THE MESSAGE OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

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CHILDREN IN A FAMILY

Rediscover the great value of closeness, friendship, and simple joy in everyday life, and the value of sharing, talking, and communicating.

I’m writing these lines, dear friends of Don Bosco and of his precious charism, as I read the draft of the *Salesian Bulletin* for September. My greeting is the last thing inserted: I’m the last to write – just as Don Bosco used to do – so as to be in step with the content of the forthcoming issue.

This month, as we begin a new academic year in our schools and oratories, I’m pleased to see that the articles have a great missionary flavor (about the Philippines and Papua New Guinea) and, at the same time, the simplicity of a “Salesian mission” in our house in Saluzzo, with its “local flavor.”

Reading this *Bulletin* makes me appreciate something that is very much ours, very Salesian, and which I’m sure is very pleasing to many of you: I’m referring to the great value of closeness, friendship, and simple joy in everyday life, and the value of sharing, speaking, and communicating. This is the great gift of having friends, of knowing that you are not alone, and feeling loved by so many good people in our lives.

While thinking about all this, I was reminded of a sincere and very honest testimony of a young woman who wrote to Father Luigi Maria Epicoco, which he published in his book *The Light in the Distance* (“La luce in fondo: attraversare i passaggi difficili della vita”). It’s a testimony that I’d like you to know about because I consider it to be the antithesis of what we try to create every day in every Salesian house. This young woman realizes, in a certain sense, that there is no success or fulfillment if the most human of encounters or beautiful human relationships are lacking. The beginning of this school year brings us back to all this.

This young woman writes about herself: “Dear Father, I’m writing to you because I’d like you to help me understand whether the longing I’ve been experiencing in recent months tells me that I’m strange or that something important to me has changed. Maybe it will help you if I tell you a little about myself. I decided to leave home when I was just eighteen. It was a way to escape from an environment that seemed so oppressive to me, one that was suffocating my dreams. I went to Milan to look for work. My family was unable to give me financial support for my studies. I was angry with them for this, too. All my friends were looking forward to choosing a major. I had no choice to make because I had no monetary support. I looked for a job to make a living; for years, I dreamed of being able to study. I succeeded and, at the cost of great sacrifices, earned my degree. On my graduation day, I didn’t want my family to attend. I thought that farmers who had attained only an eighth grade education wouldn’t understand anything about my studies. I told my mother only that everything had gone well. Her tears momentarily awakened in me a sense of guilt that I’d never felt before. But it was of little account. I became who I am by myself; I was never able to count on anyone nor did I want to do so. Even where work was concerned, I made my own career because I chose to ‘join forces’ with myself.

“I have been this way for years. And I don’t understand why only now, in the heart of the lockdown of this pandemic, a longing for my family has erupted inside me. I dream of telling them everything I’ve never told them. I dream of hugging my father. At night, I wake up and wonder whether it’s possible to emancipate oneself from such significant relationships. I’ve never even allowed the stories I’ve had over the years to cross the threshold to true intimacy. But now everything seems so different to me. Now that I’m barred even from deciding for myself to step out of my house, or from going to meet with someone whom I consider important to me, the awareness of the great lie that I’ve been living all this time has awakened in me.

“Who are we without relationships? Maybe just unhappy people looking for affirmation. Now I understand that, in reality, I did everything I did because I was hoping that someone would tell me who I really was. But I cut off the only ones who could have helped me answer that question by shutting down relationships. Now their lives are at risk, hundreds of kilometers away from me. If I should die, I’d like it to be among them and not among my successes.”

**A joy shared**

I appreciate the honesty and courage of this young woman who made me think a lot about our reality today. It made me reflect on the lifestyle that so many families pursue – one in which the important thing is to achieve success, make a good salary, and fill our days with things to do so that everything turns a profit, etc. But we pay a very high price in order to live – not outside our houses but, more and more – outside ourselves. There’s a danger of living without being centered, i.e., of “missing the mark.” Believe me, dear friends, you can’t imagine how noticeable this is in the boys and girls of our houses, our playgrounds, and our oratories.

Don Bosco’s second successor, Father Paul Albera, recalled: “Don Bosco educated by loving, attracting, conquering, and transforming. He enveloped us all – and almost entirely – in an atmosphere of contentment and happiness, from which pain, sadness, and melancholy were banished.... He listened to the boys with the greatest attention as if the things they were saying were all very important.”

The first joy in life is to be happy along with others: “A shared joy is a double joy.” The “password” for an educator is, “I feel at home with you.” His or hers is a presence that has the intensity of life.

One of Don Bosco’s biographers, Father Eugene Ceria, recounts that after a visit to Valdocco, a high-ranking member of the clergy declared: “You have a great treasure in your house which no one else in Turin or in any other religious community has. You have a room which anyone who is filled with affliction enters and then comes out radiant with joy.” He was referring to Don Bosco’s room. Another biographer, Father John Baptist Lemoyne, noted in pencil, “And a thousand of us have experienced this.”

One day Don Bosco said: “The young among us now seem to be like so many children in a family, all little proprietors of the house; they make the interests of the Congregation their own. They say ‘our’ church, ‘our’ school, and call ‘our’ concerns whatever concerns the Salesians.”

So this is why this new academic and pastoral year is an occasion to take care of ourselves in what is most essential and most important – for *our* family.