THE MESSAGE OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

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AFTER THE TSUNAMI

The pandemic has changed the way in which we relate with the world, others, and ourselves. We need to rebuild and to begin again in greater solidarity and with greater awareness so as to rebound from a silent calamity marked by pain, confinement, struggle, and fear. What would Don Bosco do if he were alive today?

Dear Friends, readers of the *Salesian Bulletin,*

Let me begin my letter today with a short wisdom story:

*A tightrope walker stretched out his rope, at a discreet height, over a bustling marketplace. Some jugglers put on their act before his, but when their show lasted longer than expected, the square was enveloped in darkness. The tightrope walker would have to put on his show using reflected light.*

*In the subdued light of the twilight hour, the tightrope artist did not realize that a little boy had tranquilly followed him up the ladder. When he took his first steps on the rope, he realized the boy was behind him.*

*“What are you doing up here?” he asked the boy.*

*“I want to walk the rope with you.”*

*“Are you not afraid?”*

*“As long as I am with you, no.”*

*The spectators held their breath as the tightrope walker placed the little boy on his shoulders and, in order to distract his attention from the dizzying height and darkness, said to him, “Look at how beautiful the stars are up there! Keep your eyes fixed on those stars.”*

*As long as the boy kept his eyes fixed on the brilliant splendor of the twinkling stars, his thoughts did not go to the danger of the hesitant steps along that thin rope or to the huge drop beneath, but he allowed himself to be carried the entire length of the square.*

Don Bosco would have been the first to “climb up to the rope” with his children and young people. He would have been the first to be present to them and make use of all his abilities, creativity, and skills in his preventive fashion to move the young to hope. He would have believed in them, offering them the chance to be leaders and speaking to each of them about the joy in living and in growing in harmony, forming them to make a courageous commitment for the sake of others, especially of those most in need.

This isHope for our day: the opportunity to grow and to learn together as a team, comprised of students, families, educators, and specialists. We must value what we have gained from this crisis: a healthier environment, slower mode of life, being together as a family, and the many creative and innovative initiatives—virtual ones, e.g.—on the part of so many educators so they could respond rapidly and efficaciously to the needs of their students.

Things are different now, and so are we. Nothing is as it was before: life, relationships, space, and time. We do not wish to return to where we were but we want to change for the better, to renew, to create, and to believe in ourselves, our resources, and in education as a key factor in change.

**We need creativity** in order to devise new paradigms and new responses—the boldness of a life which is the bearer of something truly new. We need a vision of a new life which will become reality because the task is arduous and will take a long time. We do not need things that are improvised on the spur-of-the-moment, but we need the security found in our witness and in the joy of our Hope—in that which makes us who we are. More than ever, our presence and our witness are necessary. And more than ever before the young cannot be left to their own devices. This was never so at any time, but it is not so now in an evermore imperative way, for they await us with open arms so they may live their lives again with the strength of a love that is capable of overcoming everything. It is only love that conquers all. We need to dream anew the dream of the young.

I hope that we have learned to be more aware of the connections among all humans, more determined to educate all our children and young people well, fully aware of the power of human gentleness, and more focused on working with families and other organizations so we may educate to the future.

In our Salesian Preventive System, this means:

**Total, cordial welcome**. The conversations that Don Bosco had with the young reveal his capacity to give a complete and cordial welcome to them, something that is a fundamental element of our Salesian educational relationship. Through his informal, situational, and friendly model of communication, Don Bosco reached their hearts, overcoming all barriers of “social distancing. ” [“See to it that all with whom you come in contact become your friends” (*The* *Biographical Memoirs of St. John Bosco.* Volume X, p. 445.)] In this way, all will feel welcomed and loved (every boy felt that he was Don Bosco’s “favorite”). Where human development is concerned, what matters is that the individual be the actor in his/her life and history.

**Empathic harmony and openness.** To his Salesians, Don Bosco always recommended being close to the young at all times, a closeness rich with attention and gentleness.

**Knowledge of the young person and his/her abilities.** In Don Bosco’s pedagogical system, the young person is always able to find within him/herself those personal resources which, once put into play together with God’s grace, will bring him/her to propose and to reach new goals for his/her own improvement and self-mastery.

**Educational and pastoral experience of daily life**. Educational accompaniment is realized in daily life: on the playground, e.g., for it is that informal space *par excellence* wherein the educator can get to know and accompany the young. The extraordinary takes place in the ordinary: during the moments of daily life, the educator and the student are both hard committed to each other in frequent conversations, in sharing work and leisure in a relationship of getting to know each other, and often also one of deep friendship, which prepares the way to trust, dedication, and docility (“Make yourself loved and not feared”).

**Educational environment and family style**. Seeking to imitate what he experienced in his own family, Don Bosco wanted to transplant this family spirit to daily life at Valdocco. This sharing of life between the educators and the young had to be like that which is lived between parents and their children.

**Use of technology** that cannot substitute human teachers: education will remain (and ought to remain) an activity of high-intensity human interaction. In the future, the principal challenge, therefore, will be to find the right balance in using technological tools while continuing to invest and believe in the human factor.

**Prevention as our method.** The concept of “prevention” as spoken of by Don Bosco is not “welfare” nor is it purely “protective” by nature; it aims, instead, to empower others so they may overcome negative factors capable of destroying the person.

In the case of COVID-19, new educational strategies are necessary so as to sensitize and prepare the students—our adult citizens of tomorrow—to seek out solutions that will take into account respect for life, sustainable development, and ethical commitment.

**Personal accompaniment** as spiritual direction: sanctity. Don Bosco the educator did not limit himself to the human level but went beyond to the spiritual one. His goal is for total happiness (for Paradise). It is to this end that he will “go to the point of foolhardiness” walking the ever-risky and difficult tightrope. On Don Bosco’s shoulders, we, too, can go forward to the future fearlessly—keeping our eyes fixed firmly on the Stars of Heaven.

Affectionately,

Don Angel