

## STRENNA - 2003

---

**Let us make every family and every community "the home and school of communion" (NMI, 43) by fostering a "spirituality of communion" in the building of a culture of solidarity and peace.**

In this article

- [Introduction](#)
- [Communion: goal of the Divine plan](#)
- [Building a culture of solidarity and peace](#)
- [Family and community: home and school of communion](#)
- [For a pedagogy of communion](#)
- [Conclusion](#)

Dear Brothers and Sisters of the Salesian Family,

Together with my heartfelt good wishes, I send you my suggestion for our commitment for the New Year of 2003, confident that as in the past it may help us to continue our pilgrimage together and be a prophecy of communion in the Church. The rich values of our charism can shine forth in the fine witness we can give to communion! Here is the Strenna for 2003:

### *1. Introduction*

#### **1.1. Origin and significance of the “Strenna” in salesian tradition**

From the early period of his work, about 1849, Don Bosco “towards the end of the year had begun to give a message to all his boys in general and another to each one in particular. The first consisted in norms to be followed for the good progress of the house in the year about to begin... The second was a maxim or piece of advice adapted to the needs and conduct of each boy” (MB III. p.617).

So wrote Fr Lemoyne in the Biographical Memoirs, revealing the significance of the Strenna in the mind of Don Bosco, even from that time: it was the gift of a suggestion which would serve as a stimulus for the formative process and spiritual growth of his youngsters and which, in addition, became a guideline for the whole community, enlightening and welding it together in solidarity, and capable of translation into practical norms of living for the good running of the house. In general also the Strenna was made specific with regard to the particular category of those to whom it was addressed: the clerics, the students, the artisans, all in general (MB VI, p.115), the priests in 1858, the Salesian Society in December of 1868 (MB IX, p.457), and to the house of Mirabello.

In 1860 Don Bosco asked the boys to give him as a gift (strenna) “one communion each, made for his intentions” (MB VI, p.803).

On his side in 1859 Don Bosco had already given himself “as a strenna” to the boys: “What little I have of knowledge, what little experience I have gained, whatever I have or possess, prayers, hard work, health and my life itself, – I want to put all of it at your service. For my part I give you as a strenna my entire self; it will not amount to much, but when I give you everything, it means that I keep nothing back for myself (MB VI p.362). And all this took place in a joyful family atmosphere of exchange of gifts and offerings, more than one of simple suggestion.

Sometimes it was an invitation to promote devotion to our Blessed Lady (MB IX p,457) or an encouragement to frequent communion for the whole of life (MB XVIII, p. 503). In 1862 he even

went so far as to say: “Our Lady herself is giving the strenna to each one this year. Each of you should consider its advice as coming from the lips of the Virgin Mary herself” (MB VII, p. 2-3). For Don Bosco therefore, the Strenna took on a particular importance. He never let a subsequent year go by without one. It was something that the houses themselves looked forward to and received with affection. The Biographical Memoirs are careful and precise in recording as many of them as possible (from 1858 to 1872 and from 1875 to 1887), especially the ones for individuals: no fewer than 180 are for boys at Mirabello (MB IX, p. 457).

Little by little the custom grew into a happy and valued tradition, which became extended systematically to all the Salesian Family, and the Strenna began to be published in the circulars of subsequent Rector Majors. For the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians Mother Daghero carried on the tradition after the death of Mother Mazzarello until 1894. From that year she received the Strenna given to her by Don Rua for transmission to the entire Institute: it consisted of a simple phrase which became a formative incentive for the whole year. Nowadays the Strenna has the character of an annual appointment awaited with interest by all groups of the Salesian Family. Moreover in recent years, especially with Fr Egidio Viganò and Fr Juan Vecchi, it has taken on a much wider ecclesial aspect, inspired by proposals from the Pontifical Magisterium.

## **1.2. Objectives of the Strenna of 2003**

The Strenna of 2003 follows the same line, in continuity of thought with the last one left us by Fr Vecchi which took its inspiration from *Novo millennio ineunte*, the “Magna Carta” of the pastoral program of the Church for the third millennium. In this sense its purpose is to translate the great guidelines offered us by the Pope into projects that are specific, practical, and more immediately effective. It is an attempt to avoid falling into the ever present trap of producing documents which become simple slogans, virtually harmless and completely removed from practical daily life and without any influence on it.

At the same time it is meant to be in harmony with the theme of the GC25 of the Salesians (“The salesian community today”) and with that of the GC21 of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (“In the renewed Covenant, our commitment to an active citizenship”), so as to respond to the deeply felt challenge of the present day, which is to seek the integration of all humanity, called as it is to become the great human family in the single spirit of the civilization of Love.

Today the political and economic panorama presents us, in fact, with the picture of a society that is globalized but ravaged at the same time by so many conflicts of lesser or greater extent, always accompanied by destruction and violence, by inequality and injustice. The dominant social and economic model, which we could call globalization with marginalization, is strongly marked by a selfishness and a competitive edge which make men threaten and feel threatened in turn by each other.

We are witnessing styles of life characterized more by exclusion than by incorporation, by suspicious insecurity rather than harmonious cohesion, by the aggravation of situations of poverty in a manner that leads automatically to marginalization. Broad swathes of the population do not feel any guarantee of their fundamental rights, like those to life, subsistence, work, respect, equality, citizenship, and membership of a democracy. At the same time the patterns of life promoted by the media are creating a form of “media imperialism”, aimed more at strongly emphasising consumerism than on ensuring conditions of equity and justice: and this frequently becomes a real insult to those who lack the very necessities of life.

All this has destructive effects on families and communities. Their cohesion is put at risk by the emphasis given to aspects of separation and exclusion, to the detriment of those leading to communion and welcoming acceptance.

Families find difficulty in remaining together for many reasons, but especially through an accented intolerance that seems to derive from excessive emphasis on various elements of diversity and opposition: diversity of age, of interests, of values, of lifestyle, of mentality, of the concept of the

family itself, of attitudes to life, to work, to other people, and to faith. Such intolerance frequently explodes spontaneously into aggression and violence.

In communities the influence is continually gaining ground of a culture in which personal success is outstripping all other values in priority, to an extent that compromises any community project, even if it does not lead to the complete ignoring of people who are weaker and more fragile.

There are certainly families that continue to wager on life and are generously open to the birth of children. The parents are truly dedicated to the education and development of their sons and daughters in an atmosphere characterized not only by interpersonal relationships, but also by social and pastoral involvement. One need only think of families who have opted to go to the missions in various countries of the world, and who indeed are to be found in our salesian communities.

Equally there are communities where the family spirit reigns, to the extent of creating a true hearth and home which stimulates the growth of individual confreres or sisters by means of community and pastoral projects that strengthen motives for living together in solidarity with the poor, present in the local neighbourhood in a way which makes tangible the nearness of God.

We, as members of the Salesian Family and aware as we are of the social and cultural context in which we are carrying out our mission, feel ourselves called to collaborate in God's plan by fostering and developing networks of solidarity, fraternity and unity with all persons and institutions who are committed to the deep humanization of society. It is in borderline situations, shown up by the "signs of the times", that with the help of God we shall be able to make a stand and adopt even prophetic attitudes in the face of "diabolical" and disruptive elements, in order to make families and communities places symbolic of communion and fraternity.

## *2. Communion: the goal of God's plan*

God's original plan for humanity is found already in the first pages of Genesis. In its very beginning (Gen 1, 1-2, 4a) the Bible presents creation as the orderly organization of unformed chaos. The sacred Author is immediately concerned to make it clear that God puts all the elements of creation at the service of man, who is already oriented towards God. Created things are good to the extent that they are for the service of man and of the whole of man. Man in his turn, created male and female, has the task of continuing creation throughout history through his work of the building of union in love. Created in the image of God – who is Love, Family, Community, and Trinity – man is called to be like to God in loving, creating a family and building community.

### **2.1. Communion and division: grace and sin**

Disorder, which means a return to chaos, began when man decided, with a precise act of rebellion and autonomy, to no longer respect his dependence as a creature on God and acted according to his own subjective criteria of good and evil.

From that moment evil entered into the world and with it death – made tangible and concrete in the killing of Abel. With evil there entered also every form of division among men, culminating in a clamorous manner in the failed project of the construction of the Tower of Babel.

On the one hand we are witnessing the sin of pride and self-sufficiency (?B??s) on the part of man, who has the presumption to want to raise himself to heaven and even supplant God; and on the other we find ourselves unfortunately facing the increasing confusion between men themselves, which culminates in the immediate consequence of their disintegration and dispersion.

To this display of man's obstinacy God responds with the promise of a saviour, entrusting man to woman, making a covenant with Noah, and especially by giving a particular call to Abraham, in whose descendants will once again be blessed all the nations of the earth. This is the sapiential reflection of the sacred author (Gen 2-3.11.12).

The fruits of the rebuilding of communion and of reconciliation can already be seen as preliminary signs in the story of Joseph, who welcomes and pardons his brothers, or in that of Moses, who

intercedes for his people, or in the episode of Ruth, who is accepted and married by Booz despite the fact of being a foreigner, or in the stories of the prophets, who by their words and life manifested the love of God that guides the whole of history.

The call to communion is therefore the loving response that God continues to give in the face of man's obstinate disobedience. He is faithful to his plan of salvation despite the radical refusal of man, who seems bent on seeking his own fulfilment by following his own personal plan. But the tragic consequence of it all becomes clear in the sad effects of a world torn by ethnic hatred, the madness of homicides, and the break-up of families. From another standpoint, the polarizing effects can become rooted in collectivism and socially conforming behaviour which de-personalize the individual, or in a private and self-centered individualism that has no concern for society nor any interest in the common good.

In conclusion, while God is Love and Trinitarian Communion, sin is a breaking of communion; it is a division, a tearing apart, both internally and externally.

## **2.2. In fidelity to God's Word**

All these "signs" point to the great "Sign" per excellence, Jesus Christ, "our peace": he brought the pagans and Jews together to be one people; he demolished the wall that separated them and made them enemies (cf. Eph 2,14). He is the supreme expression of the Love of God and the creator of a new community of love, the seed of a new humanity born of pardon and reconciliation.

The characteristics of communion, in fact, provide the visible sign of a phenomenon which is taking place nowadays in a particular way in the world and in the Church, both of which are ever more sensitive and attentive to the dynamism of socialization and solidarity, and every other movement that tends to create coherence and unity. We need only recall the new vigour being acquired by theological categories like those of the "ecclesiology of communion" and of the "spirituality of communion", frequently referred to in the document "Starting afresh from Christ".

The expression "home and school of communion" in the Apostolic Letter *Novo millennio ineunte* (n. 43), is used by John Paul II in defining its role in the world and the effective contribution it is called upon to make in virtue of its calling. The Church is the image of the Trinity and models itself on the basis of acceptance of the gift of Trinitarian communion. In this way it becomes the home that welcomes the diversity of peoples and cultures, and the school in which is learned the difficult art of overcoming conflicts and antagonisms.

Today the Salesian Family wants to take on and make its own this same task of the Church, so that it becomes the motive for its formative commitment this year: to be "the home and the school of communion". It has identified the ways of communion between its various constituent Groups in the "Common Identity Card" and in the "Common Mission Statement"; it is a matter of taking up again this spiritual legacy which we share, in order to understand more deeply our "overall charismatic experience". We intend to do this in harmony with the same Word of God, who makes himself visible through some passages of the New Testament which throw light to a greater extent on the spirit of communion in charity.

St Luke in the Acts of the Apostles emphasized how the Christians of the first community "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2,42), and he mentions four specific elements which constitute the adhesive force of this communion: listening to God's Word, fraternal charity, the Eucharist, and prayer in common.

St Paul in turn, while exhorting the Romans to continue to grow in their Christian life (Rom 12,3-10), pointed out some fundamental aspects to be developed, i.e. unity in a single body, though with diversity of members, together with the humility that overcomes all kinds of presumption and abuse if power. The variety of individual charisms must be lived in the unity of spirit, in simplicity of collaboration, in mutual esteem, and in unfeigned love. In Mt 18, 20, this attitude is further strengthened by the exhortation to common prayer and mutual forgiveness.

We are familiar, or should be, with the orientation to communion by reason of our faith in the

Triune God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit; in virtue of our existential experience of Church, which is a community with brothers and sisters and with the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and because of the commandment of love which is the most characteristic identifying trait of Jesus' disciples: "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13,35), For this reason believers, and among them those particularly who are consecrated, should be the principal craftsmen and makers of communion, especially within the ecclesial community, but in civil society as well.

### **2.3. Communion among persons: grace and commitment**

Communion is both a grace and an obligation. It is a gift but also implies a task to be performed. In so far as it is a grace, it is clear that communion does not stem immediately from human nature which is subject rather to self-centredness and egoism. In so far as being a gift, it should be received by man with gratitude and openness to the conversion of any of his attitudes that offend against communion or threaten to destroy it.

As a commitment or obligation, communion is the result of the constructive and educative activity of every man and every woman. Everyone in fact is called upon to collaborate with everything that fosters the respect and formation of the person in the fullness of his dignity, as well as the unity of the human family, in an effort to build up the world and make it more humane.

It will all be possible if a philosophy and anthropology are adopted which have as basic postulates the Jacques Maritain principle of integral humanism, and are able to respect and accept in their framework of values all the dimensions of man and woman, including the religious dimension. These can then be successfully translated into a true human ecology.

The project is a fascinating one. It is "a task that requires persons who are spiritual and forged interiorly by the loving and merciful God of communion, and mature communities where the spirituality of communion is the law of life".

Do the lay groups of our Family feel themselves involved in the dynamics of these processes? And we who are consecrated persons, are we really conscious that our vocation, when lived and practised with faith, places us in the best position to become the principal agents of communion? Even the civil society of every continent is particularly sensitive to this movement towards unity. It is sufficient to note the different groups of countries that are trying to "create a common home", like the countries of Europe who, one after another, are moving towards the formation of a confederation of States, to which others are also aspiring who have already expressed the desire to enter and form part of the European Union, and are working to create the required conditions for their rapid entry and recognition. We are witnessing a process of searching for unity, for communion and for the convergence of peoples towards an integration manifested also in so many other parts of the world. It is a sign of the times that challenges us to responsible participation, both as groups and as individuals.

This is found to be the case not only at a macro-social and institutional level but also from a less official standpoint, equally visible today, in phenomena clear for all to see, like the continuous massive migrations of hungry people and refugees, looking for a well-being which in their own countries is becoming progressively more ephemeral.

Together with this social dimension, which occurs in tragic fashion at certain moments of history, the communion we are called to build among men must extend to the totality of the human person in the depth of his being and the radical nature of his attitudes, as also to the concreteness of external expressions clearly visible in the various economic, social, cultural and political aspects of public life.

### *3. Building a culture of solidarity and peace*

We are coming to the end of the year 2002. It is our duty to thank God for all the gifts he has bestowed on us in these past 365 days, and for the superabundance of grace he has poured out on humanity since the moment of creation.

The first words of the Prologue of John's Gospel: "in the beginning" clearly evoke the beginning of the book of Genesis and refer both to the fact of the creation and to God's eternal plan for leading man to the fullness of life.

Tomorrow we shall begin, with his grace, a New Year beneath the sign of communion between man and God, between man and man, between man and nature, and the reconciliation of man with himself. Our task and responsibility is to embody in ourselves the love of God, who is trying in this way to unite the whole of humanity in a single family.

#### **3.1 A year rich in events – seeds of the Word**

The background against which we end the old and begin the new year is a shadowy one pierced by occasional flashes of light and sometimes streaks of darker shadow.

On the one hand we rejoice at all the luminous aspects that are features of our human race at the present day: the developments and fruits of science, technology and economics, together with the awareness that has matured in the human conscience of the dignity of the person. But on the other we are struck by the shadows of the great evils afflicting the whole of humanity – those stemming from natural calamities (earthquakes, floods, droughts) and those that are an expression of selfishness and domineering human attitudes (wars, terrorism, poverty, sexual and racial segregation, fundamentalism, ideologies). These latter are even more serious because man has available the means to overcome them.

This means in effect that peace and concord, wellbeing and development, would be possible for all and could be enjoyed by everyone, if only we were moved by greater solidarity!

The story of the twentieth century has been one of unlimited technical advancement: technology has accelerated the process of industrialization; it has reduced distances with the tremendous development of the means of transport, and now with the rapidity of virtual communication it has made possible knowledge in real time and an unequalled power not only for international organizations, but even for individual consumers. In this century man succeeded in splitting the atom and deciphering the genetic code, and has made a network of the whole world.

In these first years of the 21st century, transformations in technology are moving at an even faster rate, compelling us to keep continually in touch with events for a constant updating as regards finance, commerce, politics, culture and science, use of spare time, sport and recreation, with the creation of new personal services, hitherto undreamt of, improving the quality of and time needed for diagnoses, the treatment of illness and old age, and strengthening expectations and hopes for the life of millions of men and women.

On the other hand, the development of technology is becoming ever more threatening; the gap between those who have much and those who have nothing is becoming ever wider, unless governments take measures to foster flexibility and innovation in the organization of work and of the economic sector, so as to give a more human face to globalization.

The tragic terrorist attack of 11 September 2001, specifically against the financial and military heart of the United States, and the recent anti-globalization demonstrations have revealed the far from remote danger of a hard, violent and generalized reaction of those peoples who feel themselves excluded from the benefits of technology and globalization.

What can be done therefore to control these deep and frenetic changes that are so greatly modifying the face of the world, transforming man himself in the dynamics of his relationships? How can we discern the "signs of the times" and the "seeds of the Word" in such a contrasting panorama?

### **3.2 “God-with-us” and “God-like-us” at the basis of our commitment in solidarity**

Only in God, revealed in Jesus Christ, can a response be found to man's enigmatic and contradictory situation with regard to the fundamental dimensions of his existential reality, constituted by his deep relationship with himself, with others, with life, and with God the creator, father and redeemer. The solution to the classic dilemma whether to affirm God by sacrificing man or affirm man by sacrificing God, is found in the one who is “true God and true Man”: Jesus Christ, our Lord. “In reality it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear” (GS 22), which enables us to say once again with *Gaudium et spes* that the most radical foundation of immanence must be based on the existential acceptance of transcendence.

Here we have a God who is not indifferent to our world, a God who is not totally separated from us, a God who has wanted to be “God-with-us” by being “God-like-us”. God has made man to his own image and likeness (Gen 1,27), he has gone so far as to make himself the image and likeness of man (Jn 1,14).

If Jesus of Nazareth is the path of God towards man, if an actual man is the face of God, it means that the actual man is the path of man towards God. We cannot seek the God of Jesus Christ except where he has appeared and lived; the place where we find him present is not in heaven but on earth, where men live or struggle to live. God-made-man lives among us. Every man, and especially the one most in need, least successful and more ill-treated or forgotten, best reflects his face and resembles him more closely.

This is precisely the salesian mission: to make God’s love visible to young people who are poor, abandoned and at risk.

Neither science, technology or economics will ever be able by itself to realize the human ideal and peace for man. The source of life and joy, of communion and fraternity, finds its radical consistency only in God.

To think that it is sufficient to abolish terrorism in order to bring about and guarantee peace is pure ideology. What must be fought against and eliminated are rather the causes of everything that creates violence, poverty, injustice and leads to under-development.

When receiving the Ambassador of Great Britain to the Holy See, John Paul II clearly reaffirmed that “the building of this culture of global solidarity is perhaps the most important moral task that humanity can undertake at the present day”. In this perspective the Holy Father wishes particularly to relaunch the spiritual and cultural challenge he has several times addressed to the industrialized countries of the West, in which “the principles and values of the Christian religion have long been woven into the very fabric of society but are now being called into question by alternative cultural models grounded in an exaggerated individualism which all too often leads to indifferentism, hedonism, consumerism and a practical materialism that can erode and even subvert the foundations of social life”. And later the Pope had strong words to say when he emphasized that “The whole of human society is deeply rooted in the family, and any weakening of this indispensable institution cannot but be a potential source of grave difficulties and problems for society as a whole”.

### **3.3. Called to live in Trinitarian communion the very life of God**

Those who declare that the fact that God is one and three, one in three persons, is irrelevant must be clearly but firmly reminded that it is specifically on the image of God formed in us that depends not only respect for the originality of Christian Revelation (we believe in fact in the Triune God), but also the quality of the image of man, of society, of religion, of Church, and even of our own mission in the world.

In the light of the God of Jesus Christ – who is God and Love –there is no place for a monotheistic or polytheistic conception that would seek to found on him the craving for power or any other form of egoism. The events of 11 September, perpetrated in the name of a vengeful god, show with lucid clarity that today there are circulating concepts and images of a god who is far from the God-Love

revealed in Jesus. This can be said of all who are trying to organize the world by founding it on the abuse of power and dominion, of man's oppression and poverty, i.e. those who have a false and distorted representation of the God who created us to his image and likeness and then called us to live with him in communion with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

We, on the other hand, surrounded and enlightened by the mystery of God, "the shining light that does not blind", are persuaded that the word "Love" is the best image to use of the Triune God. "God is love" (1 Jn 4,8.12), suggests St John, is the best expression of God's deep identity. It follows that the proclamations that "God is three in one" and "God is Love" are two different expressions of the same rich and consoling reality.

But love, like God himself, if it is to be seen and believed, needs to be manifested: "No one has ever seen God, but God's only Son, who is at the Father's side, has made him known" (Jn 1,18). "No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us" (1 Jn 4,12).

It is in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ that the infinite love of the Trinity for us is demonstrated in a particularly concrete and visible manner, as can be observed in many traditional paintings, e.g. the famous picture of Masaccio in the Church of St Maria Novella at Florence. We gaze in admiration of the Father who supports with his arms his crucified Son, at the same time giving him to us, while the Holy Spirit in the form of a white dove unites the countenance of the Father with that of Christ in a bond of love.

This is also what the famous picture of the Trinity by Andrej Rublëv (1422) is meant to represent, in which Love emanates from the Divine Persons and bathes with the purest light all the earth, symbolized by a single table. From the communion of glances rays of eternal love which will save and sanctify the world can be seen shining out.

"They are three: the Lover, the Loved One, and Love itself" declares Saint Augustine. To us is given the grace not only to know and contemplate this Love, but to accept it through Baptism and the Eucharist. That is why faith in the Trinity cannot possibly be reduced to simple acceptance of a cold truth. It requires us to be able to translate every day into a way of life founded and moulded by this same Love.

Believing in God One and Three means, therefore, being and becoming ever more men of communion, creators of harmony in communities by loving and fighting against all division and inequality and all forms of selfishness, determined to develop our calling to communion by fostering the growth of a communion of culture and solidarity.

### **3.4. Educative practice attentive to human rights**

In addition to the values of faith, for the believer the process of building a culture of communion is founded on the absolute value of the dignity of the human person, whether man or woman, confrere or Sister, foreigner or fellow-national, as is stated in art.1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948): "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights". Now the fact of being ontologically free and equal is already a sufficient reason for mutual respect in the first place, and then for the mutual acceptance and welcoming of others, leading to the next step which is expressed in the sharing of common responsibilities for the common good, so as to reach the communion of ideals and sentiments.

But since human society is subject to conditions of conflict, linked with the fact itself of the presence of many groups and communities of different cultural, ethnic and religious background, intercultural dialogue is required and this is facing serious and dramatic problems. Although the roots of the problems lie elsewhere (endemic poverty, migratory movements, savage and uncontrolled globalization, poor quality government in the countries of origin), of fundamental importance remains the need for human respect and the joint attainment of the common good, considered as the principal and unifying goal of any kind of civil society.

Now this intercultural dialogue, that we are called upon to conduct as educators in the different

parts of the world, must take place by the sharing at worldwide level of a model, or rather of a project, based on the universal law of human rights. Dialogue leads at the same time to the clarification of what must be done within the human citadel, of which we all feel ourselves full citizens, for the living together in peace and the progress for which we are all responsible. In this process of active citizenship, we stake our position on the juridical recognition of human rights, by which every individual is endowed with the same patrimony of fundamental rights (civil, political, economic, social and cultural) in whatever part of the world he may be. It is on the basis of the sharing of the values of these fundamental rights that every possibility of dialogue and communion between men is founded, to enable them to pass from the phase of multi-cultural based conflict to the phase of inter-cultural based dialogue. Education to human rights, to democracy, to mutual respect and to peace is also the first step in building communion in the civil communities of which we are part.

Now this work of internalization and sharing of human and universal values needs the support of spiritual convictions and energies which find their most suitable humus in religion. In such a context we discover still more the importance and fruitfulness of our membership of a charismatic Family, which already recognizes these principles and in its work tries to spread them as a basic platform for every educative, human and Christian endeavour.

#### *4. The family and the community: a home and school of communion*

We are well aware that none of us can solve these macro-social problems by himself, but we are equally convinced that we can all contribute to the realization of the ideal of communion in so far as we can offer alternative models, founded not on privilege, distinctions and selfishness, but on fellowship, equality and love.

In our situation as the Salesian Family concerned about education, we can make an effective contribution at least on two levels immediately within range of our possibilities and competence, those of the family and of the religious community.

#### **4.1. The family: home and school of communion**

The family, called by Paul VI the “domestic Church” and by John Paul II in *Familiaris Consortio* the “cradle of the Church”, is in itself the first cell of society, because of the experience of communion learned and lived in it through the vital communication of the experience of human values, beginning with relationships between the members. “The love between husband and wife” the Pope continued, “and, in a derivatory and broader way, the love between members of the same family-between parents and children, brothers and sisters and relatives and members of the household-is given life and sustenance by an unceasing inner dynamism leading the family to ever deeper and more intense communion, which is the foundation and soul of the community of marriage and the family,” a communion that cannot be dissolved, a sign and expression of ecclesial and Trinitarian communion. It is the communion of persons which makes the family “the richest and most complete school of humanity”.

The family is the natural place for the growth and development of the human person, in the educative interaction between parents and children in which each one both gives and receives. It is the home in which the specific and vital experience takes place which is fundamental for the building of the human individual as a person, i.e. as an individual in relationship with others. It is our “tent” in which we grow and set up our home in this world. In it we pass “from nature to culture”; in other words it is in the family that the child learns to channel instincts, feelings and passions towards appropriate cultural forms.

The family is the privileged setting for the formation of our identity as persons, for launching and developing the existential unity which is a constituent of every mature human being. The multiplicity of the different dimensions in which the person is structured (i.e. affective, intellectual,

sexual, moral, social and religious) constitutes for every individual an appeal to the search for synthesis and unity which is a guarantee of a suitable personal maturity, sustained and aided by follow-up on the part of parents and other educators whose mission includes the precious task of the formation and education of the new generations.

It is in the family that the adult too finds the relevant and necessary resources which enable him to shape and guide the impulsive traits of his character into expressions more acceptable in civilized society.

More particularly, by virtue of its Christian identity the family has a further advantage in life, because faith opens horizons to the spiritual and religious dimension, and so can speak specifically of God and love as goals to which all human existence aspires. God's presence in the Christian family becomes the central element of its unity and love, the keystone of unity and harmony even in life's painful moments.

The family, however, is one of the institutions that has been most extensively influenced by the changes of our times, becoming weakened in its structure and in its very relationship of love, even to the point of dissolution through separations, divorce and the other ways in which couples live together, facilitated also by laws and new lifestyles which are becoming widespread, especially at the level of young families.

All this cannot fail to have sad consequences, compromising not only the maturing of the persons within the family, but also the contribution it can make to society itself. A lifestyle, characterized mainly by self-centredness and the defence of one's own self-fulfilment, is very frequently reinforced not only by a series of economic, social, cultural and political factors but by the mass media, ever ready to give greater prominence to unconventional models than to those constructive of a family life spent in the normal circumstances of sacrifice and perseverance. It is a lot easier to publicize a scandal than to remove its memory from men's minds; to flaunt messages of violence and sexual misbehaviour than to use them to point to the sad effects of an increase in divorce, of conjugal infidelity, of free love, of unmarried unions, of sexual relationships before marriage.

The result we see before us is not at all encouraging, even from the standpoint of social security or the welfare state, where we note the difficulty of establishing adequate family policies with the necessary means of support. And where such situations already exist, as in the countries of northern Europe, models of living together are being supported which have little to do with commitment to the education and formation of future generations. The processes of autonomy of choice, and acceptance of the most fragile forms of union, are weakening the family in its basic characteristics, in its fundamental structure, and its prospects for stability and endurance.

From this we can deduce the urgent need for combined action to oppose the factors which progressively undermine, by strengthening the sensitivity of institutions, educators, families and young people to a new educative commitment that will be more effective. Once again in *Familiaris Consortio* the Holy Father noted that it is through a great spirit of sacrifice that family communion can be preserved and brought to perfection. It demands, in fact, a ready and generous readiness on the part of each and everyone for understanding, tolerance, pardon and reconciliation.

Living in the midst of young people and their families is for us a privileged condition, that enables us not only to listen to their silent, suffering and implicit cry for help, but also to pursue pedagogical aims leading to effective support for their life of communion.

## **4.2. The religious community: home and school of communion**

Communion has always been a characteristic and significant element in the life of the religious community, even to the point of declaring that its internal organization has given rise to various centres of human development and culture. Religious men, and also religious women, have always come together to help each other in the way of spiritual perfection and to realize a common mission by living in fraternity and fellowship.

Eloquent examples are the various evangelical models of community life: that of the Holy Family

of Nazareth, that of the apostolic community around Jesus, that of the community of Jerusalem, etc. Nevertheless our experience at the present time brings home to us at first hand the multiplicity and variety of the problems that occur and become a crisis in religious life, and affect its daily living. Perhaps never before has there been so much insistence on communion as there is nowadays, and perhaps never before have we witnessed the subtle penetration of so many forms of individualism which attack religious communities; they make difficult and even put a complete brake on the dedication of oneself to God and to man, and lead to a weakening of the enthusiasm and fervour of the initial charism.

For us Salesians, it is evident that Don Bosco drew his inspiration from the image of the apostolic community, rather than from the spirit of the hidden life of the family at Nazareth. For him the mission for the benefit of the young was the fundamental reason for living and working together and a means for creating community. But at the same time Don Bosco, genial educator that he was, saw instinctively that his boys needed the love and warmth more easily found in a family environment. "Education is a matter of the heart", he used to say to his collaborators. And so education will be efficacious and fruitful only if it is possible to create and develop in our houses the family spirit.

Against this background the vigour and urgency of the principles taught by Don Bosco can be even better understood, and they must be for us the guiding force in our mission, i.e. that:

- it is not sufficient just to love the young; it is equally necessary that this be done in such a way that they feel that they are really loved;
- even in the most difficult youngsters there is a spark of good from which, once he has found it, the educator can draw out many qualities;
- the educator must like the things the youngsters like if they are to love the values he himself puts forward.

Summing up, it is a matter of loving with a love of "kindness", specifically because kindness and affability are attitudes which make the love with which the educator interacts with young people credible, transparent and legible, as was well observed by John Paul II in the Letter "Iuvenum Patris", sent to Fr Egidio Viganò in 1988 on the occasion of the centenary of the death of Don Bosco; the Pope declared that for the Church, "to be concerned with education is obedience to the mandate received from her divine Founder". In particular, educating in the salesian spirit of loving kindness means "developing a human attitude which is neither simple human love nor supernatural charity alone. It is the commitment of the educator as a person entirely dedicated to the good of his pupils, present in their midst, ready to accept sacrifices and hard work in the fulfilment of his mission. All this calls for real availability to the young, deep empathy and the ability to dialogue with them."

Don Bosco matured during his educational experience. It had been strengthened by the dream at the age of nine years which was so farsighted and decisive for his vocation as an educator, but more fundamentally it had been launched by the continual and affectionate relationship with Mamma Margaret, as also by all the family experience of his boyhood. As he grew in years, the increasing intensity of his pastoral experience and his deep pedagogical intuitions led him to adopt the preventive system as his method and spirituality.

All of this came to be expressed in practical terms in the experience of the first community of Valdocco, which became a point of reference and yard stick when, towards the end of his life, circumstances had changed to such an extent that he felt compelled to write the precious Letter from Rome of 1884, which will always remain in salesian tradition as the criterion for verifying the authenticity of every educative work of his sons and daughters in the various settings of their apostolate.

Our community therefore remains a privileged setting and model of communion.

## *5. For a pedagogy of communion*

As is the case with all values, communion and solidarity are not things that are instinctive and natural. More natural rather are self-seeking, self-centredness and individualism, to which we are more readily inclined because of our weakness. The spirit of communion on the other hand must be acquired through precise rules and over a long period of well defined stages; it requires an educative strategy, with its own rhythms and intervals.

And precisely because these family and community values are not sufficiently grounded in the personality structure of individuals, there is need – especially in the initial phases of formation of children, adolescents and young adults – a more decisive approach, one more positive and purposeful, the fruit of a pedagogical plan and educative project, studied in suitable detail regarding its objectives, intermediate stages, practical means and determining experiences: a formative process that we could call the pedagogy of communion.

If the pieces of a mosaic have become detached, it will be necessary to restore them to their proper place. If the pieces of a puzzle are scattered and in disorder they will have to be put together again in an organized whole. If the constituent elements of a family or community have been dispersed, they will have to be brought together through a spirit of communion and common desire for unity. This is the purpose of family pastoral ministry, but it is also the aim of a renewed assumption of responsibility for an Educative and Pastoral Community (EPC).

### **5.1. In a Trinitarian and ecclesial perspective**

Fr Castellano writes in one of his valuable and enlightening contributions: “With regard to communion, there is clearly emerging the reference to a divine Trinitarian archetype, to the reality of the life that circulates in the Mystical Body, to the sense of fraternity and God’s family, to the requirement that the communion of persons in the Church reproduce the ideal image of Pentecost, which is opposed to both faceless collectivism and individual narcissism. Neither the Church, nor any community in the Church, is the summation of closed individualisms. They are not anonymous and faceless groups. The Church is that of Pentecost, in which every person – touched by the one flame of the Spirit which rested on each one, revealing his name and countenance – indicates that the grace of communion is precisely the free movement of the convergence of persons and the free assumption of tasks and missions, in the likeness of the Trinity, an ineffable communion of Persons”.

The grace of communion, translated into the commitment to build serene, active and positive fraternity, helps us to embody God’s project in the human history of our communities and families, to build a Church, an icon of the Trinity, that will draw all men to itself through the divine beauty expressed by the mystery of communion.

The primary and radical condition becomes therefore a true and proper “spirituality of communion”, which John Paul II defines as “the heart’s contemplation of the mystery of the Trinity dwelling in us, and whose light we must also be able to see shining on the face of the brothers and sisters around us. It also means an ability to think of our brothers and sisters in faith within the profound unity of the Mystical Body, and therefore as ‘those who are a part of me’”. .

This gives rise to some very practical consequences, such as: sharing the joys and sufferings of our brothers and sisters; sensing their desires and attending to their needs; offering them true and profound friendship. The spirituality of communion also implies the ability to see what is positive in others, to welcome it and to prize it as a gift to us from God, and to know how to make room for others, sharing each other's burdens.

### **5.2. In a unified and unifying life**

The work of reunification implies the emphasizing of those elements in life that have a “sacramental” character for building communion: the word of God, which before all else is the book of the community in the same way that the latter is the community of the book; the celebration of the Eucharist; the periods of formation; community dialogue; the times for revision of life.

Education to communion is developed through a renewed and persevering commitment to communion with others, and also a perhaps difficult opening up of ourselves, our own identity which tends to become closed in on itself, and its own world. We need to overcome the fear of relating to others, which can sometimes endanger the intimacy of our blessed solitude.

And so, “if communion is to become real and acquire a human countenance, there is need of a daily community asceticism demanding the following three essential movements:

- identification, or in other words feeling that we “belong”, constituting a strongly community “we”, that does not easily give way to the introduction of divisions, that does not hide behind the petty “you” that divides others into good and bad, which patiently goes on building communion even amid apparent community failure;
- solidarity, as a sharing of ideals and programs, readiness and availability when carrying them out, avoiding withdrawing or escaping when there is a hitch; it is a human virtue with extraordinary evangelical force;
- participation, or the living of communion when it is immersed in the various aspects of ordinary life, with each one watching over his allotted part with the intention of sharing with the others in the overall project”.

Communion engages all spiritual energy, all the human and evangelical virtues, and demands perseverance in doing good and the constant aiming at community and family holiness and the fulfilment of God’s will. “Communion originates precisely in sharing the Spirit’s gifts, a sharing of faith and in faith, where the more we share those things which are central and vital, the more the fraternal bond grows in strength.”

It would be pernicious to merely create ideals without educating to constant self-donation, to responsibility in the daily building of communion, in a dynamic of charity which asks nothing less than the gift of life itself according to Christ’s words: “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for those he loves” (cf. Jn 15,13).

Indispensable therefore is the creation of an environment and atmosphere that is both positive and favourable, evident in the home itself but also prompting generous participation, mutual communion, the investment of time and energy, of personal gifts and of qualities that promote personal growth, overcoming hidden and harmful expectations and pretences that come from thinking that everything must come from or be given by the others. True love carries with it the seal of the cross.

In his letter “Experts, witnesses and craftsmen of communion”, a masterpiece to which I would direct your attention once again, Fr Vecchi provides some practical steps in connection with religious communities but which can be applied to the family; they can be summarized briefly as follows:

- the capacity for deep interpersonal relationships, not only connected with work, but such as to mature in friendship towards growth in the Lord and solidarity in the mission;
- the ability to overcome the shortcomings of others, such as difficulty in communicating, timidity, sadness and unease, through an attitude of closeness, union and joy;
- the effort to cultivate the qualities needed for the success of any social group, such as self-esteem, courtesy, sincerity, self-control, sense of humour, and a spirit of sharing;
- communication, which is not reduced to a mere exchange of news items or points concerned with work, but manifested in the sharing of experiences and intuitions concerning our life in Christ and the way we understand the charism; communication made easy through revision of life, verification of community living, exchange in prayer, discernment of situations, projects and events, with readiness to modify judgements and positions even for the sole purpose of fraternal and practical agreement;

- finally, the ability to work together, passing from I to we, from my work or sector to our mission, from the pursuit of my own objectives and methods to agreement about evangelization and the good of young people. Helpful in this connection are council meetings, community assemblies, the community day, and other meetings.

### **5.3. Community and family: practical settings**

The community and the family are places for checking, for personal growth, for ensuring that commitments are practical, for the realistic practice of virtues – solidarity being demonstrated in the communion of each day.

If it is true that the more we live in communion and the more concrete is the rhythm of our life, the greater are the demands and consequent difficulties of community and family life, it is equally true that there is also need of a spirit of broad and mutual sympathy and compassion, a readiness for pardon and reconciliation, as the only way to avoid falling short of the ideal proposed to us by our Lord Jesus Christ.

We need to learn to accept people, to listen to them, encourage and forgive them, and not only check up on programs, make adaptations to projects, and improve the use of our resources.

Christian love is an art learned at the school of Jesus.

This implies the determination:

- To love everyone, without regard to sympathy or antipathy, or ethnic origin.
- To be the first to love, always making the first approach, to those both near and at a distance – without waiting for others to come to us, show us respect, or come looking for us.
- To love others as ourselves, following the “golden rule of the Gospel”, which tells us to treat others as we would want them to treat us (cf. Lk 6,31).
- To love wholeheartedly, bearing each others burdens, suffering with the suffering, rejoicing with those who rejoice (cf. Gal 6,2; 1 Cor, 12,26).
- To love even enemies, those who may not share our views, and even seek to harm us.
- To love whatever is good, learning to deny ourselves if it helps in reaching unity.

In the ordinary happenings of the daily life of community and family is built a communion that becomes prophecy. And where there is break-up, conflict and resentment, the prophecy of communion must be even stronger; it must arrive at communion of families with other families and the international communion of religious communities.

### *6. Conclusion: centering ourselves on God*

Dorotheus of Gaza, a classic of the monastic doctrine of the sixth century, in reflecting on community life uses in a very effective and adaptable manner the two symbols of the body and the circle.

The first is more easily understood because of its Pauline echoes. The second is more original, almost more universal, because it links at one and the same time love of God with love of neighbour.

It recalls a metaphor derived from the Fathers and perhaps going back as far as the Apostles.

Through this image Dorotheus highlights how all of us travel together towards God, like the radii of a circle converging on its centre. The more they approach the centre, the closer they come to each other, and the more they come closer to each other, the nearer they approach the centre.

It is a metaphor that is very clear: many and different are the paths that lead to God, and in the same way many and unrepeatable are individuals and their vocations, just as many also are the radii that converge on the centre. The circle, in addition to being a cold geometric figure, represents a lifestyle, that of the saints who walked decisively towards their centre, God. They come from different points on the circumference, distant from and sometimes opposed to one another, mysteriously drawn in by the centre’s force of attraction. Their gaze and countenances converge in

a centre-seeking movement that unites them to one another. To the extent that they come nearer to God, the ideal at the centre, they come closer to each other in a much deeper way – the wonderful pilgrimage towards communion in God.

But implicit also is the other side of the metaphor: that of the separation and centrifugal movement leading to mutual severance or rejection. The farther the individuals move away from God the more they also distance themselves from each other; and vice versa the more they separate themselves from each other, the more they distance themselves also from God.

It is a movement which well illustrates the internal logic of communion and separation. As they approach the centre the individuals converge, meet, become concentrated and communicate with each other. Going in the opposite direction and getting farther away, they reject communion with God and lose communion with each other; they drift further apart, each one enclosed in his own egoism and loneliness, without the light of the love that comes from God nor the reflected light coming from love of our neighbour (cf. 1 Jn 4, 19-21). But it is equally true that the nearer we come to our neighbour, the closer we come to God, who is present in man even to the extent of identifying with the least of them, as Jesus himself tells us: “What you have done to the least of my brothers, you have done to me” (Mt 25, 40).

The two symbols seem appropriate at the present time for inspiring progress in the spirituality of religious communities, especially as regards the realization of their internal communion. And the same symbols can also be applied to the life of communion of families.

And to bring the metaphor down to earth, Dorotheus recalls something said by the abbot Zosima who was wondering: “What man who has injured his hand or foot, or other part of his body, would hate himself or cut off the injured part, even if the wound began to fester? Would he not clean it, wash it, put a dressing on it, bandage it, put holy oil on it, pray himself, and ask holy people to pray for him. He does not abandon or reject the wounded part, even if it becomes offensive in odour or appearance, but does all he can to take care of it and cure it!”

Do not we find perhaps in these words an echo of St Paul’s doctrine on charity? “In this way – continues Dorotheus – we too must share each others sufferings, taking care of ourselves either directly or through others who are more skilful, and work out and do all we can to help ourselves and help each other. We are, in fact, members of each other, as the Apostle says (Rom 12,5). “If therefore we are all one body, and individually members of each other, when a member suffers, all the other members suffer with him (1 Cor 12, 26)”.

These reflections, which well interpret the Pauline texts, form an easily applicable doctrine that was dear to the early Christians, and they can be suitably applied also to the life of the religious community and that of the family. They express in their own particular ways the mystery of the Church, the body of Christ, which has its foundation in reciprocal charity and lives by it each day: a charity which becomes mutual compassion, reciprocal help and assistance, even when put to the proof in difficult moments of common life, as when one of its members displays physical sickness or moral weakness.

When this suffering body, which is every community and family, lives charity in all its fullness, it never reacts with angry or condemning words, but a sense of solidarity and compassion prevails which considers those others, and even sinners, as its more delicate members; it willingly shares their suffering and sickness. Community and family life, in fact, are not founded on the utopia of perfect communion, but on the realism of a situation of poverty, and sometimes even of scandal. During this year, proclaimed by John Paul II as the “Year of the Rosary”, let us entrust to Mary our families and religious communities, that she may keep them in unity. May the recitation together of the Rosary in families and communities bring growth to their lives and their witness of communion.

Pascual Chávez V

Rome – 31 December 2002