THE MESSAGE OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

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"MAY WE ALLOW OURSELVES TO BE SURPRISED BY GOD’S SMILE."

Receive my affectionate greeting friends, readers of the *Salesian Bulletin*, the publication so dear to Don Bosco.

Today I would like to share with you the message found in the title, whose author, I must admit, I am not. It was Pope Francis who chose “the smile” as the guiding theme of his Christmas greetings last year to the employees in Vatican City and their families. He chose this theme precisely in a time when a smile is too often missing because humane and respectful behavior is often missing.

Very often, I reflect a bit on those realities that surprise me. Today, let me speak to you of this one: though as human beings we are aware that affability treating others with respect, displaying signs of delicate attention and respect, and sharing expressions of brotherhood, solidarity, and Love in all circles of our lives are things that make our hearts swell and give fullness to our lives. Yet, as groups of peoples, regions, and nations, we struggle to create communion among peoples by joining forces in those things that help make us more human.

This reality is not restricted to the great issues of “macropolitics” or “macroeconomics,” which often focus on self-serving interests that are often in conflict with each other. No, it also occurs frequently within families, among siblings, among relatives. We all know that this is the case.

While we do not ignore the presence of this reality in our midst, we know that Christmas, the Birth of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, reminds us that Salvation has been given to us and that He has given us this gift so that we continue to build a world where God, with His Love for us, may be ever more present. Of course, sometimes it is obvious that this is difficult for us to do because we have full freedom to make and to undo, to build and to tear down, to add and to subtract. For this reason, while we are able to make the path to a better Humanity, sometimes we seem to take many steps backwards.

Therefore, I invite you this Christmas (albeit still in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic or at least of its threatening presence, even if it is now greatly under control and we have the ability to navigate in the midst of it) *not to give up allowing ourselves to be surprised by that smile of God* that translates into so many simple things. One beautiful human example is our behavior when in the presence of a baby: we smile automatically so as to elicit his/her smile. In turn, when that smile brightens and spreads over his/her face, it brings out great joy in us for it is a sign of simplicity in all its beauty and innocence.

"Jesus is the Smile of God," says Pope Francis, “because He came to give us the Love of the Father.” Mary and Joseph received His Message for they recognized in His smiles God’s mercy to them and to all those who were waiting for the Messiah.

And we, too, now during this Christmas season, can feel the presence of Jesus, the Incarnate Son of God, smiling upon us and upon the poor of the earth, upon all those who hope for salvation, who hope for a more fraternal world—one in which war and violence cease and where every man and every woman can live with the dignity that is theirs as a son or a daughter of God.

**A carpet at Valdocco**

Now I wish to share with you something that I myself witnessed a few weeks ago and touched my heart, filling it with a serene peace. You will understand immediately why. I was in Valdocco at three in the afternoon, passing through the courtyard when something or, better, someone attracted my attention. I focused my attention and saw that a young person was standing in the small portico under Don Bosco's rooms. He was praying. I saw that it was a Muslim who had laid his carpet on the ground, directed towards Mecca, and was kneeling and standing up, offering up his prayers according to his religion. He was communicating not with “His God,” but with the One God, in the way and manner that his religion expresses it. He was very focused on his prayer, and he cared little who passed or not, and surely he did not realize that I was contemplating him for I did so without disturbing him and with great respect.

I had just left the Pinardi chapel—through the grace of God’s Providence—where the Blessed Sacrament, the Lord Jesus present in the Eucharist, is exposed throughout the day. I thought it was beautiful that Valdocco and the portico where Don Bosco had stood so many times with His boys and where they had prayed was the same portico that now received and gave a home to the prayer of that young Muslim. God's smile is a smile shining on all His sons and daughters of our world. We are all the fruit of His Love and His Creation.

Like this portico in Valdocco, the Salesian houses of all the Congregations of our Salesian Family throughout the world welcome tens of thousands of boys, girls, and young people every day. There, in these houses, they prepare themselves for life, grow in humanity and in faith, certainly living and expressing their families’, tribes’, or ethnicities’ religion, but always as sons and daughters of the One and Only God.

It is for this reason, my dear friends, that I am sending you my Christmas greetings, laden with all the humanity and faith of which I am capable. I continue to invite you and so many others to continue to be people who believe that the world needs our small contribution towards building a humanity that is ever more in conformity with God's vision of us.

I wish you a Holy Christmas, with Pope Francis’ own greeting:

*“Take this wish to your loved ones at home, especially the sick and elderly: may they feel the caress of your smile. Every smile is a caress. To smile is to caress; to caress with the heart and to caress with the soul. And let's remain united in prayer."*

May God bless you and may you have a holy and beautiful Christmas.

Don Angel