

With Mary we generate a culture of peace

Dearest Sisters,

I reach you with joy in this special time of preparation for the World Feast of Gratitude to express my great and affectionate thank you to each one of you.

When I contemplate the marvels that the Lord has worked and continues to work in our Institute, praise and thanksgiving arise spontaneously for the life and vocation of every Daughter of Mary Help of Christians past, present, and future.

How much good has been sown in the world by so many sisters who, without notoriety, in the simplicity of daily life, in the often-heroic humility lived in difficult situations, under every sky, have given the best of themselves, driven only by the passion of the *Da mihi animas cetera tolle* and by the mandate *I entrust them to you!* For all of them and for all of you, for the educating communities, for every young person in every part of the earth: thank you!

The Feast of Gratitude is an appointment that helps us to strengthen the family spirit and leads us to the origins of our history. In the *Biographical Memoirs*, we find the narration of the first feast, created spontaneously by the boys of Don Bosco (cf. *BM III*, 534-535). At Mornese, Mother Mazzarello accepted this custom and learned from Don Bosco himself the educational meaning of this celebration.

I thank the four Provinces of Colombia who are preparing this beautiful experience of communion, the World Feast of Gratitude that will take place in Bogota this coming 26 April. The theme chosen: *With Mary we generate a culture of peace*, is the fruit of reflection on the times we are living. In fact, more than thirty wars are taking place in the world and peace is threatened in many ways. The theme is illumined by God's Word, "Blessed are the peacemakers, they will be called children of God" (*Mt 5:9*). It is an explicit invitation to not tire to build peace, to generate a culture of peace.

We are further asked to employ our unique feminine resources to help provide answers to the most urgent global problems, above all through education without which, Pope Francis underlines, any peace project proves inconsistent (see Pope Francis, *Day of Peace 2022*). "*Peace is a woman*", the Pope continues, and the contribution of the female genius in this regard is irreplaceable (cf. *Discourse to the American Jewish Committee Delegation*, 8 March 2019).

I address special thanks to the Vicar General, Sr. María del Rosario García, for the letter sent to all the provincial communities, in which she offers indications and clear guidelines for assuming and making concrete the process of preparation for the feast.

I assure each of you that you will all be present in Bogotá.

Generate life for the future

We continue our post-Chapter journey in this time of Lent, in which the Lord renews our trust and the possibility of conversion to His love, taking up the title of the Acts of General Chapter XXIV: *With Mary, be a life-giving presence*.

For us Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, to be life-giving is a priority commitment and it is necessary to concretize it in the reality of our communities, re-awakening passion for Jesus and the educative passion, immersing ourselves in the daily routine of the young people, of the families, facing the daily challenges as opportunities for the good.

We live generativity in its community dimension by involving all the members of the educating community, by integrating the resources of each one. Together we are aware of our responsibility for the future of the charism. We are in fact, responsible for a gift of the Holy Spirit for the Church and for the world.

The ability to give life is measured on the creative strength by which we do not allow ourselves to become discouraged or disheartened by difficulties, by the trials of life. Rather, we continue to commit ourselves to create the necessary conditions so that future generations can live and do good better and more than we do.

Mother Mazzarello had only nine years of religious Profession when she died, but her presence continues to live through time because we are aware of the gift of the Holy Spirit given to the Church and to the entire Institute through her.

We read in the first article of the Constitutions, "Through a gift of the Holy Spirit and with the direct intervention of Mary, St. John Bosco founded our Institute as a response of salvation to the profound hopes of girls and young women."

It is a matter of perceiving the action of God who gave Don Bosco the grace of a new apostolic spiritual experience in the Church. The same experience was fully shared and participated in by Mother Mazzarello and the first Daughters of Mary Help of Christians to the point that Don Bosco himself said these words to Fr. John Cagliero, director general of the Institute: "You know the spirit of our Oratory, our preventive system is the secret of being loved, listened to, and obeyed by young people, loving everyone and not mortifying anyone, and assisting them day and night with paternal vigilance, patient charity, and constant kindness. Well, good Mother Mazzarello possesses these requisites and therefore we can be confident in the government of the Institute and in the government of the Sisters. She has nothing other to do and does nothing other than conform to the spirit, system, and character proper to our Oratory, to the Salesian Constitutions and deliberations. Their Congregation is equal to ours. It has the same end and the same means, which she inculcates with her example and with her words to the Sisters. Following Mother's example, they in turn are more than superiors, directresses, and teachers; they are tender mothers towards the young boarders." (MACCONO F., *Saint Mary Domenica Mazzarello Co-founder and first Superior General of the FMA* vol. I, Turin FMA 1960, 274).

Certainly, the charism has a dynamic force here and now, which is entrusted to us as persons, as educating communities, and as an Institute, but its future depends a lot on our courage, our enterprising creativity, our ability to see and welcome the new calls from God. An indispensable condition is the choice to walk *together* and seek *together* the most suitable ways, in communion with the synodal journey of the Church.

For this reason, in the second priority choice of General Chapter XXIV, we defined as a commitment: "We live the service of authority, as *generative leadership*, in a circular, participatory style, shared in the animation, governance, and management of educational works. Let us courageously redesign the physical and organizational structures at the service of the mission and vitality of the charism" (*Acts GC XXIV*, 35.2).

For life-giving animation

Whoever in the Institute is called to the service of animation and governance knows that she must first seek communion by taking care of unity in diversity. She must nurture the encounter with God in prayer, in the experience of community, of fraternity, and of sharing the apostolic mission. She makes herself a companion on the journey, and in collaboration with all her Sisters, a point of reference for the educating community.

Anyone exercising a service of authority knows that she is the first to humbly seek, in docile attention to the Holy Spirit, the will of God in prayer, in listening to the Word and reality, in constructive dialogue with the Sisters and the laity with whom we share the charism, in the synodal journey of the communities at the local, provincial, and world levels.

In Mother Mazzarello, we find these attitudes of involvement and of co-responsible participation. She does not theorize about the service of animation. Her presence beside people, her style of personal encounter with each one, her capacity to value the resources of everyone on the community and pastoral journey are the fruit of a long journey of docile listening and of total self-surrender to God supremely loved.

We are aware that the renewal desired by all for a style of animation that is more communal, fraternal, synodal needs, especially in this historic time, greater care and attention. For this reason, with the General Council, we have inserted in the Six-Year Program Seminars by Provincial Conferences on the theme, "*For a life-giving animation*".

In the synodal spirit, individual reality is intertwined with the relational one that is the *humus* of generativity. In fact, a life-giving animation is more authentically implemented in the synodal dynamic that grants a holistic gaze on the present and on the future, in a synergy aimed at bringing 'to light', empowering it, taking care of it, to evangelically promote those entrusted to us. It is the assumption of responsibility moved by the genial creativity of love.

In this direction, inserted in the journey of the Church and in the history of our Institute, we are asked to increasingly assume synodality as a style of animation and governance at all levels, for an ever-greater appreciation of each person and a more fruitful mission in favor of young people and the most disadvantaged young people.

Responsibility and obedience

A service of authority as the concentration of power and the pursuit of formal observance is not Salesian and does not convince anyone. Nor does horizontal egalitarianism convince, which is as averse to authority as it is unaware of the perfume of true freedom that is always and only born in obedience and responsibility. (cf. Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *For new wine new wineskins. From the Second Vatican Council consecrated life and the challenges still open*, 2017, 19-28).

Synodality is based on obedience which is like the 'glue' of the community. There is no true obedience without inner freedom and a sense of responsibility towards the community and the mission. In article 32 of our Constitutions we read, "Don Bosco considered obedience the 'hinge' of our life, because it is closely linked to our apostolic mission and to the community dimension that characterizes it. In communion with the Superior and with the Sisters, we make ourselves totally available for whatever may be asked of us in carrying out the mission entrusted to all."

Our Constitutions clearly express, although with different words, the synodal style of the mission to which we are called as Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. In fact, obedience empowers our freedom that is manifested in responsible creativity at the service of the community and of the mission, as many Sisters have testified to us. In obedience we do not give up thinking, questioning, dialoguing. Rather, there is detachment from ourselves, from prejudices. Confrontation with the Word of God, with the Constitutions, with the Magisterium of the Church, community dialogue, and mutual trust enhance freedom and the ability to affect the reality in which we live.

Article 32 of the Constitutions also incisively presents the style of our obedience: “We will obey in a spirit of faith, cheerfully and humbly, with a sense of responsibility and of belonging to the Institute.”

For Don Bosco, obedience was an indispensable virtue that he continually inculcated in his boys and in the Salesians. It is enough to think of the effect of the conversation with the young in the courtyard of Valdocco, when before all he folded, crumpled, rolled up his handkerchief, until he said, “Everything will be possible if you let me do with you what you have seen me do with the handkerchief! If you obey me, if you do my will, the will of the Lord, you will see that He will work miracles through the young people of the Oratory” (*BM VI*, Chap. 1, 11-12).

Mother Mazzarello invites us to obey in the Salesian style, with a feminine imprint and evident Pauline resonances, “Do freely whatever charity requires” (L 35, 3). A freedom that recognizes the primacy of charity and, by serving it, makes it concrete. She asks us to live an obedience that expresses what charity is, “Love is patient, love is kind. It is not jealous, [love] is not pompous, it is not inflated, it is not rude, it does not seek its own interests, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury, it does not rejoice over wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails” (*1 Cor 13: 4-8*).

Therefore, freedom in charity becomes the life force of the community and dynamic and synodal energy in action. It leads us to responsibly share what we are and what we have, in the conviction that proceeding in synodality presupposes a new style of animation and government, but also a new style of being obedient and co-responsible in the mission. It is an open path on which to walk by interacting with lay men and women, young men and women, the Salesian Family and all those with whom we share the charism.

Before concluding, I want to recall again the Sisters and the communities suffering with their people the violence of war, of injustice, of religious and social discrimination, the dramatic consequences of climate change, the earthquake, especially in Syria and Turkey. We are grateful for the generosity with which the Provinces, communities, individuals who become aware of it, the young, children, and families have donated and will donate their contribution of solidarity to face the terrible consequences of the earthquake. Our constant prayer invokes peace and the Lord’s blessing on the whole human family and strengthens solidarity.

Also, in the name of the General Council, I wish a holy Easter to you, to your families, to the Rector Major Fr. Ángel Fernández Artime, to the Salesian Confreres, to the members of the Salesian Family, and to all those involved with passion and love in the educative mission.

May the wish of hope and light come especially to the young men and women. May the light of the Resurrection shine in our lives as a proclamation of hope and peace.

I greet you with affection, I assure you of my prayers, and I warmly thank you for yours.

Rome, 24 March 2023

Affectionately, Mother