

Dearest Sisters,

On 26 December at the Generalate, we had the joy of having with us the Rector Major, Fr. Ángel Fernández Artime, who presented to us with deep human sensitivity and Salesian wisdom Strenna 2021. I regard as a gift the 'presence' of Don Bosco's Successor during a time in which, due to the Coronavirus Pandemic, meetings and relationships are almost exclusively online.

I thank Fr. Ángel, also on behalf of all of you, for having given us the first fruits of the presentation of the Strenna with a very significant, current, and important theme in this period of severe trial, of uncertainties, of fear due to the spread of the contagion and its sad consequences and also, for so much suffering caused by other calamities around the world. A situation that as believers, as Institute, and as Salesian Family we are experiencing in profound solidarity with the whole world. The harder the trial that the world society is facing, the more hope must shine with a new light. The Holy Spirit inspired Fr. Ángel to choose a theme that releases an exciting propelling power and which is for everyone a gift to be accepted from God and a challenge to be faced with evangelical courage and a Salesian heart: never alone, but together!

This is the wording of the theme:

Moved by hope:
"Behold, I make all things new." (Rev 21:5)

The Strenna is a call for the Salesian Family to let itself be 'moved' by hope: the most beautiful gift that can be given to us, because we all have extreme need of it, especially at this time.

In his Encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, Pope Francis reminds us that hope, "speaks to us of something deeply rooted in every human heart, independently of our circumstances and historical conditioning... Hope is bold; it can look beyond personal convenience, the petty securities and compensations which limit our horizon, and it can open us up to grand ideals that make life more beautiful and worthwhile" (*Fratelli tutti*, 55).

Despite the hardships and difficulties we experience everywhere, we are called to 'contagion' with hope, without letting ourselves be captured by the doubt of whether it is appropriate or possible today to proclaim it, not only with words, but with concrete choices. I think this is a perplexity that can arise in each of us, in our educating communities, among people who live the challenges of the present, young people and adults.

The Rector Major clarifies that the hope we are talking about is not superficial optimism, nor the human security that derives from illusory promises, as emerges in the mentality of the world, but it is the Christian hope that is based on faith in God and that nothing and no one can steal from us.

It is an interior dynamism that comes from the Holy Spirit, the only one who can set our whole being in motion to guard this 'precious pearl' and find the most appropriate way to share it. Hope is a wonderful gift from God that is part of the mystery and, as such, it develops, grows, expands, becomes an enormous potential for good if we believe that it must be witnessed to in this time and in the concrete situation we are experiencing.

Studying the Strenna in depth will help us to become more aware and to make it the motive for growth in faith, in hope, in love: three theological virtues that cannot exist separately. They live in harmony and walk together.

It is surprising to discover how, through the action of the Holy Spirit and through our readiness to let ourselves be formed by Him, we can ‘make it be seen’ that it is possible today to hope and to proclaim that the God of Jesus Christ is present, that He never abandons His people. His love as our Father is not indifferent to the tears of suffering on the face of His daughters and sons.

As Salesian Family with the energy that comes from the charism, we have the possibility to give a Gospel response to the various unprecedented emergencies, to write in humility, with creativity and resourcefulness, a new page of salvation, even in the awareness of our fragility and of our weakness. Together we can recognize in the events of daily life the signs of *new life* that are budding, and proclaim with joy, above all to the young people, that even in adverse situations, life is stronger than death; “See, I am doing something new! Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” (*Is* 43:19).

Our Founder was brilliant and courageous, Fr. Ángel underlines, in extremely precarious and difficult situations. He managed to make young people understand that in God a new Spring can be born in which, thanks to Him, hope can shine again, and that a world without God is a world that slowly buries hope until it is erased from human existence.

We can say the same of Mornese, where hope blossomed from situations of poverty and grew to the point of bringing signs of resurrection, opening horizons of the future in many young women destined to remain closed in narrow confines, at times, even humiliating.

When we refer to the experience of Don Bosco and of Mother Mazzarello, our ‘teachers’ of life, we become aware that hope is a plant with deep roots that come from afar, roots that grow robust through difficult seasons and journeys that require a lot of sacrifice. It is precisely in difficult situations that the young people can be educated to ‘inhabit’ hope and to make it shine around them, bringing the light of Christ, and generating new life in other young people!

This is the story of ‘our home’ that finds a beautiful and fruitful continuity in the present. In addition to our Founders, the Strenna also cites some other witnesses like them, who ‘hoped against all hope’, and who encourage us as well to be in the Church and in the world today, ‘capable of living it and giving it’. I think we can add our names to the list, even if many times our actions are discrete and humble.

I allow myself to share the joy I feel when I receive news from the communities present in the various areas of the world, willing to get involved, sometimes even risking their life, to bring help to those in need, to those who live in solitude, to those who no longer have any reasons to hope for better times. They are communities that make radical choices of moderation in favor of poor families, giving them emergency aid, together with a smile, a serene look, and a discrete word full of affection and sincere understanding.

And with them, many young people and adults are experiencing the beauty of solidarity without measuring time, effort, giving something of themselves to relieve others in difficulty, not only as providers of social services, but heralds, bearers of the light of Christ, the only true hope of world! The creativity with which we are living the educational mission in this historical moment is a great source of hope. Education is, par excellence, a sign and path of hope!

This ‘going’, ‘reaching out’, ‘being present in solidarity’ is truly transforming the lifestyle of our educating communities, opening roads of humanization and new fraternity, according to what Pope Francis suggests in *Fratelli tutti*.

We read in the Strenna that the time of trial is the time of choices. In this regard, Fr Ángel announces some proposals accompanied respectively by feasible commitments to be a Salesian Family that bears witness to hope.

I invite you to make it the object of sharing, assuming the proposal or proposals most suited to your real situation and your possibilities. All are equally important and are inter-related. Most of them refer to Benedict XVI's encyclical note: *Spes salvi* of 2007.

Among the various commitments suggested, I wish to highlight the importance of fidelity to prayer lived as a 'school of hope' that is helpful especially in times of difficulty and confusion, and is an opportunity to 'let ourselves be educated by God' as communities: Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, adults, and young people. Prayers of thanksgiving and of praise also nourish our hope and sustain trust in the love of the Lord who guides history.

I also emphasize hope as a gift from God which, starting from our poverty, makes us privilege the poorest, the excluded, and the forgotten young people in our educative-evangelizing action. We were born for them; the poor are part of our *dna* and, as the Rector Major reiterated: "If we lose the poor the charism dies". I am sure this will not happen and I thank you for the courageous choices you are currently making for those in need.

Together we are in agreement to make seeds of new life germinate in the hearts of the many young people God entrusts to us through the precious 'treasure' that has been given to us as a charism: education.

The emergency that we are experiencing due to Covid-19, and which is causing so much suffering and an unprecedented social crisis, highlights even more the centrality of education as a guarantee of the future and the need to build networks and synergies starting with the Salesian Family.

"Education is always an act of hope": this is how the Holy Father introduced himself in the video message sent in December 2020 to the Symposium for the launch of Mission 4.7 and the *Global Compact on Education* he wanted and which I invite you to view. Quality education, Pope Francis specified, is the indispensable prerequisite for all to protect our common home and promote human fraternity.

We welcome the Strenna, which is placed within the horizon of Pope Francis' magisterium as a renewed call to be communities in the Church and in the Salesian Family that radiate hope, which the world urgently needs and which is a typical characteristic of the Salesian educational charism. In fact, there is no education without hope, because to educate is to sow a good seed that will not only grow in the future, but which already bears fruit today for the good of the entire human family. May our self-giving and our smile always be a small light that enkindles hope, as a sign of the Lord's presence in us.

I end by assuring the Rector Major of our commitment to live with the young people and with the educating communities, the proposal he has offered us with so much passion.

I invoke with you the maternal presence of Mary, Mother of hope, to bless the whole Salesian Family, especially Fr. Ángel who is its animator and center of unity.

May the year 2021 be for everyone and especially for you, dear Sisters, for the educating communities, for the young people, and for your families a time of renewed hope, of serenity, of health, of concrete solidarity toward every sister and brother with the love and mercy that Jesus places in your heart.

May the blessing of the Lord sustain you in hope!

Rome, 1 January 2021

Affectionately, Mother