

STRENNA 2007

COMMENTARY OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

My Dear Brothers and Sisters, all the members of the Salesian Family,

At the conclusion of 2006, which has been a year of grace for the Salesian Family, with the magnificent gift of the declaration of the heroic practice of the virtues by Mamma Margaret, by which she has been declared Venerable, and at the beginning of 2007 which opens before us rich in hope, I communicate with you as did Don Bosco, wishing you the fulness of life in Christ, while I give you the spiritual and pastoral programme for this year which has as its theme precisely that of life.

1. Introduction

Last year's strenna was greeted with great enthusiasm in the Salesian Family and led to a large number of initiatives. With this year's strenna I would like to see these initiatives continue and at the same time open up fresh horizons.

In the course of 2006, which we devoted to a commitment to the family, we experienced the great event in the Church of the Vth International Meeting of the Family, in which was re-affirmed the value of love and of human life, for which the family is the privileged setting. The words of the Pope addressed to an audience of hundreds of thousands, including many members of the Salesian Family, are a source of hope and challenge us to continue our journey in defence of life and for the renewal of the family the cradle of life and of love.

At the same time, however, there have been other dramatic events in which once again we have witnessed human life treated with contempt: the wars in Iraq and in the Middle East, terrorist violence, the inexorable increase in emigration, in the abuse and exploitation of children and of women, laws which permit experimentation on embryonic cells, etc.

All of this helps us to see that nowadays the great gift of life is under threat, as John Paul II of venerated memory said speaking to the young people at the VIII World Youth Day: As time passes the threats against life do not diminish. On the contrary they take on huge dimensions. It is not only a question of threats that come from outside, from the forces of nature or from those 'Cains' who kill the 'Abels'; no, it is a question of threats that are planned in a scientific and systematic way. The XXth century will be remembered as an era of massive attacks against life, an endless series of wars and constant destruction of innocent human lives. The false prophets and the false teachers have had the greatest possible success..[\[1\]](#)

Faced with this situation, we cannot remain indifferent, especially as members of the Salesian Family, animated by the spirit of the humanism of St. Francis of Sales, which Don Bosco lived and passed on as a precious educational heritage. It is a humanism which leads us to appreciate all that is positive in the life of each individual, of things and in history, and to defend and nurture it; to believe in the power of good and to spend ourselves in promoting it rather than in lamenting over evil, to love life and all the human values it contains.[\[2\]](#)

We need to feel ourselves challenged by God the lover of life. If human life comes from God's very Spirit, if it is the divine breath, if we have been created in His image and likeness, then necessarily the love of God gently caresses our life. God loves all living things. He cannot hate what he has so lovingly created.

Contrary to what those may think who are living with the gloomy conviction that God constitutes a threat to human beings and is a oppressive presence which needs to be eliminated in order to be able to live and enjoy life more fully, we want to proclaim our faith in God as mankind's best friend and the most reliable defender of life. This is what He has shown Himself to be throughout the history of Israel, and the author of the Book of Wisdom puts it like this.

‘Yes, you love everything that exists, and nothing that you have made disgusts you, since if you had hated something you would not have made it. And how could a thing subsist, had you not willed it? Or how be preserved, if not called forth by you? No, you spare all, since all is yours, Lord, lover of life! For your imperishable spirit is in everything! And thus gradually, you correct those who offend; you admonish and remind them of how they have sinned, so that they made abstain from evil and trust in you, Lord? (Wis. 11,24-12,2).

God gives life through love, sustains it in love and destines it to love. It is the love of God that urges us to love life, to foster it through responsible service, to defend it with hope, to proclaim its value and its meaning, especially to the young people who are the most weak and defenceless, those drifting between emptiness and apprehension.

For this reason I am proposing to the whole Salesian Family that they allow themselves to be guided by this God who is the lover of life and by His love for life, and to decisively commit themselves to its defence and promotion.

At a time when life is particularly under threat, as the Salesian Family we commit ourselves to:

- *accept life with gratitude and with joy as an inviolable gift,*
- *foster life with passion as a responsible service,*
- *defend with hope the dignity and the quality of every life, above all the most weak, poor and defenceless.*

This stenna is intended to be ‘a precise and vigorous reaffirmation of the value of human life and its inviolability, and at the same time a pressing appeal addressed to each and every person, in the name of God: respect, protect, love and serve life, every human life! Only in this direction will you find justice, development, true freedom, peace and happiness!’^[3]

2. Ambiguity of the current culture of life

Pope Benedict XVI told the priests in the Diocese of Rome: To me this also seems in some way the nucleus of our pastoral care: to help people make the true choice for life, to renew their relationship with God, as the relationship which gives us life and shows us the way to life.^[4]

Our first efforts therefore must be directed to trying to reflect on some of the serious contradictions in the culture of our times, to find the questions posed by the way modern man is living, to appreciate what is positive in modern life in order to strengthen it and condemn the ‘culture of death’ which threatens the very existence of mankind and of his world.

• The value of human life proclaimed and defended but also attacked and threatened.

Undoubtedly modern man has acquired a greater awareness of the dignity of each human being and of his inviolable rights. Today there is a strong reaction against the death penalty, torture, ill-treatment or any other kind of punishment which degrades the individual. Modern legislation and social arrangements reflect in many ways the demand that the individual should be respected and human life defended.

But it would be a mistake to ignore the abuses of power that continue to be practised contrary to what society proclaims and to what is codified in the laws. Human life is destroyed before birth by means of abortion: and the same happens in more or less terminal situations in the name of a misunderstood ‘mercy’ towards a sick person or of what is called ‘a dignified death’ or euthanasia.

The fact of many little boys and girls ill-treated or sexually abused is a scandal that cries to heaven, as is that of women forced into prostitution, exploited and enslaved by organised groups at the service of the sex trade.

Particularly distressing is the spectacle of so many people, especially young people, caught up in the turmoil of drug use, of alcohol consumption, or who devote themselves to a style of life that is reckless, disordered and irresponsible.

In a society and in a world that is ever more developed in which the possibilities of a life of dignity are expanding there is, none the less, an increase in the number of those who are excluded, forced to live on the edge of survival, with nations and whole continents exploited and forgotten, as though it were a matter of second class human beings.

- ***Quality of life: an ambiguous goal.***

For a long time peoples' concerns had been concentrated on ensuring the basic and indispensable conditions needed for survival. It was the only thing they could aspire to when they did not have the resources to expect anything more. For some years now quality of life has become the new goal for society and for individuals.

This concern about the quality of life can lead to a variety of different consequences according to the intention behind it: if it is inspired by a humanitarian desire to produce the most favourable conditions for the expansion and development of a decent life for all human beings, or else if it becomes an absolute end in itself, founded on utilitarian or hedonistic ideas on the basis of which one measures, evaluates and comes even to exclude from life those who do not reach a predetermined level. In this way a distinction is made for example between sick people who are to be treated with all the means available, and sick people with a limited quality of life (with certain disabilities, elderly people without families, the chronically sick etc.) who can be neglected, and to whom, in the final analysis, the most effective treatment can be denied. There are lives which are considered less important or less useful, lives which are too long, and which come to the point of being perceived as a threat to the well-being of others and so are terminated.

So that a few might enjoy a high quality of life with a hedonistic and consumerist mentality there is the undermining and the destruction of the planetary ecosystem (pollution in its various forms, climate change, crisis in water resources, reduction of biodiversity etc), favouring a model of non-sustainable development which also seriously compromises the future of the whole of humanity.

- ***Increase in destructive aggression.***

Together with the many signs of an increase in respect for human life, concern for every living creature and respect for the environment, there are also unfortunately the many examples of violence which is ever more serious and destructive. We may think about the wars and the arms trade which supports them which continue to lead to thousands of innocent victims; also the cruel fighting between different peoples and races which oblige whole populations to leave their own homes and seek refuge outside their own countries; and again the increase in xenophobic violence against immigrants, who are considered a danger and a threat, and are exploited and their most fundamental rights denied.

There are other forms of violence too arising from an anti-life attitude, following from an experience of the dashing of a person's deepest aspirations; then hostility, rejection, hatred of life and of others grow; things are destroyed, people are ill-treated, wholesale damage is done ? This kind of violence is very often to be found in gangs of youths or in groups who foment violence on the streets, etc.

- ***An anti-life culture***

The thing that causes most concern is the spreading of a certain way of thinking, of judging and of behaving which has the appearance of being normal, and sometimes is even presented as some kind of a defence of freedom, which, rather than defending and fostering life, is leading in the opposite direction undermining it, emptying it of its meaning and in the end towards its extinction. This is what John Paul II used to call a "culture of death": "We are confronted," he wrote, "by an even larger reality, which can be described as a veritable structure of sin. This reality is characterized by the emergence of a culture which denies solidarity and in many cases takes the form of a veritable "culture of death".? In this way a kind of "*conspiracy against life*" is unleashed. This conspiracy involves not only individuals in their personal, family or group relationships, but goes far beyond, to the point of damaging and distorting, at the international level, relations between peoples and States.?[5]

In the face of this situation we are profoundly challenged as educators who want to help young people to discover the absolute value of every life, especially every human life. Here then are some of these **challenges**:

? The ultimate foundation of the absolute worth of every human life.

Why does each human life deserve to be defended and always respected in every situation and circumstance? Are some lives more valuable than others?

Where can the criteria for a quality of life that is worthy of human beings be found?

? The challenge of the promotion of every life especially that of the weakest and defenceless.

Is it really being human when the great sensitivity that contemporary man has for a life that is fuller and better is very often changed into a greater threat towards the weak and defenceless?

? The challenge of evangelisation in this context and this culture.

How can we face up to this culture which is against life and proclaim in it the 'Gospel of life' as something healing and life-giving for all?

How do we foster in our communities, among the young and in the Salesian Family a style of life that is in accordance with Don Bosco's proposal, which leads every one to love, appreciate, defend and promote life as a gift and as service?

3. The involvement of the Salesian Family in the defence of life.

This view of the situation would not reflect reality if it did not place on record the many efforts, commitments and achievements in all parts of the world by the various groups of the Salesian Family. As an example I want to present to you some of the more common and significant initiatives of our Family, while at the same time inviting you to be aware of, to appreciate and to develop the resources, initiatives and opportunities already present in every country or region. Here is a list, certainly incomplete, of initiatives that demonstrate the commitment of the Salesian Family to life:

- The expressions of solidarity launched in response to the great disasters which have occurred in recent years (the 'tsunami', earthquakes, floods, fires, attacks, wars ?), which demonstrate the readiness and the compassion of so many people, especially ordinary ones in responding with generosity to the needs of others and in protecting the lives of the poorest ones, giving them hope and a future.
- The daily welcome given to so many youngsters at risk, to street children and unemployed young people etc. by thousands of educators who with great generosity and a Salesian approach devote their lives to helping them to get over their difficulties of marginalisation and danger, and to become capable of facing their future better prepared.
- The various aid programmes for refugees and immigrants that the Salesian Family undertake in different countries, dedicating themselves to welcoming and educating them and helping them to fit into the new culture in a positive manner.
- The initiatives in progress in Africa, such as the programmes 'Stop AIDS!' and 'Love matters?', to respond to the tragedy of AIDS which is gripping this suffering continent, condemning to death millions of people and at the same time leaving millions of orphans. The Salesian Family is implementing preventive strategies aimed at informing the young people in a professional manner about the subject and forming their consciences, in the knowledge that this pandemic will not be conquered with condoms but with effective education.
- The thousands of educators who in various Salesian works and centres are involved in the education of the young, preparing them to take their place in the world of work.
- The huge humanitarian, educative and evangelising work that is carried out in the missions and which very often constitutes one of the few ways of defending life and promoting integral human development for thousands of people and entire populations.

- The very large commitment in the missions to a considerable effort aimed not only at preserving the existence of native peoples but above all their development, their recognition publicly and socially with their own rights to their language, their culture, their world view, their social organisation and political representation.
- The work of so many families who with difficulty but with dedication and generosity are involved in a daily effort in education and in the defence of life.
- Voluntary service in its various forms: social, missionary, vocational.

And so many other initiatives and activities which, day after day, are building up a network which provides support for a great number of people under threat and in danger, and with determination and generosity promotes the commitment to construct a way of life that is more human, supportive and evangelical and in this way creating the 'culture of life.'

I believe that with this large number of groups of people of the highest quality, we can and we must face up to the great challenges which the defence of life presents. The Strenna is an encouragement to examine one's own vocation to life, an invitation to join forces and to continue our efforts so as to be able to respond in a creative and dynamic way to the enormous challenges.

4. The God who loves life

From the first pages of the book of Genesis to the last page of the book of the Apocalypse, Sacred Scripture shows the belief and the profound conviction of the People of God that life comes from God and needs to be lived in the presence of the one who safeguards and protects it. It is a blessing from God whose love and generosity shine out in this gift. It is the greatest of the gifts that God can grant.

For this reason, the first thing to do is to enjoy living. The first command that we receive from God is to live; it is a command that is not written on tables of stone but rather carved in the very depth of our being. Our first act of obedience to God is to love life, to welcome it with a grateful heart, to care for it solicitously developing all the possibilities that it has.

The Bible continually emphasises the direct relationship between life and God. Man's life comes from God; it is, as John Paul II points out, 'a gift by which God shares something of himself with his creature.'^[6] God is the only Lord of life; man cannot dispose of it. Life and death are in the hands of God: 'In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of all mankind' (*Job* 12,10). Every life comes from God and God protects it. He did not create man to let him die but to be immortal. (cfr. *Wisdom* 2,23).

Precisely for this reason the God of life is the 'God of the poor,' those who scarcely manage to survive; he is the 'God of justice,' who defends those who are threatened by the abuses and by the unjust actions of the strong and the powerful (cfr. Code of the Covenant, in *Ex* 21,1-23,9). Only God who is faithful to life can reveal himself throughout history as the defender of the life of the poor, of the weak, of the widow, of the stranger, of the defenceless. Knowing this God means exercising the justice which gives life, and fighting against the injustice which kills. Believing in him means promoting solidarity with those who suffer and die abandoned. Hearing his voice is to open one's ears and one's heart to his constant demand: 'What have you done to your brother?' (cfr. *Gen* 4,9-10).

The God who in the Old Testament had already revealed himself as 'the friend of life' became man in *Jesus Christ*. In Him the disciples had been able to see with their own eyes and touch with their hands the One who is the 'Word of Life' (cfr. *1 Jn* 1,1). His words and his gestures are directed from the start to bringing life and healing to mankind. In fact this was the memory of Jesus that the first community preserved: 'God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.' (*Acts* 10,38).

For Jesus life is a precious gift, 'more than food' (*Mt* 6,25). Saving a life is more important than the sabbath (cfr. *Mk* 3,4), because 'He is not God of the dead, but of the living' (*Mk* 12,27). The defence of human life is a central idea in the plan of the Kingdom. The two aspects 'the proclamation of the Kingdom and care for man's life' together make up the content of his messianic activity, as can always be seen from the accounts in the

gospels: "Jesus went about all Galilee preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every infirmity among the people" (Mt 4,23; 9,35; Lk 6,18). Indeed, it was the healing ministry that best characterised the Messiah. It was in this that the works of the one sent by God were most immediately evident: "The blind receive their sight and the lame walk; lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; and the dead are raised up and the poor have good news preached to them." (Mt 11,5).

In John's gospel too life is the central value. Jesus is the bearer and the guarantor of a life that is "eternal" and definitive, that is to say, a life that God communicates to his children and which will have its final consummation beyond this world. So the evangelist presents Christ to us as "the bread of life" (Jn 6,35.48), "the light of life" (Jn 8,12); "the way, the truth, and the life" (Jn 14,6); "the resurrection and the life" (Jn 11,25), to the extent that every one "who believes in him though he die, yet shall he live" (Jn 11,25).

This eternal life can be experienced right now by the believer: "he who believes has eternal life" (Jn 6,47); the one who listens to his word "has eternal life" and has passed from death to life" (Jn 5,24); "he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day" (Jn 6,54). But the fundamental experience that ensures the opening up of our present life and its direction towards eternal salvation is always love: "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love remains in death" (1 Jn 3,14).

Jesus not only values life and defends it but also *gives his own life* as the supreme service of love so that mankind may not finish up in death and in ultimate destruction. "I lay down my life" No one takes it from me. I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down and I have power to take it again" (Jn 10,17-18). If Jesus gives himself even unto death it is certainly not because he despises life, but because he loves life so much and wants all to have it, even the most unhappy and wretched, and he wants it to be final, full and eternal.

This "crucified life" for love is a "scandal and foolishness" according to the models of life nowadays holding sway in society. But from the point of view of Christian faith, it constitutes the ultimate criterion for every life which is meant to be fully human and not disfigured or transformed by selfishness, by the lack of solidarity, by injustice. Indeed, for believers this "crucified life" is the supreme revelation of the love of God for man and his respect for and defence of human life: it is the "Gospel of life."

This gospel culminates in the *resurrection*. The God who raises Jesus is a God who puts life where men put death. This is what the apostles preached: "You killed him" but God raised him up" (Acts 2,23-24). The one who believes in this God who raises up, "God of the living," begins to love life in a radically new way and with a total love. Easter faith urges the believer to take the side of life wherever this is seen to be damaged, violated or destroyed. His fight against death is not only the result of some ethical imperative, but from faith in this God who raises up, who wants man to participate for ever in his own divine life. The Christian truth about life here reaches its summit: The dignity of this life is linked not only to its beginning, to the fact that it comes from God, but also to its final end, to its destiny of fellowship with God in knowledge and love of him. In the light of this truth Saint Irenaeus qualifies and completes his praise of man: "the glory of God" is indeed, "man, living man", but "the life of man consists in the vision of God."^[7]

5. Letting ourselves be guided by God's love for life

God's love for life encourages us in our commitment: to bear witness to, to proclaim and to love the value of human life. John Paul II has written: "We need to bring the Gospel of life to the heart of every man and woman and to make it penetrate every part of society."^[8] This sort of proclamation involves proposing clearly and decisively the inviolable nature of life.

The life of a human being is fragile, precarious and fleeting, but it is something sacred and inviolable. God breathed his own spirit into man, he created him "in his own image and likeness" (Gen 1,27). No one can dispose of life at his own whim, neither his own nor anyone else's. This life received from God is the foundation of the constituent and indestructible dignity of every man, the first value on which all other values and rights are based and develop.

The commandment of God is clear and unequivocal: "You shall not kill" (Ex 20,13). Even though formulated in a negative way, it expresses the fundamental sense of the value of life and continues to urge us to re-affirm it today.

In the face of the various attacks on life, nowadays the duty of promoting an *education* more sensitive to the value of life, to respect for it, and in its defence is of decisive importance; an education capable of offering an overall view of life and of health and of giving people an ethical sense. The new generations need parents and teachers who really are 'teachers of life.' They need someone to teach them to be grateful to be alive, to live with a healthy and moderate life style and to accept responsibility for their own life, to build it up integrating in it failures, difficulties sacrifices, sufferings, to celebrate life and the God who gives it to us, and to live it with love and dedication.

To carry out this task it is necessary to remember the vocation and the mission of the *family*. Its educational responsibility arises from its very nature and from its specific mission, the fact, that is to say, of its being a community of life and of love and of being destined 'to guard, reveal and communicate love.'^[9] The family proclaims the gospel of life especially by educating the children to a deep respect for life and to being grateful for God's gift.

It is a question of the careful work of the formation of a *moral conscience*. In its words and in its witness, in its relationships and its everyday decisions, the family can teach, educate and help live the great values of freedom, respect for others, acceptance, dialogue, a sense of justice, of solidarity, of the dedication of oneself. In this way, with confidence and courage, parents will educate their children to the essential values of human life.

6. Don Bosco loves and promotes life for the young especially the poorest

For us, members of the Salesian Family, love for and a commitment to life find in Don Bosco a model and a teacher.

From being a boy Don Bosco was full of life; he learned from his mother, Mamma Margaret, to discover the beauty of nature and of life; he knew how to enjoy the splendour of the countryside, the hills and flower-filled meadows around the Becchi and gaze in wonder at the stars. He made a pet of a little bird and cared for it lovingly. In all these things his mother taught him to discover the work of God the creator who cares for his children, his wisdom and infinite power and above all his love. In this way John was opened up to a positive and providential view of life, he knew how to enjoy the simple things of country life and without discouragement to face the difficulties that came his way in his own home. In this spirit he tried to communicate a sense of joy to his companions, entertaining them on feasts with a great variety of games; but it was always with an educational motive: to make them better and help them carry out the duties of a good Christian. While still a young student at Chieri, with his friends he founded the 'Cheerful Society,' the first rule of which was precisely that of always being cheerful and trying never to offend God.

As a priest going round the streets of Turin and visiting the prisons, Don Bosco understood that young people are looking for happiness, that they want to enjoy life, to feel accepted and appreciated; and if sometimes they live out their aspirations following the wrong path which can even lead them to prison, it is not because they are bad but because they have not found people who believe in them and help them to develop all their energies and gifts in the right way. For this reason Don Bosco dedicates his life to them, and with them creates a positive environment that favours a life in which they can experience the joy of living, with ample opportunities for playing and enjoying themselves, for training themselves and for finding work, for feeling loved, accepted and appreciated in a family atmosphere. For Don Bosco games, music, the stage, outings and walks are important means of education and the way to conquer hearts, and so to help these youngsters to develop their best qualities, to feel that they are capable of doing good and making themselves useful to others and to society. In this way Don Bosco leads them to know and to live in friendship with Jesus Christ.

We can say that with his boys in Valdocco Don Bosco lives a real *pedagogy of life*, of joy and of celebration; indeed, he invites them to commit themselves to foster among their companions this atmosphere. He writes in his biography of Francis Besuccho: If you want to be good practise three things only and all will be well. (?) They are Cheerfulness, Study, Piety. This is the grand programme. Following it you will be able to live happily and do a lot of good for your soul.. Joy is an essential characteristic of the family atmosphere and the sign of loving kindness, the natural consequence of an approach based on reason, and on religion which is interior and spontaneous and which ultimately arises from peace with God, from a life of grace.^[10] For this reason, in Don Bosco's mind joy is not only a means to make the serious matter of education acceptable but a way of life which takes into account the way boys are and their desire for life. Don Bosco understood this and wanted to make it fully real. He appreciated that deep down a youngster needs to experience the joy of living, freedom, games and friendship. But

above all, as a priest, Don Bosco firmly believes that Christianity is not a religion of prohibitions, but, on the contrary, is the religion of life, of happiness, of love; for this reason through an educational system of celebration and joy he helped young people to open themselves to Jesus Christ, leading them to a personal relationship of friendship with Him. Faced with an impression of Christian life which these youngsters picked up from the society of their times as something sad, full of renunciation and prohibitions, a life little adapted to the young, Don Bosco put to them *a form of Christian life that was happy and joyful*.

Don Bosco sanctified work and joy. He was the saint of Christian good-humour, of an active and joyful Christian life ? In this consisted his very innovative approach. ?With the brilliant intuitive insight of his love full of human understanding, and persuaded of the natural and reasonable needs of youth and a wholesome life, together with work, Don Bosco sanctified joy, the joy of living, of working and of praying.?[11]

Don Bosco himself lived and knew how to communicate to all his sons, collaborators and friends a *positive and integral view of life*; he believed in the goodness and in the dignity of every human being, especially of every young person, and in a special way of the poorest and those in danger; he wrote: The educator must persuade himself that almost all these dear young people have a natural intelligence to recognise the good that is being done for them, and a sensitive heart easily moved to gratitude.[12] Therefore he believed that every youngster could be rescued; he believed in the effectiveness of the work of education when it is undertaken with generous devotion and follows a method of reason and loving-kindness.

Young people who are abandoned or deviant need to be helped to find the most elementary meaning to life; this means encouraging in them the desire to live, and through work and the sweat of their brow to earn the means of providing a decent life for themselves and their family. For those who were deprived of affection Don Bosco set out to create a setting and a network of family-style relationships and of friendship, capable of restoring an affective life in which their emotional needs and their full expression can be realised.

In addition Don Bosco was convinced that the Christian faith and friendship with Jesus Christ provide the strongest and most effective source of energy to sustain the efforts in education and to lead a style of life that is joyful and happy here on earth and guarantee happiness for ever in eternal life. For this reason he set ? and he explained his intention very clearly ? as the highest goal of education *holiness*; not as an aim for some of the privileged ones, but as the ideal proposed to everyone, as he said in the ?Good night? which prompted Dominic Savio to take up the task of holiness: It is the will of God that we should be saints; it is very easy to become one and great rewards are promised to saints in heaven.[13]

As a priest and educator he always wanted to appreciate and encourage whatever there is that is positive in life, and in the heart of every individual, to foster a Christian life capable of savouring and valuing whatever can be found in every day life and in the hearts of even the most wretched people that is human, positive and noble, at the same time making a great effort to open up education and culture to Jesus Christ, in the conviction that only in Him is it possible to be fully saved.[14]

Following Don Bosco therefore, as the Salesian Family we are called to testify and to proclaim that human life is sacred and inviolable, and therefore not only should it not be eliminated but it needs to be positively protected and defended. The value of life is an essential part of the gospel of Jesus. In a culture and in a civilisation which threatens life at its roots, the Salesian Family of Don Bosco must be particularly sensitive in providing an educational service which takes care of and welcomes *all life and the life of everyone*:[15] especially prepared to accompany and protect, in addition to life at its birth, the life of so many young people under threat, as they struggle with poverty, marginalisation, suffering, the lack of ideals and with the lack of meaning. It is especially for the life of these young people that we are called to be ?signs and bearers of the love of God.?[16]

7. Commitment of the Salesian Family on behalf of life

The Church has received the *gospel of life* and is commissioned to proclaim it and make it become a reality. This vocation and mission requires the generous contribution of all its members including the Salesian Family. Together we need to recognise ?our duty to preach the Gospel of life, to celebrate it in the Liturgy and in our whole existence, and to serve it with the various programmes and structures which support and promote life?[17]

Faced with such solemn statements on behalf of life which are to be found side by side with deep-seated anti-life attitudes, our educative-pastoral service needs to bear witness to and proclaim its value as we pledge ourselves to defend it and promote a genuine culture of life.

7.1. Defend the value of every human life

Human life has always been surrounded with danger, threatened by violence and death. Today not only have the threats to life not been reduced, they are assuming alarming proportions, even being planned in a systematic and scientific way. Sometimes the point is reached where violent death is considered a sign of progress and of civilisation.

The old threats remain, those resulting from hatred, violence from conflicting interests (murders, wars, killings), made worse by indifference and lack of solidarity. Side by side with this there is the violence carried out against millions of human beings who struggle to survive and who die of hunger, the scandalous arms trade which continues in spite of so many declarations, the upsetting of the ecological balance, the spread of drugs, traffic accidents, terrorist attacks which all cause a veritable carnage. From its earliest moments to its terminal stages human life is under siege in an incredible manner from human beings themselves.

In the face of the dark clouds over it nowadays, it is more than ever necessary and urgent to defend the inviolable and sacred value of every human life. For this reason we must promote among ourselves and among the young a positive attitude to life. This presupposes:

- ***Considering life as a gift.***

Often life is considered a product of man's own abilities and power rather than as a gift of God. This mentality limited to productivity easily leads to a specious discrimination against those lives which are not planned, are inconvenient, or 'unproductive': unborn babies, old people, the physically or mentally handicapped, defective lives. Considering life as a gift leads to living it with an attitude of gratitude, of praise and of profound joy, and to committing oneself to taking care of it and loving it, trying to develop all its positive potential.

- ***Promoting an integral view of life.***

For all human beings life is much more than simple material well-being or economic progress; life is a path to personal fulfilment, a fulfilment which involves not only material, economic or social activity, but also progress in the spiritual life. The defence of life means that we are ready to take on responsibility for looking after, loving and developing all the potential in life and in nature in order to lead them to their fulness and give them a genuine human quality. Living with an integral vision of life also requires that we overcome exaggerated hyperactivity, which prevents us from giving due attention to other important aspects of life such as personal contacts and friendship, silence and contemplation, joy and beauty, generous selfless service.

7.2 Protecting the life of the poor

Every human life is precious and worthy of respect. It follows that not only a healthy, useful, happy life is worth while, but also the undervalued, the one lived in pain and sickness, that of the unborn child, and that of the elderly invalid. It is not only the life of the powerful that is precious: so too is the life of the poor and the abandoned.

As sons and daughters of Don Bosco we feel particularly called to protect and take care of the lives of the many young people who have to grow up in poverty, on the margins of society and affluence. We have to be able to invent and create new kinds of a missionary presence in the world of marginalisation and exclusion. Here are some practical suggestions:

- ***Caring for youngsters at risk.***

Every Salesian centre should be committed to responding to the growing challenges presented by the young people living in situations of marginalisation and at risk: street children without a family or far from home, young people without any training and out of work; immigrants, especially youngsters who arrive on their own without

their families; youngsters exposed to delinquency or those sexually exploited, and the many other degrading situations, in which human life is exposed to danger and is affronted.

It is our task to welcome these youngsters, to help them to recover a love for life and genuine values, to educate them and train them in such a way that they can take their proper place in society, to accompany them in finding a place in the world of work, develop their openness to God as a central element in becoming fully human; to introduce them to Jesus Christ and guide them towards a personal relationship with Him in a Christian style of life that is simple, joyful, positive and adapted to them.

● *Accompaniment and help for families in difficulty.*

Special care should be given to families living under severe stress or already split up, families experiencing serious difficulties in educating their children, and others in situations of hardship. In response to last year's Strenna many initiatives were launched for the support and help of parents in their task of education, for the support and guidance for couples in difficulty, in the creation of family groups and communities etc. I invite you to continue along those lines. In the commentary on the Strenna for 2006 I suggested a series of attitudes and activities, which I invite you to consolidate. The family is the first place for the defence and the promotion of life, and as such should continue to be the privileged object of our pastoral care.

7.3 Educate to the value of life

In order to defend and to care for life it is necessary to educate to the value of life: "To be truly a people at the service of life we must propose these truths constantly and courageously from the very first proclamation of the Gospel, and thereafter in catechesis, in the various forms of preaching, in personal dialogue and in all educational activity."^[18]

This is a task that involves us all: parents, educators, teachers, catechists, theologians. As has already been pointed out, the new generations need to find in their parents, educators and catechists real *teachers of life*?. They look to us not only for knowledge, information or doctrine, but as people who can show them a positive way of life and encourage and accompany them in the development of their best qualities and possibilities. With our lives and through our words we must be capable of highlighting the absolute value of life, committing ourselves to giving it the highest possible quality, and always promoting an attitude of unconditional respect for individuals, taking a positive and hopeful view regarding them and their future, fighting against everything that prevents them living with dignity and solidarity. Our attitudes and our actions in simple ordinary every day circumstances ought to be for the young people a veritable school of life.

As educators we also need to know how to re-awaken in the young the joy of living, an appreciation for the most profound human values, the taste for selfless service of others and on behalf of nature which surrounds us; we need to arouse in them the sense of life as vocation and as service and educate them to be responsible and active citizens in the building of a society that is more human, more free and united.

Another important aspect of the commitment to educate to the value of life is to *help the young to accept and experience sexuality* and love and the whole of life according to their true meaning and in their close interconnection.. "Only a true love is able to protect life."^[19] For this reason there is the need to develop a real education to love, according to the typical experience of Don Bosco and the criteria of his educational system. In the pastoral proposal which accompanied the Strenna last year some steps to be followed in this direction were indicated; it is important to really take them into account throughout the whole educational process.

Only with difficulty will one arrive at a true appreciation of human life if it is not appreciated within the *family*, if there is an atmosphere of violence there, if the interruption of a life that is inconvenient or unwanted is considered a sign of progress, if competitiveness, success or power are seen as the aims in life. Ways of thinking and attitudes that are positive or negative are passed on in the everyday living of family life. The family educates well or badly through words and example, through choices and decisions, through relationships, through what it does and the concrete signals it gives.

In connection with this task of educating to the value of life I mention some *places and educational activities* which seem to me to provide particular possibilities, on condition that they have a genuine family atmosphere. I refer to two in particular: the Oratory-Youth Centre and Voluntary Service.

n **The Oratory-Youth Centre**, as a typically Salesian place, has a lively and welcoming atmosphere and is freely available to all young people, a place where they can take the lead and learn to acquire a taste for life and become fully involved in it, where there is an open and generous relationship between educators and young people, and where they are all involved and give each other support in the educational process and in human and Christian growth and development.

The Salesian Oratory and Youth Centre ought to become for the young a real *'workshop for life and for Christian living'*; the place where they can live their own lives, express and develop their own values, their leadership qualities, their interpersonal relationships; a place also where they can find positive and significant educational programmes and people who will welcome and accompany them.

So that the Salesian Oratory can effectively carry out this role for life it needs to fulfil some important conditions:

- It should be an open place in which attention is given to human relationships, where they are happy to be together and can speak and express themselves freely;
- It should encourage a variety of worthwhile activities for the youngsters corresponding to their expectations and needs;
- It should provide opportunities for them to take the lead;
- It should foster the active presence of adults, young adults and leaders whom the youngsters look up to and who encourage them;
- It should offer a high quality educational and cultural programme;
- It should have a programme of evangelisation and education to the faith rooted in the life of the young people,

In this way the Oratory will become the place where young people can bring together and organise for themselves what they hear and experience, and the values they encounter elsewhere (in the family, at school, in the parish, in the company of their friends, etc.) and construct a meaningful style of life for their future.

n **Voluntary service** is an important experience for young people, especially when they are considering their future; it can be much more than a one-off transitional experience, and become a genuine school of life understood as selfless and effective service in situations of poverty and need. Voluntary service, when it is undertaken after a systematic process of preparation which helps to bring a sense of maturity to motives and when it includes personal and group guidance, fosters a personal life option and helps it grow. In carrying out voluntary service young adults learn to be responsible citizens and committed Christians.

7.4 Proclaiming Jesus Christ as the meaning and source of life

Proclaiming the gospel of life ought to lead the young to an encounter and a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, in whom they will discover the model, the way and the strength to live a full human life. Perhaps evangelisation has never been so urgent as it is today; the proclamation of Jesus, in the face of a world which exalts deceptive and seductive models, which do not give nor can give a meaning to life. Very often the young suffer from an enormous inner emptiness which they try to fill with pleasure, entertainment, sex and drugs, or even by pursuing the crooked paths of violence and crime. But neither pleasure, nor consumption nor clutching at the various ways of filling the present moment satisfy their aspirations and their needs. There are also many young people who are living in social and economic situations of exclusion or serious personal fragility in a world that is ever more hard. It is precisely in these situations that the gospel of the God who is the friend of life needs to ring out as *'good news,'* that Jesus Christ and his plan for happiness need to be made present.

Evangelisation is the best presentation of a human life that is full and happy. For this reason we need to commit ourselves to carrying it out in a straightforward manner and with dedication in all the places young people are to be found. Given the variety of these, evangelisation requires different forms of presentation according to the situation of the young people with whom we deal. I shall mention three important ones:

- In those situations where the young people are living in an indifferent and superficial way an empty or materialistic style of life, we will offer them a gradual process, which helps them to discover and to appreciate the more positive and profound values and to experience the joy of an interior life and of silence, to re-awaken in them the desire to find some meaning, to open themselves to God, developing the *religious dimension of life*.
- As regards young people whose practice of religion is a matter of habit, merely superficial or only to satisfy their own interests or needs, we will help them to discover the person of Jesus, to become enthusiastic about Him and foster the development in them of a decisive *personal option* to follow him, committing themselves to a serious process of education to the faith.
- On the other hand, for those who already take part in groups or movements for Christian formation we offer a systematic programme that helps them to make their faith *something really personal*, to celebrate it and to put it into practice in life until it becomes a mature *vocational option* of Christian life.

Promoting these programmes of education to the faith is the most precious and most significant contribution we can make in our commitment to life.

7.5. Giving thanks for life and celebrating it

Fruits of the proclamation of the gospel of life are joy, wonder, praise, gratitude to God lover of life for his gift. The proclamation gives rise to a profound attitude of the celebration of the gospel of life. Every life as the gift of God not only has its dimension of commitment and a task to fulfil, but also of worship. Already in itself it is an expression of praise because every human life is a marvel of love. Accepting it is already praise and thanksgiving.

Celebrating life leads and urges us to cultivate a *contemplative way of looking at things*: at nature, the world, creation, life, towards which we often have utilitarian or consumer attitudes; at persons, with whom often we maintain superficial or functional relationships; at society and history which many times we only consider from the point of view of our own interests? We need to overcome our selfish attitudes to arrive at a contemplative one, which means looking deeply in order to see and admire the beauty and the grandeur of the world of persons and of history. We need to learn to welcome, respect and love things, people, life in all its forms. It is necessary to know how to appreciate silence, to learn how to listen with patience, wonder and surprise before the unexpected and the unimaginable. It is necessary to know how to make room for the other person, to be able to establish a new relationship of intimacy and trust with him.

From this contemplative attitude flow *praise and prayer*. Celebrating life is to praise, love and pray to the God of life, who knit us together in our mother's womb. It means blessing him and thanking him: ?I thank you for the wonder of my being; for the wonders of all your creation? (Ps. 139,14). Man's life is one of the greatest wonders of creation.

7.6. Caring for creation with love

God *bifilo* (*philpsychos* is the term used in *Wisdom* 11,26) not only loves human life, he loves all life, because all creation is the work of his love. As well as the value and the dignity of human life, Sacred Scripture from its opening pages also expresses in explicit terms a recognition of the goodness of nature: ?God saw everything that he had made and behold it was very good? (*Gen* 1,31). Animals, plants, the skies, the sun, the seas? everything is good, everything has a value in itself.

But this recognition is genuine only when man recognises the dignity of the earth, shows respect for nature, welcomes and accepts the richness inherent in creatures. And it is only this genuine recognition which leads to the affirmation of their worth and their rights, and consequently to the rejection of their plundering and abuse, and to a respectful development of the environment and to an harmonious living with nature.

Industrialised society had encouraged production and efficiency, but often it has dehumanised man, changing him into a mere producer/consumer. The culture of life leads to a genuine ecological attitude: love for human beings, for animals and for plants, love for the whole of creation, a commitment to defend and to foster all signs of life against the mechanics of destruction and death. In the face of the threat of uncontrolled exploitation, of the destruction of nature, of *unsustainable* development, it is well to remember the word of the Great Chief Seattle: *what wounds the Earth, wounds the sons and daughters of the Earth.*

Ecology is a genuine expression of human solidarity which obviously implies the conservation and the use of the resources of the Earth ? as the Holy See affirms in a document produced in preparation for the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002. Development of this sort needs to be based on ?sound ethical values, without which no progress will be sustainable.? For this reason ?the notion of sustainable development can only be understood from the perspective of a human and integrated development.? In this sense it asks that the term ?human ecology? be adopted which ?implies ensuring and safeguarding the moral conditions necessary in the activities of human beings with the environment.? Care of the family, the promotion and protection of work, the fight against poverty, development of education and health services, solidarity among nations at the services of an integral human development ? are some of the elements which the Holy See presents for an ecology worthy of man.[\[20\]](#)

Care and love for creation, a commitment to and concern for ecology, need to be promoted in the context of everyday life, educating ourselves and educating the young to respect nature and to care for it, using the goods things it offers (water, plants, animals, other things ?) with moderation and always bearing in mind the good of everyone, encouraging a positive commitment to the protection and sustainable development of the earth and of natural resources ? Nowadays, forming and developing an ecological mentality and an attitude is an important aspect of an all-round education.

How can we fail at this point to call to mind Saint Francis of Assisi and his Canticle of Creation?

*?Most High, all powerful, good Lord,
Yours are the praises, the glory, the honour,
and all blessing.*

*To You alone, Most High, do they belong,
and no man is worthy to mention Your name.*

*Be praised, my Lord, through all your creatures,
especially through my lord Brother Sun,
who brings the day; and you give light through him.
And he is beautiful and radiant in all his splendour!
Of you, Most High, he bears the likeness.*

*Praise be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon
and the stars, in heaven you formed them
clear and precious and beautiful.*

*Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Wind,
and through the air, cloudy and serene,
and every kind of weather through which
You give sustenance to Your creatures.*

*Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water,
which is very useful and humble and precious and chaste.*

*Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Fire,
through whom you light the night and he is beautiful
and playful and robust and strong.*

*Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Mother Earth,
who sustains us and governs us and who produces
varied fruits with coloured flowers and herbs.*

*Praised be You, my Lord,
through those who give pardon for Your love,
and bear infirmity and tribulation.*

*Blessed are those who endure in peace
for by You, Most High, they shall be crowned.*

*Praised be You, my Lord,
through our Sister Bodily Death,
from whom no living man can escape.*

*Woe to those who die in mortal sin.
Blessed are those whom death will
find in Your most holy will,
for the second death shall do them no harm.*

*Praise and bless my Lord,
and give Him thanks
and serve Him with great humility.?*

8. Conclusion: two texts to share

By way of summarising what has been said, first of all I offer you a text drawn up by people of different religious traditions who met together for the IVth Parliament of World Religions in Barcelona in 2004:

OFFERING TO THE WORLD

We citizens of the world,

people on the move, people who are searching,

heirs to the ancient traditions handed on,

want to proclaim:

- that human life is in itself something wonderful;

that nature is our mother and our hearth,

and should be loved and preserved;

- that peace ought to be built with determination,

with justice, with forgiveness and generosity;

- that the diversity of cultures

is a great asset and not an obstacle;

- that the world appears as a treasure

*if we live it in profundity,
and that the religions want to be paths
towards that profundity;
- that in their search, religions find strength and meaning
by being open to the incomprehensible Mystery;
- that making community helps us in this experience;
- that religions can be a starting point
for interior peace, for harmony with oneself and with the world,
which can be translated into an astonished, joyful, grateful gaze;
- that we who belong to different religious traditions
want to talk to one another;
- that we want to play our part with everyone
in the struggle to make a better world,
to resolve the serious problems of mankind:
hunger and poverty,
war and violence,
the destruction of the natural environment,
the lack of an openness to a profound experience of life,
the lack of respect for freedom and for difference;
- and that we want to share with everyone
the fruit of our searching
for the highest aspirations of human beings,
with the most radical respect for what each person is
and with the proposal that all may be able to live together
a life worth living.*

The second text I offer you by way of conclusion is, as in previous years, a fable which shows the importance of a positive attitude to life. It is that which marks the difference between the culture of death in which we are living without even being aware of it, and the culture of life which fills our own life and that of others with joy, with colour and with generosity.

Visiting Belarus, I was very pleasantly impressed by a group of young people I met in Minsk and by the performance they gave of a story. I liked it very much and it seemed to me so enlightening that I said to myself: this is what I want to share with the whole Salesian Family, this is what I would like to do with each one of its members: give them my yellow umbrella, the one I also received from Don Bosco.

THE YELLOW UMBRELLA

Once upon a time there was a country which was grey and sad, where when it rained all the people went around the streets with black umbrellas. Just, only black.

Everyone had a sad crunched up face... But it couldn't be otherwise under a black umbrella!

One day when it was raining more heavily than usual, a rather strange man suddenly appeared braving the flood?under a yellow umbrella.

And as if that were not enough, he was smiling. Indeed, smiling!

Some of the passers-by looked at him scandalised from under the black umbrellas they carried. And they muttered:

Look at that, how disgraceful!

He?s really ridiculous with that yellow umbrella.

Rain is a serious business and an umbrella can only be black!.

Others were furious and said to one another, enraged: What on earth has come over him over there, going out in the rain with a yellow umbrella? Show off! Others turned to the authorities: ?He?s certainly someone very full of himself who wants to get noticed at all costs! Does he perhaps think it?s funny? .

In fact there was nothing funny in that country, where it always rained and the umbrellas were all black.

Only Natasha couldn't really understand the criticism. A thought kept going round in her head:

When it is raining, an umbrella is an umbrella. Yellow or black, what matters is that it keeps off the rain, over and out!.

What was more, she noticed that the gentleman seemed to be perfectly at ease and quite happy under the yellow umbrella. So she had a great desire to know more.

One day coming out of school, Natasha realised that she had left her black umbrella at home.

She shrugged and began walking with her head uncovered so that the rain soaked her hair.

It so happened that just then ? Oh! It?s the man with the yellow umbrella!?

?Do you want to shelter?.

Natasha hesitated. If she accepted they would make fun of her. But then she had another thought:

When it?s raining an umbrella is an umbrella. Whether it?s yellow or black what does it matter? It?s always better to have an umbrella than to get soaking wet in the rain!.

She accepted and sheltered under the yellow umbrella beside the kind gentleman.

Then she understood why the gentleman was happy: under the yellow umbrella there was no longer any bad weather! There was a big warm sun and a blue sky where the birds were flying about twittering.

Natasha was astonished, and the man burst out laughing: I know! You're surprised! Just listen to me and I'll explain everything.

Once upon a time I too was sad in this country where it is always raining.

I too had a black umbrella. One day coming out of the office I forgot it and left it in the umbrella stand, But I didn't go back to get it, I started walking home just as I was.

As I went along I met a man who offered to shelter me under his yellow umbrella. I hesitated. Like you! I was afraid to be different, to make myself ridiculous. But then I accepted because I was even more afraid of catching a cold.

And I noticed ? like you ? that under the yellow umbrella the bad weather has disappeared. That man taught me that the people under a black umbrella were sad and didn't want to talk. The patter of the rain and the black of the umbrella made them sulky.

When suddenly I no longer saw him. I noticed that I was holding his yellow umbrella. Had he forgotten it? I looked around but I couldn't find him.

So I've kept it and the good weather has never left me.

Natasha exclaimed:

What a story! Are you not embarrassed keeping someone else's umbrella?.

No, because I know very well that this umbrella belongs to everyone. There's no doubt that that man too had received it from someone else.

When they arrived outside Natasha's house they said goodbye.

No sooner had the man disappeared than the girl realised that she was holding the yellow umbrella. But who knows where the man had gone!

So Natasha kept the yellow umbrella but she knew that sooner or later, it would have another owner, it would have passed into other hands to bring happiness to other people.

I will conclude renewing my best wishes for a Happy New Year for 2007, with the resolve to become worthy believers in a God who loves life, while with Him, as the Salesian Family, we work to build a culture of life.

Fr Pascual Chavez Villanueva

Rector Major

[1] John Paul II, Address during the Prayer Vigil for the VIII World Youth Day at Denver, del 14-8-1993, in *L'Osservatore Romano*, 17/18-8-1993.

[2] Cfr. Mission Statement of the Salesian Family, nn. 9. 10. 16.

[3] JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical *Evangelium Vitae (EV)*, 5

[4] To the Clergy of the Diocese of Rome. Lent 2006, in *L'Osservatore Romano*, (*Eng. Edition*) 15-03-2006, p. 5

[5] EV 12

[6] EV 34

[7] EV 38

[8] EV 80

[9] John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, 17

[10] Cfr. P. Braido, *Prevenire non reprimere*. LAS, Rome 1999, pp. 324-325

[11] F. Orestano, quoted by P. Braido, *op. cit.* p. 236.

[12] A. da Silva Ferreira, *Il dialogo tra don Bosco e il maestro Francesco Bodrato ? 1864*, RSS 3 (1984) 385.

[13] J. Bosco, *The life of Dominic Savio? p. 50*, OE XI p. 200.

[14] Cfr. P. Braido, *op. cit.* p. 233.

[15] Cfr. EV 87

[16] *SDB Constitutions*, 2

[17] EV 79

[18] EV 82

[19] EV 97

[20] Cfr. Document of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace on the occasion of the World Summit on Sustainable development in Johannesburg (26 August-4 September 2002).