

Time of trust and hope

Dearest Sisters,

We are happy to reach you in this plenum period begun last December, to express our closeness to you in a time marked by challenges, unprecedented opportunities, and by much hope. The journey of the Church and of the Institute has not stopped and we ourselves have been able to see the miracles of solidarity, of creativity, of courage, and of active charity in the educational mission to continue to take care of the people the Lord entrusts to us.

In many Provinces, the virus contagion has struck many sisters and in various communities the suffering of seeing some of them die has often left us in silence, in the most absolute solitude. We are living and sharing this experience with our families as well, with the Educating Communities, with the Dioceses, and with other Religious Congregations. In the hard trial of the pandemic, the Institute is seeking to discover the presence and action of God who, with the infinite love of a Father, does not abandon us. He calls us to renew our trust and hope in Him and in the great human family, to express nearness through concrete gestures in favor of the neediest above all.

As the Pope reminds us, “We have become aware that we are in the same boat, all fragile and disoriented, but at the same time, important and necessary, all called to row together, all needing to comfort each other. We are all...in this boat” (Pope Francis, 27 March 2020).

Seeds of hope

We find in all the Provinces and Educating Communities multiple actions of solidarity. Everywhere there is an attempt to respond to the health, social, and educational emergency of the pandemic by implementing new strategies, gestures of closeness to children, young people, families, especially the poorest and most abandoned.

Nor has the evangelizing mission been interrupted. Rather, it finds new spaces and original ways for the spread of the Gospel, for prayer, for the various Liturgical and Salesian Feasts, thus strengthening the sense of belonging that cannot now be expressed with physical presence.

The digital divide gives us a greater perception of the poverty due to the difficulty, in some contexts, of accessing current communication technologies. In its complexity, the reality urges us to better the quality of the structures and of the instruments, and the appropriate formation to acquire the required competencies. From the educational point of view, we cannot ignore the problem of the children and young people who can no longer endure, even psychologically, this lengthy online permanence and of those who are exposed to various dangers on the internet.

In a concrete and unprecedented way, we are living the mandate “*I entrust them to you*” that marks the second year of preparation for the 150th anniversary of the foundation of the Institute. Numerous Sisters, lay people, young people, Salesian Past Pupils, Cooperators have shown great courage in meeting the needs of the communities that are suffering the most and are greatly tried by the coronavirus, by natural calamities, and by complex situations at the political and social levels.

Sprouts of new life

We desire to discover with you the sprouts of new life as well, which are blossoming in our Institute, like the new buds on the tree branches. After a journey of discernment and of reflection, the three Conferences of Europe and the Middle East have been unified in one large Interprovincial Conference

(CIME: Interprovincial Conference Middle East-Europe), that wishes to be a prophetic sign of unity. The Conference embraces 3 Continents, 28 Countries, 20 Provinces, and 2 Preprovinces.

The Interprovincial Conference of Brazil has also been re-configured. After a synodal journey of seven years, on 2 February it officially celebrated their beginning as three new Provinces: “Mother Mazzarello” with its See at Belo Horizonte, “Our Lady of Aparecida” with its See at São Paulo, “Our Lady of the Amazon” with its See at Manaus. “Mary Help of Christians” Province with its See at Recife continues its journey after having shared the whole process of Reconfiguration of the Brazilian Provinces.

It is comforting to note that in the month of January, the Institute was enriched by the celebration of Religious Professions and of entrances into the Novitiate of young women, a sign of hope for the present and future of the charism.

The missionary ardor of our origins that has distinguished the various epochs, even during the World Wars, continues to manifest its fecundity even in this time of the pandemic. An additional sign of new life was the bestowal of the Crucifixes on eight new-missionaries on 1 February at the central See of the Salesians, a charismatic place that recalls the presence of Don Bosco in Rome and his commitment of obedience to the Pope. We are awaiting the requests of many future new-missionaries in this year of 2021!

The celebration of the 30th edition of the Salesian Family Spirituality Days, lived online for the first time, involved thousands of people who felt united, even though distant geographically, in belonging to the great Family founded by Don Bosco for the good of the young people of the whole world. In fact, listening to the voices of the young people belonging to the Salesian Youth Movement of the five continents was significant. They told us how they keep hope alive in the difficult situations that they face each day. In addition, the experience of professional formation lived by the young people who frequent the FMA educational works of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, evidenced how the creativity of our sisters contributes to give hope and dignity to the new generations.

Pope Francis continues to sow trust with prophetic words and gestures, and to believe that a different world is possible. The *Global Educational Pact*, launched on 15 October 2020, is the expression of a renewed season of commitment that involves all the components of society, aware that “the seed of hope dwells in education”. Responding to the call of the Pope, the Institute finds itself fully involved in this great covenant starting precisely from the educational charism of our Founders.

In the actual complex context, Pope Francis does not only address to the Church, but to the whole world, the call for universal fraternity as a new frontier of humanity. He recalled on 4 February, 2021 on the occasion of the celebration of the first *International Day of Human Fraternity*: “Today there is no time for indifference. We cannot wash our hands of it, with distance, with disregard, with disinterest. Either we are brothers and sisters, if I may, or everything collapses. It is the frontier. The frontier on which we have to build; it is the challenge of our century; it is the challenge of our times... We are brothers and sisters, born of one and the same Father. With different cultures and traditions, but all brothers and sisters. And it is in respect of our different cultures and traditions, of our different citizenships, that this fraternity needs to be built. Not by negotiating it”.

Continuing the journey in discernment

The work of Mother and the General Council during these months was strongly characterized by *discernment*. We sought new and involving ways of animation and accompaniment of the Provinces by inhabiting the digital world and creating networks of proximity.

The General Councilors, in online format, have also reached the communities, the Sisters, and the Provinces to guide the discernment in view of the nomination of 21 Provincials.

The *Working Document* of GC XXIV was studied more deeply by the Chapter members and by the Educating Communities who let themselves be questioned by the proposed theme in the light of the situation being lived in the various realities because of Covid-19.

In online format, Mother is meeting the Interprovincial Conferences, together with some Councilors, to share the synthesis of the pre-chapter work, a precious contribution for the next General Chapter. With the same format, we have been able to accomplish the formation meeting for the 14 new Provincials belonging to 4 continents, which took place on 18-29 January 2021. It was an enriching experience, lived in joy, with responsibility and a sense of belonging to a large Family.

Guided by St. Joseph

The year of St. Joseph, indicted by the Pope through the Apostolic Letter “*Patris corde*”, is in the Institute a sign of hope which helps us to renew our love for this great Patron, icon of tenderness, of taking care, of listening, of obedience, of acceptance, of creative courage, and protector in difficult historical times. “*Each of us can discover in Joseph, the man who goes unnoticed, a daily, discreet and hidden presence, an intercessor, a support and a guide in times of trouble*” (*Patris corde*).

The Year of the Family will begin on the next feast of St. Joseph and will end on 26 June 2022, on the occasion of the X World Meeting of Families. With the Year of the Family, the five years since the Apostolic Exhortation “*Amoris laetitia*” will be celebrated, with an appropriate study of its content.

As the Pope reminds us, “It is good to reflect on the fact that the Son of God wanted to be in need of the warmth of a family, like all children. Precisely for this reason, because it is Jesus’ family, the family of Nazareth is the model family, in which all families of the world can find their sure point of reference and sure inspiration”. (*Angelus*, 27 December 2020).

From the charismatic point of view, it is interesting to highlight how at Mornese and then at Nizza, St. Joseph was a continuous and constant presence in the daily life of the first communities. He was invoked as the economer of the house, protector of the works, and custodian of the spiritual life. Mother Mazzarello recommended devotion to him and “wanted prayers to St. Joseph to have a particular aim to be obtained from him, that our house be freed from any subjects not suitable for religious life, or of those among the students who were not edifying for their companions. Many times we had the opportunity to see the effectiveness of these particular prayers addressed to St. Joseph” (Maccono, *Saint M. Domenica Mazzarello*, vol. 1, 308-309).

We therefore invite you to re-read the numerous references to the active presence of St. Joseph from the very beginning of our history in the Cronaca of the Institute and in the biographies of our first sisters. We propose a popular prayer, albeit with some adaptations, which according to tradition Mother Mazzarello and the first FMA addressed with confidence to the Patron Saint.

“Saint Joseph, my favorite, come to my house I am waiting for you! Come and see, you know what is missing. Bring what is missing! And, if there is something not good for my house, come and take it away!” (San Giuseppe, mio prediletto, vieni in casa mia che ti aspetto! Vieni e vedi, quello che manca tu lo sai! Vieni e guarda, quello che manca portalo! E, se c’è qualcosa che non va per casa mia, vieni e portala via!)

We wish you an active Lenten journey accompanied by the Lord Jesus, who loves us and continues to give His life for us and for the world. May Mary Help of Christians support us in the commitment to spread hope, especially among young people and the people whom the Lord entrusts to us.

Our affectionate greetings

Rome, 11 February 2021

Mother and the Sisters of the Council