

A “Special” year with St. Joseph

Dearest Sisters,

With great joy I entrust to you the circular which has as its protagonist Saint Joseph in this “special” year dedicated to him.

We want to be in tune with Pope Francis who, on 8 December 2020, gave us the Apostolic Letter *Patris corde* on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the declaration of St. Joseph as Patron of the Catholic Church, made by Blessed Pius IX on 8 December 1870.

In the Letter, the Pope shares his reflections on this “extraordinary figure” very close to the human condition of all of us. It is a desire matured in these months of pandemic, which sees ‘ordinary people’ devote their lives and professionalism to taking care of those who suffer in this time of crisis.

Patris corde is also addressed to each of us and is an opportunity to revisit, if needed, the mission of St. Joseph, the privileged place he occupied in our first communities, and to remember with gratitude that Don Bosco gave him as Patron to our Institute. Therefore, it is a joy to be able to ‘meet him face to face’, especially to go in depth in his ability to *take care*, which is an important characteristic for our life and for the mission that, as educating communities, we are called to carry out in the Church and in society.

On 19 March, in communion with the universal Church and with the whole Institute, we will celebrate the Solemnity of St. Joseph. It is to him that we want to entrust Pope Francis on the anniversary of his Petrine ministry, 19 March 2013 - 19 March 2021.

These years were illumined by a fruitful Magisterium given to the Church and to the entire human family with faith, love, and evangelical courage.

I invite you to welcome and live *Patris corde* with an open and passionate heart to “increase love for this great saint, to be impelled to implore his intercession, and to imitate his virtues and his enthusiasm” (*Patris corde*).

It is the gift that we offer together to the Holy Father on this significant occasion. We receive a welcome gift and we give it back by making it become life!

Saint Joseph the faithful guardian of a mystery

Meditating on the Apostolic Letter *Patris corde*, it came spontaneously to me to thank the Holy Spirit for having suggested to Pope Francis to propose to all the people of God, and to every person He loves, this ‘jewel’ which I consider to be effectively a precious text for our days.

In the background is the situation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic which made us aware of the importance and value of ordinary people. “Our lives are woven together and sustained by ordinary people, people often overlooked. People who do not appear in newspaper and magazine headlines, or on the latest television show, yet in these very days are surely shaping the decisive events of our history. Sisters and brothers who every day give, even at the risk of own lives, gestures of humanity, patience, care, that instill hope, and ‘contagion’ others with co-responsibility. Just like St. Joseph, “the man who goes unnoticed, a daily, discreet, and hidden presence.” Yet his is “an unparalleled protagonism in the history of salvation.” A model because of his “creative courage that knows how to transform a problem into an opportunity, always placing his trust in Providence first.”

The Apostolic Letter has the merit of having been able to give voice in an effective way, to the silence of this extraordinary Saint. In fact, there are no words spoken by him in the Gospels. In his life, the facts 'speak'! The evangelists Matthew and Luke tell us little about him, but enough to be able to penetrate the depth of his ability *to take care* of Mary and Jesus, of being *His most tender father*, of the universal mission that Providence had entrusted to him.

Patris corde retraces the crucial events that Joseph, a humble carpenter, a just man, lived in faith, with purity of heart and obedience to the Lord in the mission that was indicated to him, even without understanding everything.

In the homily at the official beginning of his ministry as Pontiff, Pope Francis reminded us that Joseph “did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took his wife into his home” (Mt 1:24). These words already contain the mission that God entrusts to him: to be guardian and to take care of Mary and Jesus; a custody that then extends to the Church. “St. Joseph, as he lovingly cared for Mary and devoted himself with joyful commitment to the education of Jesus Christ, guards and protects His mystical body, the Church, of which the Holy Virgin is figure and model” (Apostolic Exhortation *Redemptoris Custos*, 1 quoted in Homily 19 March 2013).

St. Joseph carries out this mission in discretion, in silence, with admirable fidelity, even when he does not understand. Everything is lived with love. He is next to his wife, Mary, in the beautiful events, such as the birth of Jesus, and in the most difficult ones like the dramatic flight into Egypt, and then the frantic search for Jesus in the Temple. Finally, they return to everyday life in Nazareth where life flows in simplicity, in prayer, in mutual affection, in that workshop where Jesus enjoyed the paternal presence of Joseph and learned the carpentry trade.

In *Patris corde* the aspects of his mission are expressed according to these characteristics: *beloved Father, Father in tenderness, Father in obedience, Father in welcoming, Father with creative courage, Father working, Father in the shadows*. These are expressions that manifest in a touching way both the nature of the Spouse of Mary and the faithful guardian of Jesus, and the affection of Pope Francis for St. Joseph.

How much trust the Lord placed in Joseph! He knew that in his journey of faith, he would welcome the mystery of salvation together with Mary, his betrothed, and with her he would share in full responsibility and totally, the 'yes' to this plan of love that would transform the history of humanity into a time of salvation for all peoples. His life was focused on a single reality, welcoming the mystery of the Incarnation by living ‘in the shadow of the Father’. He did not leave even the smallest fragment of what was asked of him unfulfilled. Everything was lived in listening to the Word, in essentiality, always ready to carry out God's will.

Dear Sisters, I have shared these brief reflections, aware that more cannot be done the space of a circular. It is our commitment, I am sure, to keep *Patris corde* close at hand, to make it a resource for reflection, for prayer and, as appropriate, to share it also with the educating community and with the young people.

Saint Joseph has a lot to say if we listen to him and ask him about his life choices, about the undisputed values in which he believed and for which he spent his life. We can all find something reflected in our personal and community life, the call to take care of what society and the Church are currently experiencing.

In this ‘special’ year, let us help each other to welcome Saint Joseph into our communities, into our lives, not as a ‘passing guest’, but as a ‘family presence’ with whom to dialogue, discuss, learn to live and collaborate as he did in difficult times, in full compliance with God's will, so that everything may become history of salvation.

St. Joseph: not a 'passing guest', but rather a 'family member'

In this 'special' year we will enjoy the wealth of numerous and qualified contributions to study the exceptional figure of this humble, silent, and eloquent saint. Among these contributions is the Cronistoria-Mornese literature, which I urge you to value in order to discover how St. Joseph was 'a familiar presence, one of the house' in the first communities.

In Mornese and Nizza Monferrato, in fact, he accompanies personal and community life with his powerful protection. Everyone turns to him with trust for every material and spiritual need. Mother Mazzarello, on 10 March 1875, invites the community to begin a fervent novena for two reasons: the improvement of the health of Sr. Rosa Mazzarello and the intercession of St. Joseph for help to pay the debts that were present in that community (cf. *Cronistoria*, vol. II, pages 128-131).

Mother Mazzarello turns to St. Joseph to have light for vocational discernment as well, when situations present doubts and fragilities. This is the case of the restless and ambitious young woman: Maria Belletti. St. Joseph is prayed to so that she will transform her heart and change her life. The transformation takes place and she goes to Mary to ask to be accepted as a postulant (cf. *Cronistoria*, II, pp. 129-132).

We also know that he was invoked as the protector of journeys that were certainly not easy at the time; that he was sent 'secret' letters placed at his feet to express requests for help and protection. St. Joseph did not make them wait long and he really obtained graces that exceeded expectations. The first sisters spread this love in the most diverse and faraway places. We could say that it was 'outgoing love', reaching all of us even today. Ours is a *charism of love* that is always on the move, which by its very nature needs to expand and bring light and hope.

In my encounters 'in presence' when it was possible, and now in 'virtual form', I discover how this devotion is present in many sisters of different ages, much more than we may think. We rely on him to grow in the interior life, to rediscover the value of silence, to ask him as the educator par excellence for help in the educational mission, in the economic needs of the Institute, for the needs of the Church, and of the whole world.

Love for Saint Joseph is alive, but it can grow even more, spread through the witness of life, and express itself with simple invocations on Wednesdays and in March, according to a beautiful tradition, and also invoke him as Patron of a happy death (cf. *Patris corde*). I invite you to share in community the numerous signs of Providence linked to trust in Saint Joseph. There are real miracles in our life, especially when the mission is carried out among the poorest and when our life is poor and simple because it is shared with those in need.

Dear Sisters, nothing comes by chance, but everything falls within a providential plan. I think that in this 'special' year, Saint Joseph has something to say to each of us, to our communities, to the educating communities, and in particular, to the young people. I share some aspects that I have matured in reflection, in prayer, and also recalling what I heard in dialogue with many of you and that can be useful for us to transform every event into history of salvation as Saint Joseph did.

• Love active silence

We are attracted by an aspect in St. Joseph, his silence. Joseph spoke and acted with his silence, as we can see in the discrete citations of the Gospel. At this time of Lent, still marked by Covid-19 and by many preoccupations, fears, suffering, desires to respond to the many new needs, we are aware of the need to rediscover the true journey into our heart, to recuperate the value of intimacy and of silence. It is an active silence that we can mature in faith, in hope, and in charity with joy in our heart (cf. Pope Francis, *Lenten Message* 2021).

Our Constitutions emphasize the importance of silence which favors the encounter with the Lord and makes the mission more fruitful (cf. C 54). The messages that we want to transmit must be matured in the silence of the heart, which is the place for the elaboration of the Word, for the decision for

every fraternal and apostolic gesture and initiative. In our mission we experience that young people need to find spaces of silence; they welcome them gladly when they are proposed to them as a place of prayer at this particular time for the world that is suffering and hoping. Time dedicated to God is never wasted time and is an effective ‘investment’ to be able to serve with joy and gratuitousness and offer simple gestures of solidarity, hope, and love for those in need. This is the style of St. Joseph!

- **Take care with love**

“Joseph found happiness not in mere self-sacrifice but in self-gift” (*Patris corde*).

The style of *taking care* reminds us, among other things, of the value of tenderness, kindness, respect for frailties and weaknesses, of loving without measure. “The evil one makes us see and condemn our frailty, whereas the Spirit brings it to light with tender love.” How comforting it is to learn to look at ourselves, our sisters, others, and situations with a gaze of tenderness! Let's try!

Daily relationships are a great gift in our vocation, they build us and are the channel through which the Lord passes to reach people. Sometimes because of human frailty, they put us in front of problems and difficulties that can create real conflicts, crises, making fraternal life tiring and with little serenity.

This is the time *to take care* by showing goodness, gestures of tenderness and forgiveness. We all feel the need! A positive gaze, a sincere smile, a word spoken with discretion and at the right time are small gestures, but of great human value to give our relationships light, strength to recover, courage to continue together on the path of holiness. The call of the Lord along this line is ongoing and the decision about the answer depends on each of us and on the whole community as well as on the educating community. Salesian loving kindness also has the name of tenderness.

In the Gospels, Saint Joseph appears as a strong, courageous, tireless worker, but a great tenderness vibrates in his soul “which is not the virtue of the weak but rather a sign of strength of spirit and a capacity for concern, for compassion, for genuine openness to others, for love. We must not be afraid of goodness, of tenderness!” (Pope Francis, *Homily*, 19 March 2013).

But there is need for the community to support us, to help us look forward, to continue to dream, because it is important to dream together: dreams are built together, never alone! (cf. *Fratelli Tutti* 8).

Our Constitutions offer us some very beautiful coordinates that I invite you to consider in the articles concerning fraternal life and mission. We can find convergences with what I have shared and which can cause new energies to spring up in the hearts of everyone.

How can we help ourselves *to take care* with small, hidden, daily gestures of love to give a new face to our communities and become more and more passionate about *da mihi animas cetera tolle*?

Experts in taking care

We are living the second year in preparation for the 150th anniversary of foundation that sees us committed to accepting the mandate, *I entrust them to you*. From that small, unknown town in Mornese where this mandate was given to Mary Domenica, it reaches us as a serene invitation, *I entrust them to you, so that you will take care of them*.

It is not easy today to translate this appeal into concrete actions for diverse and complex situations that we well know, but the goal is clear to us; to proclaim to young people, especially at this particular hour, that “Christ is alive! He is our hope, and in a wonderful way He brings youth to our world, and everything He touches becomes young, new, full of life. The very first words, then, that I would like to say to every young Christian are these: Christ is alive and He wants you to be alive!” (*Christus vivit*, 1).

The vocation of *taking care*, however, is not just something involving us Christians alone; it also has a prior dimension which is simply human, involving everyone. It means protecting all creation, the beauty of the created world. It means respecting each of God's creatures and respecting the

environment in which we live. It is taking care of everyone, especially the most fragile and often forgotten. It is taking the family to heart, it is seeking the common good. Basically, everything is entrusted to our custody, and it is a responsibility that concerns us all (cf. Pope Francis, *Homily*, 19 March 2013). Revisiting the style of Saint Joseph in *taking care* of Mary and Jesus, present in the *Patris corde*, can be of great help and I leave it to your reflection to study it in depth.

The Pope also proposes the theme of caring for one another in the message for the 54th World Day of Peace: *The culture of care as a path to peace* and St. Joseph is a splendid example. In the message there are indicators that help us to eradicate the culture of indifference, rejection, and confrontation, which is very often prevalent today, and guide our way of thinking, acting, and living in a more evangelical perspective. In this message we find the ‘grammar’ of *care*: the promotion of the dignity and rights of every human person, care for the common good, solidarity with those who are our fellow travelers, safeguarding creation. In other words, it is the ‘compass’ necessary to promote the *culture of care* that allows us to navigate with a safe course and together.

As educators, we feel strongly involved in the challenge of promoting the *culture of care* through the choice of education which is the necessary condition to respect and/or to revive among all, the worldwide aspiration to fraternity without borders, through dialogue and culture as Pope Francis hopes in the encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*.

To you and the educating communities, I express deep gratitude for the creativity and tenacious dedication with which you hold high, not without understandable fatigue, the educational proposal in this time of suffering due to Covid-19. The consequences of the pandemic are dramatic, and not least is the unprecedented educational crisis. Hundreds of millions of children have been deprived of their right to education, while it is a *right of all* and not only a privilege of a few!

Education is an act of hope that is based on the present, but looks to the future, so we must continue to bet on education, but together!

Together to "Rebuild the global educational pact"; *together* to build an "education village" where the person is at the center and is formed to put themselves at the service of the community in their turn; *together* to activate new dynamics that give meaning to history and transform it in a positive way (cf. Message of Pope Francis for the launch of the *Educational Pact*, 12 September 2019).

To Saint Joseph, in this ‘special’ year, and to Mary whom we celebrate on the solemnity of the Annunciation, we ask help to become experts in taking care of the young generations by giving them, through education and the proclamation of the Gospel, life in abundance in the spirit of prevention typical of our charism, and to be close to families in listening to them and accompanying their mission.

Also this year we celebrate Holy Easter in an unprecedented way. My wish is that you can live it in serenity, peace, and solidarity with those in need.

I extend this wish, also from the Sisters of the General Council, to your families, in particular to those tried by the suffering or the loss of loved ones; to the Rector Major Fr. Ángel Fernández Artime, and to the Salesian Brothers; to the members of the Salesian Family and to every person who collaborates with us in the mission entrusted to us. I promise young men and women a special remembrance full of affection, in my prayer that they may find in the risen Jesus the answer to their profound aspirations.

May the blessing of the Lord always accompany us and be our strength and our joy!

Rome, 24 March 2021

Affectionately, Mother