you that I am impatiently but trustfully waiting for the arrival of the missionary requests of the Sisters who feel called by Jesus to the mission *ad gentes*. The needs are many and the Institute grows when it shares its necessary resources for the needs of the poorest. This is the story of our origins!

I invoke on each of you, on the educating communities, on all the young people, on the members of the Salesian Family, on the whole of humanity, the blessing of God and the maternal presence of Mary Help of Christians, which we will celebrate on May 24 in communion with the whole Salesian Family and with China whose special protector she is.

Rome, April 24, 2020

Affectionately, Mother