THE MESSAGE OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

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THE LITTLE CITY OF THE BEATITUDES

Within the megapolis of Chennai (Madras), amid the enormous industrial complexes and magnificent temples and in the exciting atmosphere of city life, there lies a luminous sliver of truly Salesian goodness.

The story began many years ago following the infamous First World War, in a little town high in the mountains of Italy, in a dignified poor family of thirteen children.

One evening, after the children had been served their portion of polenta, one of them realized that their parents did not have any. “Why do you and Daddy have empty plates?” he asked his mom. She answered: “We are not hungry tonight.” “Then neither am I hungry,” he said, as he ran out into the barnyard in the darkness of the night. His mom caught up to him followed by his dad. It was then that little Orfeo said decisively: “If I become a priest, I will work only for the poor, for those who are hungry, just as I am hungry this evening!”

Orfeo Mantovani entered the Salesian novitiate and left for the Salesian missions in India in 1934. India became his second and most beloved homeland. His bishop, Louis Mathias, was another Salesian giant. He had the beard of the patriarchs and was a courageous man. He immediately granted Father Mantovani his wish by entrusting to him the most squalid areas of Madras.

Don Orfeo got to work immediately. On ground next to a train station, blackened by old coal deposits, he started to gather street urchins, those who were abandoned by everyone and who could not take it no longer. Among them, he launched his challenge to the “black tiger” – the desperate hunger of run-down neighborhoods.

In this way, the Salesian with the meek smile founded, a little at a time as Don Bosco did, his Center for social relief. It had day and night elementary schools, a free clinic and hospital, a leprosarium, and a festive oratory. After he died, another Salesian took his place, then another, and another after him. This is the beauty of a large religious family. The site became a citadel of loving charity.

Just a few weeks ago I entered that citadel in Chennai. For me, it was a magnificent experience. The work bears the name “The Beatitudes” and is known as the Salesian house into which one enters at age three and from which one leaves only at the end of one’s life, for the meeting with our Lord. They say here: under Don Bosco’s smiling gaze “from the womb to the tomb.”

Perhaps what I am writing will surprise you. I admired the work of the Salesians, the service they give to thousands of families, children, teens, young adults, and the elderly. This is all a fruit of the collaboration among three congregations in the Salesian Family: this is its freshness and richness! Here the Salesians of Don Bosco, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, and the congregation of the Sisters of Maria Auxiliatrix, the SMA; all work together.

Beginning at three years of age, children attend the grammar school run by the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, who also care for teenage girls. The Sisters of Maria Auxiliatrix assist elderly men and women who have no source of welfare and no other place to live out the end of their days. The Salesian priests and brothers care for boys and girls of varying ages as well as taking in street children. Of course, besides all this, they visit the extremely poor families in the area and take care of the parish.

All that happens there makes it seem to be, in a certain sense, a “little Salesian city.” I remained profoundly touched and promised them that I would speak of it to make it known because, as we learned from Don Bosco, the good that is done must be made known.

I appreciate and value very much the collaboration that has begun among these three congregations of our Salesian Family. What matters here is not who owns the land or the buildings but the good that is done – and is done together – going out to meet the poorest and most fragile (here we think of those elderly persons who make us understand what frailty and insecurity are). If it were not for that little paradise called “The Beatitudes,” which God had in mind for them, frailty, poverty, and insecurity would have the last word.

Whoever reflects on the Village of the Beatitudes cannot but marvel at the results brought about by a little shared love. Every day, food for 300 elderly persons is guaranteed, over 1,000 children are served, and over 15,000 people find relief for various needs, “all at zero cost.” Those who enter into this Village of the Beatitudes see with their own eyes these “fifty years of daily miracles.”

The mottoes that characterize this house are: “Serving those who are ill is the best prayer.” (Fr. Mantovani) “No one has the right to be happy all by himself.” “It is possible to give without love, but it is not possible to love without giving.”

The people hold that the Village of the Beatitudes is a tangible expression of the Salesians’ fidelity to serving the poor and also a concrete manifestation of Divine Providence on their behalf. For the young of the shanty towns, it is an oasis. It is a church, school, playground on which to learn how to play soccer, a gymnasium, and a home.

To think that in Chennai we have fifteen Salesian communities. Among these there are parishes, middle and high schools, technical schools, oratories, youth centers, social assistance centers for children and youths at risk, houses of formation, and even a seminary. The archbishop, the clergy, and the laity, both Christian and non-Christian, greatly appreciate and value the many works carried out by the Salesians, in particular their concern for youth ministry, for the mission carried out for service to the poorest, and for the excellent flagship schools that provide quality instruction for all.

All this speaks to me of the beauty of the Gospel that is passed down throughout the world, often with the strength of charity carried out in silence; it speaks to me of Don Bosco and how important it was to him to reach the most remote corners of the world. I never tire of recalling that our Salesian Family, Don Bosco’s sons and daughters, is present today in 134 countries, 72% of all the countries in the world – and that this began in a time when there but few Salesians. Notwithstanding the small number, Don Bosco still sent out his first missionary group to Argentina to go to the Italian immigrants and then to reach the indigenous tribes. If we had remained only in Italy, Don Bosco’s charism would not be what it is today.

I end this writing with the words spoken one day by a Hindu public official: “If the Christian religion can produce men such as Don Mantovani, it has to be divine.”

Affectionately,

Don Angel