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**“AND JESUS INCREASED IN WISDOM AND IN YEARS
AND IN FAVOUR WITH GOD AND MAN” (Lk 2,52)**

An unforgettable experience. - THE STRENNA for 2006. - 1. Dangers and threats facing the family at the present day. - An environment unfavourable for the family. - An easy 'solution', divorce. - Privatisation of marriage. - False expectations about marriage. - Economic and consumer factors in family life. - 2. The family, the way by which the Son of God became man. - 3. Family life and the Salesian charism. - 3.1 "In the beginning the mother was there". - 3.1.1 A brief biographical sketch. - a) Before the move to Valdocco (from 1788 to 1846). - b) Ten years with Don Bosco (from 1846 to 1856). - 3.1.2 Spiritual profile of Mamma Margaret. - a) a strong woman. - b) a 'Salesian' educator. - an effective catechist. - d) the first cooperator. - 3.2 Valdocco, "a family that educates". - 4. The family as mission. - 4.1. "Family, make yourself what you should truly be". - The cell of society. - Sanctuary of life. - Proclaimer of the gospel of life. - School of social commitment. - 4.2. "Family, have faith in your true role". - 5. Pastoral and pedagogical applications. - So here are my suggestions. - Some practical proposals. - Conclusion: a legend flavoured with wisdom.

1 January 2006

Solemnity of Mary Mother of God

My dear Confreres,

I am writing to you at the beginning of the New Year on the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God, and I pray that it may be a time of grace that will enable us to grow "in wisdom and in years and in favour with God and man", as did Jesus.

For a proper understanding of the motherly role of Mary with regard to her son Jesus in all its depth and richness, we must begin from the central mystery of our faith: the incarnation of the Son of God who – in St Paul's words – "emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men" (*Phil 2,7*).

This radical humanity of the Emmanuel (*God-with-us*), Jesus Christ, implies an essential human trait: its historical nature, the fact that being human lies in being and becoming, in a developing self-realisation throughout life, that is never finished. This is a characteristic found also in Jesus who, according to Luke's gospel, "increased in wisdom and in years and in favour with God and man" (*Lk 2,52*). This is a perspective that throws a wonderful light on Mary who, together with Joseph, was given the mission of

“educating” Jesus, of helping him to develop the powers of his being human, in a way similar to that of every mother with her children. The case of Jesus is certainly unique because his defining centre, which constitutes his eternal being, is that he is the Son of the Heavenly Father. And so this divine sonship gradually developed in him in a human fashion thanks to the educative action of Mary, and without any doubt of Joseph too who was the father-figure in the Holy Family of Nazareth and who, together with the mother, played an indispensable part in the full maturing of the child into manhood.

And there, dear confreres, you have the priceless mission of the family: to help children to attain to full human stature, which is that of Christ. Nowadays, unfortunately, the family is beset by an enormous challenge, that of recovering its nature and its mission. This explains what lies behind the Strenna for 2006 which I shall now present to you. But first let me tell you about an unforgettable experience.

An unforgettable experience

Although in the last three months since my last letter there have been many events I could share with you, including the Symposium on Consecrated Life and the Plenary Session of the Congregation for Consecrated Life in which I took part, and the Synod on the Eucharist, I prefer to tell you of another event that moved me deeply.

On 12 November 2005 I lived through one of the most wonderful and meaningful experiences not only of my Salesian life but of my entire human life. I had gone to Valdocco, among other things, for the official recognition of the body of Don Bosco, and I must say that what happened far surpassed all my expectations.

I had asked the Provincial and the Rector of the Basilica that, before the official function took place in the presence of the competent authorities and representatives of the SDB and FMA, I could remain alone with Don Bosco, beside his body, to pray.

And so I went down to the Chapel of the Relics, and as soon as my eyes fell on the body of my beloved Father, no longer in the urn in which it is normally enclosed and exposed for the veneration of the faithful, I felt a deep emotion.

With great reverence I drew near and stood at his feet, so as to see him completely. The first thing that struck me was a special kind of feeling that I was not standing before the mortal remains of a loved one, but before a living person. That is how it seemed from his serene and smiling face, I seemed to hear him saying to his boys of the Valdocco Oratory: "Don Bosco will never really die as long as he lives in you".

I was thinking of so many people and situations in the Congregation, the Salesian Family, and the young people that I have at heart; and while I was speaking to Don Bosco about them and entrusting them to him, my prayer developed into a long expression of thanksgiving.

As I recalled that since 1929 Don Bosco's body had been there in that urn we know so well, without it ever being opened, it seemed that I had been called at that moment of grace to take the place of all the Salesians, the members of the Salesian Family, our young people, our lay collaborators, and in fact all those who identify in some way with Don Bosco, to thank him from the bottom of my heart for all that he has been, for all that he has done, for everything he has passed on to us.

We are in fact millions of persons who, in all five continents, have made our own his dreams and convictions, his apostolic activity and spiritual zeal.

As I looked at his serene and smiling face, I said to myself: "But how did you manage to do so much in life without being robbed of joy and peace and energy? I don't know how many things passed through your mind, but of one thing I am certain – it was always filled with concern for God and the young, as two inseparable poles around which your whole life turned, feeling yourself sent by Him to them and by them to Him".

The more I looked at him, the more I wanted to bring him to life again in myself and wanted all Salesians to do the same. I wanted to have his mind and heart, his hands and feet, to meet reality as he did, seeing it from the standpoint of God and the young, so as to decide with creativity and generosity what has to be done at the present day, the responses to be given to the needs and expectations of today's youngsters. I wanted to be able to work hard for the young with the enterprise that characterised his own life to his last breath. I wanted to be a missionary to young people and go and look for them in the streets of Turin and its surroundings as representing all the streets and districts of the world.

Suddenly I heard steps approaching and realised how much time had passed. I greeted the people who arrived, and with great devotion we began the official recognition, after which we made a decision for the better preservation of Don Bosco's body. I must bear witness to the extreme care that had been taken by the confreres who had made the necessary arrangements for the body in 1929. Everything had been beautifully prepared and decorated: from the embroidered couch to the amice and alb embellished by the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, and to the richly adorned chasuble with which he was vested; it had been a gift of Pope Benedict XV to Fr Paul Albera. When all was finished I was invited to take his head in my hands; I kissed it with reverence and gratitude in the name of all, and gave it to those present so that they could kiss it too.

THE STRENNA FOR 2006

Now that I have opened my heart to you, I want to provide a commentary on this year's Strenna.

"The challenge of life" – said Pope John Paul II of revered memory in his last address to the Diplomatic Corps in January 2005 – "has also emerged with regard to the very sanctuary of life: *the family*. Today the family is often threatened by social and cultural pressures which tend to undermine its stability; but in

some countries the family is also threatened by legislation which – at times directly – challenges its natural structure, which is and must necessarily be that of a union between a man and a woman founded on marriage. The family, as a fruitful source of life and a fundamental and irreplaceable condition for the happiness of the individual spouses, for the raising of children and for the well-being of society, and indeed for the material prosperity of the nation, must never be undermined by laws based on a narrow and unnatural vision of man. There needs to prevail a just, pure and elevated understanding of human love, which finds in the family its primordial and exemplary expression.¹

Accepting the Pope's invitation to defend life through the family, and prompted by the 150th anniversary of the death of Mamma Margaret, mother of the educative family created by Don Bosco at Valdocco, I have thought it well to invite the Salesian Family to renew the commitment to

**Ensuring that special attention be given to the family,
the cradle of life and love
and where one first learns how to become human.**

If it is through mankind that the Church fulfils its role, it is through the family that men and women pursue their destiny, the natural setting in which they open themselves to life and to their role in society. It is the place where their affective life flowers, the context in which they come to know themselves. The place where they learn to become human, the means by which their religious sensibilities develop, the family provides that stability necessary for the harmonious growth of the children and for the educational mission of the parents in their regard.

Believing in its crucial importance for the future of the human race and of the Church, John Paul II made the family one of the priorities of his pastoral programme for the Church in the third

¹ *Osservatore Romano*, 10-11 January 2005, p. 5.

millennium: “Special attention must also be given to *the pastoral care of the family*, particularly when this fundamental institution is experiencing a radical and widespread crisis... It is necessary to ensure that through an ever more complete Gospel formation Christian families show convincingly that it is possible to live marriage fully in keeping with God’s plan and with the true good of the human person — of the spouses, and of the children who are more fragile.”²

1. Dangers and threats facing the family at the present day

John Paul II’s thought has been taken up by Pope Benedict XVI who in his addresses has spoken of the family as: “a crucial issue that demands of us the maximum pastoral attention”; (...) “it is deeply rooted in the hearts of the young generations and bears the brunt of many problems, providing support and remedies to situations that would otherwise be desperate. Yet families in today’s cultural atmosphere are exposed to the many risks and threats with which we are all familiar. The inner frailty and instability of many conjugal unions is combined with the widespread social and cultural tendency to dispute the unique character and special mission of the family founded on marriage”.³

■ *An environment unfavourable for the family*

Nowadays we find put forward with a certain ease and superficiality so-called “alternatives” to the family, described as “traditional”. And so attention moves from the problem of divorce to that of ‘de facto’ couples, from the treatment of infertility in women to medically assisted procreation, from abortion to research and manipulation of stem-cells obtained from embryos, from the problem of the contraceptive pill to the morning-after

² *Novo millennio ineunte*, n. 47.

³ Audience for participants in the 53rd General Assembly of the Italian Bishop’s Conference, *Oss Rom* 30-31 May 2005, p. 5.

pill, which is simply abortive. The legalisation of abortion is almost a world-wide phenomenon. The granting of family rights and advantages to transitory couples who do not want to commit themselves formally even to civil marriage is now also taking place. This is the case with the official recognition of “‘de facto’ unions” including homosexual couples who sometimes even seek adoption rights, in this way giving rise to very serious psychological, social and legal problems.

The face – the real nature – of the family has therefore changed. To what has already been said above needs to be added a marked preference for a form of increasing “privatisation” and a tendency towards a reduction in the size of the family, moving from a model of the “multigenerational family” to the “nuclear family” which is then limited to father, mother and just one child. Even more serious is the fact that to a large extent public opinion no longer recognises in the family, founded on marriage, the basic cell of society and a benefit that one cannot do without.

■ *An easy ‘solution’. divorce*

In the light of this cultural climate, present especially in western society, I think it opportune to recall a passage of the Gospel in which Jesus speaks of marriage: “Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?’ He answered them, ‘What did Moses command you?’ They said, ‘Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.’ But Jesus said to them, ‘Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, “*God made them male and female. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh*”. So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.’ (Mk 10,2-9).

In my opinion this is a very enlightening text, because it refers to marriage as the origin and basis of the family, but especially

because it shows us Jesus' line of argument. He does not fall into the trap of legalism, about what is permitted and what is prohibited, but begins from the original plan of the Creator; no one knew God's original design better than he did, and it is in this design that we find the "Good News" of the family.

While we recognise that there are indeed many families living the value of a stable and faithful union, we must nevertheless accept the fact that the precarious nature of the marriage bond is one of the characteristics of the contemporary world. It spares no continent and can be found at every social level. It is a practice that often makes the family frail and compromises the educative mission of the parents. If such instability is not removed, and worse still if it is taken for granted, it frequently leads to separation or divorce, which are considered the only way out of crises that develop.

A mentality of this kind weakens a married couple and puts their personal frailty at greater risk. Giving up without a struggle happens all too frequently. A proper understanding of the value of marriage and a firm faith on the other hand could help in overcoming with courage and dignity even the most serious difficulties.

Of divorce, in fact, it must be said that it is not just a question of a juridical nature. It is not a "crisis" that passes away. It leaves a deep and lasting effect on human experience. It is a problem of a relationship, and a relationship destroyed. It leaves an indelible mark on every member of the family. It causes financial, affective and human impoverishment, the consequences of which are felt particularly by the wife and children. And to all this must be added the social costs which are always very high.

I would like to point out that the elements contributing to the present increase in the divorce rate are of different kinds, even after allowing for minor variations from one country to another. The cultural environment must be kept in mind first of all which is becoming ever more secularised, and from it flow as characteristic elements a false concept of freedom, fear of commitment, the practice of cohabitation, the "trivialisation of sex" (to use the expres-

sion of John Paul II), as well as the financial constraints that are sometimes a contributing cause of such separations. Lifestyles, fashions, spectacles, tv soaps, all cast doubt on the value of marriage, and by spreading the idea that the mutual self-giving of man and wife even until death is something impossible, weaken and make fragile the family institution, causing it to lose esteem and the point is reached of dismissing it in favour of other “models” of a pseudo-family.

■ *Privatisation of marriage*

Among the phenomena we are witnessing we must also emphasise the emergence of a radical individualism manifested in numerous spheres of human activity: in economic life, in cut-throat competition, in social rivalry, in disdain for the marginalised, and in many other fields. Individualism of this kind does nothing to promote generous, faithful and permanent self-giving. And it is certainly not a cultural frame of mind that can help in the solving of marriage crises.

The result is that state authorities, responsible for the common good and social cohesion, themselves foster this very individualism by allowing it full expression through relevant laws (e.g. in the case of “civil partnership contracts”), which are presented, at least implicitly, as an alternative to marriage. The matter becomes still worse when it is question of homosexual unions, in which even the right to adopt children is claimed. By so doing, such legislators and governments undermine the institution of marriage in public opinion, and moreover contribute to the creating of problems they cannot solve. In this way marriage is frequently no longer considered as good for society, and its “privatisation” contributes only to the reduction and even elimination of its public status.

This social ideology of pseudo-freedom prompts the individual to act primarily in his own interests, to his own advantage. The commitment undertaken towards a wife or husband is seen as a simple contract that can be revised indefinitely; the promise made

has only a limited time value, and one has responsibility for one's own actions only to oneself.

■ *False expectations about marriage*

We must also note that many young people form an idealistic and even erroneous concept of being a couple as a situation of unclouded happiness, with the fulfilment of one's desires and no price to pay. In this way a potential conflict can arise between the desire of becoming one with the other person and that of protecting their own freedom.

A growing misunderstanding of the beauty of the authentic human couple, of the rich values inherent in the differences and complementary nature in the man/woman relationship, leads to a growing confusion about sexual identity, a confusion which reaches its climax in the feminist ideology. This confusion complicates the taking up of roles and the division of tasks within the family home. It leads to a renegotiation of these roles which is as constant as it is exhausting. On the other hand the present situation regarding the professional activity of both man and wife reduces the time they can spend and share together in the family. And all this limits the ability for dialogue between husband and wife.

All too often when a crisis arises the couple have to solve it on their own. They have no one who can listen to them and enlighten them, something that might enable them to avoid making an irreversible decision. This lack of help keeps the couple enclosed in their problem, no longer seeing any solution to their difficulties other than separation or even divorce. And yet, surely is it not possible that many of these crises are only of a fleeting nature and could be easily overcome if the couple had the support of a human and ecclesial community?

■ *Economic and consumer factors in family life*

Economic factors, in all their complexity, exert a powerful influence on the shaping of the family model, on the establishment of its

values, on the organisation of its functioning, and on determining the life of the family itself. The income that needs to be ensured, the expenses considered indispensable for meeting the needs or the standard of living to be reached or maintained, the lack of resources or even the lack of work which afflict both parents and children, all condition and to some extent determine many aspects of family life.

Think of the so-called "common-law" couples, who are not really only cohabiting but are too poor to get married. Another worrying situation is that of emigrants, forced to leave their own family and country in search of work to support their families, a situation which on account of the prolonged absence involved or for other reasons frequently leads to the abandonment and break-up of the family they have left behind.

The mechanisms that create a climate of consumerism in which families find themselves immersed also have an economic origin. It is from this standpoint that what constitutes happiness is often defined, resulting in frustration and marginalisation. Economic too are the factors which determine something as important as family living space. i.e. the size of houses and the possibility of possessing one. And finally it is economic factors that condition the educational possibilities of the children and their future prospects.

In the light of all this we cannot fail to have a deep sense of compassion for what is, or should be, the cradle of life and love and the school where one learns to be human.

2. The family: the way by which the Son of God became man

The incarnation of the Son of God, born of a woman and subject to the law in order to redeem the subjects of the law so that they might receive adoption as sons of God (cf. *Gal* 4,4-5), was not an event linked only to the time of his birth but embraced the whole span of Jesus' human life until the death of the cross, as St Paul tells us (cf. *Phil* 2,8). Vatican II expressed this by saying that the

Son of God worked with human hands and loved with a human heart (cf. *GS* 22). His humanity therefore was not an obstacle to the revelation of his divinity, but rather the sacrament he used to manifest God and make him visible and attainable. It is wonderful to contemplate a God who loved man so much as to make him the way by which man could come to him. It is for this reason that the way of the Church is man whom she must love, serve and help to attain his fullness of life.

But because he wanted to become incarnate, God had first to seek a family, a mother (cf. *Lk* 1,26-38) and a father (cf. *Mt* 1,18-25). If God became man in the virginal womb of Mary, it was in the bosom of the family of Nazareth that the incarnate God learned to become man. To be born God needed a Mother; to grow up and become a man God needed a family. Mary was not only the one who bore Christ; as a true mother, alongside Joseph, she made the house of Nazareth a hearth where the Son of God "could become human" (cf. *Lk* 2,51-52).

Precisely because the incarnation of God's Son was a genuine event, his subsequent development followed in the natural manner for every human creature; there was need of a family to accept and welcome him, to accompany him, to love and collaborate with him in the development of all the human dimensions which made him a truly human "person", and all this within a plan of life that made possible the development of his own resources and the finding of meaning and success in life.

This necessary and unfailing educative function that every family must offer to its members, finds its witness in the case of the family of Nazareth in a page from the Gospel of Luke. It is the episode of the finding of Jesus in the Temple: *When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, 'Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.' He said to them, 'Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?' But they did not understand what he said to them. Then he*

went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour (Lk 2,48-52).

In this extract we find three valuable pointers to what the family is called upon to do with regard to the children so that they become "upright citizens and good Christians". From this point of view it could be considered a well-chosen Salesian interpretation of the principle of the incarnation in an educative project.

In the first place it is not insignificant that Joseph and Mary had brought Jesus to the Temple at an age when a son must learn to fully take his place in the life of his people, following the traditions which had nourished and sustained the faith of his parents; the family of Jesus had brought him to the Temple in obedience to the law and to the practice of their faith, even though they knew that their son was the Son of God. Jesus' divine origin did not release him from the obligation, universal in Israel, to observe God's law; the Son of God learned to be man by learning to obey men.

Worthy of note too is the respectful attitude of the parents with regard to their son who, on his own account, seeks God's will for his own life. Jesus' reply suggests a sense of surprise, as though to say: "But how is it that after teaching me to call God Abba, Father, and seek always to do his will, that here and now when I am in his house for the Bar Mitzvah ceremony when I become a fully-fledged 'son of the law' to live now on in fulfilling the will of the Father, you ask me where I have been and why I have done this?" (cf. Lk 2,49). Though not yet fully adult, Jesus is reminding his parents that it was they who taught him that God and his affairs took precedence over the family and family matters.

And finally we may note that his parents' lack of understanding was no obstacle to the obedience of the son who returned with them to Nazareth; Jesus submitted to the authority of parents who could no longer understand him. And so, the evangelist concludes, that while Mary "treasured all these things in her heart" (Lk 2,51),

Jesus “increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour” (*Lk* 2,52). And there you have the greatest eulogy of the educational ability of Joseph and Mary. This is what it means in practice to make of a family a home and school, “a cradle of life and love, and where one first learns how to become human”.

It was in a family that Jesus learned obedience to the law and became immersed in the culture of a people; it was in a family that Jesus showed his desire to give the first place to God and to be concerned primarily about the things of God; though aware that he was the Son of God, it was to family life that Jesus returned as a man among men, to grow “in age, grace and wisdom”. The Son of God could have begun to live by being born of a virgin mother without the need of a family, but without a family he could not grow and mature as a man! A virgin conceived the son of God; a family made him fully human.

What more could be said about the sacrosanct value of the family!

3. Family life and Salesian charism

For us who are sons of Don Bosco, the theme of the family can never appear as something extraneous to our life and mission. As educators we are well aware of the importance of creating a family atmosphere for the education of young and older children, of adults and young men and women. For this purpose the best environment is precisely one based on the family: an environment that makes one “feel at home”, where sentiments, attitudes, ideals and values can be communicated as something alive, often spontaneously and without words but none the less constantly and effectively on that account. Don Bosco’s well-known expression “education is a thing of the heart”⁴ becomes translated into practice by opening the

⁴ Circular letter of Don Bosco on punishments 1883, *Collected Letters* (ed. Ceria) SEI Turin, vol. IV, p. 209.

doors to the hearts of our young people, so that they can willingly take in and practise what we teach them through our methods of education.

For us, members of the Salesian Family, living as a family is not just a pastoral option so urgently needed nowadays, but a way of living our charism and an objective to be given preference in our apostolic mission. As a characteristic charismatic trait we Salesians and members of the Salesian Family live the family spirit; as a primary objective we share with the families who entrust their children to us the task of educating and evangelising them; as an educative and methodological option, we work to recreate in our environments the family spirit.

3.1 “In the beginning the mother was there”⁵

Margherita Occhiena was “the first educator and teacher of ‘pedagogy’ for Don Bosco”.⁶ “Everyone knows,” – said John Paul II to a meeting of school-teachers at Turin in 1988 – “what importance Mamma Margaret had in the life of Saint John Bosco. Not only did she give the Oratory at Valdocco that characteristic ‘family spirit’ that still exists today, but she was able to mould the heart of her young son John into that goodness and kindness which was to make him the friend and father of his poor boys”.⁷

3.1.1 A brief biographical sketch

Convinced as I am too about the decisive role played by Mamma Margaret in the human and Christian formation of Don Bosco, as also in the creation of the educative ‘family’ environment of Valdocco, I consider it a duty to recall here, albeit briefly, her life and an outline of her spiritual characteristics.

⁵ Opening words of Joergensen’s biography of Don Bosco (Italian edtn.) SEI Turin, 1929, p. 19.

⁶ P. Braidò, *Prevenire non reprimere*. Don Bosco’s educational system. LAS, Rome 1999, p. 139.

⁷ Address to workers in schools, quoted by Fr E. Viganò in *The Pope speaks to us of Don Bosco*, AGC 328, p. 20.

a) *Before the move to Valdocco (from 1788 to 1846).*

Born at Serra di Capriole, a village in the province of Asti on 1 April 1788 to Melchiorre Occhiena and Domenica Bassone, Margaret was baptized the same day; her parents were reasonably well-to-do peasants, who owned their own house and the neighbouring fields.

There was no school at Capriglio and so Margaret did not learn to read and write. But though illiterate she was not ignorant; she acquired an eminent wisdom by listening with an alert heart to sermons and catechism lessons in the parish church, and moreover lived out what she had heard in her own daily experience of life, which was not always smooth and happy. Fr Lemoyne, the author in 1886 of the first 'biography' to be written about Mamma Margaret, wrote: "She was endowed by nature with a strong will which, aided by great good sense and divine grace, enabled her to overcome all the material and spiritual obstacles she was to meet in life... Upright in conscience, in her thoughts and affections, and sound in her judgements about persons and things, self-possessed in her dealings and frank in speech, she was never hesitant... This candour and self-assurance was a safeguard for her virtue, because with it went a prudence that never allowed her to put a foot wrong".⁸

Two kilometres from Capriglio on the facing hill, at the 'Becchi', a section of Morialdo and of Castelnuovo d'Asti, lived Francis Bosco, a young peasant of 27 years of age who was a widower with a 3-year old son, Anthony. He asked her to marry him and the wedding duly took place on 6 June 1812, after which Margaret Bosco moved over to the Biglione farmstead. The small family soon increased in number; a first child, Joseph, was born on 8 April 1813, and two years later, on 16 August 1815, a second son who was called John Melchior, the future St John Bosco.

⁸ More than a biography, Lemoyne's work should be read as an edifying narrative. The author was aware of this when he gave the work the title: *Edifying scenes in the life of Margaret Bosco*, Turin, 1886, 192 pp.

The untimely death of Francis at the early age of 33 meant that at 29 Margaret became head of the family, with three children and her mother-in-law to look after, as well as the management of the farm. Soon after becoming a widow she received a very favourable proposal of marriage, but the children would have been handed over to someone else to look after them. She flatly refused: "God gave me a husband and has taken him away again. On his deathbed he entrusted three children to me, and I should be a cruel mother were I to abandon them at a time when they have greater need of me".

At this point it was to the three children that she addressed her work of education. It was a task in which her exceptional gifts became demonstrated: her faith, her virtue, the many things she was good at, the wisdom of a Piedmontese peasant coupled with that of a true Christian full of the Holy Spirit.

She knew how to adapt herself to each of the boys. Anthony had lost his mother at the age of three and his father at the age of nine; as an adolescent he became crotchety and cantankerous like a bear with a sore head. By the time he was 18 he had become uncontrollable, often becoming violent. Sometimes he called Margaret a "cruel stepmother" although with infinite patience she always treated him as a son. But she could be strong and just as well, and for peace in the house and for the good of Joseph and John she made the sorrowful decisions that could no longer be avoided.

At the end of 1830 she proceeded to divide up their property, house and land. Anthony, now on his own, soon married and had seven children. Subsequently he became fully reconciled with the rest of the family, and turned out to be a good and well esteemed father to his children and a faithful Christian.

Joseph, five years younger, was gentle, peaceful and accommodating. He was inseparable from his brother John, whose ascendancy he accepted without any feelings of jealousy. He adored his mother, and during the long years when John was studying he would be the obedient and hard-working son on whom she could

depend for support. He too at the age of 20 married a local girl, Maria Colosso, by whom he had ten children.

John wanted to study. Mamma Margaret wanted to support him in this wish but found herself up against the unyielding opposition of Anthony. And so, with a broken heart, she sent him for a year and eight months to work as a stable-boy at the farm of the Moglia family (1828-1829). Only after Anthony had acquired his autonomy could Mamma Margaret send John to the local school at Castelnuovo (1831), and then to Chieri where he was to spend ten years (1831-1841), four at the local school and six in the major seminary. This was a period when Margaret could finally be happy, at peace and full of hope, years too in which she became the grandmother of the children of Anthony and Joseph.

When in his seventies, Don Bosco could still remember the peremptory reply he got from Mamma Margaret when in 1834 a decision had to be made about his future. "Listen, John", she had said, "I have nothing to say to you about your vocation, except that you should follow wherever God leads you. Don't worry about me. I don't expect anything from you. And keep this well in mind: I was born poor, I have lived in poverty, and in poverty I want to die. Indeed I want you to know that if by some misfortune you were to become a rich priest, I would never even come to visit you".⁹

On 26 October 1835, at the age of 20, John received the clerical habit in the parish church of Castelnuovo. From that day, Don Bosco tells us, "my mother always kept an eye on me... The evening before I left for the seminary she called me to her and spoke as follows, words I shall always remember: 'John, my son, you have received the priestly habit, and I feel all the consolation a mother can experience at her son's good fortune. But remember that what gives honour to your state is not the habit but the practice of virtue. If ever you begin to doubt about your vocation, I beg you not to dishonour this habit. Lay it aside immediately. I would rather

⁹ Cf. *MB* I, p. 296.

my son were a poor peasant than a priest who neglected his duties'." ¹⁰

John was ordained priest in Turin on Saturday 5 June 1841. On the following day, after celebrating a solemn Mass in the parish church of Castelnuovo, he went back to the Becchi. There on seeing once again the places of his first dream and so many other memories, the young priest was moved to tears. The same evening he found himself alone with his mother. "John", she said to him, "you are a priest now and you have begun to say Mass; from now on you are closer to Jesus Christ. But remember that to begin to say Mass is to begin to suffer. You will not be aware of this immediately, but little by little you will come to see that your mother was right. I'm sure that you will pray for me every day whether I am still alive or already dead, and that is enough for me. From now on think only of the salvation of souls, and do not worry at all about me". ¹¹

On 3 November 1841 the young priest said good-bye to his mother and relatives and left for Turin. Following the advice of Fr Joseph Cafasso he entered the Ecclesiastical College and immediately began his apostolate among street-boys and young prisoners. On 8 December he began the first catechism lesson with Bartholomew Garelli – the beginning of the great Salesian adventure.

The young priest began to gather together an ever growing crowd of youngsters at the College, then at the premises of the Marchioness Barolo, then in green open spaces in the neighbourhood, until finally, at Easter 1846 he took over the Pinardi shed in Valdocco. During this period Margaret was living peacefully at the Becchi, a happy grandmother among a group of grandchildren ranging in age from 13 to a few months.

In July 1846 John came near to death, exhausted by his apostolic work. When the crisis had passed he went back to the Becchi

¹⁰ *Memoirs of the Oratory*, LAS 1991.

¹¹ MB I, p. 522.

for a long period of convalescence, and mother and son were close together again. But the priestly heart of Don Bosco had remained in Turin, where so many youngsters were awaiting him! But there was a problem to be solved: as a young priest of 30 years of age John could not live alone in places like the Pinardi shed that he had recently rented; the area of Valdocco was one of ill repute. "Take your mother with you", advised the parish priest of Castelnovo. Don Bosco recounts the generous reaction of his mother: "If you think it would please the Lord, I am ready to leave at once".¹² On 3 November 1846, mother and son left, on foot, for Turin.

b) Ten years with Don Bosco (from 1846 to 1856)

For Mamma Margaret the final period was now beginning in which her life became intertwined with that of her son in the actual foundation of Salesian work.

By helping Don Bosco, Margaret evidently intended to be of service to the youngsters to whom her son had dedicated his life. In the first place she would have to get used to the daily din and hubbub of the Oratory and the late hours of the evening classes, And then there were the first homeless orphans to be taken into the house. How many of these youngsters were there in Mamma Margaret's big family? The number increased from about 15 in 1848 to 30 in 1849, and to 50 in 1850. The building of a two-storey house enabled some 70 to be accommodated in 1853 and a hundred in 1854; two thirds of them were artisans and one third students or diocesan seminarians, who went out to work or to study in the city. Don Bosco had to provide for all the needs of at least thirty of them.

One evening in 1850 Margaret reached her Gethsemani. Four years of Valdocco life had worn her down and she had reached the end of her tether! She burst out to her son: "Listen, John. I can't put up with this any longer. Every day these boys pull another fast

¹² *Memoirs of the Oratory* [ed. quoted], pag. 174.

one on me... Let me pack it in and go back to the Becchi where I can spend the rest of my days in peace". Don Bosco looked at her and was upset, and then slowly raised his eyes to the crucifix hanging on the wall. Margaret followed his gaze, and then: "You are right", she said, "you are quite right". And she put on her apron once more. The Memoirs of the Oratory tell us that from that day no word of complaint ever crossed her lips.¹³ How can one ever measure the extent of her personal sacrifice in the development of the Salesian work?

Mamma Margherita was also actively present at the first "spiritual" development of the work: the first moments of the formation of the Salesian ethos and method, the presence and follow-up of the first disciples: Cagliero (1851), Rua (1852), Don Alasonatti and Dominic Savio (1854); the first sodalities, the first fruits of holiness, the first clerics and the preparation of the Salesian Society, which would be founded only three years after her death. This long feminine and motherly presence is a unique element in the history of the Founders of educational Congregations. "The Salesian Congregation", wrote one biographer, "was cradled on the lap of Mamma Margaret".¹⁴

But the finest trait of Margaret, the one that involved not only her arms but also her heart, was her natural talent as an educator. All those orphans used to call her "Mamma", and it was clear that she did not limit herself to cooking for them and looking after their clothes. They had complete trust in her, with the affection of orphans who felt that she loved them. She was always ready to chat with them in kind and gentle words correcting, exhorting or consoling them, or providing good advice for the formation of their character and their heart of believers, reminding them of the presence of God, urging them to go to confession to Don Bosco and to have devotion to Mary.

¹³ MB IV, p. 233.

¹⁴ Teresio BOSCO, *Una nuova biografia di Don Bosco*, Elle Di Ci, Leumann 1978.

She knew all those youngsters individually and could make a shrewd assessment of each of them. For two years she was able to observe an outstanding youngster who came from Mondonio: she was impressed by his behaviour. "You have many good boys", she said one day to Don Bosco, "but no one outshines Dominic Savio in heart and mind... I see him always praying, and in church he seems like an angel in paradise".¹⁵

The only periods of peace and rest for Mamma Margaret in those years were the few weeks of holiday at the Becchi in autumn. It was rest only in a relative sense, because Don Bosco took with him all the boys who had no relatives to whom they could go. After returning from the holiday of 1856, in mid-November she fell ill and took to her bed. The doctor diagnosed pneumonia, and she died at 3 o'clock in the morning of 25 November, after receiving the last sacraments from her confessor, Don Borel, the evening before. "God knows – she had said to Don Bosco – how much I have loved you; but from heaven it will be still better. I have done all I can. If I have sometimes seemed strict, it was for your good. Tell the boys that I have tried to be a mother to them. Ask them to pray and offer a holy communion for me".¹⁶

Mamma Margaret had lived in poverty, and in poverty she died: she was buried in a common grave with no tombstone to bear her name.

3.1.2 Spiritual profile of Mamma Margaret

Her death made "ever more evident the strong bond that existed between Don Bosco and his mother, that original relationship that had moulded the primary traits of his personality".¹⁷ Loved as she was by both Salesians and youngsters, there arose immediately after her death the common conviction: she was a saint!" But the cause for the Beatification and Canonisation of Mamma Margaret

¹⁵ MB V, p. 207.

¹⁶ MB V, p. 563.

¹⁷ P. Braido, *Don Bosco, prete dei giovani nel secolo delle libertà*. Vol. I. LAS, Rome 2003, p. 317.

was introduced only on 8 September 1994. After the Diocesan Process at Turin in 1996, the *Positio* (i.e. the documentation on her reputation for holiness and on the heroicity of her life and virtues) was officially consigned to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints on 25 January 2000.¹⁸

I cannot refrain from speaking here of her spiritual profile, as it appears from the *Positio*.

a) *A strong woman*

Throughout her life there were never moments when she gave way easily to natural inclinations. She showed herself extraordinarily well balanced in dealing with the far from easy tensions that arise in family life. Her attitude appears as one of constant vigilance motivated by a higher concern, that of discerning the best thing to do for the good of her children before God. She comes across as tender but firm, understanding but not easily swayed, patient but decisive.

Prompting Margaret towards the harmonisation of contradictory traits was the fact that she had had to be father as well as mother to her children. Though she had been offered the possibility of avoiding the problems of a widow by remarriage, she had been able to reach and preserve a proper balance between the two roles; a motherly approach sufficiently strong to compensate for the absence of a father, and a fatherliness sufficiently gentle to avoid compromising motherly warmth. No empty caresses therefore and no bad-tempered outbursts, but firmness and equanimity.

She always radiated calmness and serenity, self control and gentleness. She did not hit her children, but never gave way to them; she would threaten severe punishments, but forgive at the first sign of repentance. In a corner of the kitchen – recalled Don Bosco – there was a flexible cane. She never used it but she always

¹⁸ In this work great merit is due to the Historical Commission that studied the cause. Its members were Sr P. Cavaglià and Frs. F. Desramaut, R. Farina, G. Milone, F. Motto, G. Tuninetti.

left it there in the corner, As a mother she was very kind, but always strong and firm. She managed to harmonise two factors that are usually a source of difficulties in families: the presence of a sick mother-in-law and that of a particularly difficult stepson. As a wise educator she was able to transform a family scenario bristling with difficulties into an effective and successful educative environment.

By word and example she taught her children the great virtues of Piedmontese humanism of the period: the sense of duty and of work, the daily courage to face a hard life, honesty and sincerity, and good humour. They learned also to respect old people and offer willing service to others. On the other hand, though always strong and calm, she was not afraid to speak clearly to those whose words or actions gave scandal. Examples of this kind remained deeply embedded in the minds of the three boys.

Every lesson given to her children by this illiterate teacher acquired a wise and effective tone from the dimension of faith that was its background.

b) A "Salesian" educator

It was this educative skill that enabled Mamma Margaret to identify the particular potentialities hidden in her children, bring them to light, develop them, and return them almost visibly to their own hands. This was the case especially with John, her most outstanding offspring. How impressive it is to see in Mamma Margaret the clear sense and awareness of her "maternal responsibility" in the constant Christian guidance of her children, while always leaving them autonomous about their vocation in life, right up until her death!

If young John's dream at the age of nine revealed many things to him about his future, it did so primarily for Mamma Margaret; it was she who first hazarded the interpretation: "Perhaps you will become a priest!" And some years later, when she realised that their home environment was a negative one for John because of the hostility of his stepbrother Anthony, she made the sacrifice of

sending him to work as a farm-hand in the Moglia farm at Moncucco. A mother who deprives herself of her youngest son to send him to work at a place far from home makes a great sacrifice, but she did it not only to avoid a rift in the family but also to set John on the road revealed to both of them in the dream.

We can safely say that to Mamma Margaret is due the merit of having planted in Don Bosco the seeds of the famous expression: *reason, religion, loving kindness*, that she herself lived quite simply in her calm affability and authority. Divine Providence gave her the grace to be a *Salesian educator*, animated by an anticipating love that could understand, demand and correct, all with patience and a smile.

She watched over her children, controlling and guiding them, but without being oppressive. They had to obey and ask for permissions, but the mother willingly left them free to play and be happy. She never gave way to whims and gave correction in a loving manner. Fr Lemoyne testifies: "When correcting, she wanted to avoid at all costs that it should provoke petulance, distrust or resentment. Her method in this regard was quite precise: lead the children to do everything through affection or to please God, and this made her a much loved mother".¹⁹ Don Bosco would say much later that education was an affair of the heart: he had had the happy experience of this himself in the family home of the Becchi.

c) *an effective catechist*

Mamma Margaret had the rare ability to make of all life's happenings a starting point for catechesis. She held that hers was the primary responsibility for teaching the faith to her children, and was able to put across to them strong but simple values in the school of the family. The primary things she patiently passed on to them in their years of growth were her own sterling faith, the sense of an ever present God of love, and a tender devotion to Mary.

¹⁹ G.B. Lemoyne, *Scene morali di famiglia esposte nelle vita di Margherita Bosco*, Torino, Tip. Salesiano p. 39.

The way Mamma Margaret taught catechism has become famous. She could neither read nor write, but as a child she had learned by heart the necessary formulas of the truths of faith and she not only passed these on to her children but was also able to summarise and interpret them in accordance with her own infallible motherly instinct.

The great truths were transmitted in a simple and elementary manner in the briefest of formulas:

- *God sees you:* was the truth of every moment, not intended to arouse fear, but to assure the young children that God was taking care of them, and that his kindness towards them meant that they should respond by living a good life.
- *How good the Lord is!* She used to exclaim whenever something happened that struck the children's fantasy and roused their admiration.
- *You cannot deceive God!*, she would declare when it was a matter of inculcating the horror of sin and evil.
- *We have so little time for doing good!*, she used to exclaim when she wanted them to be more diligent and generous.
- *What does it matter being well dressed, if the soul is horrible underneath?* she would say when she wanted to educate them to a dignified poverty and to keep their souls clean and beautiful.

And there was also the *catechism of the sacraments*. We know from what Don Bosco himself has taught us how she applied this with John when he was young. When the time for his first communion was drawing near she used to give him every day some prayer to say or some particular reading to do; then she prepared him for the making of a good confession (and made him repeat it three times during Lent); and then when the great day came (Easter Sunday of 1826), she made sure that the child had a real experience of communion with God. "I am convinced", she said to her son on that day, "that God has taken possession of your heart. Now promise him that you will do all you can to keep yourself good all your life".²⁰

²⁰ *Memoirs of the Oratory*, [ediz. citata], pag. 43.

And finally, there was the *catechism of charity*: in times of both relative plenty and of hunger, Margaret's house was always open to the poor, to the wayfarer, the passer-by, the policeman on the beat who would drop in for a glass of wine, to girls in moral difficulties; and similarly hers was the first port of call for neighbours in misfortune, or when there was someone sick who needed help, or some dying person to accompany in the last moments of life.

d) The first cooperator

There are in the preventive system as practised by Don Bosco certain ways of doing things, certain emphases, certain touches that have something motherly about them, something gentle and reassuring, that enable us to see Margaret not only as a woman who exerted an influence from without but also inwardly as an *inspirer* and *model*, as a collaborator and certainly as the *first cooperator*.

The presence of Mamma Margaret at Valdocco during the last ten years of her life had a far more than marginal influence on the "family spirit" that we all now consider to be the heart of the Salesian charism. That was not any ordinary decade, but the first one, the one in which were laid down the foundations of the ambience that will go down in history as the Valdocco atmosphere. Don Bosco had been moved by necessity when he asked his mother to come with him, but in God's design her presence was in fact destined to do more than meet a passing need; it was to be part of a framework of providential collaboration in a charism still in its early stages.

Mamma Margaret was aware of this new vocation she had. She accepted it with humility, well knowing what it meant. This explains the courage she showed in the most difficult circumstances. Think, for instance, of the cholera epidemic. Think of the words and gestures that have something prophetic about them, such as using altar linens to make bandages for the sick. Especially, there is the example of the famous "Good Night", an original feature of Salesian tradition. It was something to which Don Bosco gave great

importance, but it was begun precisely by his mother with a few encouraging words addressed to their first orphan before he went to bed.²¹ Don Bosco then continued the practice, not after the fashion of a sermon in church, but in a fatherly and friendly manner in the playground, or the corridors or under the porticos.

The interior stature of this mother is such that the son, even after becoming an expert in education, will always have something to learn from her. The judgement of Don Lemoyne can serve to sum up all that has been said: "You could say that she personified the Oratory".²²

3.2 Valdocco, "a family that educates"²³

Even though Valdocco was the first – and only – institution for welfare and education founded and directed by Don Bosco in person, the typical features of the work and especially the preventive system of education used in it can be understood in connection not only with Don Bosco and his particular temperament and experience but also with those of his helpers. From the outset the Oratory was a community enterprise, put together and carried forward in interaction between founder and collaborators.²⁴

Among these there was an outstanding group of women. Mamma Margaret was not Don Bosco's only collaborator in the Oratory: "other mothers lived at Valdocco, always giving it a family aspect that was a necessary consequence of their nature and experience".

²¹ Don Bosco gives an account of this episode in *Memoirs of the Oratory* [ed. quoted, p. 181-182].

²² *MB*, III, p. 376.

²³ The formula is taken from Don Bosco's own testimony: "In 1841 this Congregation was only a catechism lesson, a playground on feastdays, to which was added in 1846 a Hospice for poor apprentices, by forming a private Institute in the manner of a big family" (*Brevi notizie sulla Congregazione di S. Francesco di Sales dall'anno 1841 al 1879*, in "Esposizione alla S. Sede sullo stato morale e materiale della Pia Società di S. Francesco di Sales", Tip. Salesiana, S. Pier d'Arena, 1879 (OE, vol. XXXI, p. 240).

²⁴ Cf. P. Braidò, *Prevenire non reprimere. Il sistema educativo di Don Bosco*. LAS, Rome 1999, p. 158.

After Margaret's death her elder sister, Marianna, remained at the Oratory for nearly a year before she too died. Then the mother of Don Rua took up residence at the Oratory, helped by the mother of the cleric Bellia, the mother of Canon Gastaldi and others. Also living at the Oratory was Marianna Magone, mother of Don Bosco's well-known pupil.²⁵ With her death in 1872 the presence and influence of these mothers in the Oratory came to an end.²⁶

But it must be emphasised that it was Don Bosco's mother who, during the decade 1846-1856, was his principal companion and cooperator, sharing with him "bread, work, fatigue, concerns and the mission to the young".²⁷ "Mamma Margaret" – the name has become definitive at Valdocco – will always be actively present as the first "external" development of the work takes place: first the Oratory, then the hostel alongside for the first students and artisans, the first schools and workshops, the little church dedicated to St Francis de Sales, the launching of the *Catholic Readings* in an atmosphere of revolution and threats against Don Bosco (1853).

In those days, family life at the Oratory was rather haphazard with few resources and plenty of dreams. Don Bosco frequently had to leave the house and go in search of funds to keep a hostel with an ever increasing number of residents going, even in a simple style, or to find a peaceful spot where he could do some writing in the library of the Ecclesiastical College or elsewhere. On such occasions Mamma Margaret took his place in assisting the boys, as well as seeing to the usual domestic work in the kitchen during the day, and repairing their clothing in the evenings. These are only small facts, "little details", but "they had a part to play in many

²⁵ Cf. P. Stella, *Don Bosco nella Storia della Religiosità Cattolica*. Vol I.: Vita e Opere, LAS, Rome 1997, p. 115.

²⁶ "It was a time when the College was already well organised and there was no further need for women in the house and Don Bosco was already thinking about the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians" (P. Stella, *op.cit.* p. 115).

²⁷ P. Braido, *Don Bosco, prete dei giovani nel secolo delle libertà*. Vol. I. LAS, Rome 2003, p. 213.

aspects of the life of Don Bosco and his boys and they help us to get a concrete idea of the family life of the Oratory".²⁸ It was always Don Bosco's intention, in fact, that the Oratory "should be a *house* (i.e. a family); he did not want it to be a *College*".²⁹

Some time ago Fr Egidio Viganò emphasised the consequences of the motherly presence of Mamma Margaret at Valdocco and the contribution she made to making the Oratory environment a family one: "Mamma Margaret's heroic move to Valdocco served to imbue the environment of those poor lads with the same family style of life that gave rise to the nature of the preventive system, and so many traditional methods akin to it. Don Bosco knew from experience that the formation of his own personality was radically linked with the extraordinary atmosphere of self-dedication and kindness in his own family at the Becchi, and he wanted to reproduce its most significant elements in the Valdocco Oratory among those poor and abandoned youngsters".³⁰

It is clear therefore that the components of the "educative family"³¹ Don Bosco wanted the Oratory to become were not taken entirely from pedagogical and theological theories but also from the daily rustic life of Piedmont.³² The feminine presence at Valdocco of the mothers, and first among them Mamma Margaret, made a particular contribution of faith and simplicity, of practical approach and educative wisdom.

²⁸ P. Stella, *op.cit.* p. 115. Cf. José M. Parello, "Don Bosco, fundador de comunidad. Aproximación a la comunidad de Valdocco": *Cuadernos de Formación Permanente* 7 (2001) 166.

²⁹ A. Caviglia, "Il 'Magone Michele'", in *Opere e scritti editi e inediti di Don Bosco*. Vol. V, SEI, Torino 1965, p. 141.

³⁰ E. Viganò, *In the year of the family*. AGC 349, June 1994, p. 29.

³¹ The expression is taken from P. Braidò, *Prevenire non reprimere*. Il sistema educativo di Don Bosco, LAS, Rome 1999, p. 305.

³² Cfr. P. Braidò, *Prevenire non reprimere*. Il sistema educativo di Don Bosco. For a treatment of the topic of a family approach in the educational method of Don Bosco see ch. 15 p. 305 etc. For an historical reconstruction in relation to Don Bosco's personality also of interest is ch. 8 p. 158 etc.

4. The family as mission

These reflections on Mamma Margaret and her family help us to understand that, as well as being indirectly a part of our mission, the family is primarily and of its nature a social institution whose members are united within it by interpersonal relationships of various kinds, but with all of them drawn together by links of affection, communication and discipline which give them a certain special spiritual quality. Our efforts are directed towards the young, and our field of work is their education and evangelisation. But both young people and education are concepts inseparable from the family.

This was recalled by Fr Egidio Viganò in his commentary on the Bishops' Synod of 1980 on the family, which was followed by the publication of the Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* of John Paul II: "The thrust of our Salesian vocation", wrote Fr Viganò, "is naturally towards the poor and the lowly. They are the ones who above all have need of the family and it was for them Don Bosco conceived his characteristic ethos, as Peter Braido says: kindness that educates in a happy united family atmosphere".³³

4.1 *"Family, make yourself what you should truly be"*

"Family, make yourself what you should truly be": with this appeal John Paul II invited the families of all the world to discover in themselves their real nature and realise it in the midst of the world. Nowadays, in a world undermined by scepticism, the powerful exhortation of the Holy Father cannot but resound again encouraging families to rediscover this truth about themselves by adding: *"Family, believe in what you are!"*.

A result of God's architecture, in line with his inviolable plan, the family must be also the result of human architecture, through man's commitment to the realisation of God's design.

³³ E. Viganò, *Appeals of the Synod of 1980*. AGC 299, December 1980, p. 29.

□ *The cell of society*

The family is the foundation and support of society through its essential task of service to life: in the family citizens are born and in the family they find the first school of those virtues that are the soul of life and of the development of society itself.

Insofar as it is an interpersonal loving community, the family finds in self-giving the law that guides it and gives it growth. Self-giving informs the love of the parents for each other and becomes a model and norm for the relationship between brothers and sisters and among the different generations living together in the family. The communion and daily sharing lived in the home in times of both joy and difficulty represent for the children the most practical and effective pedagogy in the broadest horizons of society. Every newborn child is a gift to its brothers and sisters, to the parents and to the whole family. Its life becomes a gift for those who gave it life, who cannot fail to appreciate the presence of the new child, its sharing in their own existence, its contribution to the good of the family community and of the whole of society.

The same experience of communion and sharing that must characterise daily life in the family, represents its first and fundamental contribution to society. The relationships between the members of the family community are inspired and guided by the law of “freely giving” which, by respecting and fostering personal dignity in each and all as the only claim to worth, becomes welcome and cordial acceptance, encounter and dialogue, disinterested availability, generous service and deep solidarity.

In this way the fostering of an authentic and mature communion of persons in the family becomes the first and indispensable school of social relations. It represents an example and stimulus for the broadest interpersonal relationships that teach respect, justice, dialogue and love – the birthplace and efficacious instrument for the humanisation and personalisation of society.³⁴

³⁴ Francesco di Felice, *Radici umane e valori cristiani della famiglia*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2005, pp.138s.

And all of this is of greater importance today if we want to make an effective comparison with the two limited and narrow family models that result from today's consumer society: that of the self-centred family-fortress, and that of the family-hotel, without identity or relationships. Consequently, in the face of a society that risks becoming ever more depersonalised and standardised, and hence inhuman and self-perpetuating, with negative effects in so many forms of detachment, the family still possesses and makes available today tremendous powers that can draw man away from his obscurity, keep him aware of his personal dignity, enrich his deep humanity, and find him a place in society with all his uniqueness and individuality.

When it is of service to life, when it forms the citizens of tomorrow, when it inculcates in them the human values fundamental for the nation, when it introduces the children into society, the family is playing an essential role: it is the common patrimony of all humanity. Both natural reason and divine revelation contain this truth. As Vatican II put it, the family is "the first and vital cell of society".³⁵

□ *Sanctuary of life*

The first and fundamental task of the family is to be of service to life, which prolongs in history the original blessing of the Creator, and so transmits the divine image from one person to another (cf. *Gen* 5,1ff). This responsibility flows naturally from its being a community of life and love founded on marriage, and from its mission to preserve, reveal and communicate love. What is here at stake is the love of God himself, of whom parents are made collaborators and almost interpreters in the transmission of life and its education according to the Father's plan. In a family, love continues throughout time to pass on life: it does so freely, and willingly as a gift. In a family each member is recognised, respected and honoured as a person, as an individual, and if any member is

³⁵ *Apostolicam Actuositatem* n. 11.

in greater need, more intense and vigilant is the care given to him by the others.

The family is therefore involved in the entire span of existence of its members from birth to death. It is truly the sanctuary of life, the place in which God's gift of life can be adequately contained and protected against the multiple attacks to which it is exposed, and can be developed in line with the demands of authentic human growth.

As a domestic church, the family is called upon to proclaim, celebrate and serve the Gospel of life. In the procreation of a new life the parents are aware that the new offspring is not only the fruit of their mutual self-giving in love but is at the same time a gift for each of them, a gift that flows from the "Gift" itself.

□ *Announcer of the gospel of life*

It is especially through the education of the children that the family fulfils its mission to proclaim the Gospel of life. By word and example, by practical signs and gestures in everyday life, the parents introduce the children to an authentic freedom realised in sincere self-giving, and develop in them respect for others, a sense of justice, cordial acceptance, dialogue, generous service, solidarity and every other value that helps in understanding life as a vocation and as a mission of love.

And so, despite the difficulties inherent in all education, parents with trust and courage must form their children to the essential values of human life. And the children must grow in a proper freedom with regard to material goods, adopting a simple and modest lifestyle in the conviction that man is more important for what he is than for what he has.

The educational contribution of Christian parents therefore is a service to the faith of the children and a help to them to fulfil the vocation received from God. Part of their educational mission is to teach their children and bear witness to the true meaning of suf-

fering and death: they will be able to do this if they themselves are alert to any suffering around them, and if they can develop, in the first place, attitudes of closeness, help and sharing towards the young, the sick and the aged within the family circle.

We are all aware that both young and older children need a human and affective education to stimulate their personality, their responsibility and their sense of fidelity and initiative. They also need education in their sexuality which, if it is to be sound and fully human, must keep pace with the discovery of the ability to love instilled by God in the human heart. It is a question of a harmonious formation to responsible love, guided simultaneously by reason and by the Word of God.

□ *School of social commitment*

Another task of the family is that of forming the children to practise love in all interpersonal relationships, so that the whole family does not become closed in on itself but remains open to the community, and inspired by a sense of justice, solidarity and solicitude for others as well as by its responsibility to the whole of society.

In this way service to the Gospel becomes expressed in practical solidarity. The social duty of the family cannot be confined to the procreative role of biological generation and the education of children. Families with a Christian inspiration feel a continual call to be open to the needs of their neighbours. Individually or in association with others they can and must devote themselves to a variety of works of social service, especially for the benefit of the poor. Such work is of particular importance when it is a case of bringing help to people and situations not reached by charities and public welfare systems.

Animated and sustained by the new commandment of love, the Christian family welcomes, respects and offers its service to every individual, considered in their dignity as a person and child of God. Charity extends beyond our brethren in the faith, because "every man is my brother"; in each of them, and especially in those who

are poor or weak, suffering or unjustly treated, charity must be able to discern the countenance of Christ and a brother or sister to love and serve. The Christian family puts itself at the service of mankind and of the world by carrying out a true work of "human development".

We all know about the unjust distribution of goods between the developed world and developing countries, and between rich and poor in the same country; we know of the restriction of natural resources so that only a few people benefit from them. Mass illiteracy, the re-emergence of racism, the spreading of ethnic and armed conflicts, have always had a devastating effect on the family. And, on the other hand, we find instances where the family is the first and principal environment in which different values can flourish, inspired by love and communion.

By way of example I want to emphasise the ever-greater importance assumed in our society by *hospitality*, in all its forms: from opening the doors of our homes and still more of our hearts to the requests of our neighbours, to the concrete commitment of ensuring that every family has a dwelling-place which it preserves and improves. Especially is the Christian family called upon to heed and bear witness to the recommendation of the Apostle: "Contribute to the needs of the saints, practise hospitality" (*Rom* 12,13). The needy neighbour will thus be welcomed in imitation and sharing of the charity of Christ: "whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple – truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward" (*Mt* 10,42).

Another particularly significant expression of solidarity for families is the willingness to adopt or foster children abandoned by their parents, or otherwise in situations of grave neglect. True parental love knows how to extend beyond ties of flesh and blood by taking in children of other families and providing them with everything needed for their life and full development.

The Fathers of the Church often spoke of the family as a "domestic church", or as a "small Church". "Being together" as a fam-

ily is translated into "each one being for the others", and in the creation of a community space for the affirmation of every man and woman. Sometimes there is a question of persons who are physically or mentally handicapped, of whom our so-called "progressive" society would prefer to be freed. Sometimes you come across even a family that calls itself Christian with this kind of mentality. It is very sad when a family tries to get rid as soon as possible of an aging member or one who is sick or handicapped. It is done because faith is lost in the God for whom "all are alive" (Lk 20,38) and by whom all are called to the fullness of Life.

4.2 "Family, have faith in your true role!"

The family is not the product of a culture, the result of an evolution, a manner of community life linked with a certain social organisation; it is a natural institution, antecedent to any political or juridical organisation. It does not owe its foundation to any such organisation, but directly to the will of God. In a fidelity that is entirely without reservations a man and women give themselves to each other and love each other with a love that is open to life.

What I have said so far is expressed authoritatively in the four tasks assigned to the family by *Familiaris consortio*: the formation of a community of persons, service to life, participation in the development of society, and the evangelising mission.

But for these tasks to be fulfilled, and hence for the accomplishment of the appeal addressed to families by Pope John Paul II: "*Family, have faith in your true role!*", it is necessary first of all that the family – parents, children and all family members – be firmly convinced of these tasks, which flow from the very nature and mission of the family institution, and form part of God's design for the family and for each of its members.

It is a matter of a conviction which, for believers, is not only of the rational or social order, but is based on faith in God who created the family unit as a community of love and life, and through his

Son sanctified it by the grace of a sacrament, so that it would be for everyone a sign and instrument of communion.

5. Pastoral and pedagogical applications

As is customary, the Strenna – and in particular the Strenna for 2006 – provides an opportunity to offer to the whole Salesian Family some pastoral suggestions and pedagogical applications.

I have seen and value the successful efforts of some Provinces to express in the form of educational programmes the *Pastoral Plan* that I linked with this Strenna, as I did earlier with that of 2004. In addition the review *Notes on Youth Ministry* has produced a special issue which goes into the theme at greater depth and offers suggestions and valuable supporting material. I invite you to be aware of all this material, which can be of great use to you, while here I set out once again the main guidelines for the pastoral plan.

■ *Here then are my suggestions.*

To ensure that special attention be given to the family in our plan of education and evangelisation, the following necessary points among others are required:

- **The guarantee of a special commitment to education to love** within Salesian educational practice and in the journey of education to the faith proposed to our young people. The GC23 presented education to love as one of the crucial points manifesting either the incidence of faith on life or its lack of relevance in practice. The typical experience of Don Bosco and the educational and spiritual content of the preventive system prompts us:
 - to give special importance to the creation around the young of an educational ethos really conducive to affective communication,
 - to prize the authentic values of chastity,

- to foster relationships between boys and girls of respect for themselves and others, mutually enriching, and expressive of the joy of free self-giving,
 - to ensure the presence in the educational environment of clear and joyful witnesses to love, especially through self-donation in chastity.
- **The follow-up and support of parents in their educational responsibilities**, by fully involving them in the implementation of the Salesian pastoral and educational plan. The GC24, in connection with the involvement of the laity in the Salesian mission, acknowledged the duty of parents and the role of families in our works, but asked us to intensify our collaboration with the family as having the first educational role for sons and daughters (cf. *GC24*, 20. 177). For this reason it wanted us to esteem more highly the indispensable contribution of parents and families of the young, encouraging the setting up of committees and associations to ensure and enrich Don Bosco's educational mission by their participation (cf. *CG24*, 115).
- **The fostering and preparation of the Salesian style of the family**: in individual families, in the Salesian community, in the educative and pastoral community. The Salesian family spirit is a characteristic of our spirituality (cf. *GC24*, 91-93) and is expressed:
- in unfailingly listening to others,
 - in freely welcoming others,
 - in the animating presence of the educator among the young,
 - in dialogue and interpersonal and formal communication,
 - in shared responsibility for a common educational plan.
- **Growth in the spirit and in the experience of the Salesian Family** for the fostering of an educative and pastoral commitment in the service of the young.

The Salesian Family asks us especially for a combined commitment to provide every young person with an adequate and particular vocational plan (cf. *GC25*, 41 and 48). For this reason there needs to be growth in the Family through:

- the effective functioning of the consulting group of the Salesian Family,
- the presence in it of young people,
- initiatives and activities that lead the Salesian Family to work ever more in the manner of a spiritual apostolic movement.

■ ***Some practical proposals:***

- ❖ In the scheme for the formation of the young, prepare a *gradual and systematic programme for education to love*, that will help adolescents and young adults:
 - to grasp the human and Christian value of sexuality,
 - to develop a mature and positive open relationship between boys and girls,
 - in the light of the dignity of the human person, to face up to the values of life and the criteria of the Gospel, and the various questions arising at the present day about human life and sexuality,
 - to be open to God's plan as a practical way of living their own vocation to love.

Special importance will have to be given to this aspect in formation programmes in the groups and associations of the Salesian Youth Movement and in the personal guidance of the young.

- ❖ Promote among the young adults where we are involved (leaders, volunteers, young collaborators, etc.) *practical formation schemes for the discernment and follow-up of the vocation to Christian marriage*. This will require the effort to obtain the collaboration of Christian couples already belonging to the lay groups of the Salesian Family.

- ❖ Encourage in our works the setting up of *groups, movements and associations of couples and of families* that can help in the living and deepening of their own vocation to marriage and in actively taking on their educative responsibilities. In the Salesian Family there already exist groups of “Don Bosco Families”, “Hogares Don Bosco”, promoted and animated by the Salesian Cooperators, but there are also several other family associations, such as the “Christian Family Movement”, “Matrimonial Encounters”, etc.
- ❖ Support the parents of our youngsters in their educative responsibilities through the setting up of *parents’ associations, courses for parents*, etc. with a concrete and systematic plan for formation and sharing in educational matters.
- ❖ Strengthen in all our works and activities the educative and pastoral community, giving particular attention to personal relationships and a family atmosphere, to wide participation and to the sharing of Salesian values and the objectives of the educative and pastoral plan. In this way the Salesian work will become a place where the youngsters feel at home and will be at the same time a support for the families involved.
- ❖ *Involve the families in the process of education and evangelisation* that we propose and organise among the youngsters, through initiatives such as sharing sessions between parents and children, family catechesis, the involvement of parents in the organisation of groups of the SYM, joint meetings and celebrations, and Christian family groups as a point of reference for the journey of faith proposed to the young, etc.
- ❖ Encourage, prepare and accompany our lay people in *promoting and defending in society the rights of the family* in response of harmful laws and situations.
- ❖ Deepen the *sense of the Salesian Family* among the various groups present in the same locality, through the knowledge and sharing of the “Identity Card” and “Mission Statement”,

and the functioning of the “Consulting Group of the Salesian Family” at various levels.

Conclusion: a legend flavoured with wisdom

And now in conclusion, as I have done in the past when commenting on the Strenna, I offer you a legend that could sum up what I have said in this commentary.

A family

In the heart of a valley of fields, woods and meadows there lived a happy little family in a small two-storied house. There were three of them at the time: the mother and father, and a fair-haired six year old little boy. The father worked in a factory making water-taps, the mother cultivated the orchard behind the house and kept a stern eye on twelve fussy hens and a domineering rooster. The child was happy to be able to go to school, and proud that he could already write his name. He also new what “exuberant” meant.

Through the centre of the valley a bubbling stream wound its way. The house was in a rather isolated spot and so on Sundays the small family would squeeze itself into a tiny car and go to Mass in the parish church. Afterwards they consumed ice cream or drank hot chocolate, according to the season.

In the evening the little house was always in a mild state of turmoil, because when it was the child’s bedtime there was always something he wanted to do, like counting the stars or the glow-worms, or how many little squares there were on the tablecloth.

Before going to sleep they all prayed together, and every night an angel of the Lord collected their prayers and took them to heaven.

One autumn it rained for days on end and the stream became swollen with dirty water. Higher up, mud and tree-trunks combined

to form a dam, which led in turn to the formation of a muddy lake. As darkness fell, the dam gave way under the pressure of the water, and the valley began to be flooded.

The father awoke mother and child. They clung to each other in terror because the water had already invaded the ground floor of the little house and was steadily rising and getting darker.

"Up to the roof!", cried Father. He took the boy, clinging silently about his neck with eyes full of fear, and climbed up into the attic and then on to the roof. Mother followed them.

On the roof they felt as through they were shipwrecked on an island which was growing steadily smaller, because the water continued to rise relentlessly and soon reached the father's knees.

Father got his feet firmly fixed on the roof, embraced the mother and said: "Take the child in your arms and get up onto my shoulders"!

Mother and child climbed up onto the father's shoulders, as he said: "Put your feet on my shoulders and the boy's on your own. Don't be afraid. Whatever happens I will not leave you!"

The mother kissed the child and said: "Climb up onto my shoulders and don't be afraid. Whatever happens I will not leave you!"

The water went on rising. It covered the father, with his arms stretched out holding the mother, and then swallowed up the mother with her arms stretched out holding the child. But the father did not loosen his grip and neither did the mother, but the water went on rising. It reached the child's mouth, his eyes, his forehead.

The angel of the Lord, who had come to collect their evening prayers, saw only a mop of fair hair on the surface of the dark water.

He swiftly grasped the mop of hair and pulled. Behind the hair came up the child, and attached to the child came up the mother, and holding on to the mother came up the father. Neither had lost their grip.

The angel flew off and gently deposited the singular chain on a higher hill, where the water would never reach. Father, mother and child tumbled onto the grass and then hugged each other amid tears and laughter.

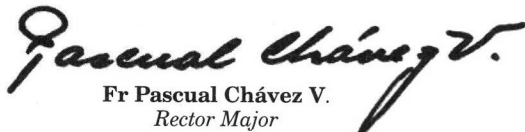
Instead of their prayers that evening, the angel took back to heaven their love. And all the choirs of heaven broke out into thunderous applause.

* * *

There, dear friends, you have a “parable” that is very Salesian, because the message is that by beginning with the children we “bring up” the rest of the family.

I end by renewing my good wishes for the New Year of 2006, which begins under the protection of Our Blessed Lady the Mother of God. May she teach us to contemplate the family she created at Nazareth, so as to understand its secrets and imitate it.

Affectionately in Don Bosco


Fr Pascual Chávez V.
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