

«So that my joy may be in you» (Jn 15,11)

HOLINESS FOR YOU TOO

Strenna 2019

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My Dear Brothers and Sisters, my Dear Salesian Family,

Continuing our century-old tradition, at the beginning of this New Year 2019 I address myself to each one of you, in every part of the “Salesian world” that as the Salesian Family we constitute in more than 140 countries.

I do so while giving a commentary on a subject very familiar to us, with a title taken directly from the Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Francis on the call to holiness in today’s world: *Gaudete et Exsultate*¹.

In choosing this subject and this title I want to translate into our own language and in the light of our charismatic sensitivity the strong appeal to holiness that Pope Francis has addressed to the whole Church². Therefore I want to emphasise those points that are typically “our own” in the context of our Salesian spiri-

¹ Henceforth *GE*.

² I express my gratitude to Fr Pier Luigi Cameroni, Postulator General for the causes of Saints, and to Signora Lodovica Maria Zanet, an expert collaborator of our Postulation Office and renowned lecturer. Thanks to their foresight I have been able to embellish these pages with material from the Postulation Office which can throw so much light on the subject.

tuality, those shared by all the 31 groups of our Salesian Family as the charismatic inheritance received from the Holy Spirit through our beloved Father Don Bosco, who will certainly help us to live our lives with the same deep joy that comes from the Lord: «*So that my joy may be in you*» (*Jn 15,11*).

Who are these words addressed to?

I can assure you that they are addressed to everyone.

To all of you my dear Salesian confreres SDB.

To all of you sisters and brothers of the various different congregations and institutes of consecrated and lay life in our Salesian Family.

To all of you brothers and sisters of the associations and various groups of the Salesian Family.

To the fathers and mothers, to the men and women teachers, to the catechists and leaders in all our centres throughout the world. And to all the teenagers and young people in our great Salesian world.

I accept the invitation addressed by the Pope to the whole Church. His Exhortation is not a treatise on holiness, but a call to today's world, and especially to the Church, to live life as a vocation and as a call to holiness; a holiness made flesh in this present time, today, wherever each one may be, in our current circumstances.

I make my own this always fascinating call to holiness because this "present time" in the Church demands it of us. Like me all the recent Rector Majors have made very significant contributions to the topic of Salesian holiness and our holy Patrons³.

³ P. CHAVEZ, *Let us draw on the spiritual experience of Don Bosco in order to walk in holiness according to our specific vocation* AGC 417 (2014); P. CHAVEZ "My dear Salesians, be saints" AGC 379 (2002); J.E. VECCHI, *Beatification of Bro Artemide Zatti: a sensational precedent* AGC 376 (2001); *Sanctity and Martyrdom at the dawn of the third millennium* AGC 368 (1999); E. VIGANO, *Don Bosco, saint* ASC 310 (1983); *Re-planning our holiness together* ASC 303 (1982); L. RICCERI, *Don Rua, a call to holiness* ASC 263 (1971).

As in previous years, I believe that in addition to being read personally, these ideas may be appropriate and suitable “guidelines” for the educative and pastoral programmes needed in the various different contexts and situations of the “Salesian world”, in which we are operating.

I. GOD CALLS EVERYONE TO HOLINESS

I should imagine that not a few people, even among ourselves and certainly among the many young people who heard the Pope’s call, have felt that the word “holiness” may sound somewhat remote, in many cases very remote and unfamiliar in the language of today’s world. It is quite possible that there are cultural obstacles or interpretations that tend to confuse the path of holiness with a kind of alienating spiritualism that is fleeing from reality. Or perhaps at best the term “holiness” is understood as a word applied to and applicable only to those who are venerated in the pictures or statues in our churches.

Therefore, what the Pope is doing is quite admirable and even “daring” as he presents the perennial relevance of Christian holiness that is to be seen as a call coming from God Himself in his Word, and is proposed as the goal in every person’s journey. God «wants us to be saints and not to settle for a bland and mediocre existence» (*GE*, 1).

The call to holiness is a natural part of our Salesian tradition (Saint Francis of Sales). The appeal of Pope Francis attracts attention above all on account of the force and the determination with which he maintains that holiness is a call addressed to everyone, not just to the few, in so far as it corresponds to God’s fundamental plan for us. It is aimed therefore at ordinary people, at those people we accompany in their ordinary daily lives consisting in the simple things typical of ordinary people.

It is not about a holiness for the heroic few or for exceptional people, but about an ordinary way of living an ordinary Christian

life: a way of living Christian life rooted in the present day with the dangers, the challenges and the opportunities that God offers us as life unfolds.

Sacred Scripture invites us to be holy: «You therefore must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect» (*Mt* 5,48); and: «Be holy for I [the Lord] am holy» (*Lev* 11,44).

There is then an explicit invitation to experience and to bear witness to the perfection of love that is not something different from holiness. Holiness, in fact, consists in the perfection of love; a love that above all was made flesh in Christ.

Saint Paul in the letter to the Ephesians referring to the Father also writes: «In [Christ, the Father] chose us before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ according to the purpose of his will to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved» (*Eph* 1,4-6). No longer servants therefore but friends (cf. *Jn* 15,15). No longer strangers and sojourners but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God (cf. *Eph* 2,19). Therefore each and every one of us is called to holiness: that is to a full and fulfilled life according to God's plan, in communion with Him and with our brothers and sisters.

It is therefore not a question of a perfection reserved to a few, but of a call addressed to everyone.

Something that is infinitely valuable yet not a rarity, but rather is part of the common vocation of believers. It is the beautiful proposal that God makes to every man and woman.

It is not the pursuit of a false spirituality that takes one away from the fullness of life, but the fullness of being human made perfect by Grace. "Life to the full" as Jesus promised.

Not with a standardised, trivialised, rigid approach; but a response to the ever-new breath of the Spirit, that creates communion while showing appreciation for the differences – «Indeed, the Spirit is at the origin of the noble ideals and undertakings which

benefit humanity on its journey through history»⁴.

It is not a question of a collection of abstract values subscribed to and shown outward respect, but of a harmony of all those virtues that incarnate the real values in one's life.

It is not merely the ability to reject evil and embrace good, but a constant attitude ready with joy to live the good life well.

It is not a goal that is reached in an instant, but an ongoing journey accompanied by God's patience and kindness, that involves personal freedom and commitment.

It is not an attitude that excludes what is different, but rather a fundamental experiencing of what is true, good, just and beautiful.

Finally, holiness is living according to the beatitudes, so as to become salt and light in the world; it is journey towards being fully human as is every genuine spiritual experience. Therefore becoming holy does not require cutting ourselves off from our own nature or from our brothers and sisters, but rather living a full and courageous human life and an experience (sometimes hard won) of communion and relationship with others.

“Becoming a saint” is the first and most urgent task for the Christian

Saint Augustine declares: «My life will be true life, all full of thee»⁵. It is in Him, God Himself that the possibility of the path of holiness in following Christ is to be found. The path of holiness is made possible for a Christian by the gift of God in Christ: in Him – of whom the saints and especially the Virgin Mary are a marvelous reflection – is revealed simultaneously the fullness of the face of the Father and the true face of man.

In Jesus Christ the face of God and the face of man shine out “together”. In Jesus we meet the man from Galilee and the face of the Father: «He who has seen me has seen the Father» (*Jn* 14,9).

⁴ JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio*, Vatican City, 7 December 1990, 28.

⁵ AUGUSTINE, *Confessions*, 10,28.

Jesus the Word made flesh is the complete and definitive word of the Father. From the moment of the incarnation, the will of God is fulfilled in the person of Christ. He shows us in his life, in his words and in his silences, in the choices he makes and in his actions, and above all in his passion, death and resurrection, what God's plan is for man and woman, what His will is and the way to correspond to it.

This plan of God for each one of us today is simply the fullness of Christian life that is measured *according to the extent to which Christ lives within us and to the degree in which, with the grace of the Holy Spirit we model our lives on that of Jesus the Lord.* Therefore it does not mean doing extraordinary things but living in union with the Lord, making his actions, his thoughts and behaviour ours. In fact going to Holy Communion means expressing and bearing witness to the fact that we want to take up and make our own the style of life, the way of living and the very same mission of Jesus Christ.

The Second Vatican Council itself in the Constitution on the Church firmly proposed the *universal call to holiness* and declared that no one was excluded: «In the various types and duties of life, one and the same holiness is cultivated by all who are moved by the Spirit of God and who obey the voice of the Father, worshipping God the Father in spirit and in truth, following the poor Christ the humble and cross-bearing Christ in order to be made worthy of being partakers in his glory» (*LG*, 41).

The “holiness of next-door neighbours” and the universal call to holiness

Edith Stein, while still an atheist, wrote about having received a decisive impetus towards conversion from two encounters: one with the wife of a friend killed in the war, who having become a widow, in spite of intense sorrow demonstrated the surprising light and strength of faith; the other was in a church (where Edith had gone simply out of artistic interest) with an elderly woman who had come in with her shopping baskets in the middle of a

busy day to spend a moment of deep trust and adoration with Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament.

Don Bosco had as his mother and first teacher Margaret Occhiena: a simple uneducated peasant woman, with no theological training, but with a wise heart and an obedience based on faith.

Saint Teresa of Lisieux used to say that as a child she understood little of what the priest was saying, but it was enough for her to look at the face of her father Louis to understand everything.

None of these lay people – Anna Reinach a friend of Edith, the unknown woman with the shopping bags, mamma Margaret or papà Louis Martin – ever thought in their lifetime of being holy, nor were they aware of the influence they were having on the people around them through their ordinary way of acting.

The presence of these simple and determined people, of these «next-door saints» – as Pope Francis describes them (*GE*, 7) – reminds us that what is important in life is to be holy, not to be declared saints one day. In addition, it helps to reflect on the fact that the canonised saints, first of all reached the simple holiness of the people of God: they all share the same glory in a deep and unswerving communion.

To live holiness then is the experience of being forestalled and saved, and learning to correspond to this faithful love. It is the responsibility of responding to a great gift.

From this point of view, perhaps one of the most important contributions to Christian spirituality is that made by the Bishop of Geneva Francis of Sales with his efforts to propose *holiness for everyone* taking “*devotion*” out of the cloisters into the world. In his splendid work “*Introduction to the Devout Life*” he writes: «As in the creation God commanded the plants to bring forth their fruits each one according to its kind, so he commands all Christians who are the living plants of his Church to bring forth the fruits of devotion, each according to his quality and vocation.

Devotion ought then to be not only differently exercised by the gentleman, the tradesman, the servant, the prince, the widow, the maid and the married woman but its practice should be also adapted to the strength, the employments and the obligations of each one in particular [...] Wherever, then, we are, we may, and should aspire to a perfect life»⁶.

The history of the Church is strongly marked by the many women and the many men, who with their faith, with their love and with their lives have been like beacons that have illuminated and continue to illuminate so many generations throughout time including the present. They are a living testimony to how the power of the Risen Lord in their lives has reached such a level that like St Paul they have been able to declare (so many times without using the words: «It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me» (*Gal* 2,20). And they have demonstrated this, sometimes through the heroism of their virtues and sometimes through the sacrifice of their lives in martyrdom, and at other times through «a life constantly offered for others even until death» (*GE*, 5). At the same time there is a holiness without a name, that of those who have not achieved the honours of the altar, whose « lives may not always have been perfect, yet even amid their faults and failings they kept moving forward and proved pleasing to the Lord» (*GE*, 3). This is the holiness of our own mother or grandmother or of others close to us; it is the holiness of a marriage which is a beautiful path of growth in love; the holiness of fathers who develop, grow to maturity, and give themselves generously to their children, often with unexpected sacrifices. Men and women, the Pope recalls, who work hard to support their families. The sick who bear their illness patiently and with a spirit of faith, in union with the suffering Jesus; elderly religious, with a life given and who never lose their smile or their hope... (cf. *GE*, 7).

It can be said with certainty that in every age of the history of the Church and everywhere in the world there have been and still

⁶ Francis of Sales, *Introduction to the devout life* I, 3.

are saints of all ages, and in all conditions of life with very different personal characteristics.

Pope Benedict XVI expressed this very well when, speaking about his personal experience, he said: «I should like to add that for me it is not only the great saints that I love and know well who are the “sign-posts”, but also the simple saints, that is to say the good people that I see in my life, who will never be canonized. They are ordinary people, one might say, without any signs of heroism, but in their every-day goodness I see the truth of the faith»⁷.

Certainly we find all this is the way so many people have incarnated the Christian path in their lives. Some may seem “small” and others “great”; but all have followed an attractive and fascinating journey.

Pope Benedict concludes with a very valuable expression which in my judgment sums up in a magnificent way the message of the Strenna for this year, when he says: «*Dear friends, how great and beautiful but also simple is the Christian vocation seen in this light! We are all called to holiness; that is what the Christian life is*»⁸.

Mary of Nazareth: a unique light on the path of holiness

All these simple and very often anonymous paths of holiness always have a model to look to and on which to reflect. Christian holiness has in Mary of Nazareth, the Mother of the Lord, of the Son of God the most beautiful and the closest model.

Mary is the woman of the “Here I am,” of full and total availability to the will of God. Saying: «let it be to me according to your word» (*Lk* 1,38), Mary is saying that she finds full and deep happiness in everything that “let it be” implies in faith. Not only when the Son leaves home and is separated from her because he has to carry out the mission of the Father; but also at the final

⁷ Benedict XVI, Catechesis at the General Audience on 13 April 2011: [Teachings VII (2011), 451].

⁸ *Ibid.*, 450.

moment in which Mary experiences sorrow for his crucifixion and death. An atrocious sorrow for a mother to experience.

In Mary, the Mother of the Lord, we can witness the richness of *a life that has accepted God's plan at every moment*; a life that has been a constant "Here I am" said to God. How fascinating it is, from this point of view to contemplate Mary and to meditate on the value of human life and its full significance in the context of eternity!

The courageous acceptance of God's mysterious plan leads Mary to become the mother of all believers, the model for each one of us in listening to and welcoming the Word of God and the safe guide towards holiness. And this because she teaches us that only God can make our life great. «Only if God is great is humankind also great. With Mary, we must begin to understand that this is so. We must not drift away from God but make God present; we must ensure that He is great in our lives. Thus, we too will become divine; all the splendour of the divine dignity will then be ours»⁹.

For this reason it is impossible to think that the easy path of holiness can be followed by the Christian without having recourse to Mary our Mother. Looking to her is to learn how to believe, how to hope, how to love. And if we pray like her and with her we shall certainly experience in our daily journey that consolation that can come only from God. In addition invoking her as the Mother of the Son of God we shall open our hearts to the gift of her intercession as Mother of the Son and of her sons¹⁰.

With Salesian sensitivity...

Therefore it could be said that to become a saint is to have everything. If one does not become a saint one loses everything. The goal of holiness and the invitation almost tender, to achieve it

⁹ BENEDECT XVI, Homily on the feast of the Assumption of Mary, 15 August 2005.

¹⁰ As a continuation of this "Marian journey" we shall be celebrating in Buenos Aires between 7 and 10 November 2019 the VIII International Congress of Mary Help of Christians with the title: *Mary the woman who believed*.

is also the great message of Don Bosco, the pivot on which hinges his whole spiritual proposal and his life witness.

The holiness that Don Bosco proposes is easy and pleasant, but also strong as he suggests. In Dominic Savio's declaration: «I want to become a saint, I must become a saint. I can have no peace until I become a saint»¹¹, one can hear much – if not everything – of what Don Bosco had managed to convey to him, following the sermon in which Dominic had heard these encouraging words: «It is easy to become a saint. Everyone should become a saint. There is a great reward waiting in heaven for those who try to become saints»¹². Don Bosco himself continued writing that this talk was like a spark that set off into a consuming blaze the love of God in Dominic Savio's heart.

In the wisdom of Don Bosco, who curbed Dominic's desire for penance and recommended to him instead fidelity in his life of prayer, in his studies and in duties done well, and diligence in recreation (and we can also say in the whole area of relationships in life), there emerges the awareness, typically Salesian, of the universal call to holiness.

In founding the Society of Saint Francis of Sales in the first place, and then (together with Mary Domenica Mazzarello the co-foundress) the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians Don Bosco proposed as the object, right up to today, the sanctification of its members¹³.

Don Rua reminded the Salesians of this shortly afterwards when he exhorted them in these words: «This is what our beloved Don Bosco taught us in the 1st article of the Holy Rule, where it says that the object of our Pious Society is first the Christian

¹¹ ISS, *Salesian Sources. 1. Don Bosco and his work. Collected works*, LAS, Rome 2014, 1187. The complete passage I am referring to says: «Another day explanations were being given about the meaning of words. "What does Dominic mean?" he asked. The reply was: "Dominic means belonging to God". "There you are", he said, "you see how right I am in asking you to make me a saint. Even my name says that I belong to God, so I must at all costs become one. I can't be happy if I am not"».

¹² *Ibid.*, 1186.

¹³ Cf. *SDB Const.*, 2, 25, 65, 105; *FMA Const.*, 5, 46, 82.

perfection of its members and then various works of charity, both spiritual and temporal on behalf of the young»¹⁴. Without that the whole apostolic endeavour on behalf of youth would prove fruitless. Don Bosco knows perfectly well that the first, most radical and decisive way to help others is to be saints.

In this «school of new and attractive apostolic spirituality»¹⁵, Don Bosco interpreted the gospel from an original pedagogical and pastoral point of view which «meant a new “fusion” of the common elements of Christian holiness that was well balanced, congenial and regulated; the virtues and the means to holiness had their own proper place, quantity, symmetry and beauty that were characteristic»¹⁶.

II. JESUS IS HAPPINESS

The proposal of holiness is addressed to every Christian because it is the fullness of life and synonymous with happiness, of blessedness. We Christians find happiness when we follow Jesus Christ.

These words are directed towards the young. They are meant for them. But we know very well that «holiness is also for you», concerns everyone: the young, educators, fathers and mothers, consecrated lay people, men and women religious, priests. In short these words of mine are directed towards each and every one of the members of our Salesian Family, in such a way that we all feel included, and naturally they concern all the People of God.

Very beautiful are the messages that with great conviction, Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis, have sent to young people, and we should not feel detached from them.

¹⁴ M. RUA, *The sanctification of our souls and of those entrusted to us*. Letter of the Rector Major to the Provincials and Rectors of America, Valsalice, 24 September, 1894.

¹⁵ JOHN PAUL II, *Address on the occasion of his visit to the Pontifical Salesian University*, 31 January 1981, in *L'Osservatore Romano*, 8 February 1981, [ASC 300 (1981), 58].

¹⁶ E. VIGANO *Rediscovering the spirit of Mornese*, ASC 301 (1981) 25.

I shall put together only a small sample of these messages, with one common denominator: in all of them the Popes ask the young take the chance of accepting Jesus as the guarantee of their happiness.

This was the great challenge that Saint John Paul II issued when he told the young people of the world: «***It is Jesus in fact that you seek when you dream of happiness***; he is waiting for you when nothing else you find satisfies you; he is the beauty to which you are so attracted; it is he who provokes you with that thirst for fullness that will not let you settle for compromise; it is he who urges you to shed the masks of a false life; it is he who reads in your hearts your most genuine choices, the choices that others try to stifle. It is Jesus who stirs in you the desire to do something great with your lives, the will to follow an ideal, the refusal to allow yourselves to be ground down by mediocrity, the courage to commit yourselves humbly and patiently to improving yourselves and society, making the world more human and more fraternal»¹⁷.

No less explicit was Pope Benedict XVI when he told the young people: «Dear young people, the happiness you are seeking, the happiness you have a right to enjoy has a name and a face: it is Jesus of Nazareth, hidden in the Eucharist. [...] Be completely convinced of this: Christ takes from you nothing that is beautiful and great, but brings everything to perfection for the glory of God, the happiness of men and women, and the salvation of the world. [...] Let yourselves be surprised by Christ! Let him have “the right of free speech” during these days!»¹⁸.

And Pope Francis told the young people that happiness is not negotiable. There should be no reduction in their expectations so that in the end happiness is not ensured in any genuine and serious way, but only as something that can be experienced in “small

¹⁷ JOHN PAUL II, *Prayer Vigil at the XV WYD*, Rome Tor Vergata, 19 August 2000.

¹⁸ BENEDICT XVI, *Address at the welcoming ceremony for the young people in Cologne*, 18 August 2005.

doses”, and which as so often happens does not last, and naturally is not true happiness, nor does it bring full human satisfaction: «Your happiness has no price. It cannot be bought: it is not an app that you can download on your phones»¹⁹.

Don Bosco wanted his boys to be happy in this life and for all eternity.

At the beginning of his Letter from Rome, on 10 May 1884, Don Bosco writes to his boys: «I have only one wish: to see you happy both in this world and in the next»²⁰.

At the end of his life on earth these words sum up the heart of his message to young people of every age and of the whole world. He wants them to be happy, as a goal in the dreams of every young person, today, tomorrow, always. But not just that. “In the next” is that extra that only Jesus and his proposal of happiness, that is holiness, can offer. It is the answer to the deep thirst for “for ever” that burns in the heart of every young person.

The world, the society of all nations cannot propose this “for ever” nor eternal happiness. But God can.

For Don Bosco all this was very clear, and he was able to sow in the hearts of his boys the strong desire to become saints, to live for God and to reach paradise: «He guided the young along a path of holiness that was simple, serene and joyful, bringing together their experience of life in the playground, with serious study and a constant sense of duty»²¹.

¹⁹ FRANCIS, *Homily at the Mass for the Boys' and Girls' Jubilee*, Rome 24 April 2016.

²⁰ ISS, *Salesian Sources. 1. Don Bosco and his work. Collected works*, LAS, Rome 2014, Kristu Jyoti Publications 2017, 501.

²¹ J. E. VECCHI, *Andate oltre. Temi di spiritualità giovanile*, Elle Di Ci, Leumann (TO) 2002.

III. SAINTS FOR THE YOUNG AND WITH THE YOUNG

The holiness characteristic of the Salesian charism in which there is room for everyone, consecrated persons and lay people has its most specific expression in relation to youth holiness. Fr Pascual Chávez, my predecessor, wrote at the beginning of his ministry in the letter *My Dear Salesians, be saints!*: «The youngsters themselves helped Don Bosco “to begin, in the context of everyday experience, a new style of holiness tailored to the typical requirements of a boy’s development. In this way they were to some extent both pupils and teachers at the same time. Ours is a holiness both for and with the young; because in the search for holiness, “Salesians and youngsters walk side by side”: either we sanctify ourselves with them, walking and learning with them in their company, or we shall not become saints at all»²². The genuine Salesian heart of our Family needs to be holy in order to reach the young, while it does not neglect the even more radical duty to make itself holy among the young and together with them.

This desire can be seen to apply to each and every one of the 31 groups that make up our Salesian Family. With a real interest I looked for the references to holiness in the Constitutions and the Regulations of the various Congregations in our Family, in the Project of Apostolic Life of the Salesians Cooperators, in the Plans, Statutes and Regulations (according to their own proper names) of all the groups that belong to the tree of our charism. I can assure you that in one way or another all of them consider holiness as an aim and a purpose for which we are born and also as religious institutions, with the intention of achieving it in our lives. Therefore a holiness that is proposed to each of the members as the purpose of the apostolate directed towards others.

Youth a time for holiness.

Convinced that « Holiness is the most attractive face of the Church» (*GE*, 9), before proposing it to the young we are all called

²² P. CHÁVEZ, *My Dear Salesians, be saints*, AGC 379 (2002), 21-22.

to live it and bear witness to it, in this way becoming a community “that enjoyed favour”, as on various occasions the Acts of the Apostles puts it (cf. *GE*, 93). Only living in this consistent manner is it possible to accompany the young on the ways of holiness.

When Saint Ambrose declared that «every age is ready for holiness»²³, so too without doubt is youth! In the holiness of many young people the Church recognises the grace of God, that anticipates and accompanies the life story of each one, the educational value of the sacraments of the Eucharist and of Reconciliation, the fruitfulness of shared journeys in faith and charity, the prophetic impact of these “champions” who have often sealed in their blood their being disciples of Christ and missionaries of the Gospel. The language most requested by young people of today is *the witness of an authentic life*. For this reason the life of young saints is the real word of the Church; and the invitation to undertake a holy life is the one that is most necessary for today’s young people. An authentic spiritual vitality and a fruitful pedagogy of holiness do not disappoint the deep aspirations of the young: their need for life, for love, for growth, for joy, for freedom for a future and also for mercy and reconciliation.

Certainly the proposal has the flavour of a real challenge. If on the one hand it is very attractive, on the other it can give rise to fear and indecisiveness. It requires the effort to avoid the risks and not to settle for a bland and mediocre existence» (*GE*, 1); it implies overcoming the temptation to “just struggle along” since the challenge of holiness is nothing different from everyday life, but is precisely this ordinary life lived in an extraordinary way and made beautiful by the grace of God. In fact the fruit of the Holy Spirit is a life lived in joy and in love, and this is what holiness is. In this regard the example the Pope offers us in the Apostolic Exhortation of the testimony of the life of Cardinal Francesco Saverio Nguyễn Văn Thuận, who spent many years in prison is very precious. He refused to waste time waiting for the day he would be

²³ AMBROSE, *De Virginitate*, 40.

set free and took another decision: «I will live the present moment, filling it to the brim with love and [...] I will seize the occasions that present themselves every day; I will accomplish ordinary actions in an extraordinary way» (*GE*, 17).

Young saints and the youth of the saints

«Jesus invites every disciple to give their entire lives, without expecting any human advantage or benefit. Saints welcome this demanding request and meekly and humbly start following the crucified and risen Christ. The Church gazes at the sky of holiness and sees an increasingly large and bright constellation of young men and women, adolescents and young saints and blessed who, ever since the time of the first Christian communities, have endured until our time. When the Church invokes them as our patrons, she indicates them to young people as references for their existence»²⁴. In various surveys including those in preparation for the Synod of Bishops on the young, the young people themselves recognise that they are «more receptive when faced with a “life story” [compared with] an abstract theological sermon»²⁵ and they consider the lives of the saints to be very relevant to them. Therefore certainly it is important to present them in a way that is adapted to their age and condition.

It is also worth remembering that as well as the “Young saints” it is necessary to present to young people the “youth of saints”. In fact all saints were once young and it would be useful to today’s young people to show them how the saints lived their lives as young people. In this way it would be possible to begin to deal with many youth situations that are neither simple nor easy, in which, however, God is present and active in a mysterious way. Showing that His grace is at work through... complex procedures in the patient con-

²⁴ XV ORDINARY ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Young people, the faith and vocational discernment. Instrumentum Laboris*, LEV, Rome 2014, 214.

²⁵ XV ORDINARY ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Young people, the faith and vocational discernment. Instrumentum Laboris. Pre-synodal meeting. Final Document* (19-24 March 2018).

struction of a holiness that matures with the passing of time in many unforeseen ways, can help all young people, without exception to cultivate hope in a holiness that is always possible.

The last number of the Final Document of the Synod declares in harmony with what we have been saying that the holiness of the young also forms part of the holiness of the Church because, «young people are an integral part of the Church. So too, therefore is their holiness, which in recent decades has produced a manifold flowering in all parts of the world: contemplating and meditating during the Synod on the courage of so many young people who have given their lives while remaining faithful to the Gospel has been for us very moving; listening to the testimony of the young people present at the Synod who in the middle of persecutions have chosen to share the passion of the Lord Jesus has been life giving. Through the holiness of young people the Church can renew its spiritual ardour and its apostolic vigour»²⁶.

IV. WHAT DOES IT MEAN: «HOLINESS IS ALSO FOR YOU!»?

Pope Francis tells us in a simple and direct way.

After saying that to be saints it is not necessary to be bishops, priests or religious he adds: «We are all called to be holy by living our lives with love and by bearing witness in everything we do, wherever we find ourselves. Are you called to the consecrated life? Be holy by living out your commitment with joy. Are you married? Be holy by loving and caring for your husband or wife, as Christ does for the Church. Do you work for a living? Be holy by labouring with integrity and skill in the service of your brothers and sisters. Are you a parent or grandparent? Be holy by patiently teaching the little ones how to follow Jesus. Are you in a position of authority? Be holy by working for the common good and renouncing personal gain» (*GE*, 14).

²⁶ XV ORDINARY ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Young people, the faith and vocational discernment Final Document*, LEV, Rome 2018, 167.

This encourages us to put into simple words the challenge facing us – one that is a valuable provocation for each and every one of us, at all ages and stages of life.

So what is holiness, this holiness that is presented to us as being close and accessible to the young person, the woman and man of today?

- It is something close, real, concrete, possible. Indeed it is the **fundamental vocation to love** as Vatican Council II recognises (*LG*, 11); the soul, the essence of this call to holiness for every individual is love fully lived: «God is love; and he who abides in love abides in God and God abides in him» (*1Jn* 4,16).
- It is a question of **making the grace of Baptism bear fruit, without being afraid that God is asking too much of us**: «Let the grace of your baptism bear fruit in a path of holiness. Let everything be open to God; turn to him in every situation» (*GE*, 15). In practical terms it is a question of living in the Spirit, allowing ourselves to be guided in the simplicity of everyday life by the Holy Spirit without being afraid to aim high and letting ourselves be loved and made free by God Himself. Pope Benedict XVI invited young people, all young people to «open themselves to the action of the Holy Spirit that he may transform our lives so that we too may become tiny parts of the great mosaic of holiness that God is creating in history, so that the face of Christ may shine in all its splendour. We are not afraid to aim high, towards the heights of God, *we are not afraid that God is asking too much of us*»²⁷.
- **It is a question of being saints because God has dreamed of us in that way.** «Far from being timid, morose, acerbic or melancholy, or putting on a dreary face, the saints are joyful and full of good humour. Though completely realistic, they radiate a positive

²⁷ BENEDICT XVI, *Catechesis in the General Audience on 13 April 2011: Insegnamenti VII* (2011).

and hopeful spirit» (*GE*, 122). John Bosco, when he was boy founded the *Society of Joy* and Dominic Savio used to say to new arrivals at the Oratory: «Here at the Oratory we make holiness consist in being very cheerful»²⁸ (even though we know that it was not a superficial joy but deep-seated, in his inner life, in a sense of responsibility before life and before God Himself).

Don Bosco understood very well and so passed on to his boys the fact that commitment and joy go hand in hand, and that holiness and joy are inseparable. His invitation therefore is also a call to the “holiness of joy” and to a joy that is lived out in a holy life. This does not mean ignoring the fact that a commitment to holiness demands courage, since it is, to put it another way, a course of action that goes “against the current”, a path at times leading to opposition, faced with which at times we have to be like Jesus “signs of contradiction”.

→ It is a question of a journey, that of holiness that accepts **the dimension of the cross**.

Pope Francis reminds us of the need for inner strength in order to be persevering and constant in doing good; he recalls the need for vigilance: «We need to recognize and combat our aggressive and selfish inclinations, and not let them take root» (*GE*, 114); he encourages evangelical *freedom of speech* so as not to allow ourselves to be overcome by fear; above all he invites us not to give up contemplating the Crucified One, the source of grace and of freedom: «If, gazing on the face of Christ, you feel unable to let yourself be healed and transformed, then enter into the Lord’s heart, into his wounds, for that is the abode of divine mercy» (*GE*, 151).

Perhaps nowadays reference to the cross is not so common among us, but certainly, in this matter too we need to change. It is not possible to live a genuine Christian life and follow the path of holiness in daily life while putting the Cross to one side.

²⁸ *BM* V, 228.

Having taken part during the last Synod in the canonization of Saint Paul VI, celebrated together with that of six other saints, I find these words of his most appropriate: «What would a Gospel be, that is to say a Christianity without the cross, without the suffering, without the sacrifice of Jesus? It would be a Gospel, a Christianity without the Redemption, without Salvation, of which we have an absolute need. The Lord saved us with the Cross; he has given us back hope, the right to life with his death. Carrying the Cross! It is a great thing, a great thing my dear children! It means facing up to life with courage, without weakness and without cowardice; it means transforming into moral energy the inevitable difficulties of our life; it means, knowing how to understand human suffering and finally knowing how to truly love!»²⁹.

→ It is a question of living holiness so that **it does not come between us and our obligations, concerns, affections** but includes them all in love. Holiness is the perfection of love and therefore corresponds to man's fundamental need: that of being loved and of loving. The holier a man or woman may be the more human they are because: «life does not have a mission but is a mission» (*GE*, 27).

Holiness therefore is **a process of becoming more human.**

«We need a spirit of holiness capable of filling both our solitude and our service, our personal lives and our evangelizing efforts, so that every moment can be an expression of self-sacrificing love in the Lord's eyes. In this way every minute of our lives can be a step along the path to growth in holiness» (*GE*, 31).

So holiness coincides with **the complete flowering of all that is human.** It is not a proposed way of living that leads to detaching oneself from the human condition and its circumstances, but one that enables people to experience ever more fully and in a true manner their own human nature and that of their brothers and sisters. In the face of the true saint, one

²⁹ PAUL VI, *Address during the «Way of the Cross»*, 24 March 1967.

always recognises clearly the man or women they really are with all their special distinguishing features of heart, mind and will and openness to relationships: «In the saints one thing becomes clear: those who draw near to God do not withdraw from men, but rather become truly close to them»³⁰.

Right now I invite you to remember, when, at the end of the commentary we shall speak about the saints, blessed, servants of God and venerables of our Salesian Family the precious witness that they offer us in their lives.

Don Bosco himself, so fully human, was the first to have found, healed and reconciled the boys who often arrived at the Oratory having lived through difficult situations of affective poverty, economic difficulties, of being orphaned and abandoned. To these boys he offered all the riches of the family spirit and the Preventive System, in a magnificent atmosphere including the spiritual, which helped to cure them. Those wounds were healed thanks to the fatherly approach of Don Bosco himself, the joyful family atmosphere and the pathway of faith and of friendship with Jesus to whom Don Bosco led his boys.

In Mornese Mother Mazzarello and the first sisters, lived out, with the particular sensitivity of women this coming face to face with life situation of those poor babies and girls taken into the first house of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

In this way our history has been repeated in so many groups of the Salesian Family with a special feature typically ours, which is also that of the Gospel that has allowed us to care for and to heal the humanity of every person with whom we have come in contact.

→ It is a question of a **holiness that is also a “duty” and a gift** (that is a vocation, a responsibility, a commitment and a gift). Holiness is a sharing in the life of God, not a perfection from a moralistic point of view that one has the presumption to arrive

³⁰ BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus caritas est*, LEV, Rome 2005, 42.

at with just one's own efforts. In fact a holy life is not principally the result of our own effort, of our actions. It is God the thrice Holy (cf *Isaiah* 6.3) who makes us saints through the action of the Holy Spirit, who gives us the strength and the will. Holiness is a commitment and a responsibility. It is something that only you can do: «May you come to realize what that word is, the message of Jesus that God wants to speak to the world by your life» (*GE*, 24).

For the consecrated persons of our Salesian Family this duty becomes indispensable. Paul VI said so in a radical manner: «Religious life must be a holy life or else there is no reason why it should exist at all»³¹.

V. SOME POSSIBLE INDICATORS OF HOLINESS

I offer some suggestions that may be appropriate for each one personally and for our mission. Allow me to indicate some particular points.

– *Living everyday life as the place to meet God.*

The heart of the Salesian spirit, which is our distinguishing feature as a charismatic Family, can be identified by the fact that it thinks of life in a positive way and sees it day after day as the meeting place with God. This place is traversed by a rich network of relationships, of work, of joy and of relaxation, of family life, of the development of one's personal capabilities, of giving and of service..., all lived in the light of God. This is expressed in simple practical terms in that very Salesian conviction that comes from Don Bosco himself: to be a saint you have to do well what you have to do.

It is the proposal of the holiness of everyday life. If Teresa of Avila found holiness among the dishes in a kitchen, and Francis of Sales shows that a Christian can live in the world sur-

³¹ PAUL VI, *Address on 27 June 1965*, in E. VIGANÒ, *Replanning our holiness together*, ACS 303 (1981).

rounded the tasks of life and its preoccupations and be a saint, with the simplicity of joy Don Bosco with the exact fulfilment to one's duties and a life lived all for the love of God, creates with his boys at Valdocco a real school of holiness.

– ***Being individuals and communities of prayer.***

Holiness is the greatest gift that we can offer to the young, and – I may add – nowadays young people, youngsters and their families need the witness of our lives. And, as I have said, this simple holiness will be the most precious gift that we can offer them.

Nevertheless, this process is not possible without cultivating depth in our lives, without a genuine faith and without prayer as the expression of this faith. Pope Francis declares: «I do not believe in holiness without prayer» (*GE*, 147). And in fact all of this is impossible without intimacy with the Lord Jesus: prayer of thanksgiving, the expression of our gratitude to the transcendent God; prayer of supplication, the expression of a heart that trusts in God; prayer of intercession, the expression of fraternal love; prayer of adoration, the expression of our recognition of the transcendence of God; prayer of meditation on the Word, the expression of a docile and obedient heart; Eucharistic prayer the summit and source of all holiness.

– ***Developing in our lives the fruits of the Holy Spirit:***

charity, joy, peace, patience, benignity, goodness, longanimity, mildness, faith, modesty... Holiness is not quarrelling, arguing, envy, division, haste. «Holiness does not make you less human, since it is an encounter between your weakness and the power of God's grace» (*GE*, 34).

– ***Practising the virtues:*** not only rejecting evil and pursuing good, but being passionate about good, *doing good things well, everything that is good...* Prayer and action in the world, service and self-giving and also times for silence. Family life and a sense of responsibility at work. «Everything can be accepted and integrated into our life in this world, and become a part of

our path to holiness. We are called to be contemplatives even in the midst of action, and to grow in holiness by responsibly and generously carrying out our proper mission» (*GE*, 26).

So then, following the good life of the Gospel, in the joyful and constant practice of the virtues will truly be a simple way of holiness.

– ***Bearing witness to communion.***

The path of holiness is followed together and the way to holiness is one lived in community and pursued together. The saints are always together, a company. Where there is one of them, others will always be found. Everyday holiness makes communion flourish and fosters relationships. **We become saints together.** It is not possible to be saints alone and God does not save us alone: «no one is saved alone, as an isolated individual» (*GE*, 6). Holiness is nourished by relationships, by familiarity, by communion because Christian spirituality is essentially communitarian, ecclesial, profoundly different and far from a vision of holiness that is elitist or heroic.

On the contrary, there is no Christian holiness where communion with others is forgotten, where one forgets to seek and to look at the face of the other, where one forgets the fraternity and the revolution of tenderness.

– ***Understanding that everyone's life is a mission.***

The Pope clearly asks that the whole of one's life be seen as a mission. Sometimes in difficult moments, people ask what is the purpose of their lives, what is the point of living, the reason for their being in the world, what personal contribution could they make?... In all these cases the question being asked is: what is my mission? And it is in the light of all this one discovers that «a Christian cannot think of his or her mission on earth without seeing it as a path of holiness» (*GE*, 19), always giving the best of oneself in this commitment.

Some Salesian houses, such as Valdocco, Mornese, Valsalice, Nizza, Ivrea, San Giovannino... from the very beginning provide proof of a holiness that is a shared experience, that flour-

ishes in friendship, in dedication and in service, (today we speak about life as “vocation and mission”).

- ***Seeking the simplicity (which is not easiness) of the Beatitudes*** (cf. *GE*, 70-91).

In proclaiming the Beatitudes Jesus offered us a real path to holiness. «The Beatitudes are like a Christian’s identity card» (*GE*, 63).

In them a way of life is proposed to us which includes processes which go from poverty of heart which also means austerity of life, to reacting with humble meekness in a world where quarrels easily arise over the slightest thing; from the courage to allow ourselves to be “pierced” by other peoples’ sorrow and to show them compassion, to seeking justice with a true hunger and thirst, while others share out the spoils obtained by means of injustice, corruption and the abuse of power.

The Beatitudes lead the Christian to look and to act with mercy, which means helping others and also forgiving them; they encourage him to keep a heart that is pure and free from all that taints love for God and for one’s neighbour. The proposal of Jesus asks us to sow seeds of peace and justice and to build bridges between people. It also asks us to accept the lack of understanding, deceitfulness in our regard, and finally all persecutions, even the most subtle ones that exist today.

- ***Growing through small gestures*** (*GE*, 16). This is another simple indicator, practical and within everyones reach. God calls us to holiness through small gestures, through simple things, which we certainly find in other people and reproduce in ourselves in everyday life; encouraged also by the fact that the path of holiness is neither unique nor the same for everyone.

One follows a path of holiness according to one’s own state of being either a man or a woman. From this point of view feminine tenderness, attention to small details and gestures are a magnificent example for all. For this reason Pope Francis says: «I would stress too that the “genius of woman” is seen in feminine styles of holiness, which are an essential means of re-

flecting God's holiness in this world and [...] I think too of all those unknown or forgotten women who, each in her own way, sustained and transformed families and communities by the power of their witness» (*GE*, 12).

– **Everything, except refusing to fly when we have been created for the heights!**

There are so many small steps that can help us to journey in the way of holiness, in this simple holiness, anonymous but which shape our lives in a beautiful way. As I have said, everything can help us; everything except refusing to fly when we have been born for the heights! Because we are «God's chosen ones, holy and beloved» (Col 3,12).

What I want to say has been expressed in a magnificent manner by Mamerto Menapace³² in a beautiful story, a fine metaphor that speaks of the dilemma between staying on the ground or flying up to God, to holiness, towards the heights.

This is what the story says:

Once upon a time, a countryman who was walking along a path in the high mountains found in the rocks close to the summit a strange egg: too big to be a hen's and too small to be that of an ostrich.

Not knowing what it might be he decided to take it with him.

Back at home he showed it to his wife. She had a turkey which was sitting on its nest. Seeing that the egg was more or less the size of the others, she put it under the tail of the turkey.

The chicks began to break the shells and the little one from the egg taken from the mountain did the same. It seemed to be an animal different from the others, but the differences were not sufficient to make it stand out among the rest of the clutch, even though it was a small condor. Although hatched by a turkey it had another origin.

Given that it had no other model to learn from the little condor imitated what he saw the turkeys do. . He used to follow the large

³² M. MENAPACE, *Cuentos rodados*, Patria Grande, Buenos Aires 1986 (our translation).

turkey looking for worms, seeds and scraps. He dug the earth and jumping up tried to pluck the fruit from the bushes. He lived in the henhouse and was afraid of the dogs that often came to steal food. At night he climbed up the branches of the carob tree afraid of the weasels and other predators. He lived this way imitating what he saw the others do.

At times he felt a little strange. Especially when he had the chance to be alone. But that did not happen often. In fact the turkeys did not like solitude, nor that others should be alone. It is a species that likes to move about always in flocks, swelling their chests to make an impression and opening their tails and dragging their wings. In the face of whatever happened, there was always a strong scornful response.

The characteristic of turkeys is this: in spite of being a large size they do not fly.

One midday when the clear sky was being crossed by white clouds the little animal was surprised to see some strange birds flying majestically, almost without moving their wings. He felt a jolt in the depth of his being. Something like an old call that wished to reawaken him in the depth of his existence. His eyes used to always looking at the ground searching for food, were unable to distinguish what was happening in the heights. His heart was awakened with a strong nostalgia: why can't I also fly like that? His heart was beating quickly and with anxiety.

At that moment a turkey approached him and asked him what he was doing. He laughed when he heard what he had to say. He told him that he was a romantic and should stop joking. They were something different. They should return to reality and he suggested that he would accompany him to a place where he had found a lot of ripe fruit and a large number of worms.

Confused, the poor animal woke from his enchantment and followed his companion who took him back to the henhouse.

He took up his normal life again always tormented by a deep inner sense of dis-satisfaction that made him feel strange.

He never discovered his true identity as a condor.

Having become old one day he died. Yes unfortunately he died exactly as he had lived.

And to think that he was born for the heights!

It is all about the way of Christian growth towards holiness: «We are not afraid to aim high towards the heights of God; *we are not afraid that God will ask too much*»³³.

VI. PATHS OF HOLINESS TODAY IN THE LIGHT OF OUR HISTORY AS THE SALESIAN FAMILY

– **There are many paths along the road to holiness.**

We know that some are saints but we never know who is holier than another. Only God knows our hearts. There is a special beauty in each one. One should not ask of someone what they cannot and should not give. Saying this is encouraging, healthy. Otherwise we would convince ourselves that we could not be saints because we shall never be like the saints that are proposed to us as models. «There is no need to put into holiness more perfection than is in fact actually there»³⁴. That is to say Christian heroism is not a question of heroics, Christian perfection is not the perfection of the superhero. «In my Father's house there are many rooms» (*Jn* 14,2). Paradise is like a garden: there is the humble violet or the sublime lily and the rose. *No state of life represents an insurmountable obstacle to the fullness of joy and of life.*

With Don Bosco we meet not only Dominic Savio, John Masaglia and Francis Besucco; but also Michael Magone and many other difficult youngsters whose life stories are characterized by deep wounds.

In the first foundations of the Salesians and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians are to be found the first real orphanages and people of various kinds the victims of injustice and trauma (Charles Braga, Laura Vicuña...).

³³ BENEDICT XVI, *Catechesis in the General Audience on 13 April 2011: Insegnamenti VII* (2011).

³⁴ P. CATRY, «Le tracce di Dio», in Aa. Vv., *La missione ecclesiale di Adrienne von Speyr. Atti del 2° Colloquio Internazionale del pensiero cristiano*, Jaca Book (= Già e non ancora), Milano 1986, 32 quoted in L. M. Zanet, *La santità dimostrabile. Antropologia e prassi della canonizzazione*, Dehoniane, Bologna 2016, 204.

Then there are those with particular personal wounds: such as Beltrami or Czartoryski who knew that they would never be able to lead a regular oratorian life because of their illness. Artemides Zatti too was rejected from the priesthood because of sickness. Francis Convertini showed very modest intellectual gifts and it was only his outstanding holiness that convinced the Superiors to allow him to continue to the priesthood. Alexandrina Mary da Costa was confined to bed with a progressive paralysis. Nino Baglieri lived through the same situation. Vera Grita, a Salesian mystic, lived a similar calvary, following the trauma suffered in an accident.

In this way, **in Don Bosco's house** there is room and a welcome for a whole variety of those wounded in all sorts of ways by sorrowful family or personal events; people who according to the normal criteria of human prudence or efficiency should never have been accepted. People who at a first cursory glance seem to be completely at odds with the joyful and even "vigorous" vivacity of the Salesian spirit. Yet in the light of faith the facts show that no personal situation constitutes an impediment to holiness.

– **Every saint is a word of God incarnated.**

There are no two saints the same. Imitating the saints is not copying them. Each one needs his own time and has his own path because «the paths of holiness are personal»³⁵.

The galaxy of holiness is vast and varied: therefore it should not be levelled out into a generic orientation towards good, but should be considered as an inexhaustible source of inspiration and potential development. Living reflections of the Gospel the saints interpret its most authentic spirit and are a mirror that reflects the face of Jesus Christ, the Holy One of God. They spread abroad the gift of goodness and of beauty, not giving in to the passing and ephemeral fashions of time, and with the flare of a heart forever young make the miracle of love possible. With the power of grace saints change

³⁵ JOHN PAUL II, *Apostolic Letter Novo Millennio Ineunte*, Rome 2001, 31.

the world, but also the Church, made more evangelical and more credible by their witness.

It is the same Holy Spirit who inspired the sacred authors who animates the Saints to give their lives for the Gospel. Their different ways of “incarnating” holiness constitute a sure way of undertaking a living and effective hermeneutics of the Word of God.

– **Every saint in our Salesian Family tells us that holiness is possible.**

Every one of our Saints, Blesseds, Venerables, Servants of God brings with them a wealth of elements that deserve further consideration and appreciation. It is a matter of contemplating a diamond with a multitude of facets, some more visible and attractive, others less immediately so, but not for this reason less real and impelling. To know and to make known these extraordinary examples of believers leads to an ever more progressive involvement in their journey, a passionate interest in the events of their lives, a joyful sharing in the projects and the hopes that guided their steps.

I offer you some examples.

– **The holiness of the young people “on our doorstep”.**

With the witness of Dominic Savio, Laura Vicuña, Zeffirinus Namuncurá, of the five young oratorians of Poznan, of Albert Marvelli and others, there are 46 young Saints and Blesseds from the Salesian Family under 29 years of age.

In particular some of the aspects of the witness of Saint Dominic Savio deserve to be highlighted:

- A reminder that the idea of the preventive aspect is not only a pedagogical, educational factor, but also a theological one. In his life as Don Bosco himself testified, there is a preventive grace at work that can be seen³⁶.

³⁶ Don Bosco recalls: «I recognised in him a soul where the Holy Spirit reigned supreme, and I marvelled at the way grace had already worked in his young heart and mind.», J. BOSCO, *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico allievo dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales con appendice sulle grazie ottenute per sua intercessione*, Ed. 5,

- The decisive value represented by the First Communion³⁷.
 - The fact that he is a sort of leader and teacher in the ways of God (just as Don Bosco also saw him in the Lanzo dream in 1876), as is confirmed in the lives of so many of our Blessed, Venerables and Servants of God who will make their own Dominic's proposals: Laura Vicuña, Zefirinus Namuncurá, Joseph Kowalski, Albert Marvelli, Joseph Quadrio, Octavius Ortiz Arrieta.
 - The role of Dominic in the founding of the Immaculate Conception Sodality, training ground of the future Salesian Congregation, in conjunction with John Massaglia, a true friend of spiritual things, of whom Don Bosco declared: «If I were to write about the good example and virtues of John Massaglia, I should be largely repeating what I have already written about Dominic whose faithful follower he was as long as he lived»³⁸.
- **The missionary holiness of the Salesian charism**, expressed in a good number of men and women, consecrated and lay people who demonstrate: the proclamation of the Gospel, the inculturation of the faith, the promotion of women, the defence of the rights of the poor and of the native populations,

Torino, Tipografia e Libreria Salesiana 1878 in ISS, *Fonti Salesiane. 1. Don Bosco e la sua opera. Raccolta antologica*, LAS, Rome 2014, 1039.

³⁷ Rapture in the life story of Dominic Savio, is typically connected to the eucharist and finds its moment of grace on the day of his First Communion, seen as a seed that if it is cultivated becomes the source of a joyful life and of decisive commitments: «It was a wonderful and never-to-be forgotten day for him; it was a renewal of his life for God, a life that can be taken as an example by anyone. If one got him to talk about his First Communion several years later his face lit up with joy and happiness as he said: “That was the happiest and most wonderful day of my life. He made some promises on that day which he preserved carefully in a little book and often re-read them [...] 1. I will go often to Confession and I will go to Holy Communion as often as I am allowed by my confessor. 2. I will try to keep Sundays and holy days holy. 3. My friends will be Jesus and Mary. 4. Death but not sin”. These promises which he often went over were the guiding light of his life until he died» (J. BOSCO, *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico allievo dell’Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales con appendice sulle grazie ottenute per sua intercessione*, Ed. 5, Torino, Tipografia e Libreria Salesiana 1878 in ISS, *Salesian Sources. 1. Don Bosco and his work. Collected works*, LAS, Rome 2014, Krystu Jyoti Publications 2017 *Life of the young Dominic Savio, pupil at the Oratory of St Francis de Sales*, 1171).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 1210.

the foundation of local Churches. Deeply impressive is the fact that a very large proportion of the brothers and sisters of our Salesian Family who are in the process of the recognition of their heroic virtues and of their holiness are missionaries: (Blessed Mary Romero Meneses FMA; Blessed Mary Troncatti FMA; the Venerable Vincent Cimatti).

- **The oblative holiness of the “victim”** expressing the deep roots of “Da mihi animas, coetera tolle”. Leading the way in this group is the Venerable Fr Andrew Beltrami (1870-1897), whose example provides a pattern for a long list of others living Salesian holiness in this way which starting from the trio Andrew Beltrami, August Czartoryski, Louis Variara, continues through the years with other great figures such as Blessed Eusebia Palomino, Blessed Alexandrina Mary da Costa, Blessed Laura Vicuña, without forgetting the numerous host of martyrs (among whom should be mentioned the 95 martyrs of the Spanish civil war, and among these many young confreres in formation and young priests).
- **The dimension of the “broken home”**: families in which at least one of the parents is absent. or else where the presence of the mother and/or the father, for different reasons (physical, psychological, moral or spiritual), creates problems for the children. Don Bosco, who himself experienced the early death of his father and having to live away from home following Mamma Margaret’s prudent decision, wanted the Salesian work to be particularly dedicated to «poor and abandoned youth».
- **Blessed Laura Vicuña**, born in Chile in 1891, who had not known a father and whose mother in Argentina began to live with a rich landowner Manuel Mora. Laura, suffering from the irregular moral situation of her mother mamma, offered her life for her.
- **The Servant of God Charles Braga**, born in Valtellina (in the north of Italy) in 1889. He was abandoned by his father while still very young, and his mother was sent away because, through a mixture of ignorance and gossip, she was considered

emotionally unstable. Charles met with great humiliations and several times saw the authentic nature of his Salesian vocation put in question, but in this great suffering he was able to bring to maturity a great capacity for reconciliation, and to show a deep sense of paternity and goodness especially with regard to the parents of confreres.

- **The vocational dimension:** in the context of the bicentenary of the birth of Don Bosco there were two beatifications of two confreres martyrs, whose lives reflect some constitutive aspects of our charism.
- The person of **Stephen Sándor** (1914-1953), beatified in 2013 (his cause was introduced in 2006), recalls the complementarity of the two forms of the single consecrated Salesian vocation: the lay (Brother) and the priestly. The shining testimony of Stephen Sándor, as a Salesian Brother, expresses a clear and decisive vocational choice, an exemplary life, an educational expertise and an apostolic fruitfulness, in which we see a presentation of the vocation and the mission of the Salesian Brother, with a special love for the young apprentices and for the world of work.
 - **Titus Zeman** (1915-1969), beatified in Bratislava on 30 September 2017 (his cause was introduced in 2010). When the Czechoslovakian communist regime, in April 1950, prohibited religious orders and began to deport male and female religious to concentration camps it was decided it was necessary to organize secret journeys to Turin to enable young Salesians to complete their studies. Titus took upon himself this dangerous enterprise and organized two expeditions for about 20 young Salesians. During a third expedition Fr Zeman with the other fugitives was arrested. He endured a severe trial during which he was described as a traitor to the fatherland and a Vatican spy and was condemned to death. He accepted his calvary with a great spirit of sacrifice and oblation: «Even if I lose my life I would not consider it wasted, knowing that at least one of those I helped has become a priest in my place.»

- **The dimension of “Salesian paternity and maternity”:** after the great example of paternity in Don Bosco, we recall among others, Saint Mary Domenica Mazzarello, Blessed Michael Rua, Blessed Philip Rinaldi, Blessed Joseph Calasanz, Venerable Mamma Margaret, Venerable Vincent Cimatti, Venerable Teresa Valsè, Venerable Augustus Arribat, the Servant of God Fr Charles Braga, the Servant of God Fr Andrew Majcen...
- **The episcopal dimension:** in the varied examples of holiness that flourished at the school of Don Bosco, there are a significant number of bishops who incarnated in a special way pastoral charity, typical of the Salesian charism, in the episcopal ministry: Louis Versiglia (1873-1930), Martyr and Saint; Louis Olivares (1873-1943), Venerable; Stephen Ferrando (1895-1978), Venerable and Founder; Octavius Ortiz Arrieta (1878-1958), Venerable; Augustus Hlond (1881-1948), Venerable, cardinal; Anthony de Almeida Lustosa (1886-1974), Servant of God; Orestes Marengo (1906-1998), Servant of God.
- **The dimension of “charismatic sonship”.** It is also very interesting to notice that we venerate some saints who shared with Don Bosco some stages of life, appreciated his holiness, his apostolic and educational fruitfulness, but then followed their own path with evangelical freedom and became in their turn founders, with their own perceptive intuitions, a genuine love for the poor and unlimited trust in Providence: Saint Leonardo Murialdo, Saint Louis Guanella, Saint Louis Orione.

This situation that has been described is so beautiful, that it fills us with a sense of responsibility and also encouragement. It can clearly be seen that we are the depositories of a precious inheritance which deserves to be better known and appreciated. The danger is to reduce this heritage of holiness to liturgical celebrations, not fully appreciating its potentiality in the areas of the spiritual, pastoral, ecclesial, educative, cultural, historical, social, missionary mission. The Saints, Blesseds, Venerables and Servants of God are precious nuggets that have been extracted from

the darkness of the mine so that they will shine out and reflect in the Church and in the Salesian Family the splendour of truth and the love of Christ.

- **The pastoral aspect** of these people is connected to their effectiveness as successful examples of Christianity lived in the particular socio-cultural and political situations of the world, the Church and the Salesian Family itself.
- **The spiritual aspect** involves the invitation to imitate their virtues as the source of the inspiration and of the planning ability for our style of life and for our mission. The pastoral and spiritual work involved in a cause is a genuine form of *education to holiness*, to which, given our charism, we ought to be particularly sensitive and attentive.

I end this commentary on the Strenna with the extensive and up-to-date information from our Postulation Office. It will certainly be of great interest to our Salesian Family and especially to all the groups in this beautiful tree of Salesianity who can see one or other of their members included in one of the processes. As Don Rua wrote, the holiness of us all his sons and daughters will be a proof of the holiness lived by and handed down to us by Don Bosco himself, the beloved Father of the whole Salesian Family spread around the world.

My dear brothers and sisters I can confidently state that the greatest and the most pressing need that we have today in our Salesian world is not to do more things, not to plan or replan initiatives, to open new foundations... but rather to show what our lives individually and collectively communicate, our way of living the Gospel which develops and expands in time as the continuation of the way Jesus lived³⁹. What really is at stake is our holiness!

We are saints, as was our Father and the Founder of our beautiful Salesian Family which today is spread throughout the world!

³⁹ Cf. VC, 62.

Pope John Paul II, today a saint, made an enthusiastic appeal to us that although at the time was addressed to the Salesians, equally applies to the whole Salesian Family in general and to each one of its groups. Let us listen to it once again as a word addressed to each one of us and to our Institute. This is what he said:

You want to «propose once again with courage “tending towards holiness” as the principal response to the challenges of the contemporary world. In short it is a matter not so much of taking up new activities as of living and bearing witness to the Gospel without any compromises so as to encourage towards holiness those young people that you meet. Salesians for the third millennium! May you be enthusiastic teachers and guides, saints and formers of saints as was St John Bosco»⁴⁰.

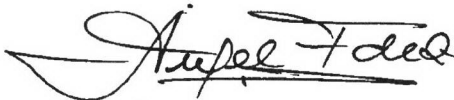
Let us ask Mary our Mother and the Help of Christians that she may grant us the light necessary to see clearly and to follow faithfully with all our hearts this path of life. May she give her support to the commitment of each one and of the whole Salesian Family along the path of Salesian holiness for the sake of those to whom we are sent and for our own.

May she, the Mother, expert in the Spirit, work in us the marvels of grace that she has worked in all our saints.

May the Help of Christians accompany and guide us.

I wish you a year full of the fruits of holiness.

Affectionately,



Fr Ángel FERNÁNDEZ ARTIME, sdb
Rector Major

⁴⁰ JOHN PAUL II, *Message of H.H. John Paul II at the beginning of the GC25*, in GC25, 140.