

III. CIRCULAR LETTERS TO SALESIANS AND THE DAUGHTERS OF MARY HELP OF CHRISTIANS

Don Bosco's Circular letters to the Salesians and Daughters of Mary Help of Christians are small masterpieces of spirituality. The Saint expresses in them a vigorous view of consecrated life: by the vows we give ourselves completely to the Lord, ready to follow him through tribulations until death, courageously facing up to fatigue and difficulty in order to win souls for God. Seen this way the Salesian and the Salesian Sister are encouraged to remain firm in their vocation; to flee worldly spirit; to practise obedience and poverty magnanimously; to cultivate union with God and confidence in their Superiors; to know how to put up with all kinds of inconvenience serenely to "save souls"; to faithfully observe the rules.

Here we include just a selection of circulars which more explicitly show evidence of themes on spiritual life.

Particularly expressive is the letter to the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians of 24 May 1886 (no. 237), in which Don Bosco writes: "I have asked for the grace that you always be kept faithful to your holy vocation, that you be religious who love perfection and holiness; that by practising Christian and religious virtues, and edifying and exemplary life you may honour Jesus Christ your heavenly Spouse, and honour Mary your most loving Mother". Then he lists the qualities of the Salesian Sister: exact obedience, mastery of her own shortcomings, heart turned to God alone; no regrets about the world's goods, joy in practising poverty and enduring hardships, to "follow Jesus Christ who humbled himself on earth, was crowned with thorns and nailed to a cross, so you can then be with him, exalted in heaven, clothed in glory amidst the splendour of the angels and saints"; of good physique, good-natured, a "truly cheerful spirit"; desiring to become holy through ordinary works of good example and encouragement to the young; desiring to "become adept instruments of God's glory by carrying out the tasks and fulfilling the occupations that are proper to the institute." ⁵⁰

⁵⁰ *Cronistoria*. by Giselda Capetti, Vol. V. *Ultimi anni sotto lo sguardo del Fondatore (1885-1888)*. Roma, Istituto FMA 1978, pp. 93-94.

228. The first purpose of our Society is the sanctification of its members

Critical ed. in E(m) II, pp. 385-387⁵¹.

Turin, 9 June 1867, Pentecost Sunday

Perhaps our Society will be definitively approved very soon and therefore I need to speak with my beloved sons more frequently. Since I cannot always do this in person I will try to do it at least through a letter. I will begin then by saying something about the general purpose of the Society and then we will move on to speaking once again of the particular observances of this same Society.

The first purpose of our Society is the sanctification of its members. Therefore each one on entering will strip himself of every other thought, every other concern. Whoever enters to enjoy a calm untroubled life, have comfort and pursue studies, be freed from his parents' commands or be exempt from obedience to some superior, would have a twisted purpose and his would no longer be that *Sequere me* of the Saviour's, since he would be following his own temporal interests and not the good of souls.

The apostles were praised by the Saviour and were promised an eternal kingdom not because they abandoned the world, but because by abandoning it they showed themselves ready to follow him along the way of tribulation, as in fact happened, consuming their life with fatigue, penance and suffering, and eventually suffering martyrdom for the faith.

Nor is it a good reason for one to enter or remain in the Society believing he is essential to it. Let each one have this firmly etched on his mind and in his heart, beginning from the General Superior down to the least of the members. No one is essential to the Society. God alone is its head, its absolutely essential master. Therefore its members must turn to their head, their true master, the one who will reward them, to God, and let each one join the Society out of love for him. Out of love for him let him work, obey, abandon whatever he possesses in the world in order to be able to say at the end of our life to the

⁵¹ This is Don Bosco's first letter to the Salesians.

Saviour whom we have chosen as our model: *“ecce nos reliquimus [omnia] et secuti sumus te, quid ergo dabis nobis?”*

So while we say that everyone ought to enter the Society led only by his desire to serve God with greater perfection and to do good for himself, that means doing what is truly good for himself, for his spiritual and eternal good. Whoever seeks an easy and comfortable life does not enter our Society for a good purpose. Our basis for this are the words of the Saviour who says: “Whoever wants to be my disciple, let him sell what he owns in the world, give it to the poor and follow me.” But where do we go, where do we follow him if he did not even have a place to lay his head? Whoever wishes to be my disciple, says the Lord, follows me in prayer, penance, and especially by denying himself, accepting the cross of daily tribulations and following me: *“abneget semetipsum, tollat crucem suam quotidie, et sequatur me”* [Lk 9:23]. But how far does he follow him? Until death, and if necessary, even death on a cross.

That is what someone does in our Society who wears himself out in sacred ministry, teaching or other priestly activity, until death, even a violent one in prison, in exile, by the sword, water, fire; until the point where having suffered or died with Jesus Christ on earth he can rejoice with him in Heaven.

This seems to me to be the meaning of those words of St Paul who tells all Christians: *“Qui vult gaudere cum Christo oportet pati cum Christo.”*

Once a member has entered with these good dispositions he must show that he is without pretence and accept with pleasure any task that might be entrusted to him. Teaching, study, work, preaching, confession, in church, outside church, the humblest tasks have to be taken up happily and willingly because God does not look at the task but at the intention of the one doing it. So all duties are equally noble because equally worthy of merit in God’s eyes.

My dear sons, put trust in your Superiors; they have to render a strict account to God for their works, therefore they study your abilities, your tendencies and they make arrangements that are compatible with your strength, but always in a way that can redound to the greater glory of God and the benefit of souls.

If only our confreres were to enter the Society with these dispositions our houses would certainly become a true earthly paradise! Peace and harmony would reign amongst individuals in every family and charity would be the everyday clothing of the one who commands; obedience and respect would precede the steps, works and even the thoughts of the Superiors. Yes, we would have a family of brothers gathered around their father to promote the glory of God on earth, to then go one day to love him and praise him in the immense glory of the blessed in Heaven.

May God reward all your efforts with blessings, and may the grace of the Lord sanctify your actions and help you to persevere in doing good. Amen.

Affectionately yours in Jesus Christ,

Fr John Bosco

229. Unity of spirit and unity of administration

Critical ed. in E(m) II, pp. 529-531.

[Turin, end of April 1868]

To my beloved sons and confreres of the Society of St Francis de Sales.

The month of May that we usually dedicate to Mary is about to begin and I wish to profit from this occasion to speak to my dear sons and confreres and put some things before them that I could not do in the Conference of St Francis de Sales.

I am convinced that you all have the firm desire of persevering in the Society and so acting with all your strength to win souls for God and firstly saving your own. To succeed in this great endeavour as a general basis we must have the general concern of putting the rules of the Society into practice, because our Constitutions would be of no help to anyone if they were like a dead letter just to be left lying on the desk. If we want our Society to go ahead with the Lord's blessing it is essential that every article of the Constitutions is a norm for our activity. Nevertheless there are some practical and very effective matters for achieving the purpose proposed and amongst them I note unity of spirit and unity of administration.

By unity of spirit I mean the firm, constant decision to want or not want those things that the Superior considers to redound to the greater glory of God. This decision should never waver however serious the obstacles that oppose spiritual and eternal good, according to the teaching of St Paul: "*Caritas omnia suffert, omnia sustinet*" [1 Cor 13:7]. This decision leads the confrere to being punctual in his duties not just because of the command given him, but for the glory of God it is his intention to promote. This is where his readiness comes from to put the established time in for meditation, prayer, visit to the Blessed Sacrament, examination of conscience, spiritual reading. It is true that the Rule prescribes these things, but unless there is a supernatural motive for observing them, our rules are forgotten.

What contributes powerfully to preserving this unity of spirit is making frequent use of the holy Sacraments. Let priests do whatever they can to celebrate holy Mass regularly and devoutly; those who are not priests should try to go to Communion as often as possible. But the fundamental issue lies in frequent Confession. Let everyone try to observe what the Rule prescribes in this regard. Then, special confidence is necessary with the Superior of the House in which each one lives. The great defect is this: many people seek to misrepresent the dispositions of the Superior, or judge them to be of little importance, and meanwhile they waver in their observance of the Rule, damaging themselves, causing annoyance to the Superiors, and omitting or at least neglecting things that would have powerfully contributed to the good of souls. So let each one strip himself of his own will and renounce thinking of his own good; seek only what redounds to the greater glory of God and then go ahead.

The following difficulty then arises: in practice we encounter cases where it seems better to do differently from what was commanded. That is not true. The best thing is always to be obedient, never changing the spirit of the Rule as interpreted by the respective Superior. Henceforth, let each one try his best to interpret, practise, recommend the observance of the Rule amongst his confreres; and do for his neighbour everything the superior judges to be for the greater glory of God and the good of souls. I regard this conclusion to be the fundamental basis of a Religious Society.

Unity of administration must go with unity of spirit. A religious proposes to put into practice the Saviour's saying: it means renouncing what he has or could have in the world in the hope of a better recompense in Heaven. Father, mother, brothers, sisters, house, all kinds of things, all offered for the love of God. Except that even if the soul is united with the body it still needs the material means for being nurtured, covered and to act. Therefore while he renounces all he had, he tries to join a Society in which he can provide for the necessities of life without having to worry about temporal administration. So how should a Society arrange matters to deal with temporal things? The rules of the Society provide for all; so by practising the Rule every need is satisfied. One garment, a slice of bread are enough for a religious. When there is need for more, he indicates this to the superior and it will be provided. But this is where everyone's efforts have to focus. Whoever can procure some advantage for the Society should do so, but never make himself the focus. Efforts should be made to see that there is a single purse, just as there should be a single will. Whoever seeks to sell, buy, change or keep money for his own use ... whoever does that is like a farmer who is throwing wheat away and tossing it amongst the husks while the threshers are threshing it⁵². In regard to this I must urge you never to keep money under the false pretext of it being useful for the Society. What is most useful for the Society is observance of the Rule.

Clothes, your room, its furniture should be far from being amongst the finest. The religious must be ready at any moment to leave his cell and appear before his Creator without anything that might accuse him once he has left it and without giving the Judge any reason to reproach him.

Let everything proceed then, guided by obedience, but humbly and confidently. Nothing should be hidden from the Superior, nothing. Let each one be as open as a child is to his father, with complete sincerity. This way the Superior himself will be able to know the state of his confreres, provide for their needs and take the decisions which will make it easier to observe the Rule and that will be of advantage to the whole Society.

⁵² *Volva*, the word Don Bosco uses here means chaff, husks, the outside covering of wheat in old Piedmontese, cf. V. DI SANT'ALBINO, *Gran dizionario piemontese-italiano*, Torino, Unione Tipografica Editrice 1859, p. 146.

One could say many things about this. That can be done in another letter, through appropriate conferences and especially in the next retreat at Trofarello, if God in his great mercy preserves us, as I hope he will. This will help us next September to bring all this together.

May the grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ be with us always and grant us the spirit of fervour and the precious gift of perseverance in the Society. Amen.

Affectionately yours in Jesus Christ,

Fr John Bosco

230. Confidence between superiors and confreres

Critical Ed. in E(m) III, pp. 125-126.

Solemnity of Our Lady's Assumption 1869

My beloved sons,

Divine Providence has seen that our Pious Society has been definitively approved by the Holy See and while in humility of heart we thank the Lord for his goodness, we must act with all solicitude to correspond to the purpose that we had when entering the Congregation and see that all who professed the Rule keep exact observance of it.

Amongst the articles [in the Rule] is one regarding the confidence that should exist between superiors and inferiors. Each one, it says in Chap. 5 art. 6, must place the fullest confidence in his superior and not keep any secret of his heart from him.

This article is of the greatest importance and it is observed that the dealings of the superior with his subject are of great advantage so that this way people can explain their needs in all freedom and ask for appropriate advice, while the superior himself will be able to understand the state of his confreres, provide for their needs and make the decisions that will help the observance of the rules and benefit the entire Society.

It seems that this is precisely what the Holy Spirit meant when he says: "*Vae soli, quia cum ceciderit non habet sublevantem se*" (Qo 4:10). "Woe to

the one who is alone since he has no one to raise him up when he falls.” And then he adds: “whereas in religion, if anyone has the misfortune to fall or is in danger of falling he is sustained by another and in a certain way his fall is arrested. *Si unus ceciderit, ab altero fulcietur.*” (*ibid.*). This way, says St Thomas, the religious achieves his purpose and is advised in the risks he faces; in case he falls, he is helped to rise up again. *“Iuvatur a sociis ad resurgendum.”*

So that we can bring this advantage to our Society we have thought it well to establish certain things that we could call the practical consequences of the above-mentioned article:

1. Every month there will be two conferences given one of which will be reading and giving a simple explanation of the rules of the Congregation. The other conference will be on some moral subject, but in a practical way and adapted to the people who are being spoken to.

2. Once a month each member should present himself to the Director of the House he belongs to and speak to him about what he judges to be of advantage to the good of his soul, and if he has any doubt concerning the observance of the rules let him talk about that, asking for the most appropriate advice for his spiritual and temporal benefit.

For his part the Director, with due charity, will give some time to listening to everything; indeed he will endeavour to question each member separately with regard to his bodily health, the duties he has, his religious observance, the studies or work he has to attend to.

Finally he will endeavour to encourage him, help him with his work and advise him so that he is able to have the peace of heart and tranquil conscience which ought be the principal purpose of everyone who is part of this Pious Society.

3. Ordinarily the Director of each individual House will give an exact account to the Rector Major each month on the moral state and the health of the confreres as well as some indication of the material progress of the house entrusted to him. There is a small exception here in the case of the Mother House.

Those who make up the Chapter and any priests who ask for it can present themselves to the Rector Major to talk about issues.

This giving an account of oneself to one's superior is a general practice in all religious houses and is of great benefit, and I hope it will be likewise amongst us especially for achieving the peace of heart and tranquillity of conscience that is so essential.

Many things need to be said in this regard. This will be done through letters, appropriate conferences and especially in the upcoming Retreat at Trofarello, if God in his great mercy preserves us, as I hope he will, and help all of us to be gathered there next September.

So courage my dear sons! We have a great enterprise in hand. Many souls await us for their salvation; amongst these souls, our own has to be first; then those of the other members and the souls of any of the Christian faithful to whom we can be of some benefit. With God with us, let us try to correspond with the heavenly favours granted us and that we hope will be abundantly granted in the future.

May the grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ be with us always and grant us the spirit of fervour and the precious gift of perseverance in the Society. *Amen.*

Yours affectionately in Jesus Christ,

Fr John Bosco

P.S. This letter will be read to members who have come together, with any observations the Director should judge to be appropriate.

231. Austerity of life

Critical ed. in E(m) IV, pp. 113-115.

[Turin], 4 June 1873

To the beloved sons of St Francis de Sales living in ...

Experience, my beloved sons, is a great teacher. But if we learn from it what can be of common or private advantage to families, it will certainly be

of much greater use in religious families where there should not be any other aim than to know what is right in order to practise it, and know what is wrong in order to flee from it.

This is why I judge that it would be good to point out certain things observed in the recently conducted visits to our houses and this for the advantage of the members in particular and in general for the Congregation. Some of these concern material matters, others morality and discipline. They will offer content for three different letters.

The material running of our houses must for the moment be the objective of our concerns, because the acquisition, construction, reconstruction and setting up of new houses have been the reason for very heavy expenditure: increase then in any kind of foodstuffs results in the monthly expenditure being much higher than income. We must therefore think seriously about economy and study what practical things we can gain any savings from.

I note briefly for you:

1. This year no building should be undertaken unless it is strictly necessary. Only reconstruction that you regard as essential should be completed. In these cases see what is necessary and how much it would cost approximately and then send this on beforehand to the Superior Chapter.

2. Do not undertake journeys unless for our needs and as much as possible avoid commitments, undertakings or chores that would mean expenditure or wasting time. Where there are things that can pay for themselves or where others can pay for them, you should prudently take advantage of these.

3. A reminder that observance of articles 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, of Chapter 4 of our rules should be given practical explanation by the Rectors; if needs be they can take them up in detail or defer to the Superior to do this. These articles are the basis of religious life and lead by their very nature to detachment from earthly things, from people and from oneself, and they see that our common efforts are directed to fulfilment of our duties, and to the greater benefit of the Congregation.

4. Limit the purchase of books, clothes, hosiery, linen, furnishings and other objects for use; for decorum's sake, repair things that you already have.

5. Also some economy can be introduced where foodstuffs are concerned; look after things that can be kept: buy things wholesale, be parsimonious where costly things are concerned, like meat and wine; regularity and quality of condiments; see that bread, meals, wine, lamps, wood are not wasted; invite people to the house only out of strict need and with these invitations never forget that we live from Providence, that we have no income and that the spirit of poverty must inform whatever is ours. These are also points to be kept in mind.

6. Work in with other Houses to help with purchasing and in managing those kinds of things that can be found at lower prices in their respective towns.

Recommend savings where possible to do so, but it is my intention that nothing is omitted which could contribute to preserving bodily health or to maintaining morality both amongst the beloved sons of the Congregation and the pupils whom Divine Providence entrusts to our care.

I hope shortly to be able to write to you about other no less important matters.

Meanwhile let every Rector read and explain what I have explained here; let him speak with the Prefect of the house about it, and after some weeks see what has been done and what you judge can still be done to achieve the purpose.

In general then I am very happy with the morality, health and knowledge being spread in our Houses. Let us give thanks to God, the Creator and giver of everything that is good, for this. To him be glory and honour forever and ever. *Amen.*

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ always be with us and may Heaven bless and sustain all our works.

Pray for me. With fatherly affection and in the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary I remain,

Your most affectionate brother and friend,

Fr John Bosco

232. Giving good example and promoting moral behaviour

Critical ed. in E(m) IV, pp. 177-180.

Rome, 4 February 1874

To my Salesian sons at the House in Turin,

While I am dealing with matters to do with the Congregation in the Eternal City, a city consecrated by the blood of the two princes of the apostles, Peter and Paul, and after having prayed at Mass, invoked the light of the Holy Spirit, and asked a special blessing from the supreme leader of the Church, I am writing a letter concerning one of the most important topics: the way to promote and preserve morality amongst the boys who Divine Providence has been pleased to entrust to us.

In order not to deal with this issue too summarily I believe it would be good to divide it into two parts:

1. The need for morality amongst the Salesians.
2. Ways of spreading it and preserving it amongst our pupils.

We could therefore establish as an unvarying principle that morality among boys depends on who trains them, assists them, directs them. Whoever has nothing can give nothing, the proverb tells us. An empty sack can give no grain, nor can you put good wine in a flask full of dregs.

Hence before setting ourselves up as the teachers for others it is essential for us to be in possession of what we wish to teach others. The divine master's words are clear: He says, "You are the light of the world", and this light, or good example, must shine from you over all people, so that seeing all of your good works they may also in a certain way be drawn to you to follow you and thus glorify our common Father in Heaven.

St Jerome says it would be a poor doctor who wanted to cure others if he could not cure himself. He would certainly receive the response of the Gospel: "*Medice, cura te ipsum*" [Lk 4:23].

Therefore if we want to promote morality and virtue in our pupils, we ourselves must possess it, practise it and see that it is resplendent in our works, our language, and never expect that our dependants should exercise an act of virtue that we ourselves have neglected.

In fact how can we expect our pupils to be exemplary and religious if they see us negligent in matters of the church, in getting up in the morning, in meditation, going to confession, communion or celebrating holy Mass? How could a director, or teacher or assistant expect obedience if they exempt themselves for frivolous reasons from their obligations or even more so, leave the house without permission and get involved in things that have nothing to do with their duties?

How can we get others to be charitable, patient, respectful, if the one in charge is angry with them, strikes them, complains about the superiors, criticises the timetable and arrangements at table and whoever looks after them? We are certainly all in agreement that we should say to him: "*Medice, cura te ipsum.*"

Not long ago a young lad who was reprimanded for reading a bad book replied in all simplicity: I did not believe I was doing anything wrong reading a book that I have often seen my teacher reading. Another time someone was asked why he had written a letter complaining about how the house was run. He replied that he had only written words he had heard on many occasions from the assistant.

So then, my dear sons, if we want to foster good behaviour in our Houses, we have to teach through good example. Suggesting something good to others while we are doing the contrary is like someone in the dark of night wanting to shine a light with a spent lamp; or wanting to draw wine from an empty cask.

Indeed it seems to me we can compare this with someone who wants to flavour food with poisonous substances; so in similar guise not only would he not be promoting good behaviour, but giving occasion of doing evil, giving scandal. So we become miserable, besotted salt, ruined salt that serves no other purpose than to be thrown out as rubbish; “*Vos estis sal terrae,*” Christ says “*quod si sal evanuerit in quo salietur? Ad nihilum valet ultra nisi ut mittatur foras et conculcetur ab hominibus*” [Mt 5:13].

The public often laments immoral deeds that result from the ruining of good behaviour and horrible scandals. It is a great evil, a disaster; and I beg the Lord to act in such a way all our houses be closed before similar disgrace happens to us.

I certainly do not wish to hide from you that we live in calamitous times. The world today is like the Saviour described it: “*mundus in maligno positus est totus*” [1 Jn 5:19]. It wants to see everything, judge everything. Other than perverse judges who take on God’s role, it often exaggerates things, very often invents them to others’ loss. But if perchance it succeeds in basing its judgement on fact, imagine the racket, what a trumpeting of things!

Nevertheless if we impartially see the reason for these evils, we mostly discover that the salt was infatuated, the lamp was spent; meaning that the cessation of holiness in the one who was in charge gave cause for the disasters that took place amongst their dependants.

Oh chastity, chastity, you are a great virtue! Until you are resplendent amongst us, meaning so long as the sons of St Francis de Sales are marked by their aloofness from the world, modesty, temperance and everything we have promised God by vow, morality and holiness of behaviour will always have a glorious place amongst us, like a burning torch shining out in all the houses dependent on us.

If God gives me life I hope to be able to write to you again about certain strategies that it seems to me could help effectively in promoting and preserving good behaviour amongst our pupils.

Meanwhile, so what this friend of your soul is writing can bear some fruit, I beg you to see to what follows:

1. That there be three different conferences or better, three practical examinations in which things to be done and things to be avoided concerning the vow of poverty, chastity and obedience are read and explained. Then let everyone apply to himself the tenor of life described in these three chapters and see that he firmly corrects whatever is at fault in his words, deeds, in poverty, chastity and obedience.

2. The chapter dealing with practices of piety should also be read and then kneeling at the feet of the crucified Jesus, let us resolve, and I will do the same here while thinking of you, to do them all in an exemplary way at the cost of whatever sacrifice.

My dear sons, we find ourselves at a most important moment in our Congregation. Help me with your prayer, help me with your exact observance of the rules and God will see that our efforts are crowned with good success to the greater glory of God, the advantage of our souls and those of our pupils, who will ever be the glory of our Society.

May the grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ be with us and preserve us all constantly on our way to Heaven. Amen.

Most affectionately in Jesus Christ,

Fr John Bosco

233. Keeping the memory of deceased confreres

Critical ed. in E(m) IV, pp. 381-382.

[Turin, January 1875]

To Salesian confreres,

1874, my beloved sons, was a very memorable one for us. His Holiness Pius IX currently reigning, after having granted us great favours on April 3, deigned then to definitively approve our humble Congregation. While of course this glorious event filled us all with true joy it was soon gravely

saddened by another series of events. In fact on the 13th of the same month God called Fr Provera to himself, then Fr Pestarino, and then cleric Ghione and Fr Giuseppe Cagliari and all this in the space of just four months.

We have lost four workers for the Gospel in these dear confreres, all perpetually professed, all who very much loved the Salesian Congregation, faithfully observed our Constitutions, and were truly zealous in working for the greater glory of God.

So it should not surprise us that these losses were felt so hard in our Society. But God who is so infinitely good and who knows what can be to our greatest benefit judged that they were already worthy of himself. One can say of them that they lived only a short time but worked as much as if they had lived a very long time: *Brevi vivens tempore, explevit tempora multa* [Ws 4:13]. And we have well-founded reason to believe that these confreres, ceasing to work amongst us here on earth, have become our protectors with God in Heaven.

We therefore believe it is appropriate to offer some indications on the life of each of them so their memory may be preserved amongst us.

What we do for them, with the Lord's help, we hope will be done for confreres already called to eternal life in times past and for those whom God will be pleased to call in the future. We do this for three reasons in particular:

1. Because other religious orders and ecclesiastical congregations usually do this.
2. So that those who lived amongst us and practised the same rules in exemplary fashion may be an encouragement to us to follow them in promoting what is good and fleeing from what is evil.
3. So that by preserving their names and their main actions we may more easily be reminded to lift up our prayers to God for the eternal repose of their souls, should they still not yet have been welcomed into the bosom of divine mercy.

We certainly must not serve the Lord so that the memory of our actions will be preserved amongst men, but so that our names, as the Saviour says,

may be written in the book of life. This notwithstanding, we must recognise that just as our bad works can cause scandal to others after our death, so can our good deeds be a source of edification.

Therefore while we are reading this brief collection of information concerning our confreres let us not cease to lift up our prayers to God for them and for all the confreres who have been called to the other life since the beginning of the Congregation.

Over this current year (1875) we should demonstrate our indelible gratitude by raising up constant supplication to the Divine Majesty for the holy Church and especially for the preservation of the precious days of our Supreme Pontiff, our outstanding benefactor, from whom we have so often been filled with spiritual and temporal benefits. He deigned to give definitive approval to our Constitutions, so we may be faithful in observing them; he has granted us many favours. Let us try to show ourselves worthy by using them for the greater glory of God and the good of souls.

May God bless you all my dear sons, and pray for me too. I am most affectionately yours in Jesus Christ,

Fr John Bosco

234. Ways of cultivating vocations and preserving the spirit of piety

Critical Ed. in E(m) V, pp. 41-44.

Turin, 12 January 1876

My dear sons in Jesus Christ,

Having completed my visit to our Houses, I feel the need to spend some time with you, my dear sons, on matters that could be for the greater glory of God and to the advantage of our Congregation.

Before anything else I am happy to be able to reassure you that I have been very happy with the material and moral progress, both in what refers to internal administration and in our external social relationships. There is work being done, the Constitutions of the Society are observed, discipline is being

maintained, people are frequenting the holy Sacraments, the spirit of piety is being fostered and vocations cultivated amongst those with the good fortune to show signs of being called to the ecclesiastical state. Thanks be to God for all this. It is to his goodness and mercy that we owe the little good we are achieving amongst us.

I also have the consolation of sharing with you how our Society is growing day by day. The year just finished a number of new houses were opened; others will be opened this year, 1876. Personnel is growing in number and in approach, but as soon as someone becomes suitable to take up a responsibility, Divine Providence immediately presents an opportunity to put him to work.

What can we say of the requests to open houses in so many places? In many cities in Italy, France, England; in North, Central and South America and especially in the Empire of Brazil and in the Argentine Republic; in Algeria, Africa, Egypt, in Palestine, India, Japan, China, Australia there are millions and millions of reasonable beings still buried in the darkness of error, but from the brink of perdition they raise their voices and cry: "Lord, send us workers of the Gospel who can come and bring us the light of truth and point out the only way that can lead to salvation." A few of our confreres, as you well know, have already given ear to these moving voices and have left for the Argentine Republic, where they have gone amongst the savage tribes of Patagonia; but in all the letters written on their journey and from their places of mission the same voice resounds: "Send us workers." Amongst other things they note how the Archdiocese of Rio Janeiro, Brazil, has two million inhabitants with very few priests and just five seminarians in the seminary.

My dear sons, I am distressed when I reflect on the abundant harvest that presents itself at any time and anywhere, and that we have to leave unharvested because of lack of workers. However let us not lose courage, and for now apply ourselves seriously to work and with prayer and virtue prepare a new army for Jesus Christ. We will achieve this especially by cultivating religious vocations; and if needs be in time we will even offer ourselves for those sacrifices that God deigns to ask of us for our salvation and that of others. Meanwhile, in the desire to come to matters which will be helpful in cultivating religious

vocations and be effective for preserving the spirit of piety amongst Salesians and the boys entrusted to us, I am recommending some things that experience has taught me as being very necessary.

1. In every House, and especially in the Oratory of St Francis de Sales, let each one take great care to foster small groups such as the Altar Servers, Sodalities of the Blessed Sacrament, St Aloysius, Mary Help of Christians and the Immaculate Conception. Let no one be afraid of speaking about them, recommending them, encouraging them and pointing out their purpose, origin, and the indulgences and the other advantages that can be gained. I believe that these groups can be called the key to piety, preserver of morals, support of ecclesiastical and religious vocations.

2. Be careful of relationships, friendships or ordinary or particular conversations whether in writing, talking, through books or gifts of any kind. Taking someone's hand, caresses on the face, kisses, walking arm in arm or with your arms around someone else's neck are all strictly prohibited, not only amongst yourselves and yourselves and your pupils, I say, but including amongst the pupils themselves. Let's keep our thoughts firmly fixed on what St Jerome says: "affection for no one or equal affection for everyone."

3. Keep away from the world and its maxims. The root of sorrows and disorder are our relationships with the world we have abandoned and which wants to attract us back to it again. Many who seemed to be models of virtue while living in the religious house, once they went elsewhere, with family or friends, soon lost their good will and after returning to the Order could no longer recover [their former stance], and some have even gone as far as losing their vocation. Therefore never go back to the family except for serious reasons and when there are serious reasons never go without due permission and, as far as is possible, accompanied by a confrere chosen by the superior. Taking on commissions, recommendations, business affairs, buying or selling for others are things to be constantly avoided because they can be ruinous for vocations and morality.

4. In the evening after prayers, let each one retire immediately for rest. Stopping to take a walk, chat or finish work, is dangerous for spiritual and

also bodily health. I know that in some places, thanks be to God not in our houses, they were forced to lament painful abuses and when they sought the reason for them, they were found to be conversations begun or continued at the time we are talking about.

Punctuality in taking rest is tied in with getting up promptly in the mornings, something I equally insist on. Believe it, my dear sons, fatal experience tells us that spending longer in bed in the mornings without need for it was always found to be a very dangerous thing. On the other hand getting up promptly, as well as being the principle for having a good day, could also be called an ongoing good example for everyone. In this regard I could not fail to warmly recommend that Superiors act in such a way that everyone, especially Coadjutors and service personnel, are given time to be at holy Mass every morning, the opportunity to receive holy Communion frequently and go to the Sacrament of Penance regularly, according to our Constitutions.

This letter that I am addressing to everyone in general I would like you to consider also as written for each of you in particular, and that its every word be spoken, repeated a thousand times in everyone's hearing, so it will never be forgotten.

But I hope, out of the affection you have for me, and for the commitment you show to your duties, especially by putting into practice the advice of your father and spiritual friend, you will give me the great consolation of not only being faithful to these recommendations, but even more will interpret them in ways that can best contribute to the greater glory of God and of our Congregation.

And with such persuasion I ask God to bless you all and grant you good health and the precious gift of perseverance in doing good. And finally, pray for me. I remain yours always, in Jesus Christ our Lord,

Your affectionate friend,

Fr John Bosco

235. Strenna to confreres and boys

Critical ed. in E IV, p. 195.

Turin, 28 December 1882

Dear Director at the House in ...

We are at the end of the year and the beginning of a new one.

I encourage you to warmly thank everyone who has written to me and prayed for me over these days.

I am asking God to give everyone health and the grace of a happy life.

My strenna, then, is:

1. For the director. Charity and kindness with everyone.
2. For confreres of the Congregation. Exact observance of the vows by which we have consecrated ourselves to the Lord.
3. For all the youngsters. Frequent confession and devout communion.
4. Tell everyone from me that I recommend they tell me completely and separately what they want me to do to help them save their souls, which was and will be the object of all my concerns to the end of my life.

May the grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ always remain with us.

Your most affectionate friend,

Fr John Bosco

236. We have put our hand to the plough: Be firm

Critical ed. in *Lettere circolari di DB*, pp. 20-22⁵³.

Turin, 6 January 1884

My dear and beloved sons,

I experience great consolation every time I hear words of homage and affection from you, my dear sons and my good daughters. But the affectionate

⁵³ The same letter, with appropriate adjustments as needed, was sent to the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, cf. *Cronistoria*. By Giselda Capetti. Vol. IV. *L'eredità di madre Mazzarello passa nelle mani di madre Daghero (1881-1884)*. Roma, Istituto FMA 1978, pp. 281-284.

expressions of Season's Greetings and Happy New Year which you have given me personally or by letter, reasonably demands a special thanks from me in answer to the filial affection you have shown me.

First of all let me tell you that I am very pleased with you, with your solicitude in every kind of work, even taking on heavy work in order to promote the greater glory of God in our houses and amongst the boys and girls Divine providence entrusts to us every day, so that we may lead them along the path of virtue and honour on the way to Heaven. You have thanked me in many ways and with different expressions for what I have done for you. You have offered yourselves to work courageously with me and to share the labours, the glory and honour on earth, in order to obtain the great reward that God has prepared for us all in Heaven. You also told me that you desire nothing except to know that which I think best for you and which you would carefully listen to and practise. I am also pleased with these precious words. As a father I simply reply that I thank you from the bottom of my heart, and that *the best thing you can do for me is to help me save your souls*⁵⁴.

You know well, my beloved sons, that I have accepted you in the Congregation and that I have always taken great care of your spiritual well-being in order to assure your eternal salvation. Therefore if you help me in this great undertaking you do what my paternal heart expects from you. You can easily guess, then, the things you must practise in order to succeed in this great project. Observe the Rule, the Rule that holy Mother Church destined to be your guide, for the good of your soul and for the spiritual and temporal advantage of your pupils. We have read and studied this Rule, and now it forms the object of our promises and the vows with which we have consecrated ourselves to the Lord.

Therefore I recommend with all my heart that not one of you let words of regret escape you, or worse still, of sorrow for being consecrated to the Lord. This would be an act of deepest ingratitude. All that we have either in the spiritual or temporal order belongs to God. Therefore when we consecrate ourselves to him by our religious profession, we do nothing more than offer to God what he himself has so to say lent us, but which is his absolute property.

⁵⁴ The underlining is by Don Bosco.

Moreover by withdrawing from the observance of our vows, we commit theft against God, and before his eyes we take back, we despise, we profane that which we have offered him and which we have placed in his holy hands. Some of you may say: "But the observance of our Rule is burdensome. The observance of the Rule is burdensome to those who observe it unwillingly, to those who transgress it. But to the diligent, who love the good of their soul, this observance becomes, as the Divine Saviour says: "*Jugum meum suave est, et onus meum leve*" [Mt 11:30].

And then, my dear sons, do we wish to go to Heaven in a carriage? We became religious not to enjoy ourselves but to suffer and to earn merit for the next life. We consecrated ourselves to God not to command but to obey; not to attach ourselves to creatures but to practise charity towards our neighbour, moved solely by the love of God; not to live a comfortable life but to be poor with Jesus Christ, to suffer with Jesus Christ on earth, to be made worthy of his glory in Heaven.

Courage then, dear and beloved sons and daughters; we have put our hand to the plough - be firm; let no one of you turn back to admire the false and treacherous world. Let us go on. It will cost us fatigue, hunger, suffering, thirst and perhaps even death. We shall always answer: "If the greatness of the reward delights us, the fatigue we must bear to merit it should not dishearten us: *Si delectat magnitudo praemiorum, non deterreat certamen laborum.*"

There is one other thing I believe I should mention. Our confreres are writing to me from everywhere. I would be very happy to give everyone due answer. But that not being possible, I will try to send out letters more often; letters that, while they make it easier for me to open my heart, could also serve as an answer, even a guide for those who for holy reasons are living in distant lands and therefore cannot be around to hear the voice of the father who loves them so much in Jesus Christ.

The grace of Our Lord and the protection of the Blessed Virgin Mary be always with you, and help you to persevere in the Divine service until the last moment of your life. Amen.

Affectionately yours in Jesus Christ,

Fr John Bosco

237. Attitudes and virtues of a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians

Critical ed. in *Cronistoria*. By Giselda Capetti. Vol. 5. *Ultimi anni sotto lo sguardo del Fondatore (1885-1888)*. Roma, Istituto FMA 1978, pp. 91-94.

Turin, 24 May 1886

Most beloved Daughters in Jesus Christ,

While we are celebrating the most solemn Feast of Mary Help of Christians in Turin today, with an extraordinary gathering of people who have come from all parts as children to the feet of their most tender Mother, it is very consoling for me to turn my thoughts also to you and to the Institute that bears her name. Yes, I have also remembered the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians this morning at holy Mass, and I have prayed for them.

Among others I have asked the grace that you remain faithful to your holy vocation, that you should be religious with a love of perfection and holiness; that by the practice of the Christian and religious virtues, by an edifying and exemplary life, you should give honour to Jesus Christ your Heavenly Spouse and honour to Mary, most loving Mother. I hope that you have also prayed for me and that Mary Help of Christians will hear our prayers and obtain for us from God the grace of living in the holy fear of God, of saving our own soul and that of many others.

Meanwhile I announce to you that this year finishes the six year term since the election of the members of the Superior Chapter of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. Therefore according to Chapter VII of the Constitutions, new elections will be held.

If it pleases God this will take place toward the middle of August on a day within the Octave of the Assumption of Our Blessed Lady into Heaven. For this reason I invite all the superiors who can, to be at the Mother House of Nizza Monferrato, where the elections will probably take place before the 15th of the appointed month.

Since the good of the whole Institute and the glory of God depends in large measure upon a good Chapter, and above all on a wise Superior General,

the Sisters eligible to vote need particular enlightenment in their choice and in giving their vote to those who are considered most capable for the important office.

Therefore it is necessary that Our Lord enlighten them and guide them to fulfil this duty according to his holy will, so that great advantage might come from it.

For this reason I recommend that from the day on which this letter is received, every Superior shall have recited or sung in common by the Sisters, the *Veni Creator* in the morning and in the evening the *Ave Maris Stella*.

I also exhort every Sister to add special prayers privately, particularly after holy Communion, and to make some acts of virtue or mortification to obtain all the help which is necessary for the superiors.

Besides prayers, the voters should reflect on the present needs of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. It seems to me that the Institute needs Sisters who, formed with the spirit of mortification and sacrifice, greatly desire to work and suffer for Jesus Christ and for the salvation of their neighbour. It needs Sisters who are well persuaded that exact obedience, without comment or complaint, is the way which they must walk with courage in order to reach perfection and holiness quickly. It needs Sisters who know how to master their affections, and how to keep their heart turned to God only, so as to be able to say with St Francis de Sales: "*If I knew that one fibre of my heart were not for God I would tear it out.*" It needs Sisters who regret neither the world nor its goods, nor the comforts which they have renounced; Sisters who regard it as glory to live in poverty and privation like their Divine Spouse, Jesus, who being rich, made himself poor in order to enrich souls by his grace and make them heirs of paradise; Sisters who have no other ambition on earth than to follow Jesus Christ, humiliated, crowned with thorns and nailed to a cross, in order to surround him exalted in glory among the splendours of the Angels and the Saints.

It needs Sisters of good physical constitution, of good disposition, of a cheerful spirit, desirous above all of becoming saints, not by extraordinary

means but by ordinary actions, so that they may be a means of stimulating and encouraging their neighbours and especially youth to the practice of Christian virtues. In short it needs Sisters who are and can make themselves fit instruments for the glory of God, discharging those offices and fulfilling those duties which are proper to the Institute.

Now, to have such Sisters, it is important to have Superiors at the head of the Institute who have sound judgement to test and discern the vocations of young girls before admitting them to Clothing and Profession. It is also important to have superiors who themselves possess and practise those virtues which they have to inculcate in their subjects. It is important that the superiors love all the Sisters impartially like their own sisters, like Daughters of Mary, like spouses of Jesus Christ. To a kind and patient charity, however, they must add that firmness of soul which in due time will prevent abuses and transgressions of the Constitutions without violence and, moreover, without human respect. Superiors should possess a prudent and discrete firmness of soul which, while preserving piety and regular observance, does not endanger the health of the Sisters.

Let each Superior reflect which of her Sisters possess these gifts more or less, and in due time vote for those who, before God and according to her own conscience, seem most suitable for the position they must occupy.

In the hope of being able to be present for the forthcoming General Chapter, I pray God to preserve you all in his holy grace and to grant that all may love him and faithfully serve him—superiors and subjects, the healthy and the sick, in whatever place or occupation obedience assigns you, so that when that day and the hour comes for Our Lord Jesus Christ to call you to eternity, you may be able to reply: “I am ready, O my God; let us go to the enjoyment of that happiness which you have prepared for me in your infinite mercy.”

Pray for me, and believe me in the Lord,

Yours very affectionately,

Fr John Bosco