**THE MESSAGE OF THE RECTOR MAJOR**

**Don Angel Fernandez Artime, SDB**

**LORD, HELP ME NEVER STOP BEING AMAZED**

**OR BECOME INURED TO REALITY**

«This is my prayer after having visited over 100 nations around the world where there are Salesian presences... and where I came to know realities that are so incredible, fascinating, precious, and often times so painful».

Cordial greetings, my friends, readers of the *Salesian Bulletin*. Surely, we have begun 2021 with a strong desire that it be a better year than the previous one. Perhaps there is still much fear, but perhaps we also feel deep down that we have to cultivate Hope because it does us good and helps us to live better and more meaningful lives.

On the last Sunday of January we celebrated the Feast of Don Bosco. This also took place in a different way from previous years because the pandemic has not yet disappeared and continues to condition our life. Still, even in this situation we have to know how to see the light and the buds of Hope that are present.

It is in this context that I chose these reflections to share with you this month. The title expresses the way in which I have prayed many times throughout these last seven years - and continue to do so. Very often, almost daily, I pray in this way: “Lord, help me never stop being amazed or become inured to reality.” Let me explain what I mean by these words:

In the past six years, before the pandemic, I had the precious yet demanding (as you will readily understand) opportunity to visit over 100 nations around the world where there are Salesian presences. The Salesians of Don Bosco and various branches of the Salesian Family minister in these places. I came to know realities that are so incredible, fascinating, precious, and often times so painful that my daily prayer and my thought upon returning to Rome, was: "Lord, help me never stop being amazed."

* May I never stop being amazed at having witnessed the dignity of hundreds of women in the refugee camp of Juba in South Sudan who were left alone to care for their children after their husbands had died or disappeared. This camp is located on our property, surrounding our Salesian house in Juba. May we never stop appreciating the decision that our Salesian Confreres made to welcome, stay with, and accompany all those people who have nothing and, surely, no one ...
* May I never cease to be amazed at the joy that I experienced upon meeting the teenage boys and girls who live in “Don Bosco City” in Medellín, Colombia. In this Salesian house, they were able to resume their studies after months, or maybe years, after having been forced to become child soldiers in FARC (the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia). Those young people who have been rescued and saved from the guerrillas now live with a smile on their faces and with Hope.
* May I always be amazed at the good that is done by our Salesian community living in the heart of the Kakuma refugee camp in North Kenya. This is a UN refugee camp that could be considered a city unto itself for it has more than 300,000 people inhabiting it. We, too, have been living there - extraordinarily so - for many years. The reason I say “extraordinarily so” is because the regulation in these refugee camps is that in the evening no one extraneous to them (non-refugees) can stay there. But we are allowed to stay because of their fascination with the person of Don Bosco and the educational style of his Sons and Daughters. This is what has allowed us to have a house in the midst of these families and to run both a school to teach them a trade and a parish to minister to them in various places within the confines of the camp.
* May I never cease to be surprised by the closeness I felt with the good people of the “*villas*” (the slums) which surround the “great Buenos Aires” in Argentina. There, the one who today is known as Pope Francis very closely accompanied the “Villeros priests”, as the diocesan parish priests who minister there are called. Here, also, our SDB Confreres and FMA Sisters minister.
* May the smiles on the faces of so many boys and girls who have been rescued from the streets and welcomed into our homes never cease to amaze me. These are the street children of Colombia, Sierra Leone, Angola, so many of our presences in India... In these places, I was able to see many miracles among the street kids, boys and girls, who come to our Salesian houses so they can get washed up, have something to eat, and sleep there for the night, if they wish. This work is very difficult. The Salesians walk the streets at night to find these children, establish contact with them, gain their trust (not easy to do for the abandonment and abuse received at the hands of so many other adults) and then make an invitation to them to come in off the streets. This mission has saved lives – so many lives – from the streets where they used to live (the boys more than the girls) and sleep and where they would destroy their lungs by sniffing chemicals, paints, and glue to mask their hunger pangs and emotional pain.
* I pray with faith that the *Hope and Dignity* that I found in so many young animators, high school and university students, in Damascus and Aleppo will never cease to amaze me. These young people, together with our Salesian Confreres continue to gather hundreds of young people every day to help make the war in this, their country, “not so horrible”. Perhaps this is similar to what is narrated in the film *Life is Beautiful* in which a father is interned with his little son in a Nazi concentration camp. In Aleppo and Damascus, though, the reality is acutely painful because it is not a film, but real life. When I was there I didn't hear any laments. Rather, I heard lucid arguments about the war and the diverse interests of so many nations. I found dignity and solidarity, brotherhood and faith. I asked the Lord not to stop surprising me with such dignity in the midst of the horror of a war in a city that has been 70% destroyed – something I had ever only seen in movies. Actually being in the midst of such a situation is *very* different.
* I also ask the Lord never to cease to amaze me at the beautiful reality of life which we have shared for years with so many indigenous peoples – whether they be the Yanomami, the Xavante, or the Boi-Bororo of Brazil; the Ayoreo and the Guarani of Paraguay; or the Shuar and Achuar of Ecuador. When I came to know them, I did not stop marveling at their reality and that of my Confreres and Sisters who have spent so many years sharing life with them.

I could continue at length giving examples of why I ask Our Lord to help me not to stop being surprised because contemplating these realities raises up in me a sense of awe and wonder and makes me grateful to God, to life, and to those who have done so much for the good of others. Don Bosco's missionary dreams have unfolded and have undoubtedly become reality far beyond what he himself could have imagined. I know that I have been but a witness to these realities, almost like a notary public, during my pastoral visits but I am grateful for having had the opportunity to witness them firsthand.

At the same time, I am afraid of becoming inured to many realities or just curious about, e.g., the number of deaths today from COVID when there are so many stories of pain (and quite often stories of wonderful lives) behind those deaths. I don't want to become immune to the pain caused by refugees trying to reach a new land and ending up dead in the Mediterranean Sea or on the borders and rivers of various Central American nations.

I don't want the knowledge of the abuse done by the mafias to stop being painful to me for they exploit people, deceiving them with the promise of a better life, and subject them - most often women, children, and teens - to a life of prostitution and abuse with no hope of release.

I don't want to get used to thinking that nothing can be done about this in our societies.

I don't want to be inured when I see lines and lines of people waiting for a plate of food in our big "first world" cities and come to know their very painful stories.

I want to remain sensitive to all these things – as sensitive as one is when touching an infected wound.

Dear readers, this is my simple and humble message to you. I know that many people are greatly aware of these realities and ones just like them. I also know that many of us believe that it is possible to change these situations and work to ensure that the changes happen.

As I continue to wish you a New Year full of Hope, of authentic and true Hope, I also invite you to dream in 2021 and not to give up being surprised by the beauty and incredible things of life and by so many unique stories. At the same time I pray you not “get used to” what should not be.

Thank you for continuing to stand by our side as friends, believing that a better world is always possible and that it is not a distant and unattainable “utopia”.

With great affection,

Don Angel