

LETTER TO ELDERLY SALESIANS

**Sharing  
wisdom  
and hope in  
digital culture**



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### Dear confreres

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I am addressing you with fraternal affection through these lines, to explore together the meaning of living with wisdom and hope in an era characterised by digital culture.<sup>1</sup> This letter stems from the desire you have expressed to share some reflections on how we can navigate these waters, orienting ourselves with the compass of the Gospel.

1. *History is life's teacher.* You have witnessed incredible revolutions: the rise of radio and television, the advent of the first personal computers, the age of the telephone that gradually paved the way for global connectivity. The digital adventure wrote one of its first chapters with the creation of ARPANET in the 1960s, the ancestor of the Internet. In the 1990s, the Internet entered the homes and lives of millions of people, with the arrival of mobile devices such as laptops, tablets and smartphones. In 1995, the first social networking platform came to life in the United States and Canada, ushering in an era in which information sharing and the integration of multimedia content – such as videos, music, movies, games, and shopping – became central to the online experience.

2. *We are witnessing a revolution.* With the emergence of Artificial Intelligence, we will witness further and incredible evolutions in communication. It is not possible, nor even desirable, to stop this phenomenon, just as in the 1900s no one could stop the explosion of mass communication. The only option we have is to interpret it and put our experience at the service of others.

3. *All Salesians are and have been communicators.* In Salesian houses and institutions you have all experienced the communication tools of the time, such as films, slide projectors, mimeographs, turntables. Effective tools to engage young people before the advent of digital tools. Now, in the era of an accelerated expansion of technologies, the pace has intensified, allowing even the youngest to explore the web, play online, access music and movies on the Internet.

4. *In many ways, the digital evolution has changed the way we work, relate, study and have fun.* We know its challenges and opportunities and we are part of this universe. For us, who learn from our father Don Bosco how important it is to walk with the times, it is necessary to ana-

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Walking with young people in digital culture* AGC 440, August-December 2023.



lyse and understand it in order to be protagonists and not victims.

5. *Times always urge us to change.* At every stage of our lives, as Salesian educators we are called to educate and evangelise through dialogue with different cultures, in the light of the Gospel. This involves understanding various human phenomena – such as interculturality and youth language – and addressing emerging social and political issues.

6. *Big changes, big questions.* Often, older Salesians ask themselves: how can I carry out my task in this world made of passwords, clicks, likes, photos, videos, news that are produced through countless devices? How can we continue to communicate our vocation and mission at the service of young people in a human and gospel-based way?

7. *In the Bible* we find characters who, in their old age, knew how to live and communicate God's message wisely and with relevance. For example, Abraham,<sup>2</sup> who became a guide and father to his people in middle age, symbolises the courage and faith needed to undertake new ventures and missions. As a wise elder he inspired hope despite uncertainties, criticism, and indifference.

8. *Zechariah*, servant of the Lord and husband to Elizabeth, embodies the elder who is dedicated and reconciles family care and spiritual commitments, becoming an ambassador of hope. In his canticle<sup>3</sup> (the Benedictus), he announces the arrival of the Saviour. Similarly, in late age Simeon sings of joy and gratitude (the Nunc Dimittis), having seen the Messiah with his own eyes. He represents the elder who celebrates life and the divine plan of salvation that has come his way and knows how to share his joy.

9. *Saint John Bosco*, our father and teacher, dedicates every moment of his life to the service of young people. He communicates his vision through books, letters, conferences, homilies, the Salesian Bulletin, as well as through music and photography.<sup>4</sup> He became a living message to others until the end his life.

10. *In the light of a Salesian spiritual perspective*, the question that inevitably emerges in the

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Gen 12:1-9.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Lk 1:68-79.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Circular Letter on the Spread of Good Books* by St John Bosco (19 March 1885), in Ceria E., *Epistolario di San Giovanni Bosco* volume 4, letter 2539.



face of the current panorama is: how can I bring fraternity, listening, conversation and the pleasure of being together at table back to the centre in a digital world full of stimuli and distractions? How can I, as a Salesian priest or brother, live wisely and carry on the work of evangelisation in this intricate universe of digital networks?

11. *First, remember what is the most authentic gift you can share:* Gospel wisdom and the gift of the Salesian vocation in your life that comes with it. Your path of faith, personal growth, your commitment to consecrated life, fidelity to Don Bosco and love for Mary Help of Christians, loyalty to our charism and your generous dedication to young people are at the heart of the message to be spread. Example continues to be more effective than words: your lived life is the most powerful message you can offer.

12. *Second, your message will be made alive by the experience of communion in community:* fraternal life and prayer, love for the Word of God, the sacraments, joyful service, moments of silence and sacrifice <sup>5</sup>.

13. *Third, your gospel-based wisdom<sup>6</sup> will be a source of inspiration* for young people<sup>7</sup> and all members of the Salesian Family. Thanks to this you have learned to love and forgive; to be among the people; to authentically live the faith and your vocation which is an expression of God's love for others, especially for young people. So, this is the most authentic and credible message you can offer in the digital world.

14. *Everything you are contributes* to the Salesian mission, the evangelisation and education of young people in the community. Don't feel outdated. You are not: those who walk with wisdom and gospel hope always remain young. This way you can continue to actively collaborate with the Salesian mission in your communities. You are, then, our first and most important communicators.

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. *John Paul II. Apostolic Letter Salvifici Doloris* to Bishops, Priests, Religious Families and the Faithful of the Catholic Church on the Christian meaning of human suffering.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Pontifical Biblical Commission. "*What is man?*" (*Psalm 8:5*). An itinerary of biblical anthropology, no. 56.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Salesian Constitutions* 14. "Our vocation is graced by a special gift of God – predilection for the young: 'That you are young is enough to make me love you very much.' This love is an expression of pastoral charity and gives meaning to our whole life. For their welfare we give generously of our time, talents and health: 'For you I study, for you I work, for you I live, for you I am ready even to give my life.'"



15. *We know that communication has changed shape*, but the underlying principles are always the same. In the inter-generational and multicultural context of many of our communities, we can always cultivate the gift of exchange and the construction of communion and fraternity in a shared mission.

16. *Today, every Salesian is “connected”*. It is important to accept a different way of living and working with an open mind. It is about cultivating our ability to understand people, to feel part of the mission of the community without losing the desire to serve others with joy and enthusiasm.

17. *The digital universe is a vast land of wheat and tares*.<sup>8</sup> Digital technologies open broad prospects for human and cultural development. However, navigating prudently<sup>9</sup> and wisely in this universe is critical. This does not mean labelling behaviours or prescribing strict rules, but adopting gospel and Salesian discernment. It is essential to know that political, economic and ideological interests lie behind the digital world. Knowing this and knowing how to avoid risks therefore becomes essential. It would be interesting to think of moments and spaces for sharing and forming people in the pastoral, educational and ethical use of these means.

18. *Experience is golden*. In this scenario, your life experience is valuable, because ethics returns to the centre of reflection on digital communication. It becomes a lighthouse for navigation in its oceans. In fact, the algorithms that underlie digital communication can lead to reckless consumption, data manipulation, damage to privacy, and the spread of hidden ideological currents. Precisely for this reason it is important to learn how to protect yourself, carefully manage your personal data and your own and others' privacy. Finally, protect your physical and psychological health.

19. *We are aware that the digital world is not only a risk, but also a great source of opportunity*, if lived with an educational and ethical approach. The network is a fundamental tool for the exchange of information, collaboration, study, research, evangelisation.

20. *We continue to communicate with an open heart* to our confreres and with eyes attentive to reality. We must always remember that living digitally with a critical spirit allows us not to

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Mt 13:24

<sup>9</sup> “The prudent person is creative: he or she reasons, evaluates, tries to understand the complexity of reality and does not allow him or herself to be overwhelmed by emotions, idleness, pressures and illusions.” (Cf. Pope Francis, General Audience. St Peter's Square Wednesday, 20 March 2024)



## SHARING WISDOM AND HOPE IN DIGITAL CULTURE

limit our universe of thought to a bubble which keeps us away from real life: from poverty, wars, exclusion, environmental problems, the digital divide and individualism. It cannot be a screen to escape direct contact with people and the richness of community presence, which leads us to share experiences and emotions with confreres, lay people and young people.

21. *Dear confreres, let us continue to navigate together with wisdom and hope.* In our navigation Mary is the main lighthouse. Among the many titles of the Mother of Jesus, Stella Maris is the most enlightening. This name appeared when the first missionaries challenged the oceans. Mary is the guide in infinite spaces; she is Mother and Teacher and guides us in navigating the digital world.

May Mary, Stella Maris, always guide us!

Rome, Easter 2024

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