The Message of the Rector Major

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CHEERFUL AND SERENE

EVEN THOUGH LIVING IN A WHEELCHAIR

Encounters on Epiphany with amazing people

who have good hearts and luminous faith

Dear friends, readers of the *Salesian Bulletin*,

I greet you cordially and extend my best wishes to you in this new year 2024 that we inaugurated just a short while ago. I wish with all my heart that it will be a year filled with God’s presence in our lives and with blessings.

You know that I’m accustomed, whenever possible, to write this greeting to share something that I’ve experienced and that has had an impact on me for one reason or another.

On the Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord (January 6), I was in my hometown, Luanco-Asturias, feeling very connected with my roots, with the sea and nature that saw my birth and my growth, as well as with my countrymen. On that day, I went to celebrate Holy Mass. The pastor of my town kindly granted me this privilege while he went to another of the parishes entrusted to him. In this way, we were able to celebrate this solemnity in more Christian communities.

What I want to tell you is that it was a morning in which the Lord had prepared some unexpected encounters for me. As I learned about the situation of some people, the certainty of how the Lord consoles and comforts us even when pain, sickness, or limitation have settled into some lives was made more real for me.

Before going to celebrate Mass, I began my journey that morning by visiting an elderly person who had been a doctor in my village for many years – a great family doctor, a believer – and, by the way, a Salesian past pupil from Salamanca. For years and years he was one of the figures I heard my parents talk about when they would sometimes go to the doctor. I made this family visit to him in response to his daughter’s invitation and met this man of faith who told me that, as a doctor, he could give only a little of the great amount he had received from God. Now, with a grave illness, he only asked the Good Lord to prepare him for the Encounter with Him. So great was his conviction and his peace that I went to celebrate Mass having already received my dose of “*la parolina all’orecchio*” (a “brief word whispered in the ear” – a phrase Don Bosco used to describe one means of exercising the Preventive System in relationships).

At Mass, I met, as on other occasions, a young man no more than 32 years old who, because of an accident, has been living in a wheelchair for years. Even being in a wheelchair, he has gone with his mother to India to make contact with the poorest. My young friend impressed me with his serenity, his smile, and the joy that lives in his heart. It is with this same serenity, smile, and joy that he participates in daily Mass and receives the Lord. Certainly, this young friend of mine could have reason to decry his “bad luck.” But, even worse, he could blame God for it because people often do that when something is beyond them. But no, he simply lives without feeling sorry for himself and being thankful for the gift of life, even in a wheelchair. When I’d see him at the end of each Mass, we’d always greet each other. His words were always ones of gratitude; yet it is rather I who should thank *him* for being a great living witness of faith in the Lord of Life, which he shows to us all.

That’s how beautiful and impressive my Epiphany day had been up until the moment when, at the exit of the church, a middle-aged couple greeted me and gave me their wishes for the new year. They also had joyful faces – the husband with more joy and serenity (who was suffering from cancer) than his beloved wife (who suffered for him). Still, both spoke to me of their certainty that they must live this moment and this illness in trust and abandonment to God.

Finally, among all these greetings, there was still one lacking – that of an elderly mother who recalled to me that a year ago she lost one of her sons. He’d been ill and died, and now she’s suffering from cancer. She asked me only to keep her before the Lord. I asked her how she felt, and she told me that she’s in pain, but very comforted by our Faith. I can assure you that I was speechless owing to the intense emotions that had come and overwhelmed me throughout that morning due to these living witnesses.

I could not but promise my prayers to each one, and I’ve kept that promise while becoming aware, yet again and more strongly, of how the Lord continues to do great things in the humble, in those most affected by life’s situations, and in those who feel that He alone is truly their consolation and help.

I find all this so important that I can’t keep it to myself. Sometimes it seems that we can’t write about these things nowadays because “it’s not fashionable,” or because we talk about other things. But I rebel against everything that prevents me from sharing and witnessing to what is important, profound, and hopeful in our lives. I don’t know why, but I have the sense that many readers feel in tune with what I’m sharing and that I myself have experienced because what’s being narrated here, what happened on an Epiphany morning in a small village near the sea, doesn’t happen only there. No, this is all a part of our human condition, and the Lord is always at our side through all of it, if we allow Him to be.

I wish you all the best, dear friends. Let us continue to believe that, at all times, even in the most difficult moments, we have reason for hope.