The message of the Rector Major

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**WELCOME POPE FRANCIS!**

**THE GIFT OF A MARIAN AND MISSIONARY SPIRITUALITY**

When Monsignor Jorge Bergoglio was auxiliary bishop and then archbishop of Buenos Aires, every 24th of the month he used to drop at the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians, either by underground or by bus, so as to “salute the Mother, Help of Christians” and have a chat with Our Blessed Lady. The cardinal went during the hours that were not frequented by the faithful, he used to go high up in the chapel of this magnificent and imposing church, he used to kneel down on a bench hidden by a column and there, at the feet of the statue blessed by Don Bosco, he used to pray for a long time.

“He has a special affection towards the Help of Christians” states the parish priest, “and also towards the chapel of St. Anthony close by, where in 1908, thanks to a Salesian priest Lorenzo Massa, the football team San Lorenzo de Almagro was born. The Pope is a member of this football club and he also supports this team. It was actually Bergoglio who at the centenary celebrations of this football club asked the authorities to never remove the Help of Christians from its foundation. The red and blue of this football club were inspired by the mantle and dress of Our Blessed Lady.

It is perfectly natural that during his pilgrimage to Turin, the Pope will make a stop at the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians. He really wanted this trip, so as to express all his devotion towards Mary Help of Christians and Don Bosco.

Speaking to the members of GC 27 he said, “The evangelisation of youth is the mission the Holy Spirit entrusted you with, in the Church. May the experience of Don Bosco and his preventive system sustain you always in the task of living with the young. Your presence among them must be distinguished by that tenderness which Don Bosco called loving kindness, while you experiment with new forms of expression, yet knowing very well that the language of the heart is the fundamental language that draws you close to them and leads you to befriend them. The bicentenary since the birth of Don Bosco is the right moment to propose once again the charism of your founder. Mary Help of Christians has never faltered in offering her help during the life of the congregation, and she certainly won’t stop from doing so in the future.”

These words of the Pope, that reveal his deep knowledge of the Salesian charism, his deep appreciation for this gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church and his personal devotion to Mary Help of Christians, should be for us a stimulus to grow in our faithfulness towards the Pope and in an authentic Marian devotion.

**The roots of his Marian devotion**

In various writings, especially in the letters addressed to Fr. Cayetan Bruno and stored in the Salesian archives of Buenos Aires, Pope Francis describes his Marian devotion and the Salesian experience which his family passed on to him and made him live. In one of them he declares, “It is not strange that I speak affectionately of the Salesians because my family was spiritually nourished by the Salesians of San Carlos. As a child I learnt to go to the procession of Mary Help of Christians. When I was at Grandma’s house, I went to the oratory of St. Francis of Sales... They had taught us to ask for the ‘blessing of Mary Help of Christians’ every time we bade farewell to a Salesian.”

He was baptised at the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians and started to participate in the processions in her honour, accompanied by his maternal grandmother. These signs led him to the Salesian college of Ramos Mejia where he witnessed the testimony of many Salesians. Among all of these, the testimony of the missionary priest Enrique Pozzoli distinguishes itself. All these elements contributed in fortifying and deepening his Marian piety.

Accompanied by Fr. Pozzoli, his process of vocational discernment led him to pray and discover the will of God at the feet of the image of Mary Help of Christians, blessed by Don Bosco himself, in the Basilica of San Carlos.

He reminisces as he says, “A ‘Goodnight’ that left an impression was on the necessity of praying to the Blessed Virgin so as to understand one’s own vocation. I remember that during that night I prayed hard on my way to the dormitory... and from that night I never went to sleep without praying. It was the right psychological moment to give sense to the day, and to things.”

**His Marian devotion and his invitation to go the peripheries**

In the Pope’s writings, when he was still Cardinal of Buenos Aires, it is evident most of all that his Salesian experience strongly joins together Marian devotion together with sacramental life and the missionary drive. His devotion to Mary Help of Christians allowed him to fathom the missionary zeal of many sons of Don Bosco and members of the Salesian Family whom he got to know through the years.

In this key, keeping in mind his devotion to Mary Help of Christians, we can re-read these personal memories which he includes in one of his letters: “I saw that the blocks had no pastoral care; this worried me and we began to look after the children; on Saturday afternoons we taught them catechism, then we played etc. I realised that we professors had the vow to teach the doctrine to the children and to those who didn’t know it, and I myself started doing so together with the students. The whole thing grew: five big churches were built, the children of this area were organised ... and not only on Saturday afternoon and on Sunday morning... And then the accusation came that this was not the work the Jesuits should be doing, that I had salesianised the formation.”

This testimony of Pope Francis should stimulate us to launch once again our personal and communal devotion to Mary Help of Christians, as an essential element of our being disciples and missionaries of Jesus.

**Conclusion**

In this time, the Lord has given me the grace to come to know the Salesian work around the world. It has also given me the privilege to witness the action of Mary Help of Christians among us. She is the Virgin of difficult times who encourages us to go to the peripheries, following the invitation of Pope Francis. She is the Mother and the Shepherdess of Don Bosco’s dreams who continues to awaken in us a deep love for the Church and the Pope and a convinced pastoral work in favour of those less fortunate youth who are in situations of risk.

As children of Don Bosco, while thankful for the ecclesial moment we are presently living, I invite you to deepen our devotion to the Help of Christians and to grow in the awareness of being servants of the young, so as to truly live the strenna of this bicentenary year: *Like Don Bosco, with the young, for the young...*