THE RECTOR MAJOR’S MESSAGE

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THE TSUNAMI OF HOPE

The land of sorrow and death today hosts a house of affectionate rebirth and well-founded hope thanks to the sons of Don Bosco.

Dear friends of Don Bosco’s charism, I offer you my cordial greetings, as I do every month. You certainly know that one of the most beautiful components of friendship is to be able to share one’s feelings, joys, and anxieties. Therefore, I want to share with you the experience I recently had among my Salesian brothers and sisters in Thailand.

I went to that fascinating part of the world to animate and encourage the Salesian community and works that have flourished there for a long time. Among the objectives of my visit was one in particular: to know a small but beautiful Salesian presence located in a place of intense sorrow—today a place of life—right where one of the saddest pages of modern history was written. That corner of the world suffered the most serious natural disaster of the modern era, the tsunami of December 26, 2004.

**The tsunami claimed some 230,000 victims**, thousands more missing, beaches, lives, entire regions completely destroyed—vanished into thin air. Waves were never seen so high, some up to 50 feet. Entire hotel complexes were wiped out, along with thousands of tourists who had come from all over the world to spend the holiday season.

Right here, in the area of Khao Lak, one of the most affected, in a small fishing village that’s also a tourist town, a “paradise” especially for foreigners, the dead and missing amounted to almost 8,000 people—an immense tragedy.

At that time, Fr. Chavez, my predecessor as Rector Major, asked the Salesian provincial of Thailand to act immediately to take many of the orphan victims of the tsunami into a new Salesian presence.

Until then, there were no Salesians in that area of Thailand. But with the spirit and dynamism that Don Bosco bequeathed to us, everything was taken care of. In a very short time at least 117 boys and girls had a home in which a large family welcomed them, gave them security, and even amid the grief, gave them the possibility of looking at life with hope.

The years have passed, and those boys and girls have grown up. They’ve been able to receive an education, and today they are women and men with their own families and satisfying lives. It became a blessing even in the midst of tragedy.

**The miracle of a new life**

Today, 18 years later, there are no more orphans of that tsunami at Khao Lak. But we can ask, what happened to this Salesian presence?

That’s what I saw with my own eyes. When we arrived, 42 children and adolescents between six and 15 years old were waiting for us. They are living a beautiful experience of friendship and family. They’re organized in five charming hexagonal houses in which they have at their disposal a kitchen, laundry, toilets, showers, a study room, a dining room, and a small dormitory. Like the whole region, it’s heavenly. The vegetation is leafy and lush. I must admit that the heat is also strong and a little oppressive. A green hill “guards” the village from above. A little further on are long stretches of sand bordered by wooded hills, while the clean, warm water of the Indian Ocean runs along the coast. Next to the Salesian house is the public school which our boys and girls attend.

Who are these boys and girls? They have no connection with the tsunami of the sea, but rather with the tsunami of life, poverty, family breakdown. Generally, they don’t have parents; there are those who have the protection of a distant uncle or an even more distant, almost unknown, relative.

The Salesian house is an opportunity that transforms lives, that performs real “miracles.” Yes, I repeat the word: real “miracles.” Don’t be frightened by this. I can assure you that I was moved to know that the girls who are there, in this house that is now their home, have the opportunity to prepare happily for life, to feel cared for and protected, to be educated, to study ... sometimes at the highest levels. And do you know why I say it’s a miracle? Because without this opportunity, these 13-year-old youngsters could be forced to fall into a network of prostitution or child exploitation or be forced at the age of 14 to marry some elderly husband.

I thought: “This would be enough to demonstrate the value of the beautiful ideal of Don Bosco’s charism, which even today, 165 years later, is being incarnated and realized.”

I would add something else that I find wonderful. You might think that we have a Salesian community there, but it isn’t so. Our presences in Thailand and the needs to be attended to are so many, so different, so vast that we can’t reach them all with Salesian communities. But Salesian presences are staffed by Salesian educators of all kinds. In particular, at the Don Bosco House of Hope, two consecrated lay women are responsible for this educational presence and act as mothers 24 hours a day. There’s also a married couple, Salesian Cooperators, who take care of the administration, the shopping, everything needed, and there’s a lady, a real Mama Margaret, who’s an exceptional cook. The Salesian province makes sure that they don’t lack what they need. It’s a presence like many others and is cared for with the same affection.

Two last points. First, Salesian creativity enables these boys and girls to make high-quality handicrafts that they can sell. The proceeds are set aside and constitute the little fund that they’ll take with them when they leave the Salesian house. The Salesian province is also preparing a market where they can exhibit and sell everything they produce, especially to attract the many tourists.

Second, my heart was filled with joy when I learned that 12 percent of these boys and girls of Don Bosco go on to university, 15 percent continue their technical studies in our vocational schools, and more than 50 percent, after finishing public school, find a job with which to start their lives independently.

There I had not only a beautiful dream, but I found a reality that was very close to my heart. This is another of those good things, good news that exists, that develops, that doesn’t make noise but that makes the world more beautiful.

That’s why the sorrow of the tsunami today gives way to the beauty of hope.