MESSAGE OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

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That Young Man Said to Me:

“MY PASSION IS CHRIST.”

I think it has been many years since I have heard that expression from any young person, in such a casual context, and in the presence of his classmates (since some others had approached as we were speaking).

My dear friends and readers of the *Salesian Bulletin*,

We have begun a new year. We find ourselves in 2023. At least to me that sounds like an unimaginable number, perhaps “galactic time.” I don’t know if it is, but certainly we are living in the 21st century.

Nowadays many ways of living, of expressing oneself, of communicating have changed greatly. But we can still be surprised by something we experience, something we see, something we hear.

What I want to share with you now is something that I believe to be very opportune for this greeting for the *Salesian Bulletin* for the month of January, “Don Bosco’s Month” – as we are used to saying in Salesian colloquial language. A few weeks ago I visited the Salesian works in the United States of America. Very early on, I visited St. John Bosco High School in Bellflower, California, and spent several hours with hundreds of students – middle school children from St. Dominic Savio Grammar School and the high school students. Following that, there was a roundtable with 45 young people from the high school. We talked about their personal plans and dreams. They were very pleasant and enriching hours. At the end of the morning, the young people and I ate lunch on the patio. I was sitting at a wooden picnic table with four other Salesians, in the open air, on the patio, with my sandwich and a bottle of water. I greeted many young people, some sitting at tables, others standing, during this lunch period. At my table there were two open seats. At one point two young men came up and sat with us. Naturally, I spoke to them and struck up a conversation. Not even two minutes had elapsed when one of the young people said to me: “I want to ask you a question.” I replied, “Ask.”

* The young man inquired: “What do I have to do to become Pope? I want to be the Pope.”
* I was left with a surprised look on my face, even if I was smiling. I told him that I had never been asked that question before, and that I was surprised that he was so direct and decisive. I said that from among the 1,600,000,000 Catholics it is not so easy to become the Pope. Then I added something else to my answer. I said, “Look, you could start by becoming a Salesian.”
* In response to what he heard, the young man told me: “Well, I won’t say ‘NO,’” adding, “because, without a doubt, MY PASSION IS CHRIST.”

I have to tell you that in the face of such an answer, I was absolutely surprised, pleasantly surprised. I think it has been many years since I have heard that expression from any young person, in such a casual context, and in the presence of his classmates (since some others had approached as we were speaking).

I told my friend that I really liked his answer since I saw that he was absolutely sincere. And I added that if he gave me permission, I would like to comment on this dialogue of ours at some other time and place. I am doing so here.

At that moment my thoughts turned to Don Bosco. Surely Don Bosco would have greatly enjoyed a dialogue with a young man like this. Undoubtedly, many of the dialogues he had with Savio, Besucco, Magone, Rua, Cagliero, Francesia, and numerous others had a lot of the same: the desire of young people to do something beautiful with their lives.

I thought about how important it is still today, 163 years after the beginning of the Salesian Congregation, to continue to believe deeply that young people are good, that they have so many seeds of goodness in their hearts. They have dreams and plans that often carry with them much generosity and self-donation. How important it is to continue believing that it is God who carries out the good work in the hearts of each one of us, in each one of His sons and daughters.

It seems to me that today, in our times, we run a very great risk of becoming practical and efficient when looking at everything that happens to us and what we experience so that we lose the ability to surprise ourselves and others – and what is more worrisome – not to allow ourselves to be “surprised by God.”

That young man said he was fascinated by Jesus, to the point of saying that He was his passion in life. That same thing has happened, I think, with many of us, and with millions and millions of other people.

I invite you, friends who are readers of the *Salesian Bulletin*, friends of Don Bosco's charism, to join this numerous group of people who perhaps could be described as “naive” or “gullible” because we believe that there is so much good to look forward to and so many beautiful things of which to dream, to wish, and to commit ourselves.

I think that just as it was with Don Bosco yesterday, today there are thousands and thousands of young people who want to see Jesus, who need to experience friendship with Him, and who want others to accompany them on this beautiful journey.

Happy feast of Don Bosco, the Saint of Youth, the “Father and Teacher of the Young!” (Pope Saint John Paul II)

Don Angel