

Contagion the joy of fidelity

Remain in my love

(Jn 15:9)

Dearest Sisters,

After attentive listening to the call of God in the time we are living at the ecclesial, social, and Institute level, I thought to dedicate this circular to the beauty and the value of *fidelity*. I wish to confirm in you the will to 'contagion' the joy of the Covenant of love with God that, in full freedom, we have accepted and is the essential part of our consecrated life. The two circulars: *Radiate the joy of vocation* (cf. Circular 991) and *Contagion the joy of fidelity* are in close continuity because vocation and fidelity are two indivisible and inseparable aspects!

It is in this perspective that I share what I feel in my heart and that I cannot silence. Fidelity is the expression of God's gratuitous love and is an experience that is so intimate and deep that it urges us to give a total and exclusive response, consecrating everything to Him, present, future, and *forever*! Fidelity becomes a lifestyle expressed in joy and that makes us ready to embrace the demands of the Paschal Mystery with faith, with renewed hope, in the certainty that the *yes forever* finds meaning and radiance here.

As an Institute, we are living a favorable time of preparation for GC XXIV and the celebration of the 150th anniversary of its foundation. These are two events charged with a special grace. A time in which the Holy Spirit and the presence of Mary Help of Christians accompany us to 'revisit' our experience of fidelity with sincere listening to Jesus who tells us: "Remain in my love". *To remain* is the invitation to respond fully and unconditionally to His call and to make our life *love-service*, taking care of those who live next to us and those entrusted to us by charism.

Today, more than ever, there is need for fidelity and we are aware of how important it is to recognize it in a society that tends to lose this value and where, very often, culture is dominated by the fragment, the provisional, the speed of change causing uncertainty, disorientation, disappointment. These are elements that can also affect consecrated life, our life, weakening its fundamental motivation and making its meaning opaque in the Church and in society.

The Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life published a new Document on February 2, 2020: *"The gift of fidelity, the joy of perseverance"*. It contains Guidelines which offer, in this regard, a broad vision of the situation of fidelity in consecrated life today and proposes some formative indications. Indications that we are called to read in close relationship with our charismatic identity, with the knowledge of very diversified realities on a world level. Indeed, we are all summoned by a call of predilection that awaits a response of joyful fidelity, at a time when fidelity is put to the test.

With our religious profession, we have entered into "the covenant of love that God made with Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello and which continues to be lived out in the fidelity of our Congregation" (C 9). God is faithful and in Him personal and community fidelity finds consistency and strength to face doubts, hardships, and new challenges.

The fidelity of God is our ‘rock’

God is the faithful one par excellence and His fidelity is an expression of His fatherly goodness which, even in the face of the infidelity of His people, knows how to wait patiently and does not stop loving despite everything. He is the ‘rock’, a sign of His immutable fidelity to His promises. The whole history of salvation is nothing more than a narration of this unshakable covenant between God and His people, between God and creation, between God and the entire human family. He will never betray His covenant, indeed, with infinite love and mercy He assumes human sin in Himself so that we can return as soon as possible to be faithful to Him in the freedom that forgiveness returns to us (cf. Document, n. 24).

In the prophet Hosea we find the beautiful and evocative image of marriage, a sign of God's tenacious love for His people: "I will make you my bride forever, [...] in love and benevolence, I will make you my bride in faithfulness and you will know the Lord" (*Hosea* 2: 21-22). The fragility and infidelity of Israel do not scratch the ‘rock’ of God's faithfulness which, as the Psalmist sings: "Good is the Lord, his love is forever, his faithfulness from generation to generation" (*Psalms* 99).

There are wonderful pages in Sacred Scripture that document God's will to want to remain in relationship and recover it at any cost after the infidelity of His people, until the coming of Jesus in whom the Father's fidelity is fully manifested.

Jesus is the faithful witness (cf. *Rev* 1:5), the icon of fidelity. In Him all the promises of God are fulfilled (cf. *2 Cor* 1:20). With His willingness to live the Father's will unconditionally He teaches us *how and when* to be faithful to His Word. "We cannot win this fidelity with our strength, it is not only the fruit of our daily commitment; it comes from God and is founded on the ‘yes’ of Christ, who affirms: ‘my food is to do the will of the Father’ (cf. *Jn* 4:34). It is into this “yes” that we must enter [...] in order to affirm with Saint Paul that it is not we who live, but Christ Himself who lives in us” (Document, n. 25).

Looking at Jesus, we cannot withdraw when God, in His saving plan, asks us to give everything of ourselves: mind and heart, will, decision, and willingness to say our ‘yes’ to Him, and He does so with immeasurable confidence, certain that, even in our frailties, we want to be *faithful to Him out of love*. It is in this encounter between His fidelity and ours that the path of fruitfulness opens up before us and it is here that the true happiness we all yearn for resides.

We are aware that this fidelity is not cheap, far from it! Lived as a *martyrdom of love* in everyday life, we experience peaceful, beautiful moments and others that are dark, tiring. Pope Francis, with realism and concreteness, recommends that we *always persevere, remembering* the happy moments of encounter with the Lord, where everything was bright, and he invites us to look continually to Him with hope even in moments of temptation and fragility (cf. Pope Francis, Meditation “Santa Marta”, 1 February 2019).

Mary remains for us a model of life lived totally in fidelity. Her ‘yes’ said in Nazareth grew in a response of love to the foot of the cross and made universal by the Holy Spirit received with the Apostles in prayer (cf. *Acts* 1: 12-14).

She knows how important it is to make Jesus' mandate our own: "Abide in my love", a love that He not only has and gives, but which is! *Remain*: "here lies the strength of the vocation of the consecrated person" (Francis, *The strength of vocation*, p. 44)

Fidelity a gift to share

It is not easy today to speak of fidelity which is a gift and a challenge to be faced day by day as individuals and as a community. I am aware that this is precisely the favorable time to look together at our way of living the precious gift that the Lord offers us continuously and share it in the community at the service of a common mission. We are called to be of mutual support among ourselves, but also with the laity and young people for the vocational growth of each member of the community.

In the numerous encounters I have had with many of you in recent years, from the knowledge of personal and community situations, I have noticed that there is everywhere a deep desire for authenticity, fidelity, commitment to cultivate one's life so that it is more and more a response of gratuitous, courageous, joyful love. At the same time there are situations that sometimes weaken the fidelity of the sisters, making them lose the motivation of 'why' and 'for Whom' we gave our life. Then our ability to take care of each other and ourselves is called upon in the style of the family spirit that must characterize each of our communities (cf. C 50).

Every day we experience that the strength of fidelity does not come first of all from us, but comes from welcoming Jesus, from letting Him enter the room of our heart until we conform ourselves to Him, becoming a living memory of His way of being and acting.

Fidelity means placing oneself at the school of the Holy Spirit who is creativity, novelty, openness to ever new horizons. It is not immobility, fixed, but a journey that requires knowing how to look at one's own experience as consecrated persons with realism and objectivity, without closing one's eyes to the onset of problems or critical issues that may be signs of a precarious fidelity or the drift toward infidelity (cf. Document, n. 4).

This is possible, dear sisters, only by entrusting ourselves to the action of the Holy Spirit who maintains in us the charm of a choice of life that is certainly demanding, but also beautiful because it is a free gift of God's love which He has reserved for us from eternity.

It is the Spirit of God who pushes us to walk forward looking to the roots and dreaming of the future. He is like the potter who, little by little, shapes our life (cf. *Jer* 18: 2), but we must let Him act freely and invoke Him when we feel that something in us is cooling: emotions, feelings, relationships. It is He who keeps the fire burning of fidelity towards God, the sisters, the young, the mission.

There are many articles in our Constitutions that speak of fidelity. We are invited to take them in hand again. Significant is article 10 which concerns our profession of fidelity to God. It is like a *return to our first love*, rediscovering that mysterious and true spark that made us answer 'yes' to Jesus' call and that we want to live up to in the fullness of love until our last day. This is how Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello lived and this is how we too want to 'spend' our lives.

It is this love that makes us strong and courageous witnesses in a historical time particularly marked by uncertainties, fragility, and precariousness due to the pandemic that has upset the life of humanity and which lies ahead of us with the unknowns about 'how will tomorrow be?', 'what possibilities will we have to carry out our mission?'

I can confirm that, in this regard, I receive comforting testimonies from individual sisters and educating communities who, precisely in this unprecedented hour, express an unexpected creativity, a strength to react in solidarity, a communion of purpose with the Church and with various institutions to give hope, promote processes for the good, and encourage a path of inclusion for all, especially for the most disadvantaged.

With emotion I interpret this creative dynamism in solidarity as an expression of fidelity to God, to history, to the call to be a sign of life, to be generative in contemporaneity, to put "new wine in new wineskins". This is the face of fidelity for today!

We are not sailing in easy times and I am aware that difficulties and hardships can emerge in our communities that put a strain on the joy of consecration and, at times, even perseverance. With the heart of a mother I allow myself to share some conditions so that our being faithful today may be a response of unconditional love to God and to the mission lived in the spirit of the *da mihi animas* always accompanied by the *cetera tolle*. I entrust them to you, dear sisters, certain that you will know how to welcome them with an open heart, willing to dialogue on what can be useful for you to live your 'yes' to Jesus in fidelity.

- *Persevering in prayer.* On many occasions I have stressed the importance of fidelity to personal and community prayer, reserving the best moments of the day for it. Listening to and meditating daily on the Word of God, sacramental life, personal and spontaneous encounters with Jesus, praying the daily rosary regenerate our heart, strengthen the life of faith, and are light in moments of difficulty and fragility, also vocational. How can we think of being faithful to Jesus' requests for love if He is not the center of our heart? The Constitutions, our life project, invite us to give space to the Holy Spirit who "leads us gradually to put on Christ, strengthens sisterly communion, and renews apostolic zeal" (C 39).
- *Fraternal life the place of perseverance.* "We are all mutually responsible and *guardians* of our brothers and sisters, especially the weakest ones, because we are "gathered in Christ as one particular family" and the bonds of fraternity must be cultivated with honesty to create reciprocal help so everyone can fulfill their own vocation" (Document, n. 99). Our Constitutions clearly trace the face of the family spirit, "Don Bosco's creative force" and present essential aspects that involve us in creating the climate of the home, in being a welcoming home. It is well known that certain abandonments of the vocation are often due to difficulties in community relations, to conflicts not always recognized in time and therefore difficult to resolve, to totalizing and self-referential apostolic services, to emotional or other fragilities. All of us, especially in delicate situations, are called to form communities *rich in humanity*, places of welcome, *accompaniment*, and *discernment* so that the community becomes a space for the elaboration of limitations and support for the fidelity of all. Each person has a face, a story that only God knows and that invokes understanding, cordial help in moments of tiredness, suffering, trial. It is not always easy to cultivate these attitudes, but how many sisters I meet who in their daily experiences rediscover the educational and regenerating value of fraternal love that knows how to give trust, that encourages, that knows how to forgive, give hope, and express the joy of giving, a sign of the will to create communion, to begin again, to "remain in love". Let us ask ourselves: do I feel responsible for the fidelity of my sisters? Do I know how to share with them the joy of an ever-growing fidelity that never tires of getting up after each fall? Joy, says Pope Francis, is the engine of perseverance; it is the joy of bringing God's consolation to everyone; it is true joy that infects and moves forward (cf. Pope Francis, Meeting with Seminarians, 8-9 July 2013, quoted in Document, n. 44).

I thank you for welcoming this sharing on *prayer and fraternal life* with confidence, the same one I have in all of you young sisters and sisters with more years of fidelity. To all I say *the future of the Institute* is founded on the certainty of God's fidelity which sustains our perseverance and, moreover, that the mandate "I entrust them to you" finds its splendor and its fruitfulness in the daily 'yes' lived in community and in the mission entrusted to us.

Fidelity to the mission

The joy of fidelity to God shared in a community necessarily radiates in the mission as a privileged space for networking with today's young people in the spirit that our Founders transmitted to us: the *da mihi animas cetera tolle*. This is not a habitual slogan, but a mandate that is made daily to keep the fire of passion burning for the salvation of young people to our last breath.

How I would like our life to be an explosion of love for the mission in this time of grace that our religious family is experiencing! Let us remember that everything begins in the Covenant of love with Him and is nourished in prayer, which is the source of fruitfulness in the mission (cf. *Circular 1000*).

Let us allow ourselves to be challenged by that "I entrust them to you" to 'make way' with the young people who in this particular time of pandemic, despite real difficulties and precariousness, hope that something new is sprouting. Many adults, with an abundance of sociological analysis and interpretations, speak of young people by often highlighting fragility, inconstancy, irresponsibility, but perhaps few speak to young people recognizing that there is 'something good and new' in them. There are many cries for help from young people in all countries of the world. How do we try to listen to them, interpret them, and seek answers, making the most of the resources of the young people themselves?

It is our commitment, certainly with the modalities imposed by the pandemic, to be close, to shorten distances with creativity, so that their loneliness does not become isolation and dispersion, but the desire to take risks, to keep the 'construction site of life and hope' open in the drama of everyday life.

Our presence must vibrate with an ardent love, new every day, as courageous as that of Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello, especially towards children, young people, the most disadvantaged families tried by various forms of poverty. Not alone, but as educating communities, we have an enormous potential to educate the hearts of the new generations to *desire* through the *mysticism of closeness*, seeking their true good. Together, adults and young people, in a network with the Church and with educational institutions in the area, it is possible to find the right path, the appropriate language to 'get closer' "not as an obligation, not as a burden that exhausts us, but as a personal choice that fills us with joy and gives us identity" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 269).

The words of Pope Francis in the homily of WYD in Panama are alive in our memory when he emphasizes that one of the fruits of the Synod on young people was the richness of meeting and listening between generations, the recognition of the need for each other, to strive together to favor channels and spaces in which to involve ourselves in dreaming and building tomorrow starting today. With full conviction, the Pope says: "You are not the future of God: you young people are *the now of God*! He calls you, He calls you in your communities, He calls you in your cities to go in search of grandparents, of adults; to stand up and speak with them and realize the dream the Lord has dreamed for you". (*Homily*, January 27, 2019).

I feel current, more than ever, the words of the Holy Father in this time that we are facing with suffering, with organizational efforts to adapt environments and educational proposals in response to the restrictions of Covid-19. If at times you feel a little discouraged, invoke the Holy Spirit with faith and insistence. It is He who helps us to overcome the difficulties inherent in our limitations to strengthen communion, to create the ever more necessary synergy to fight the virus of individualism, to choose the path of TOGETHER, to live a true conversion that transforms life.

Being faithful to the mission is the great joy that prompts us to proclaim, without timidity and perplexity, not only to young people, but also among ourselves and to the people we meet, that today: "*Christ lives. He is our **hope** and the most beautiful youth in this world. Everything He touches becomes young, becomes new, is filled with life. Therefore, the first words I want to address to each young Christian are: He lives and wants you alive!*" (*Christus vivit*, n.1).

Mary, who with faithfulness to her 'yes' believed in God's promises at every stage of her life, walks with us and teaches us to participate actively, *with* young people and *for* them, in this *now* of God with a loving, confident, enterprising heart in the firm hope that He is the unshakable 'rock' that nothing and no one can scratch!

I would like to thank you for all the responses that reached me about the various Circulars, including Circular No. 1000! It is beautiful to note that the Lord touches the heart of each one through the message they need at this moment. Your reflections are a stimulus for me to pray and to accompany the whole Institute.

God bless you and the Archangels, whom we celebrate this month, protect us and keep our gaze always turned towards the Sun of our life: Jesus!

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