

Rejuvenate the face of the Church, the Mother of our faith.

Commentary of the Rector Major

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'Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her'. So that he might present her to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish (Eph. 5,25.27).

On the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the conclusion of Vatican Council II, in the light of *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes* which helped us see that the Church is the People of God, the Body of Christ, Mother of believers, servant of the world, and aware that it is the Church's task to reflect the light of Christ in every historical period, to make his face shine also before the generations of the new millennium (NMI 16), as the Salesian Family we commit ourselves to Rejuvenating the face of the Church, the Mother of our faith

There was a man sent by God whose name was Angelo; or rather, whose name was John. Yes, John XXIII, the good Pope who one day was prompted by the Spirit to rise up and proclaim a new Spring for the Church. With an unexpected gesture he not only opened the windows but threw wide the doors as well so that the Spirit could enter. The Second Vatican Council which he convoked was like a cyclone entering unexpectedly into a closed and blocked up environment, *the rush of a mighty wind* (Acts 2,2) as in the Cenacle on the day of Pentecost.

On the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the ending of the Second Vatican Council, and in the light of *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes*, which have enabled us to see the Church as a Mystery, the People of God, the Body of Christ, the Mother of believers and Servant of the world, we are conscious as members of the Salesian Family that 'it is the Church's task to reflect the light of Christ in every historical period, to make his face shine also before the generations of the new millennium' (NMI 16). And so, reliving that extraordinary event, we commit ourselves to

**Rejuvenating the face of the Church,
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Rejuvenating the Church: a gift and a task

We could not fail to commemorate with grateful hearts this anniversary of the conclusion of Vatican II, a great event of the Spirit that was a real Pentecost for the universal Church. Already my predecessor, Fr Egidio Viganò had declared that it would be our guiding compass for the third millennium. Today our task is to take up and bring to fruition the dynamism stemming from the Council, an authentic blast of fresh air which filled with the Holy Spirit the lungs of the Church, in whose continued renewal we commit ourselves to collaborate. The Council's Constitutions *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes*, enriched by the recent reflection of *Novo millennio ineunte*, will be our point of reference.

Unlike the previous Strenna this new one will not be followed by a *pastoral proposal*. At the time I explained that such a proposal would be with us for several years; it was impractical to think that the commitments it suggested could be put into effect in a short time. And so for this year too it continues to be the objective and point of reference for the pastoral initiatives to be realised in the different places where the Congregation and the Salesian Family carry out their service to the Church and to the young. This is true to an even greater extent with regard to our commitment for youthful holiness, which finds in our pastoral plan its focus and in the present Strenna a great incentive.

Rejuvenating the Church is both an exciting gift and a demanding task; but what does rejuvenating mean? I will begin from the negative point of view of what it does *not* mean. It is not a matter of a face-lift or cosmetic surgery, such as would be well suited to today's consumer culture of the ephemeral and the transitory, but hardly in harmony with the renewing power of the Spirit. Nor is it a question of making a few external changes or superficial adjustments, so as to make it seem that the Church has been updated to modern times in the manner of other social institutions. To make her beautiful and attractive we have to provide her with new vigour as does the Holy Spirit; we must do what Jesus does: love the Church and spend ourselves for her.

The theme of this year's Strenna is best explained by the passage in the Letter to the Ephesians, which says: '*Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her*'. *So that he might present her to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish* (Eph 5,25-27). This beautiful text is both constructive and intriguing; it needs to be studied, contemplated, and lived out. The fundamental meaning is evident: Christ loves the Church, he purifies her, sanctifies her and nourishes her. He loves her out of his goodness and not for his own satisfaction. The Church spoken of here is not an ideal or something abstract but the concrete Church in history. Christ transforms her to make her beautiful, resplendent, true and holy. He takes the initiative in her regard, and spares himself nothing to remove from her every spot and wrinkle.

This is our task: to love the Church as Christ loved her, to the extent of giving ourselves completely for her. The beauty of the Church's countenance must reflect the beauty of her Lord, the Crucified and Risen Christ. It is the beauty of the love revealed to us by Jesus in his passion, 'the fairest of the sons of men' (Ps 45,3), 'a man of sorrows, despised and rejected by men' (Is 53,3), 'by whose stripes we are healed' (Is 53,5c). It is the beauty of the love that in the resurrection could roll back the stone that closed the tomb and sit upon it, with the cloths that were wrapped round the crucified one left on the ground and the veil covering the face folded and set aside, thus inaugurating the new creation (Mk 16,2; Jn 20,6-7). This is the beauty that will save the world and that we are called upon to make shine out in the Church. It is not vanity; it is the beauty of love.

Our task is also to bring it about that the Church resembles ever more the '*new Jerusalem*' (cf. *Rev 21, 10-23*), coming down from heaven and adorned like a bride for her husband; to ensure that she may be a community renewed by the breath of the Spirit which animates her and makes everything

new; a community enriched by multiple charisms and ministries which keep it alive and dynamic; a community open and welcoming, especially to the poor, to whom it is sent and among whom it becomes credible and a beacon of light; a community that lives passionately for freedom, justice, peace and solidarity - values to which men and women of today are particularly sensitive; a community which is the leaven of hope for a society worthy of man and for a culture rich in ethical and spiritual values, to ensure that the Church becomes ever more a youthful Church, in which young people feel themselves at home as in a family.

The new Jerusalem is an image that speaks of an eschatological reality, that is, one that touches on the last things, that goes beyond what man can do by his own efforts. This heavenly Jerusalem is a gift of God reserved for the end of time. But it is not a Utopia. It is a reality that can begin to exist here and now. Wherever there is an effort to speak and work for peace and reconciliation, even temporary, in every kind of human community life corresponding to the values of the Gospel, there is a break through which even now gives grounds for hope. [\[1\]](#)

Rejuvenating the Church means making her return to her original youthful state; like the Churches of the Acts of the Apostles, of the Letters of St Paul, of the Book of Revelation, she lives by the strength of Easter and the power of Pentecost, she realises the truth of Christ and freedom of the Spirit; she recalls the 'first love' (cf. Hosea 2,9). A Church which returns to her apostolic roots is courageous in *martyrdom*, that is in bearing witness to Jesus and his Gospel even to the extent of giving up life itself. She is characterized by the *euangelia*, that is, the communication of the Gospel to all; evangelization is the reason for her existence, as is explicitly stated in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, the most important document on evangelization, promulgated by Paul VI ten years after the ending of the Council. She is brought together by *leitourgia*, because salvation is not just a victory to be gained but a reality to be celebrated with gratitude and made present and effective in every time and place. She is committed in *diakonia*, the significance of which is clearly dealt with in *Gaudium et Spes*: the Church is not the mistress of the world, but its servant.

Rejuvenating the Church means making it a home for the young. The Church will be young when it includes young people, especially nowadays when at least in some parts of the world - there is a growing disaffection because of the Church's must be devised to bring in young people and lead them to become Church. At this point the enlightening image of the disciples of Emmaus comes to mind once again: it helps us to understand the Church as mother and teacher, the travelling companion of all men and women who are looking for the meaning of life. She opens them to the revelation of God in Scripture, enlightens their minds and warms their hearts, offers the communion of the Body of Christ and so become community. It is a matter of making the Church the home of all who believe in the risen Christ and want to testify to their faith in him. The *Strenna*, therefore, is an invitation to make the Church young, and to make young people the Church.

John Paul II, in his message for the Fifth World Youth Day in 1990, wrote to all the world's youth telling them amongst other things: 'Take your place in the Church, which is not only for those to whom pastoral care is directed but especially for those who play an active part in her mission.' The Church is yours and, indeed, you *are* the Church. It is an invitation to the young in every place and time.

Footnotes

[\[1\]](#) C.M. MARTINI, *Perch la Bibbia il libro del futuro dell'Europa?*, Cesano Boscone, 9 May 2004.

[\[2\]](#) Cf. J. GALOT, *Il Cristo Rivelatore, fondatore della Chiesa e principio di vita*, in *Vaticano II - Bilancio e prospettive, venticinque anni dopo 1962-1987*, ed. R. LATOURELLE, Cittadella, Assisi 1987, pp. 343-360.

[\[3\]](#) *ibid* p. 347.

- [4] O. GONZLEZ, *La nuova coscienza della Chiesa*, in *La Chiesa del Vaticano II*, Opera collettiva diretta da G. BARANA, Vallecchi, Florence 1965, pp. 238-239.
- [5] *ibid* p. 240.
- [6] PAUL VI, *Opening address, second session of the Council*, 29 September 1963, in *Enchiridion Vaticanum I*, EDB, Bologna, 1993, nn.143-145.150.153.
- [7] Cf. O. GONZLEZ, *La nuova coscienza della Chiesa*, op. cit., p. 241.
- [8] G.B. MONTINI, *Discorsi e scritti milanesi*, vol. III: 1954-1963, ed. G. E. MANZONI, Istituto Paolo VI, Brescia, 1997, p. 930.
- [9] Cf. *Seguir a Jesucristo en esta Iglesia*, Pastoral letter of the Bishops of Pamplona and Tudela, Bilbao, San Sebastin and Vitoria, Lent - Easter 1989, pp. 13-16.
- [10] A. ANTON, *LEcclesiologia postconciliare: speranze, risultati, prospettive*, in *Vaticano II - Bilancio e prospettive venticinque anni dopo 1962-1987*, ed. R. LATOURELLE, Cittadella, Assisi 1987, p. 363.
- [11] Cf. A. ANTON, op. cit., pp. 386ss.
- [12] *Gaudium et spes*, n. 1.
- [13] *Gaudium et spes*, n. 2.
- [14] *Gaudium et spes*, n. 3.
- [15] TERTULLIAN, *Apologetic*, 18, 4.
- [16] ITALIAN BISHOPS CONFERENCE, *Il volto missionario delle Parrocchie in un mondo che cambia. Nota pastorale*, Notiziario della Conferenza Episcopale Italiana, Numero 5-6, 1 July 2004, p. 140.
- [17] J. BOSCO, *Meraviglie della Madre di Dio invocata sotto il titolo di Maria Ausiliatrice*, Turin 1868, in *Opere edite*, vol. XX, Editrice Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco, Rome, pp. 198-199.
- [18] M. RUA, *Lettera Edificante. Lo spirito di D. Bosco Vocazioni Buona Stampa*, 14 June 1905, from *Lettere Circolari*, Edizione Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco, Rome, pp. 384-385
- [19] L. RICCERI, *I Salesiani e la responsabilit politica*, in *Lettere Circolari di don Luigi Ricceri ai Salesiani*, Edizione Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco, Rome, p. 942.
- [20] *ibid* p. 951.
- [21] *ibid* pp. 951-952.
- [22] E. VIGAN, *Mary renews the Salesian Family of Don Bosco*, AGC 289, Rome 1978.
- [23] E. VIGAN, *Animation of the Salesian Rector*, AGC 306, Rome 1982, p. 12.
- [24] E. VIGAN, *Our fidelity to Peters Successor*, AGC 315, Rome 1985, p. 26.
- [25] Cf. E. VIGAN, *Our fidelity to Peters Successor*, AGC 315, Rome 1985, pp. 26-30.
- [26] K. LEHMANN, *Vale la pena rimanere nella Chiesa e vivere per essa*, in J. RATZINGER - K. LEHMANN, *Vivere con la Chiesa*, Queriniana, Brescia 1978, p.36.
- [27] L. MACARIO, *Appartenenti a Cristo nella Chiesa - Note di pedagogia ecclesiale*, in AA.VV. *In Ecclesia*, LAS, Rome, 1977, p. 487.
- [28] K. LEHMANN, *Vale la pena rimanere nella Chiesa e vivere per essa*, in J. RATZINGER - K. LEHMANN, *Vivere con la Chiesa*, Queriniana. Brescia 1978, p.33-34.
- [29] *Manuscripts autobiographiques*, Lisieux 1957, 229.
- [30] *All the Colours of the Rainbow*, based on an American legend, presented by *Leon Orb*, 2 June 2004.