THE MESSAGE OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

**Don Ángel Fernández Artime, SDB**

THAT DAY I UNDERSTOOD A LITTLE BETTER WHAT DON BOSCO MUST HAVE FELT

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Yesterday, February 1, the day after the great solemnity of Saint John Bosco, was a very special morning. I had obtained the necessary permits to enter the Ferranti Aporti Penitentiary Institute for Minors (IPM) in Turin, at one time called the Generala. Those of us who know about the early years of the young priest John Bosco know all that his visits to this prison in the company of his spiritual teacher Father Cafasso meant. The impact that such visits left on his soul was so great that he promised the Lord that he’d do everything possible so that boys would not end up in that place. This is how the Oratory and the Preventive System were born.

I was in that very place with a group of young people. I stepped into the gallery that looks just as it did in Don Bosco’s time, unchanged and very well preserved. There is a large plaque on one of the walls that commemorates his visits to the imprisoned young men.

Father Silvano, a Salesian of Don Bosco and chaplain of the center, had arranged for all the permits necessary and was waiting for me. All the Salesian novices came too. Under the guidance of the master of novices, this year they’re preparing for their first religious profession as Salesians. This group of 18 young men go every week to meet with the young inmates of the IPM to carry out an initiative they call “the playground behind bars.” All the “residents” are much younger than the novices that Don Bosco keeps (I like to say it that way!), and the vast majority don’t have close family. Indeed, this is very similar to what Don Bosco experienced.

Also present were the teachers who accompany these young people each day. When I arrived, several of them were in the corridor and others in a room that is used for art activities. I greeted each one personally. I greeted those who came from the Arab and Muslim world with their usual salutation “salam malecum” (though the correct expression in Arabic is “As-Salaam alei-kum,” Peace be with you), to which they responded in Arabic, as is usual, “malecum salam.” I also greeted some Italians and other young Europeans.

I told them about myself, my background, and nationality. “I’m Spanish; I was born in Galicia, the son of a fisherman. I’ve studied theology and philosophy, but I know much more about fishing because my father taught me. Forty-three years ago I chose to become a Salesian. I had wanted to be a doctor, but then I understood that Don Bosco was calling me to heal the souls of the young.”

I asked them about their nationalities. Some told me, and I shared with them what I knew about each one’s country and when I’d visited there. I felt that communication was possible. Prior to our meeting, the three novices had put on for them a skit taken from a scene of Don Bosco’s life. Then they gave me the floor. Following that, they gave the young people the opportunity to ask me three or four questions. That’s how it went. They asked me who Don Bosco was for me; why I was a Salesian; what my personal experiences felt like; and why I’d come to visit them.

Regarding this last question, I told them I’d have liked it much more if, instead of my having come to visit them, that they would have been the ones who, under different circumstances, would have come yesterday afternoon to Don Bosco’s feastday and would have celebrated a beautiful gathering in the playground and shared some pizza. I told them that this time it hadn’t been possible, but that nothing prevents it from happening in the future.

Following this conversation, the teachers invited us all to sit down together for lunch (a slice of pizza) in a larger room. We all headed there, youngsters, teachers, novices, and the Salesians who were with them. We took several photographs because the boys requested it (naturally for “internal use,” as souvenirs for them); one of the young men gave me a sports shirt that he’d screen-printed. He does screen printing very well. I told him that he’d have a future in that business since it’s a field that is always growing.

At one point, a young man asked whether he could pose a question to me that he didn’t want to ask in public. I said yes, but at that point I was interrupted several times. When I looked for him, he was no longer there. As soon as I was free I looked around the room for him; I spotted him, approached him, and asked him whether I could answer his question. We moved away a little distance from the large group to make it clear that they shouldn’t interrupt us, and I spoke to him sincerely. His question was: "What’s the use of being here?" I told him: “I sincerely believe ‘for nothing and for a lot’ because jail, internment, can’t be a goal or destination, but only a passageway. But, I added, I think it will help you a lot to make the decision that you don’t want to return here, that you have possibilities for a better future, that after a few months here there is the possibility of going to one of the reception communities that we Salesians have, for example in nearby Casale.

As soon as I said that, the young man added without letting me finish: “I want that. I need that because I’ve been in the wrong place and with the wrong people.” I asked him whether he’d give me permission to tell the chaplain that we had to begin thinking about his future and that of the others. He said, “Yes.” That’s what I did. We talked. They talked. I realized how true are Don Bosco’s words, that in the heart of every young person there are always seeds of goodness. That young man, and many others I met, are totally “reclaimable” if he gets a decent chance after making mistakes.

And I also understood better than ever what Don Bosco could have felt in his youthful and passionate heart when he saw those young men locked up in the Generala.

I greeted the young people again, one by one. Our exchanges were very cordial. Their faces were open, their smiles the smiles of young people who’d been hit hard by life, who’d done wrong at some point, but still those of young people full of life. I sensed in their teachers that they had a great vocational understanding of their job, which I liked.

At the end of the time agreed upon, I said goodbye. Then someone approached me and asked, “When are you coming back?” I was moved. I smiled at him and told him: “The next time you invite me, you’ll have me here. Meanwhile, I’ll wait for you, like Don Bosco, at Valdocco.”

This was my experience yesterday. Friends of the *Salesian Bulletin*, friends of Don Bosco’s charism, just as in Don Bosco’s day, it’s possible also today to reach the heart of every young person. Even in the midst of the greatest difficulties, it’s possible for them to improve; it’s possible for them to change their ways so as to live honestly. Don Bosco knew this and he was committed to it for his entire life.

I send you my cordial greetings and best wishes.

Don Angel