

Mary guides on the path of holiness

Dearest Sisters,

In this month of May I wish to reach you in the company of Mary Help of Christians. As I am writing, I let myself be guided by her, our Mother, from whom we feel greatly loved and whom we also love greatly! I will confide to you. I feel Mary is very present, always close and, when I think of her, I cannot contain a deep emotion. I desire that each of you may have the same experience.

In this letter, I wish to share some reflections that I have at heart and that I sense as a new call to be light, buds of new life with a gaze that opens onto horizons of hope in this troubled time that the entire world is living. I perceive it as a call to give new ardor to our journey of holiness with Mary in an intense prayer and in a strong solidarity that embraces the whole human family.

Within the limits possible, many communities are participating in the ‘prayer marathon’ of the Rosary desired by Pope Francis for the end of the pandemic. It is an appeal that brings us close to those who are suffering and are troubled and stimulates us to invoke consolation and comfort from the Lord through the intercession of Mary, Mother of all peoples.

In ordinary life, we are accompanied by her who helps us to strive for holiness in daily life. Many sisters who have already preceded us into Heaven are splendid models of holiness. This year we remember in a special way, Mary Domenica Mazzarello in the 140th year of her *dies Natalis* (14 May 1881) and in the 70th anniversary of her canonization (24 June 1951). She lived holiness as a vocation toward the fullness of life, conforming herself to Jesus in the concrete and not always easy situations of the origins.

I also think of Mother Rosetta Marchese. I had the joy on 30 April to participate in the official opening of the Diocesan Inquiry of her Cause of Beatification and Canonization. The presence of Mary in her life and in that of many other sisters is for us an inspiration and a call to make our communities ever more ‘Marian’, to live the joyful humility of the Magnificat, and to be ‘helpers’ among the young people (cf. C 4).

I am sure that we all feel the interior desire to contemplate Mary, to look upon her as the beacon that illumines our daily life and that gives light when fog sometimes obscures the horizon.

With a contemplative gaze

In all of us there is the will to know Mary in depth and in the beauty of her maternity. “For Mary is what God wants us to be, what he wants his Church to be: a Mother who is tender and lowly, poor in material goods and rich in love, free of sin and united to Jesus, keeping God in our hearts and our neighbor in our lives.” (Pope Francis, *Homily* 1 January 2018)

Devotion to Mary is not an accessory element, but a need of Christian life. We all need the heart of a mother who makes us experience the tenderness of God and knows how to listen to the throbs of the human heart.

It is marvelous to learn to contemplate her as Mother, she who lived the experience of contemplating Jesus in her arms, and from Him, feel herself tenderly watched with sweetness and delight in her smile. It is a unique and unrepeatable relationship of the Mother with her Son and of the Son with His Mother.

If we open the pages of the Bible, we can see how the Prophets and the Just ones of the Old Testament ardently desired to see the Lord’s face, but no one succeeded to do so. The first one to see God face to face, almost as a prelude to Heaven, is Mary, His Mother. Contemplating her Son,

she contemplates the face of God. She teaches us that contemplating is looking at God with simplicity and fidelity, and it is also letting ourselves be looked at by Him. This is not merely a 'seeing', but it is 'loving' and 'encountering' starting from the heart. This is how it was in the whole arc of her life. In this light, re-visiting the salient moments of her life is always a stupendous discovery that is never exhausted.

To Mary of Nazareth, God addressed a *call within a call*: to become the Mother of Jesus and then, at the foot of the Cross, to open herself to a universal maternity with the entrustment of the disciple to the Mother and of the Mother to the disciple (cf. Jn 19: 25-27). Entrustment is a gift of love and a response of love to a person, and in particular, to the love of a Mother (cf. *Redemptoris Mater*, 45). From that instant Mary is our mother by vocation. She herself takes care of all her daughters and sons, of each one of us, of the young people, just as she took care of Jesus in the various experiences of His life: bringing Him with St. Joseph into exile in Egypt; when as an adolescent, she accompanies Him on the pilgrimage to Jerusalem; when with discretion and consideration, she asks Him to work the first miracle at Cana for the joy of the young spouses; when she walks with Him on the road to Calvary, remaining beside Him until His death on the cross; when she contemplates Him risen; and, finally when in the Cenacle, in communion with the Apostles, she invokes the Spirit upon the nascent church.

These are fundamental stages that she, *vocationally a mother*, lived in full fidelity and with infinite love. Mary teaches us the great value of fidelity in the various situations of life, especially those that touch us deeply because they do not respond to our plans and our expectations. She reminds us that holiness is welcoming God's wonderful plan of love that unfolds in the various circumstances in which He asks us everything, absolutely everything, for the coming of His Kingdom! Love knows no boundaries and is surprising because it is the action of the Holy Spirit who always creates, chisels, sanctifies, strengthens the bonds of communion and makes the mission fruitful.

With serenity and truth, we recognize that we do not always know how to "take Mary home", but being a Mother, we are certain she keeps us close to her, cheek to cheek, as if writing a new icon of tenderness, joy, and suffering.

Saint Paul VI affirmed: "If we want to be Christians, we must be Marian" (*Homily* at the sanctuary of Bonaria, April 24, 1970). And because we are all committed to placing Jesus at the center of our life, of our mission in this historical moment, Mary must live in our life, in our communities as in Mornese, Nizza Monferrato, and in many others, up to those in mission lands contained in the Cronistoria. They were Sisters who radiated joy and hope among the young people, in the Church, and in society, because the strength and joy of the *Magnificat* lived in their hearts. And this joy has been very fruitful throughout the world from generation to generation.

A heart inhabited by the Magnificat

I thank all the communities who are walking with commitment and gratitude towards the event of the 150th anniversary of the foundation of the Institute united with Mary, for being "generative of new life" and reviving the richness of the charism by spreading it throughout the world. The special time we are living does not stop us from sowing hope. On the contrary, it urges us to put all our possibilities into action by trusting Mary and entrusting ourselves to Her.

We are her daughters and we want "We strive to make her dispositions of faith, hope, charity, and her perfect union with Christ our own. Let us open our hearts to the joyous humility of her *Magnificat*, to be 'helpers', like her, especially among young people." (C 4)

It is a fire that we all carry in our hearts and we want it to be always lit in order to continue the journey of holiness in the spirit of the Magnificat with more vigor and determination, rediscovering the beauty of *being the living memory of Mary today*. In this regard, I invite you to take up the *Plan of Formation* again: *Rooted in the Covenant* where our Marian identity as daughters is outlined, a

living memory of Mary, committed to express today 'the unpublished of her life' and to transmit her presence to the new generations (cf. *Plan of Formation*, pp 35-37).

It is pleasant to think that in this dynamic and complex contemporaneity, we can write a new page of history every day with young people and with the educating communities. Only built and sung *together* can the hymn of the Magnificat be harmonious and shine with the light proper to the Salesian charism.

Which page should we write *together* in a historical moment that Pope Francis calls "the hour of truth"? I think back to the solicitude of Mary who hurries to Elizabeth to share joy, to live an industrious charity where there is a need, carrying Jesus in her womb. And it is there that the song of the Magnificat explodes. I retrace the stages of her life and discover her motherhood which now embraces the whole world and which, more than ever, needs to be reunited in authentic fraternity. We too, today with even more urgency, are called to go out to meet sisters and brothers, young people and families in situations of need.

In Pope Francis we find the answer to know "which page to write today". We welcome his call to be architects of fraternity, to respond with a new dream of fraternity and friendship that is not limited to words, but that acts (cf. *Fratelli tutti*, 6).

"For many Christians, this journey of fraternity also has a Mother, whose name is Mary. Having received this universal motherhood at the foot of the cross (cf. *Jn* 19:26), she cares not only for Jesus but also for 'the rest of her children' (cf. *Rev* 12:17). In the power of the risen Lord, she wants to give birth to a new world, where all of us are brothers and sisters, where there is room for all those whom our societies discard, where justice and peace are resplendent." (*Fratelli tutti*, 278).

It is not utopia to venture into dreaming of a "new fraternity", despite the fact that there may be doubts, perplexities and, perhaps, even skepticism. No, it is a dream that can be realized, but not alone: "No one can face life in isolation [...]. We need a community that supports and helps us, in which we can help one another to keep looking ahead. How important it is to dream together!" (*Fratelli tutti*, 8).

I too have a dream for our communities and it is a *dream of communion*. In the Cenacle, Mary is in prayer with the Apostles waiting for the Holy Spirit. After having received Him, they 'go out', 'they go without fear' to proclaim that the miracle of the Resurrection has happened. Jesus is really risen!

Where Mary is, there is the Holy Spirit and with their presence our communities can recognize themselves as true "spiritual cenacles", "places of exquisite humanity". Two aspects that can never be separated. Everything that is authentically spiritual from the perspective of the charism is profoundly human and we all feel an immense need for humanity.

How important it is then to take care of our interior life, to reserve for ourselves spaces to pray, to listen to God's Word, to be generous in fraternal charity, and to build a truly universal fraternity.

I understand that it is not easy due to the many activities that often 'steal' our time, due to the ever-new challenges that overwhelm us, due to the sometimes tiring community relations and other situations of cultural, generational, social, and even ecclesial divergences. But every situation is always inhabited by Jesus who assured us that He will be with us until the end of time and He transforms every moment into eternity, if it is lived with love.

In the Wednesday catechesis, Pope Francis offers us wonderful and practical meditations on the value of contemplation, of prayer, essential for this time of pandemic. Prayer enters into play as an act of faith and love, as the "breath" of our relationship with God. Prayer purifies the heart and also

sharpens our gaze, allowing it to grasp reality from another point of view (cf. *Audience*, 5 May 2021).

Mary, with her life made up of joys and worries, hopes and difficulties, teaches us that every challenge is an opportunity to be architects of community-communion and in these dynamics let the Magnificat explode: a song that recognizes the great wonders created by God in every one of His creatures and in our Institute which belongs entirely to Mary.

I take this opportunity to thank all of you for your commitment to keep alive the *da mihi animas cetera tolle* in difficulties, especially educational, that the current situation entails.

A life totally given to the mission

We are preparing together: FMA, lay adults, and young people to celebrate GC XXIV which, I am sure, will be an event of the Holy Spirit and where Mary will enjoy a privileged place!

The choice of the theme and the objective of the Chapter is confirmed: *To re-awaken the original freshness of the vocational fruitfulness of the Institute*. We are asked to be “*generative communities in the heart of contemporaneity*” with an attentive gaze on the current reality with its challenges and opportunities (cf. Circular, 1008).

I consider the General Chapter as a new ‘Pentecost’, a lymph of life that will make the educating communities fertile. What we are experiencing is a time in which, with joy, we totally give our existence to the mission to the point of martyrdom if necessary, to be *generators of holiness* in the wonderful and demanding world of young people, enabling them to occupy their rightful place in history as protagonists of a new humanity, for the advent of the civilization of love.

Among the priorities that we must take care of is, without doubt, the authentic happiness of young people. You are well aware of their discomforts, the concerns that haunt them on an existential level: why am I alive and what gives my life meaning; of the uncertainty for the future, of the desire for infinity that inhabits their heart and that they are not always able to decipher. How many young people in an unspoken way invoke serenity, peace, a dignified life to be ‘well spent’. They are eager to be protagonists in the construction of their life, of society. The future of humanity is present in them. They are a precious treasure to be valued. They accompany us on our path of holiness that we build together. Sisters, we cannot disappoint them, cost what it may!

I pause on two essential aspects of our journey of holiness on which I invite you to reflect further, aware that you are already investing time, skills, energies given with love and in complete gratuity. However, there is a ‘greater quality’ to reach because the mission that awaits us is boundless.

- Be ever more passionate about the educational mission in the spirit of the *da mihi animas cetera tolle*, sharing it with the young, so that they in turn become agents of transformation where they are, communicators of life and hope. I do not doubt that each of your realities is able to identify the appropriate conditions for this *educational dream* to be realized: life is generated with life, not alone, but *together and with Mary* the educator par excellence.
- It follows that, even in times that are not easy and sometimes hostile and arduous, dedicating oneself to education always means proclaiming with patience, respect, and trust that life is a vocation, a mission. *"Today too Jesus needs hearts capable of experiencing vocation as a true love story that urges them to go forth to the peripheries of our world as messengers and agents of compassion. He addresses this call to everyone, and in different ways."* (Message World Missionary Day 2021).

God never stops calling and awaits patiently from us today, the ready response of Mary, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word.” (*Lk* 1:38).

On 24 May we will meet virtually in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians in Turin. We will ask Mary to renew us in our commitment to holiness and missionary ardor. We will entrust to Her GC XXIV, the life of the young people, the educating communities, the groups of the Salesian Family, and in particular, the Past Pupils, to proclaim *together* that “There is only one great call in the Gospel, and it is that of following Jesus on the way of love.” (*Audience, 5 May 2021*). Mary is an irreplaceable guide to educate us to grow in love and to sow it in the world.

God bless you!

Rome, 24 May 2021

Affectionately, Mother

NEW PROVINCIALS 2021

Africa

Preprovince “Mary Help of Christians” AES
Sr. Marie-Dominique Mwema Mukato

Province “Our Lady of Africa” AFC
Sr. Clarisse Ngoie Mongyumba

Province “Mary, Source of Life” MDG
Sr. Blandine Rafaraonisoa

America

Province “St. Joseph” ANT
Sr. Cesarina Batista

Province “O. L. of Perpetual Help” HAI
Sr. Altagrâce Mathias

Asia

Province “Mary Help of Christians” CIN
Sr. Kenny Kum Lee Luk

Province “Mary Our Help” CMY
Sr. Gertrudes Ditching

Province “St. Mary D. Mazzarello” FIL
Sr. Teresita Padron

Province “St. Mary Mazzarello” INB
Sr. Meenakshi D’Silva

Province “Mary Help of Christians” INC
Sr. Leelamma Palliparambil

Province “Mary Help of Christians” VTN
Sr. Maria Ha thi Thu Hoang

Europe

Province “Holy Family” ILO
Sr. Stefania Saccuman

Province “Our Lady of the Cenacle” ILS
Sr. Elide Degiovanni

Province “Our Lady of Good Counsel” IMR
Sr. Maria Ausilia De Siena

Province “St. John Bosco” IRO
Sr. Gabriella Garofoli

Province “Mother Maddalena Morano” ISI
Sr. Angela Maria Maccioni

Province “St. Mary D. Mazzarello” ITV
Sr. Claudia Squizzato

Province “Mary Immaculate” CEL
Sr. Zdeňka Švédová

Preprovince “Mother of God” EEG
Sr. Malgorzata Pietruszczak

Province “Our Lady of the Nations” FRB
Sr. Marie-Agnès Chetcuti

Province “Mary Help of Christians” PLA
Sr. Lidia Strzelczyk