**Between Admiration and Pain**

I cordially greet all Don Bosco’s friends who come to the *Salesian Bulletin* with interest. This is the instrument of communication that Don Bosco loved so much and that he himself founded so he could make known what was happening in the Salesian houses around the world and the good that was being done in them.

Today, I greet you for the last time from this page of the *Salesian Bulletin*. As of August 16, the day on which we commemorate Don Bosco’s birth (August 16, 1815), my service as Rector Major of the Salesians of Don Bosco ends. There’s always a reason to give thanks, always. Thank you! Thank you—to God, above all, to the Congregation and Salesian Family, to so many dear people, and to so many friends of Don Bosco’s charism, many of them benefactors.

I also want my greeting to transmit and connect with something I experienced recently. Therein lies the title of this greeting: “Between Admiration and Pain!”, because I’m going to refer to the joy that filled my heart in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, specifically in the region of Goma, nowadays beaten by and immersed in warfare, and the joy and testimony that I received yesterday. I’ll explain.

Three weeks ago I visited the Palabek refugee camp in Uganda. Fortunately, thanks to Salesian work and other help in these years, it has ceased to be a Sudanese refugee camp and has become a place where tens of thousands of people have settled and found new life.

Crossing through Rwanda, I arrived at the Congo border in the region of Goma. It’s a beautiful land, beautiful and rich in nature—which is the very reason it’s coveted in such a way that weapons “speak.” Sadly, due to armed conflicts, in that region there are more than a million displaced people who’ve had to leave their homes and their land. We Salesians also had to leave our presence of Sha-Shah because it was occupied militarily.

These million displaced persons have come to Goma. In one of its neighborhoods, Gangi, there’s the Salesian presence named “Don Bosco.” My joy was immense when I saw the good that’s done there. Hundreds of boys and girls have their home there. Several dozen teenagers have been brought off the streets and are living in Don Bosco’s house. Right there is the home for eighty-two babies—even newborns—and small children who’ve lost their parents or have been “abandoned” because the adults have no way to take care of their own children due to the war. There, in that other Valdocco, one of the many Valdoccos in the world, a community of three nuns from El Salvador, together with a group of ladies, takes care of those babies and little ones. All of them are supported by the Salesian house with the help that comes, thanks to the generosity of benefactors and of Providence, When I visited them, the sisters had dressed everyone for the party, even the babies sleeping in their cribs. How can we not feel our hearts full of joy in the face of this reality of goodness, despite the pain that abandonment and war produce?

But my heart was stricken when I met several hundred people who came to greet me during my visit. They’re among the 32,000 displaced people who’ve left their homes and land because of bombs and have come seeking refuge. They’ve found it on the playing fields and grounds of the Don Bosco house in Gangi. They have nothing. They live on a few square meters of land under tarps or cloth. This is their reality. Together we look for ways to find food every day.

**But,** **do you know what impressed me the most?** When I was with these hundreds of people, who are mostly elderly or mothers with children (most men haven’t ben able to come because of the armed conflict), **they hadn’t lost their dignity, their joy, or their smile.**I was amazed even while my heart grieved in the face of so much suffering and poverty, even though we’re doing our bit in the name of the Lord.

I felt even greater joy yesterday when I heard a life testimony that made me think of adolescents and young people in our places, and of the very many parents who perhaps read my messages and feel that their children are unmotivated, or bored with life, or hardly have passion for anything. Among the guests these days at Sacro Cuore, the Salesian generalate in Rome, we had a visit from an extraordinary pianist who has traveled the world giving concerts and who has been part of great philharmonic orchestras. She’s a former student of the Salesians who looked up to a certain Salesian, who has since passed away, as a great reference point and role model. She wanted to offer us a concert in the atrium of the Basilica of the Sacred Heart as a tribute to Mary Help of Christians, whom she loves very much, in gratitude for her life up to now. I share this because our dear friend, who was accompanied by her daughter, gave us a wonderful concert, of exceptional quality—*and she’s* *81 years old!* At that age, perhaps an age far past when some of the elders in our families say they no longer feel like planning or doing anything that involves effort, our dear friend, who practices her piano exercises daily, moved her hands with wonderful agility and was immersed in the beauty of the music and its execution. Time stopped for her in that hour. In her simple way, good music, a generous smile at the end of her performance, and the offering of some orchids to the Virgin Help of Christians was all we needed on that wonderful morning. My Salesian heart couldn’t help but think of those boys and girls and young people who perhaps haven’t had or no longer have anything to motivate them in their lives. She, our concert pianist friend, 81 years old, lives with a lot of peace and, as she told me, continues to offer the gift that God gave her. Every day she finds more reasons for it: another life lesson and another testimony that doesn’t leave the heart indifferent.

That’s why, my friends, I thank you, thank you from the bottom of my heart for all the good we’re doing together. No matter how little it is, it helps to make our world a little more human and more beautiful. May the good Lord bless you.

Cardinal Angel