

Stir into flame the gift of God that you have
(2 Tim 1:6)

Dearest Sisters,

We are living a time of openness to the surprises of God manifested in history. On May 31, we invited the Institute and you received the Circular that announced the new convocation of General Chapter XXIV. It was a choice matured in prayer and in discernment together with the sisters of the Council and made necessary because of the pandemic provoked by the coronavirus.

Through online contact and the communications we have been able to accomplish at this time made a strong new hope rise in me. I felt myself in continuous and deep communion with our entire family living in this world. The fatigues, doubts, fears, worries, the impossibility of responding adequately to the new emergencies did not paralyze you, but confirmed in you, in the laity, in the young, the certainty that something new can in fact be born from the new energies that have been shown! The resonances I have received, led me to believe that this is a favorable time *to stir into flame the gift of God that we have* and to witness it *precisely today* with trust and with perspectives open to the future. This gift of God is in each of us, in the Institute, in the young people!

The choice of the theme for this circular wishes to be a simple response to what vibrates in all hearts ready to let themselves be *formed* in the heart of contemporaneity by the concrete situations of life. *To stir into flame the gift of God that we have* asks us to assume with new passion the *formation journey* as a space where the Holy Spirit acts, renews, re-creates, breathes where He will and how He will. He is the 'active and transformative presence' in us, in the educating communities, in the young. He is the 'Formator' par excellence who nourishes, sustains, and revives the joy of fidelity to the gift of our Christian vocation and daring in the mission as Salesian consecrated women.

A favorable time to stir into flame the gift of God that is in us

This unprecedented time of human history, crossed by a serious environmental, ethical, economic, existential crisis, and now aggravated by the experience of the pandemic, poses questions on 'what to do', how to act, which prospects are opening before us. Above all, we are invited to discern who we are and who we are called to be. Immersed in this complex scenario of contemporary society, with renewed faith we are certain that the Lord is present with His Spirit. This is the only true strength, to believe in His presence that is the gift to recognize and receive as the condition to revive hope in us and around us. The Holy Spirit chooses us as His collaborators. We are invited to deepen the sense of this call.

Are the preoccupations and difficulties that we are facing illumined and sustained by this certainty? Are they the object of our sharing, also with lay adults and young people? This is the mission that is asked of us today. To disregard it would be to betray the expectations, very often unexpressed, of brothers and sisters, especially of the younger generations to whom we must pay maximum attention. I am aware that it is not an easy task. At times, there can prevail discouragement, a kind of skepticism about the future that awaits us, or an anesthetized attitude, as Pope Francis often underlines. We are many who confirm that in a lot of people, and even young people, there is the impelling need to hear a 'voice' of hope witnessed by a closeness and a listening pervaded by exquisite humanity.

Religious life has grasped in these months a great call for closeness, for the nearness of people. The Spirit needs our docile, active, constant, creative participation. This can be the concrete way to revive the gift of God that is in us, keeping lit with daring, without fear, His fire that burns in the heart of all of humankind and that perhaps in this moment, risks to weaken, and in some cases, to become extinguished. I remember the cry of a young woman, in the name of many others, at an Assembly of consecrated life, “You have a huge fire in your heart, strong, able to inflame the whole world. We have a small, fragile flame in us. Help us with your fire to not let the little flame that is in us go out!”

The word of Paul to Timothy, that I chose as the title of this Circular, is a motive for reflection to penetrate our ‘life’, not as a time destined for decadence, but as the possibility of new life, the one that flows from the Spirit who is Love. Paul writes at a difficult time for the Church and for his own personal life. It is in this context that he says to Timothy, “*Stir into flame the gift of God that you have.*”

All the communities and each of us are walking with a sense of responsibility towards GC XXIV that proposes “a new style of formation, more docile to the Holy Spirit ‘*that gradually guides us to configuration to Christ*’ attentive to the person and rooted in concrete reality” (*Circular 985*). This is the time to open our heart’s door and let the fire of the Spirit invade our existence, be free to act without putting conditions and impediments. It is a prerequisite for the gift that is in us to take on new light and make the truth of life shine at this particular time in history that involves us all.

A continuous journey of formation

In these days I have received comforting messages that show how something new is maturing in us and in the life of the young people. I share some expressions, “Truly at this time, new things are sprouting forth, hidden from the human eye and alive in the mystery of God. We have understood that we have to do something concrete for the young in vocational search, give priority to the formation of these young people.” Another message reads, “Those who organize these meetings are young people... they want them and it is wonderful when they want young people from other backgrounds and situations to get to know us. And young people don't care about age: this is another discovery that I keep making.”

These are expressions that highlight how everything in life is an occasion for formation and growth. Sometimes it is the young themselves who tell us in a way that perhaps is not immediately understandable, “Revive the gift of vocation that God has placed in you; the light that emanates from your life makes us curious, attracts us, questions us, it sets our quiet life in motion.” We are aware that there are young people who are indifferent, apathetic, even hostile and rebellious before some demanding proposals, but there are many others who are waiting to meet a “consecrated life that makes them think.” We must believe that “the young are waiting for those who know how to propose life styles that are authentically evangelical and journeys of initiation to the great values of human and Christian life” (*Circular 985*).

Is there in us and in our communities the desire to radiate in a concrete way and with joy, the gift of the beauty of our vocation? It can happen that tiredness, disappointments, frustrations, difficulties of various kinds lead to forms of retreat into ourselves, individualism, discouragement or pursuit of protagonism, overshadowing the beauty of the call. This asks us to respond to the Father who has chosen us with love and who in Christ consecrates us, gathers us, and sends us and, with the grace of the Holy Spirit, follow Him in His mission of salvation (cf. C 8).

The reason that unites us at every age of life, in the diversity of cultures and backgrounds, is to follow Jesus unconditionally, love Him by welcoming the needs of the Paschal Mystery with faith,

proclaim Him with the freshness of the 'first yes', despite the inevitable concerns of daily life, tiring relationships, frailties, weaknesses, ever new and sometimes even discouraging apostolic needs. This happened in Mornese, but the *art of reviving the gift of God* lived in fidelity and in response to the needs of the mission won over everything. We can say that in that blessed 'holy land' where we were born, gratitude and wonder for the gift received were at home

The time we are given to live is full of unknowns, challenges, and opportunities, as we have already said. It is up to us to empower it and convert it into an hour of grace, a true *Kairòs* in which we can perceive the 'whisper of the Spirit' who speaks to the hearts of everyone.

A call that today emerges over others is *formation* as the indispensable condition for renewal and missionary fruitfulness, as is specified in the Circular of Convocation of GC XXIV that in turn, recalls the *FMA Formation Plan*.

For New Wine in New Wineskins is the title of the Document of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life that we know well. It is an invitation for today more than ever, to form ourselves to become 'new wineskins' to collect the 'good wine' of the miracle of Jesus at Cana. Basically in the Institute, it is the quality of formation of the Daughter of Mary Help of Christians and also of the laity and the young people.

In numerous personal and community meetings I have often been told of the need for a more solid formation at all levels to avoid the risk of superficiality and carelessness in the educational mission that is entrusted to us and to 'keep pace' with the journey of history. Formation is a gradual process that involves us personally and at all ages. Each is the protagonist of her own formative journey. The Constitutions clearly remind us of this: "Each of us has the primary and most direct responsibility for our personal formation" (C 80). This means "*letting ourselves be shaped by everyday life*, by our brothers and sisters, by ordinary and extraordinary things, by prayer as well as by the educational mission, in joy and suffering, until the moment of death" (*Circular 985*).

Dearest Sisters, I thank you because I know that you are walking on this road with love, seriousness, and openness to the challenges of our times, but I also know the inevitable fatigue. I wish to underline here some aspects that can help us to keep our gaze fixed on the goal.

Formation asks *to be docile* and open to the living and transforming presence of the Holy Spirit. In this perspective, I highlight the importance of *faithfulness to the life of prayer*. It is the privileged space for a deep and intimate experience of communion with Jesus, with His Word that shapes our life and guides our every choice. I understand that sometimes there are reasons why we neglect it, giving precedence to 'things to do' that we consider most urgent. But the mission that involves us, and sometimes overwhelms us, requires that we feed the fire so that it does not go out.

Each day, do I reserve a space of time for personal prayer and defend it from other choices, albeit good ones, but which should not always have priority? Do I create in myself the internal and external conditions to ardently desire the encounter with the Lord in the Eucharist, in His Word, in sacramental life, and in His many calls?

Prayer thus understood shapes and transforms us, because it shapes our life according to the Spirit, is the source of missionary audacity, and supports the capacity for discernment in order to be able to elaborate new answers to the problems of today's world (cf. *Consecrated Life*, n. 73).

Furthermore, each day we have ever new possibilities for formation and self-formation within the community which "is a place of formation for all" (C 101). Hence the importance of *caring for community relationships* lived in the family spirit, the creative outpouring of Don Bosco's heart that requires the commitment of everyone (cf. C 50). The community is the 'theological place' where we express charity in the style proper to the charism. How many times have I heard it said to me: "Mother, we must love each other and show it among ourselves and around us." I reflect a lot on this need which is founded on the Word of Jesus: "Love one another as I have loved you! By this everyone will know that you are my disciples" (Jn 13:35). When we love each other in this perspective, there the beauty of the Gospel shines, there is the joy of rekindling together the gift that

unites us: the call of Jesus to serve Him in the person of the poorest young people, in synergy with those who spend life for their happiness in this particular historical time; there our communities are formed to become the "fruitful womb of new vocations", as we invoke every day in preparation for GC XXIV.

What steps do I think I can take to make the community a place of life for all, especially for the young people? The holiness that we receive as a gift and that we are called to cultivate is not only personal holiness, but it is also community holiness.

In this part of the circular I have kept in mind the recent Document of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life: *The gift of fidelity. The joy of perseverance. Manete in dilectione mea* (Jn 15: 9), which I advise you to study for a coherent journey attentive to the challenges that are posed to consecrated life today.

To be a response to the challenges of contemporaneity and to the needs of the mission, *formation must be qualified and solid and also cultural* (cf. *Circular 985*). The present context, as I have already said, places us before a complex reality rich in challenges and unprecedented possibilities. It asks us on our part and that of the educating communities, a capacity for critical and objective reading of events to integrate their meaning both in the specific vocational experience as well as in the common mission.

For this reason, priority must be given to the commitment to self-formation, study, and cultural updating where we find time and space for the choice to cultivate educational and professional competence in continuous dialogue with the socio-cultural reality. Competence is a never-ending journey and in our vocation as educators, Salesian holiness includes professional quality, the formation of persons capable of guiding young people in their integral growth. Collaboration, working in synergy with adult and young lay people, with other educational institutions is a laboratory of continuous growth in humanity and of evangelical witness.

More than learning of ideas, although necessary, formation is an experience that penetrates life, nourishes the spirit, offers opportunities for evaluation, regenerates the quality of daily relationships, and enables a more effective and incisive educational service. It involves all seasons of life and keeps the passion of the *da mihi animas cetera tolle* alive in the heart of each one. By vocation we are all educators at all ages and in any situation. How many sisters I meet who testify to the joy of being educators to their last breath!

I appeal to the Provincials to promote the formation of the Sisters in the Sciences of Education, in catechetics, in communication, in the management of the works, and in teaching that are indispensable today for the quality of the mission in the Institute, but also to respond to the calls of the Church. Formation must have priority in the Province choices, with a forward-looking vision and a planning mentality.

The formation journey is implemented in various ways and in specific environments that have as their goal that of elaborating a culture and the transmission of knowledge in an organic way in response to current needs. One of these places is the Pontifical Faculty of the Sciences of Education *Auxilium* where there is the assurance of a cultural formation in response to the integral education of the young and of the religious of other Congregations, as well as those of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. We are preparing to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Faculty and with a grateful heart, I mark its fitting commemoration.

A special Jubilee: "With Mary for a culture of life"

On June 27, we mark fifty years since the canonical erection of the Pontifical Faculty of the Science of Education *Auxilium* by the Congregation for Catholic Education. As Superior General and Deputy Grand Chancellor, I wish to express deep gratitude, on behalf of the whole Institute, to all those who during this time committed themselves with dedication and professionalism to fostering development and quality for this Institution; to those who, with differentiated tasks,

contributed to the construction of the academic community through a precious contribution of culture, creativity, love, and wisdom.

Special thanks to the Church which, through the Congregation for Catholic Education, gave confidence to the Institute, recognizing and supporting the first and only Pontifical Faculty directed by women, with the specialty of research in the Sciences of Education and with the possibility to confer academic degrees on behalf of the Holy See.

Remembering this jubilee is an occasion to celebrate the ‘wonders’ that God has worked using humble, but available instruments for His action.

It is also an opportunity to raise the song of the *Magnificat* with Mary Help of Christians, the special Patroness of the Faculty, who is present as a guide towards ever new formative goals

Revisiting the past fifty years, I can affirm with satisfaction that there is in the Faculty a passionate line of continuity, of fidelity to the Magisterium of the Church, to the charism of the Institute, to the challenges posed by the world of youth, through the study of the Sciences of Education, networking with other Institutions. From the beginning, the Faculty knew how to wager with competence and with a prophetic gaze on the potential of the woman, during times unthinkable for the woman herself, and believed in her real possibilities to make a positive impact on history, in an intercultural and inter-disciplinary horizon, at times also with fatigue and difficulty.

We are aware that cultural formation is an indispensable condition for educational action, especially today. The service that is still offered by the *Auxilium* presents this goal of a clear charismatic matrix and is the motive for continual formation for those who intend to acquire competence and to explore the great questions of life, and find possible responses from a scientific and existential point of view.

The Faculty is a living part of the Institute. For this reason, every Province and Preprovince is called to feel it as ‘their own’, concretely contributing in the ways possible, for the development of its *mission-vocation*, appreciating more and more the opportunity to form in it the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and the members of the Educating Communities, adults, and young people.

In my trips to various parts of the world, I have been able to meet sisters and lay people who manage educational works with love for the charism and with pedagogical competence, thanks to the cultural preparation received at the *Auxilium*, and I recognize this with gratitude.

Effectively, the Faculty is a real ‘pedagogical laboratory’ where the talent to educate is cultivated *elaborating with Mary a culture of life* permeated by the integral pedagogical humanism of St. John Bosco and of St. Mary Domenica Mazzarello with a broad international scope.

On this occasion, I invite all the Provinces who have young people in formation, to send some sisters to the *Auxilium* each year, so that they may continue to radiate in the Institute the experience of an intercultural formation in the specific field of the Sciences of Education, which is very important for the development of the charism.

I interpret all of you, dear sisters, in expressing to the *Auxilium* Faculty the wish that, in this time of cultural transition and precariousness due to the pandemic caused by Covid-19, you will continue with renewed passion to achieve the mission that the Church and the Institute entrust to you.

May the Sacred Heart of Jesus that we celebrate this month, give us the joy of reviving the gift of God that is in us. May He bless you!

As Mother Mazzarello loved to repeat: Dear sisters, let's meet in the Heart of Jesus (cf. Letter 17,2). There we all meet and in Him we find the graces we need for ourselves and for the world.

Rome, June 24, 2020

Affectionately, Mother