

Experience of family and synodality in the Church and for peace

Dearest Sisters,

We have just ended the winter *Plenum* meeting of the General Council. They were challenging and serene days in which we felt your presence and your accompaniment with your daily prayer and offering. We are comforted by the awareness that in the Institute there is a lively sense of belonging and of communion that is nourished by the source of the Salesian Charism.

2022, a year of grace

At the close of the fourth centenary of the death of St. Francis de Sales, Pope Francis gave the Church and us the Letter *Totum Amoris est* which summarizes the spiritual heritage of the Doctor of love, who is also Patron of our Institute. Through a vital study of the doctrine of St. Francis we will be able to accept the Pope's invitation, "This is what awaits us as an essential task also for this our epochal passage: a non-self-referential Church, free from all worldliness but capable of inhabiting the world, to share the life of the people, to walk together, to listen and welcome" (Apostolic Letter *Totum amoris est*).

Don Bosco was inspired by St. Francis de Sales, seeing in him the example of a loving fatherhood, capable of making himself everything to everyone for young people and showing them the high standard of Christian life which is holiness. In the *Treatise on the Love of God*, St. Francis de Sales recognizes that "God is the God of the human heart". The relevance and meaning of consecrated life lie precisely in the radical testimony of this experience. We are asked to deepen the covenant of love that opens us to accepting Mary's invitation, "Do whatever he tells you" (Jn 2:5) in fidelity to the word of Jesus, to promote every person and take care of them with educative love.

From the beginning, our Institute has been characterized by this solicitude full of love towards young people. At the conclusion of the celebrations for the 150th anniversary of its foundation, we note that there have been many signs of grace contemplated and lived! The transparency of God's action in the life of so many of our sisters and educating communities and the presence of Mary in the history of the Institute is reason for praise, blessing, and commitment for a new missionary proclamation, capable of generating life, hope, and future for the vitality of the charism on all Continents.

In continuity with General Chapter XXIV

The *programming for the six-year period of the General Council* continues to be the point of reference for the assumption of the Chapter priority choices and the Deliberation.

The commitment to "be a presence that generates life" remains the leitmotif of our existence and mission. In this spirit, we lived the visits to the various Provinces and communities. Everywhere, we have tasted the joy of meeting face to face after a long period lived at a distance.

The richness of the experience shared in the *Plenum* gatherings allowed everyone to touch the beauty and vitality of a dynamic and ever more current charism. We appreciate the processes activated by each Province to experience the transforming power of 'presence' in a journey of continuous formation and missionary synodality in daily life. We perceive in the various realities the joy and the keen desire to 'be there', as a presence that generates life in the geographical and existential peripheries, to respond to the cry of the poor, and to the educational demand in the various contexts, as evidenced by the opening of new communities inserted in the territory.

The process of resignification, which many communities and Provinces are courageously implementing to revive the charism and to make our presence more meaningful, stimulates us to project our gaze on the future with hope, while it helps us to consider the present with the renewed trust of being in the Lord's hands. This process is a gesture of great daring which guides us towards overcoming the temptation to leave things as they are. In fact, today we perceive unprecedented calls from God that demand new and courageous responses. All of us, at whatever age, are important in the Institute, co-responsible for the common educational mission, and each one is called to offer an irreplaceable contribution for building the Kingdom of God.

Even the recent unification of the Provinces of Argentina (January 31, 2023) was the fruit of a long journey of discernment, motivated by the desire to give new impetus to the charism and to continue to live communion by valuing diversity.

Let us accompany these processes with prayer and closeness which express listening to the Holy Spirit and the desire to make our poverty a place where the "miracle of the new wine" is manifested today for the joy and life of young people.

In line with the first Chapter choice, as General Council we have given continuity to "formation together". With the Sisters who collaborate in the various Sectors, we have continued the deep study of integral ecology, reflecting on the objectives of the encyclical *Laudato si'* in the spirit of the Preventive System. The same theme was explored by the editorial team of the *Da Mihi Animas* magazine and will be proposed in the four issues of this year 2023.

In response to the mandate of General Chapter XXIV that asked us to update the texts of the *Formation Plan of the FMA Institute* and the *Guidelines of the educational mission of the FMA*, we have started a process of shared reflection at an interdisciplinary level in collaboration with an FMA commission. Through this, in synodal style and with an interactive methodology, we will reach out to and involve the Interprovincial Conferences and, consequently, every Province and every community.

Experiences of family and synodality

On 22 January in Turin Valdocco, we met the Rector Major of the Salesians, Fr. Ángel Fernández Artime and his Council. In the joy of being together as a family in the places of origin, we shared experiences and reflections on the theme of *Vocation animation as the inspiring principle and goal of Salesian Youth Pastoral*.

Precisely in the times in which we live, we feel the great opportunity to promote a vocational culture. Indeed, we see that young men and women thirst for God, that Jesus continues to call them because He knows their generous hearts. For our part, it is necessary to be truly present among them, to renew community life and the educating community through a pastoral ministry based on insistent prayer and passionate witness to the vocation that God gives to each one, to deepen vocational pedagogy, and develop concrete itineraries in educational practice.

We also share with joy that, after the pandemic, we have resumed the annual meeting with the General Council of the Secular Institute of Don Bosco Volunteers, in the Generalate. It was an occasion for mutual enrichment within the Salesian Family.

The reflection proposed on the "prophecy of presence" has led us to emphasize listening, as openness to God and to one's brothers and sisters, and a presence that knows how to walk with others, cultivates a culture of reciprocity, generates care in a continuous personal and community conversion.

The experience of "synodality" lived in the formation meeting with the group of new Provincials from four continents was particularly relevant. Together we shared moments of reflection and fraternity, of deep listening to the Spirit and of searching for a new style of service of animation and governance aimed at generating life in the heart of the communities. The climate of trust, dialogue, and confronting enriched us. It has been a school of formation and a reason for hope.

Also significant for us was the event of 7 December 2022 on the theme: *What future for girls after the Pandemic?* held in Rome at the UISG headquarters and organized by Good Shepherd International Foundation Onlus, by Vides International NGO, by the Cambodian in the World, and RNDM International Mission Development Office, with the collaboration of UISG: International Union of Superiors General.

There are four female religious congregations involved in this experience: the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, the Comboni Missionary Sisters, the Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions, and our Institute. It is a first step towards the establishment of a *permanent Observatory* to develop joint support actions among women's congregations in the field of the protection and integral education of girls.

In the Church and for peace

On 31 December 2022, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI returned to the Father's house. We remember him with affection and gratitude as "a person so noble, so kind", a witness of faith and prayer, and a "great teacher of catechesis".

The life and message of Pope Benedict XVI remind us, among the fundamental themes of his rich Magisterium, the centrality of God's love. "At the beginning of being a Christian there is not an ethical decision or a great idea, but the encounter with an event, with a Person, which gives life a new horizon and with it a decisive direction" (*Deus caritas est*, 1).

Pope Benedict lived this conviction consistently and ended his life with the words, "Lord, I love you!".

The Institute, as Church and in the Church, is experiencing the continental phase of the *Synod on synodality* which offers ecclesial realities the opportunity to listen to each other in view of the General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops which will take place in the first session from 4 to 29 October 2023.

The journey of synodality is "the journey that God expects from the Church of the third millennium" (Pope Francis, Commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops, 17 October 2015), and it is the programmatic commitment that Pope Francis proposes to everyone. It's not just a question of style, but of love. Those who love promote communion, participation, and mission. It is a call, a challenge, and a real opportunity for growth for the Church and, of course, for each of our educating communities.

Synodality also involves recognizing that each one is the bearer of a gift for the good of all. This was clearly demonstrated by the Pope who, from 31 January to 5 February 2023, went to the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Sudan on an "Ecumenical Pilgrimage of Peace". We see embodied in his

choices the attention to inclusion for all, the presence and closeness to people to get to know and listen to them, the appreciation of differences, and openness to signs of the future.

Pope Francis clearly denounced the injustices that especially affect the poorest, but he did so with an unshakable faith in the power of God and expressing his trust in the ability of people to come together "as brothers and sisters of one family and work for a future that is together with the others."

Meeting young people in Kinshasa, he gave them "five ingredients for the future": prayer, community, honesty, forgiveness, and service. By accepting her invitation, and walking with the young men and women, we can build together the civilization of peace starting from everyday life. Many of our communities live in difficult and often risky situations alongside the weakest and most defenseless. We are grateful for their silent and courageous witness which is an effective contribution to peace.

Let us never tire of educating, of promoting peace, even at the cost of paying in person, seeking concrete ways to spread an evangelical culture of reconciliation and peaceful resolution of small and large conflicts.

In these days, we are close and in solidarity with the populations of Turkey and Syria affected by the disastrous earthquake of 6 February and we thank the communities of the Middle East Province "Adolescent Jesus" and all those who, in various ways, collaborate in bringing emergency aid.

The time we are living is for all of us a new call to believe in the Lord's Providence, to trust in His grace, which never abandons us and accompanies us even today. Supported by this certainty, we hope to live Lent with a merciful heart, willing to let ourselves be transformed by the Word as Mary did.

We greet you with affection and gratitude.

Rome, 24 February 2023

Mother and the Council Sisters