**THE MESSAGE OF THE RECTOR MAJOR**

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MUCH GREATER THAN

THE HILLS OF MONFERRATO

All of Don Bosco’s pedagogy is encapsulated in these autumn outings: familiarity and camaraderie; joy and celebration; a time to walk, as one walks along the paths of life; space for conversation and friendship; and Don Bosco’s good and kind presence.

It was the month of August 2015. More precisely, it was the afternoon of August 15th and we were celebrating the 200th anniversary of Don Bosco’s birth with 5,200 young people from all over the world in the International Youth Encounter (SYM DON BOSCO).

Initially, with an idealism far removed from reality, we on the planning team thought it would be possible to walk with those 5,200 young people from Turin to the hills of Becchi, the place where John Bosco first saw the light of day. The distance would be about 35 kilometers. But we soon realized that we had to give up our plan. It would be very difficult to keep up a good pace with so many young people. In the end, we decided to do something very simple, which is directly connected with many of Don Bosco's autumn walks with his boys. We started the walk in Castelnuovo Don Bosco, the town where he was baptized and where he celebrated one of his first Masses.

We walked those eight kilometers that separated us from Becchi together with that great column of young people—but under a torrential downpour all the way. The rain had been predicted—and it came. But this mattered nothing to us and much less to those young people.

I could not stop imagining Don Bosco surrounded by his boys, carrying baskets of bread for their lunch or snack, and musical instruments to cheer them up wherever they went.

Do you know that behind it all is a precious vision—one both educational and spiritual?

I could continue to develop this thought myself in telling the story, but I have chosen to leave it to one of my Salesian brothers, José Miguel Núñez, who has an extraordinary talent for writing:

For many years, Don Bosco used to celebrate the Feast of Our Lady of the Rosary at Becchi, accompanied by a handful of boys who followed him with unimaginable joy. They were the best boys of the Oratory. For all of them, it was a reward to be with Don Bosco for a few days on vacation. In the beginning there were only a few, but soon they numbered more than 100. His first stable destination was the land of his birth and his beloved family home. Joseph, his brother, gladly welcomed that horde of boys and accommodated them as best he could in barns and stables, taking care to provide what was necessary. Certainly, there would be inconveniences, but good Joseph knew how to look the other way and make things run as smoothly as possible. After 1858, Don Bosco established true “marches” through the villages of Piedmont and the neighboring provinces. He himself planned the itineraries and entrusted his boys to friends and benefactors who welcomed them into their homes or prepared some snacks for that “battle-ready army”—whenever it came to quelling hunger. Fruit, freshly baked bread, or a piece of cheese was generously offered by the locals, who were enthusiastic about the hustle and bustle that this priest brought for he had the reputation of being a saint. Though he tried to downplay this fervor, more often than not it was without much success.

**The farmers left their tasks**

Beautiful testimonies of those joyful days of celebration and of unforgettable experiences when accompanying Don Bosco for so many young people have been passed down to us. One of these boys, Anfossi, wrote this:

I always remember those trips. They filled me with joy and wonder. I accompanied Don Bosco through the hills of Monferrato from 1854 to 1860. We were about a hundred young people and we saw how the fame of sanctity already surrounded Don Bosco. His arrival in the villages was a triumph. The parish priests of the surrounding area and usually the civil authorities also came out to meet him. The people looked out of the windows or went out into the streets and the farmers left their tasks to see the Saint…

All of Don Bosco’s pedagogy is encapsulated in these autumn outings: familiarity and camaraderie; joy and celebration; a time to walk, as one walks along the paths of life; space for conversation and friendship; and Don Bosco’s good and kind presence, Like that of an adult accompanying another along his/her journey, he has a good and kind word for everyone and extends a gesture of closeness and solidarity with those who show greater difficulty in reaching the goal.

The music and the celebration flooded their hearts and reawakened enthusiasm in those young people. They were happy to be close to this father whom they admired so much and to whom they were so grateful. In perfect marching formation and playing their musical instruments, the advent of Don Bosco’s boys in those small villages of Piedmont must have been quite an event.

**God walked with them**

The boys were filled with wonder and joy. To Don Bosco, it seemed as if he were in heaven as he rejoiced at the smiles of his young people and their festive songs. Prayer and benediction with the Blessed Sacrament in the village church were a constant.

Their father's affection was rendered worthy of their trust thanks to the familiarity they experienced along the way. Without knowing it, many of those young people would continue to travel with him throughout their lives—much greater than the hills of Monferrato.

I am thinking now about how important it is for us to invite our adolescents and young adults, our “digital natives” who live immersed in the digital world, to experience the richness of personal encounters (and not through a telephone screen): the precious exercise of listening to each other; of laughing together; of being silent during a simple prayer; of marveling at a sunset; of experiencing the joy of greeting the elderly who are resting for a while on their porch, watching people pass by—they who have already lived life abundantly, thanks be to God.

I leave you these words which the Pope addressed to us Salesians at our General Chapter: “I like to think that we are still very capable of dreaming and of helping others dream.”

With all my heart, I wish you a happy summer.

Don Angel