

acts

**of the General Council
of the Salesian Society
of St John Bosco**

OFFICIAL ORGAN OF ANIMATION AND COMMUNICATION FOR THE SALESIAN CONGREGATION

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BRINGING THE GOSPEL TO THE YOUNG

STRENNA 2010

Centenary of the death of Don Michael Rua

PREMISS: Some significant events in the second half of 2009 – **COMMENTARY ON THE STRENNA 2010:**

1. Introduction: the motives behind the Strenna. – **2. Being disciples and apostles: our vocation.** – **3. The task of the disciples is to hear the “desire to see Jesus”** – **4. First disciples, then apostles.** – **5. To help the young “to see Jesus”.** 5.1. The aim of evangelisation: meeting Christ in the Church. 5.2. Method of evangelisation: walking together. 5.3. Motivation for evangelisation. 5.4. Re-thinking pastoral work. 5.5. Processes to implement in order to change. – **6. Don Michael Rua, disciple and apostle.** 6.1. “The most faithful one” 6.2. Fruitful Fidelity. 6.3. Dynamic Fidelity. – **7. Suggestions for putting the Strenna into practice** – **8. Conclusion:** *Don Bosco evangeliser, sign of God’s love for the young* (Meditation on the painting of Don Bosco by Sieger Koeder).

Turin-Valdocco, 18 December 2009

150th anniversary of the Founding of the Salesian Congregation

Dear Confreres,

I am writing to you from Valdocco, today 18 December, the date on which we are celebrating the 150th anniversary of the founding of our beloved Congregation, the date on which we raise a hymn of praise to the Lord, who has been so magnanimous to us. God had blessed abundantly the action of that group of young men from the Oratory of Valdocco who, gathered around Don Bosco «all unanimously determined to promote and maintain the true charity that is needed in the work of the festive oratories for abandoned youth nowadays exposed to many dangers», decided to form «a Society or Congregation» (cf. *BM VI*, pp. 182). It is the concluding celebration of this jubilee, opened last year, in which we want to renew our religious profession to make our own the pledge of our young founding fathers: that of always remaining with Don Bosco, following his ‘dream,’ his apostolic project, to ensure, *God willing*, the continuity and the development of his charism and of his mission.

From this perspective, the year 2009 has been very enriching and fruitful with very many activities in the Provinces fostering the spiritual and pastoral renewal of the confreres. One feature which has especially helped with this commitment has been the re-discovery of the Constitutions, genuinely «Don Bosco's will and testament, for us our book of life and for the poor and little ones a pledge of hope» (C. art. 196). Allow me, dear confreres, to say to you once again that these need to be always better known, loved, prayed and lived.

From the start 2010 opens with the shining figure of Don Rua. He knew how to become the son, the disciple and the successor of Don Bosco. He went halves, that is was in full communion with him in his labours and sufferings. Day after day he imitated our Father, and with fruitful and dynamic fidelity he made the Congregation and the Salesian Family flourish and expand. In all of this he takes his place before our eyes as our model! Looking again at Don Rua once again we want to make our own the suggestions offered in my previous circular letter. They are simple and clear. A real plan of life.

At this point, before presenting you with the commentary on the Strenna for 2010, I want to give you some information about the main events of these last few months: from July until the present. For a more detailed account I refer you to the Chronicle of the Rector Major and those of the Councillors, included in this issue of the Acts. You will find there the visits to the various Provinces and talks in a number of meetings and gatherings. Here I should just like to mention those events which to me seem most outstanding.

First of all I want to mention the pilgrimage in the steps of Saint Paul, which with the all members of the Council we made between 27 June and 5 July. We passed through the main places associated with the life of the Apostle Paul on his journeys in which he met Christ, and his untiring travels proclaiming the Gospel, from Tarsus, the place where he was born, to Damas-

cus, and Antioch, and Ephesus and to Athens. It was, as we had planned, a real spiritual experience, marked by the reading of the Word of God and by “lectio divina” led by Fr Juan José Bartolomé, and by reflections on Paul the evangelist. A subject which reminded us of the commitment to evangelisation proposed to us by the GC26 and which represents the focal point of the Strenna for 2010. The pilgrimage was also an opportunity to meet the Salesian communities working in those places: Damascus and Aleppo in Syria, Istanbul in Turkey. In each of the communities, the visit of the Rector Major and the Council was an occasion for fraternity and celebration, also on the part of the young people and the Salesian Family.

Something which affected us deeply, a real blow to the heart, was the death of our very dear confrere Fr Antonio Domenech, which happened on 20 July, at the house of Martí Codolar, in Barcellona. I cannot but recall his memory, given that Fr Domenech was a member of the General Council for 12 years, offering his services to the Congregation in the Youth Ministry Department. They were years of total dedication, of work reflecting his many talents and dynamism. We shall never forget the witness he gave: his love for life, the strong faith and sense of hope which marked the years of his illness. A period of suffering, of trial and of grace, which transfigured him and then brought him to the definitive meeting with the Lord. To him go our thanks and our admiration.

On 15 and 16 August, with Mother Yvonne Reungoat, I took part in the “European *Confronto*” at Colle Don Bosco, also celebrating the anniversary of the birth of our Founder and Father. This event, with the presence of Confreres, Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and leaders from all the Provinces of Europe, was a gathering at which once again we were able to experience how the charism of Don Bosco is relevant and “close” to the young. This fact alone would be sufficient for us to appreciate the value of the experience of the *Confronto*. One needs to add that this gathering had been prepared with great care and skill

by the SDB and FMA Youth Ministry Departments, and brought out clearly the leading role of the young people themselves, as Don Bosco wanted. These are the obvious elements which always ensure the success of this kind of event.

In the first days of September with Fr Adriano Bregolin and some other friends we made the 'Pilgrimage to Santiago'. It was a very beautiful experience in human and spiritual terms. It seems to me an expressive icon of the journey of life and of the faith journey each one of us is called upon to make. In an interview I gave for the Provincial Newsletter of the Province of León, Spain (which provided us with logical support during the walk) I pointed out that this walk tests, first of all, the pilgrim's physical fitness, teaching him to adapt his own pace to that of his travelling companions, provides time and space to contemplate nature as one slowly follows the scallop shells (the sign indicating the pilgrim's route) which show the path to be followed, helps one to come to terms with oneself in silence, and very simply invites each one to reflect on one's life and to pray. You can very well imagine the joy at reaching the goal with so many other pilgrims, and then having the opportunity to say mass on the tomb of the Apostle.

On the last Sunday of September I met those taking part in the *Harambée*. Afterwards in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians, I had the grace of sending on its way 140th Salesian missionary expedition. This year the number of missionaries, particularly high, was intended to represent another sign of the celebration of the 150th anniversary of the founding of the Congregation. An expedition like this is always something beautiful and significant in which we put into practice what the Lord Jesus asked of us: to be his witnesses even to the ends of the earth. It is also the continuation of what Don Bosco began in far off 1875, when he sent his first Salesian missionaries to Argentina.

Between 6 and 14 October we had the 'intermediate reunion' of the General Council, during which, taking up again

the study of the Regions, we examined that of South Asia. This reflection allowed us to get to know better the state of this Region, at the moment the most fruitful one in vocations in the Congregation, identifying the challenges which have to be faced, assessing the available resources and suggesting the general outlines for the immediate future. The subject will be taken up again with the Provincials of the Region in Sri Lanka during the next term.

Between 21 and 26 of the same month I went to Perù for the meeting of the Provincials of the Interamerica Region. Meetings of this kind at which the Vicar also takes part, are intended to be a form of accompaniment for each of the Regions. I already referred to this in previous letters. I should like to underline the fact that the experience of the meetings and their subsequent practical consequences are seen more and more to be profitable for the method chosen, and enriching for the Provincials taking part. On the occasion of this meeting, I also chaired a seminar of updating with the Provincials, the Delegates for Formation and Youth Ministry and some leaders, on the document of the Vth General Conference of the Latin-American Bishops at Aparecida. Meetings of this kind were conducted by Fr Egidio Viganò after the Conferences of the CELAM in Puebla and Santo Domingo. The purpose was to put the Congregation in harmony with the Latin American Church.

In the month of November I visited the Provinces of Dima-pur and Guwahati, in India, which can very rightly be considered one of the most successful examples of the inculturation of the Salesian charism and mission. Demonstrating this are both the growth of the Church in this area of north-east India, and the development of our Congregation. There is no doubt that the name of Don Bosco is like a magic word in this whole area, the result of the missionary stimulus given from the very beginning by Bishop Louis Mathias and all the great missionaries responsible for such an exemplary and fruitful establishment

of the Church and for the faithful inculturation of the charism, comparable to that achieved by the first missionaries in South America. They were confreres who were courageous and enterprising who made great efforts to learn local languages and cultures. Committed to human development, especially through education, they were always great evangelisers and cultivators of vocations. The recognition given us by the people close to us and by outsiders, by Christians and by non-Christians, by men of the Government and of the Church, is confirmation of how great were the epic deeds of the missionaries in this part of India. This splendid achievement also makes us reflect on why in certain places the Congregation has developed so well even among the tribal groups, while in others it is such a struggle to establish a local Church and to have vocations for the Church and for the Congregation.

Still in the month of November, between 15 and 22, at Turcifal, in Portugal, I preached a Retreat for the Provincials, the members of the Provincial Councils and other invited confreres, from the West Europe Region. It seems to me that this is one of the specific services of animation of the Rector Major who in this way can better communicate his vision of consecrated life in general, and Salesian life in particular, and pass on his teaching and the lines of government with which he wants to enlighten and guide the Congregation. Personally I was very happy with the atmosphere of prayer and reflection that was created. At the end of the Retreat I wanted to go to Fatima to pray to the Madonna and to entrust to her all of you, dear confreres, our works with the world of people, adults and the young who move around them. I cannot hide from you that I felt a real need to make this visit to the Sanctuary sanctified by the presence of Mary.

In conclusion, at the end of the month of November, I took part in the Bi-Annual and General Assembly of the USG (Union of Superiors General), in which we reflected on consecrated life in Africa. At the next Assemblies we will be reflecting on conse-

crated life in Europe and I can assure you that this topic arouses a great deal of interest: we are convinced that if consecrated life came to birth in Europe and from here developed and spread throughout the world, it is important that it is re-born here. As you can see this is in line with the 'Project for Europe' which more and more is also being taken up by other Congregations.

And without further ado I move on to give you my **Commentary on the Strenna for 2010**.

* * *

*«Truly, nothing is more beautiful
than to know Christ and to make him known to others».¹*

My Dear Confreres,
Daughters of Mary Help of Christians,
All the Members of the Salesian Family,
Young People,

Here I am once again for this annual appointment for the presentation of the commentary on the Strenna for 2010. As a real spiritual and pastoral programme, it will help us to strengthen our Salesian identity, re-invigorate our communion of minds and hearts to place ourselves within the Church as "disciples and apostles" for the building of the Kingdom and the transformation of the world. Today more than ever the world needs Christ and his Gospel; for this people are required who make the Kingdom of God the cause for which they live, as did Jesus; the witness is needed of disciples, new men and women, born not of the "flesh" but of the Spirit; apostles are required who are seriously engaged in the preservation of creation, in justice, in solidarity and in brotherhood and sisterhood among all peoples.

¹ BENEDICT XVI, cf. *Sacramentum Caritatis*, n. 84.

1. Introduction: the motives behind the Strenna

After my appeal last year in which I invited the Salesian Family to live and act as a “movement” so as to be more visible, more significant and more effective in its service for the salvation of the young, in 2010 I should like to see you animated by the same spirit and involved in a joint project: proclaiming the Gospel to the young, and in this way leading them to a personal meeting with the Lord Jesus.

It is a question of a word of advice offered to us by the Holy Father himself who in a letter sent to me on the occasion of the XXVI General Chapter of the SDB, wrote:

«May evangelisation be the main and priority frontier of their mission today. It presents many tasks, urgent challenges, vast fields of activity, but its fundamental purpose is that of proposing that everyone should live their human life as Jesus lived it. In multi-religious situations and in secularised ones, it is necessary to find new ways of making Jesus known, especially to the young, so that they may discover his perennial fascination».²

Therefore, on the occasion of the centenary of the death of Don Michael Rua, most faithful to Don Bosco and to his charism, I should like to invite all the members of the Salesian Family to become ever more and more disciples in love with Jesus and his enthusiastic apostles and to commit themselves to the evangelisation of the young. Let us speak to them about Christ, let us tell them about our meeting with Him, let us tell His story, without which there is the risk that He slips into the realms of mythology and idealism, let us give them the programme of happiness which He offers us in the Beatitudes, let us tell them how beautiful life is once He has been encountered

² BENEDICT XVI, *Letter to Fr Pascual Chávez Villanueva, Rector Major of the Salesians, on the occasion of the XXVI General Chapter*, 1 March 2008, n. 4; cf. GC26 of the SDB, p. 91.

and how much joy there is in being embraced by Him and being drawn into the cause of the Kingdom of God.

The commitment to evangelisation flows from the identity of the disciple who after setting out to follow the Lord Jesus become His personal representative and ardent missionary. We want to take up the challenge of helping the young to “learn to look on this other person not simply with my eyes and my feelings, but from the perspective of Jesus Christ”.³ It is true, we are Salesians and as such we carry out our mission of evangelising by *educating* and of educating by *evangelising*. This is not just a slogan nor a meaningless expression. It indicates the close link which exists between evangelisation and education; without confusing the one with the other and respecting their autonomy they are at the service of the building up of the human person in order to bring him or her to the fullness of Christ. Education is genuine when it takes into account all the different characteristics of the children, of the adolescent, of the young person and is clearly directed towards the all-round formation of the individual, opening him up to the transcendent. Evangelisation on its part has a strong educational dimension, precisely because it seeks the transformation of the mind and heart, the creation of a new person the result of his being conformed to Christ.

The Strenna for 2010 takes its cue from the Pauline year just concluded and from the Synod on the Word of God, while we still await the Pope’s post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation, which will help us to proclaim and to witness to the beauty of the Encounter with Christ, the Word of God, who is living amongst us. During the Synod, at which I had the grace to be present, I spoke about the passage from Luke and the disciples on the way to Emmaus, seen as a model, from both its content and its method of the evangelisation of the young; it could be useful to take it in hand again and meditate on it.

³ BENEDICT XVI, cf. *Deus caritas est*, n. 18.

Here, then, the spiritual and pastoral programme for the year 2010:

«*Sir, we want to see Jesus*».
In imitation of Don Rua,
as authentic disciples and zealous apostles
let us bring the Gospel to the young.

Already a good number of the groups of the Salesian Family are in harmony with this task. By way of example I will give you two passages from the General Chapters of the SDB and of the FMA.

The XXVI General Chapter of the Salesians shows its awareness of the urgent need to evangelise and of the centrality of proposing Jesus Christ: «We perceive evangelisation as the principal requirement of our mission, aware that the young have a right to have Jesus proclaimed to them as the source of life and promise of happiness now and in eternity. Our “fundamental purpose is that of proposing that everyone should live their human life as Jesus lived it. ...At the centre should be the proclamation of Jesus Christ and of his Gospel, together with the call to conversion, the acceptance of the faith, their taking their place in the Church; then from this will come faith journeys and forms of catechesis, liturgical life and the witness of charitable work».⁴

The XXII General Chapter of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians then, recognises that it is the love of God which urges us on: «The Upper Room where the apostles were together is not a place for them to stay but one from which to launch out. The Spirit changes them from fearful men into zealous missionaries who, full of courage, carry the good news of the Risen Jesus along the world’s highways. Love leads to exodus and to a

⁴ BENEDICT XVI, *Letter to Fr Pascual Chávez Villanueva, Rector Major of the Salesians, on the occasion of the XXVI General Chapter*, 1 March 2008, n. 4; cf. GC26 of the SDB, p. 91.

going out of oneself towards new frontiers to make a gift of oneself: love grows through love.⁵ Mary, who from the Upper Room teaches us to throw open the doors was the first to experience the exodus and to set out on her journey. The first to be evangelised became the first evangeliser. Carrying Jesus to others, she offers her service, brings joy, makes love an experience».⁶

2. Being disciples and apostles: our vocation

Being disciples who welcome in their heart the Word of God and apostles who with joy pass it on is the vocation of every Christian. The life and mission of the Church consists precisely in this. Jesus himself began proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom of God and calling the disciples to send them out to preach. Not only the Twelve, but all the baptised are called to be disciples who make themselves familiar with the Word, identify themselves with the Lord to the extent of having His sentiments, who have the mind of Christ, they live in close union with Him, and then become convinced and zealous apostles, sent out in all areas of life to bear witness to the faith, to explain their hope, to collaborate in the transformation of culture and of society, to build a world where justice and peace reign, to be alive to solidarity among peoples and social groups and fraternity among all people.

No Christian can withdraw from the vocation and mission. All of us – not just priests, missionaries or religious – moved by the love that the Lord has for us and in virtue of our Baptism, are called to be evangelisers. We can respond to this mandate of the Lord in the family, at work, in our communities, with words and deeds, that is with the love we put into our actions and our words, making sure that they are according to the Gospel. Evangelising means putting in some yeast with such power as to

⁵ Cf. BENEDICT XVI, *Deus caritas est*, n. 18.

⁶ GC XXII FMA, *The greatest of these is love*, n. 33.

change the way of thinking and the heart of individuals and through them the structures of society, so that they are more in harmony with God's plan. It is not a question of an inward looking activity; evangelising is launching a real social revolution, the most profound, the only effective one. This explains why it meets with so much resistance and opposition, open or hidden.

Before thinking about the ways and means of evangelising, it is necessary to have a motive, to be, that is, "those in love" with God having experienced his friendship and closeness: «No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you» (*Jn 15,15*). Between the time of the call and that of the sending out there is the time in which the disciples "stay" with the Lord, to learn his way of life, to learn how to interpret personal and universal history as the history of salvation, to experience in their own lives the truth, the goodness and the beauty of the message which is entrusted to them and which they are called upon to proclaim.

In this regard, this is what I said in my opening remarks at the bi-annual Assembly of the Union of Superiors General, in preparation for the Synod on: "The Word of God in the life and mission of the Church". «Only the minister of the Gospel – consecrated or lay – who keeps the Gospel in his heart, making it the object of contemplation and a motivation of prayer, will succeed in keeping it on his lips as a treasure to speak about and will hold it in his hands as an inescapable duty to pass on».⁷

In the beautiful task of welcoming, incarnating and communicating the Word of God, Mary is our mother and teacher, because – as Saint Augustine says – She conceived the Son first in her soul then in her flesh. In fact in Luke's gospel Mary is presented as the one who replies with extraordinary openness to the message of the Angel: «Behold the handmaid of the Lord, let

⁷ P. CHÁVEZ, *It would not be right for us to neglect the Word of God*, Greetings at the opening of the Assembly of the USG, Rome 21 November 2007.

it be done to me according to your word» (*Lk* 1,38). Mary is the model of the disciple who in the face of events she sees but does not manage to understand keeps all these words and meditates on them in her heart (cf. *Lk* 2,19). At the beginning of her Son's ministry, at the wedding at Cana, she invites the servants, to «do what he tells you» (*Jn* 2,5), and during his ministry she is to be found among the disciples who «hear the word of God and keep it» (*Lk* 11,27-28). When the time of the passion arrives, Mary is at the foot of the cross, sharing, to the bitter end, the abandonment, the rejection, and the suffering of the Son, and carefully safeguarding his will and testament: «Women, this is your son» (*Jn* 19,25-27). And finally after the resurrection, she devotes herself to prayer with the disciples awaiting the promised Holy Spirit (cf. *Acts* 1,14). This then is our model of the disciple and of the apostle of the Word.

3. The task of the disciples is to hear the “desire to see Jesus”

Precisely because evangelisation is not just a message to be proclaimed but is the revelation of God in Jesus it is authentic when it leads to an encounter with Jesus and is effective when it communicates the salvation which God wants to give in the Son. Therefore evangelisation implies an inner dynamic which begins from the religious sentiment expressed in the human desire to see God as the Psalmist puts it: “Of you my heart has spoken: seek his face; it is your face O Lord that I seek” (*Psalms* 26,8). And one of the disciples dared to ask Jesus: «Lord, show us the Father and we shall be satisfied» (*Jn* 14,8). This tells us that evangelisation is a personal meeting and a person is evangelised precisely when s/he encounters and welcomes the person of Jesus.

The evangelist John records that some Greeks, on the way to Jerusalem for the Passover Feast approached Philip with the

request to “see Jesus” (*Jn* 12,21). Faced with such an unexpected request and not knowing what to do, Philip spoke about it to Andrew and together, “they went and told Jesus”. He then realised that the hour, so often delayed, had come for Him to be glorified. At that moment when those who were far away felt the desire to see him, Jesus knew that the time had come to announce his handing over of himself to death, the hour of his glorification, the decisive moment of the salvation of the whole world.

Jesus came to the awareness of his hour when he knew that there were some Greeks who wanted to see him. He came to know of it because two disciples told him. Without realising it Philip and Andrew help Jesus to know this crucial moment in his life. Without these two disciples the Greeks would not have been able to show their desire to see the Lord; without them Jesus would not have known that the moment had arrived for his glorification. Jesus needed the disciples to recognise in the desire to be seen by those far away the arrival of the hour of his glory.

Today too, Jesus needs disciples who succeed in recognising in peoples’ hearts, in their joys and in their fears, a desire that is not always put into words to approach Him and meet Him. What once again urged Jesus to undertake the work of salvation was knowing that he was wanted. Only the disciple who stays close to him can recognise among the many who are looking for him the one who really wants to find him. The disciple follows Jesus in order to facilitate the meeting with him of those who want to see him. It is in this way that the disciple of Jesus becomes his apostle: Jesus needs disciples, companions in his life and mission in order to recognise the arrival of his hour. Bringing to him those who want to see him, the disciple of Jesus is changed into his apostle.

Identifying among the many aspirations of young people nowadays the real desire to “see Jesus” is for us, members of

the Salesian Family, the motive, if not the only one, no less fundamental, to become real disciples of Christ. If we don't do it, who will present to Jesus the dreams and the needs of the young? Who will help the young to see Jesus? The members of the Salesian Family are being called to listen to the sighs of the young to meet Jesus, and at the same time, to interpret the world of youth in a way that highlights the desire the young people have to draw close to Jesus. This is our way of helping Jesus today to save the young. And it is in this way that we become his real companions and his apostles.

This means that the evangelisation of the young has to start from the practical situations in which they are to be found giving special attention to their culture, deeply marked by the value of individualism and self-centredness which leads them to gather together in groups with their peers and keep their distance from the world of adults. In this regard, quite enlightening are the words of Benedict XVI in his catechesis on 5 August 2009, speaking about the holy Curé d'Ars: «If in his time the “dictatorship of rationalism” existed, in the current epoch a sort of “dictatorship of relativism” is evident in many contexts. Both seem inadequate responses to the human being's justifiable request to use his reason as a distinctive and constitutive element of his own identity. Rationalism was inadequate because it failed to take into account human limitations and claims to make reason alone the criterion of all things, transforming it into a goddess; contemporary relativism humiliates reason because it arrives *de facto* at affirming that the human being can know nothing with certainty outside the positive scientific field. Today however, as in that time, **man, “a beggar for meaning and fulfilment”, is constantly in quest of exhaustive answers to the basic questions that he never ceases to ask himself**».⁸ Here then is why the young – especially them – have a need, not always recognised or expressed, of patient and understanding guides.

⁸ *L'Osservatore Romano* English Edition 12/19 August 2009, p. 15.

As regards attitudes towards religion in general and to Christianity in particular, information about the young leaves no room for doubt. Keeping their distance, soon giving up contact, a sense of irrelevance are the features of the relationship of young people with religious institutions, topics and people. Nowadays it is more and more common to come across youngsters who have never had contact with anything religious, or whose contact has been insufficient for them to understand the question of God, or those who have distanced themselves after an experience which at first had been quite promising.

Hearing the cry, explicit or implicit, of the young who want to see Jesus means in present day circumstances going out to those places and life situations where the youngsters feel at home, to make clear to them that among the most authentic desires concerning life and happiness is hidden the question about the meaning and the search for God.

My predecessor, dear Fr Juan Edmundo Vecchi, had dealt with this situation very precisely. "The world of youth is mission territory as far as the numbers involved are concerned of those who need to hear again the first proclamation, as regards the ways of life and the cultural models to which the light of the Gospel has not yet arrived, and as regards the verbal, mental and existential language which does not fit in with tradition".⁹

"It should be recognised that young people are interested in God. All research confirms this. A high percentage say that they feel the need for God and that they are convinced of his existence. However, they don't feel the need for any religious practice or for consistent moral behaviour, nor do they adhere to any "truth" about God which anyone from the Church proposes.

The image of God that young people have is quite varied, almost kaleidoscopic. But it would be too hasty to label it a false

⁹ J.E. VECCHI, "L'areopago giovanile", NOTE DI PASTORALE GIOVANILE (NPG) 1997, n. 4 (May), p. 3.

one. Rather it is incomplete or out of focus, sometimes quite considerably so.

Given a certain mistrust of institutions and the image of God they present, and taken for granted some of the principles for evaluation typical of current thinking, there are no criteria to assess objectively the validity of the different representations of God.

In taking up one of them therefore a subjective choice seems to prevail. This is not entirely bad: faith is a free act of the will moved by grace and enlightened by reason. But there are certainly some unbalanced images. God is not an object, an image, an interrogator, a relationship and a discovery in purely individual terms. As a result one has a notably vague concept of God himself [...]

There are some young people for whom the idea of a personal God has almost disappeared. So too, any question at all about God. Ideas and questions remain in the recesses of the mind as though in a hidden corner no longer visited.

In this situation which is more comparable to a city square than to a church, one asks the question: when and how should one speak about God, towards what sort of image/idea of him should one direct experiences and messages. It is clear that just as God revealed himself through facts and words, so too our speaking about him happens through facts and words, events and illustrations".¹⁰

4. First disciples, then apostles

To be able to help youngsters to see Jesus it is necessary to know him, to live with him, to be one of his. In other words, it is not possible to be witnesses and apostles of Jesus without first

¹⁰ J.E. VECCHI, "Parlare di Dio ai giovani", NPG 1997, n. 5 (June), pp. 3-4.

being his disciples. In fact, a person does not become an apostle by wanting to be one, but by being called. Philip, Andrew and the other members of the first apostolic community were called by Jesus, one by one, by name, chosen from among a large crowd: «those whom he desired, came to him,» twelve, «to be with him and to be sent out to preach» (*Mk* 3,13-14). And to go with Jesus they had to leave the people who were following him and follow him. Those who are invited to stay with Jesus and to preach in his name do not belong to the group who are looking for him; they are part of those who have already met him and have decided to stay with him.

The first mandate the apostle receives, the initial invitation addressed to him by the one who calls him, is to “stay” with his Lord. In the apostolate this living together comes before being sent out; companionship come before preaching; personal fidelity is the premise to the mission. In fact, those will be sent by Jesus who have lived with him, sharing the journey and the repose, bread and dreams, successes and disappointments, life and plans. Before the gospel fills their minds and becomes the reason for their labours it has to have been accepted into their hearts and become the cause of their joy. Jesus does not entrust his gospel to someone who has not given his life to him (cf. *Acts* 1,21-22). The first ones sent out by Jesus were his first companions.

Because they had been with him the people who wanted to know Jesus approached the disciples; the desire to find Jesus led the crowd to look for those who followed him. Only the disciple who lives with Jesus can facilitate access to him for someone who wants him. From this arises the urgent need that youngsters feel that they are meeting disciples of Christ who will take them to Him, precisely because they are always with him. Only authentic disciples can be credible apostles.

In the year just finished the person of Paul helped us to understand that before the “gospel of grace” was proclaimed to everyone, came the experience of the meeting with the Risen

One: Paul was able to preach the gospel of God and in a completely new way because the Risen One had been revealed to him (cf. *Gal* 1,15-16) on the road to Damascus. From this experience came Paul's plan of life «For me to live is Christ» and his pastoral plan "Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel" (*1 Cor* 9,16). If "Christ is everything for us" and if "nothing comes between us and the love of Christ", our life then becomes a joyful witness and a proposal to everyone of the meeting with Him.

5. To help the young "to see Jesus"

Finding Jesus doesn't mean immediately meeting him. "Finding" Jesus in some kind of strong religious experience which produces great joy and enthusiasm does not always lead to faith, to an authentic encounter with the Lord, because, as in the parable of the seed (cf. *Mk* 4), the soil in which it falls is not prepared.

In the encounter, the initiative comes from Jesus. "He takes the first step and seeks an encounter. He goes into a house, he goes up to a well, where a woman has gone to draw water, he stops in front of a tax collector, he looks up at someone who has climbed a tree, he joins someone on a journey. From his words, from what he does, from the person that he is there comes something fascinating that attracts the person he speaks to. It is admiration, love, trust, and attraction.

For many people the first meeting will be transformed into wanting to listen to him again, to become friends with him, to follow him. They will sit around him asking him questions, they will help him in his mission, they will ask him to teach them to pray, they will be witnesses of his happy and his sorrowful days. In other cases, the meeting concludes with an invitation to a change of life".¹¹ This is the unanimous testimony of the four evangelists.

¹¹ J.E. VECCHI, "Educare alla fede: l'incontro con Cristo", NPG 1997, n. 3 (April), p. 3.

The experience is not a different one when one thinks of the meeting of Jesus with the young. For each one of them the most explosive event occurs when Jesus is seen as the one who gives meaning to life, the one to turn to when seeking the truth, the one through whom to understand a relationship with God and with whom to interpret the human condition. The most important thing is to move on from admiration to knowledge, and from knowledge to intimacy, to love, to following, to imitation.

The fact remains that one cannot “see Jesus”, if He does not “let himself be seen”. No one can come to me, he said, unless the Father who sent me draws him. (cf. *Jn* 6,44). The desire to meet him, therefore, is not enough to come to the joy of recognition; nor is it sufficient to find his disciples in order to meet Jesus and to recognise him as Lord.

The Emmaus account, the model for the meeting between the believer and the Word incarnate (cf. *Lk* 24,13-15), identifies the goal which the believer has to reach, and indicates the path to get there. The episode illustrates the faith journey and describes the stages which are always relevant. The account in Luke offers us a *precise programme for evangelisation*, in which is described who it is who evangelises and how one evangelises: it is Jesus who evangelises through his word and the eucharistic gift of himself walking with the disciples.

5.1 The aim of evangelisation: meeting Christ in the Church

The account begins by narrating the fact of two disciples of Jesus leaving Jerusalem. Disconsolate over how much had happened three days earlier, they abandon the community, in which however there are some starting to say that the Lord has been seen alive; the two disciples cannot believe women’s gossip (cf. *Lk* 24,22-23; *Mk* 16,11). Only at the end of the journey when they see Jesus repeat the gesture of breaking the bread do they

recognise him, only to lose sight of him at once and to return to the community. The unexpected conclusion of the journey to Emmaus was to find themselves again with the community in Jerusalem. The Risen One did not stay with them, and they were unable to remain alone: they returned to the community where they encounter Christ again in the witness of the Apostles: «Indeed the Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon» (*Lk* 24,34). This is a criterion to assess the authenticity of an encounter with Christ: the gift of the community, which is rediscovered as one's own home, the dwelling place of the Lord, the hearth at which all those who have seen the Lord belong.

Re-discovering the community and finding oneself in the Church, the place in which to live the shared faith is the logical consequence of a personal encounter with the Risen One. Outside the community the proclamation of the gospel seems chatter not to be believed (cf. *Lk* 24,22-23). Today, as yesterday, or more than yesterday, we have to deal with the obstacles which evangelisation encounters. The first is disinformation, because not only do people say little about Jesus, they are trying to make him disappear from today's culture, from organised society, from personal conscience. His presence is considered irrelevant in society and his absence is seen as an advantage. The second obstacle is a purely subjective view of Jesus, who, deprived of his historical reality, becomes more and more a Jesus made to suit us, viewed according to our own desires or needs. The third obstacle is more subtle: in an attempt at inter-religious dialogue they would try to reduce Christ to one among a number of other spiritual teachers or founders of religions, so as no longer to recognise him as the only Saviour of all. Finally, there is the danger, not imaginary but very common among Christians themselves, of considering Christ to be so well known that he has nothing new to say to us; having become insignificant, it is no longer worth the trouble of having him as guide and Lord.

The account in Luke about the disciples on the way to Emmaus tells us that if the Risen One had not become their com-

panion during the journey and at table the two disciples would not have managed to discover that he was alive, nor would they have had again the desire to live together. Let us take good note of this: it does not matter whether the one returning to the community had abandoned it beforehand; it is however decisive that they return as soon as possible, immediately after seeing the Lord. Only the one who recovers the common life knows that the Risen One was with him and will recover the joy of having felt him near (cf. *Lk* 24,35.32).

One has to have doubts about a form of evangelisation, which over and above its methods and intentions, does not start from the evangeliser's life in common, and which does not arise from the joy at having met the Lord in the community. If it were like that, such evangelisation would not have its origin in a meeting with the Risen Lord, nor would it lead to a meeting with him. Those who saw the Risen Lord and ate with him could not hold on to him for themselves but discover the desire to tell of their lived experience, returning to their community. This is not by chance, but is the proof of a law of Christian life: someone who knows and proclaims that Jesus is Risen lives that experience in common.

Even though it is true that one can meet Jesus anywhere, his house, the place where he lives is the Church, the community of believers, of those, that is, who confess him as their Lord, the family of his disciples, of those who share life and mission with him.

There is no doubt that we really have to work to correct a distorted image of the Church that many young people can have. Some "speak about it affectionately as though it were their own family, indeed their own mother. They know that in her and through her they have received spiritual life. Even though they are aware of limitations, wrinkles and even scandals, nevertheless that appears secondary compared with the benefits she brings to the individual and to humanity as the dwelling place of

Christ and from where his light shines out: in the efforts to do good which are observed in works and individuals, in the experience of God moved by the Spirit that is found in holiness, the wisdom which comes from the Word of God, the love which unites and creates solidarity beyond national and continental boundaries, the prospect of eternal life.

Others keep it at a distance as though it were something that had nothing to do with them, of which they do not feel a part. They judge it from the outside. When they say "the Church" they seem to be referring only to some of her institutions, to some formulation of the faith or to moral norms which they don't like. It is the idea one gets from reading some newspapers. [...] They are mistaken precisely in what constitutes the Church: its relationship, indeed its identification with Christ. For many this is a truth that is not known or in practice forgotten. There are even those who see it as a pretext of the Church so as to monopolise the person of Christ, to control any interpretations of him and to manage the patrimony of images, of the truth of the fascination that Christ represents.

For the believer, on the other hand, this is the fundamental point: the Church is the continuation, the dwelling place, the actual presence of Christ, the place where he dispenses grace, the truth and life in the Spirit. [...] That is precisely what it is. The Church lives with the memory of Jesus, continues to meditate and to study his word with all the means available drawing from it new significance, re-actualises his presence in its celebrations, seeks to throw the light that comes from his mystery on to the events and on to the concepts of current day life, taking up and carrying forward Christ's mission in its totality: the proclamation of the Kingdom and the transformation of the less-than-human living conditions. Above all Jesus is its head who draws individuals together, unites them in a visible body and, gives strength to the communities".¹²

¹² J.E. VECCHI, "Maestro, dove abiti?", NPG 1997, n. 7 (October), p. 3.

If this is what the Church really is, we have the task of seeing to it that the young love her as the Mother of their faith, who raises them as children of God, who helps them find their vocation and mission, who accompanies them along the path of life and who waits to lead them into the house of the Father. This is what Don Bosco knew how to do in an incomparable way in the education and the evangelisation of his boys at Valdocco. Let us see what we can do today for the young people who want to see Jesus.

5.2 Method of evangelisation: walking together

The probable reason why the Emmaus episode is so relevant lies in its being so close to our spiritual situation today. It is easy to identify oneself with these disciples who are returning home before the sun goes down, weighed down with thoughts of sadness. In the experience of the two disciples on the way to Emmaus we find the necessary steps to be taken in the education to the faith of the young, the Easter experience which accompanies the beginning of life in community and apostolic witness.

Starting point: going to Jesus with one's disappointments

It was not so much what had happened in Jerusalem "in those days", as their deep personal frustration that led to their leaving for Emmaus. They had lived with him and that living together had awakened in them hopes of something better: it seemed "he would be the one who would liberate Israel" (*Lk* 24,19-21). Instead, his death on the cross had buried all their hopes and their faith. It was more than logical that they would feel the failure, and feel that they had been deceived. Nowadays young people have little in common with these disciples; but perhaps they have nothing more in common than the frustration of their dreams, the fatigue in their lives and the disenchantment in discipleship. It is not worth it, they often think, following Jesus: it is not worth the trouble: someone who is not present is of no value for their lives.

That is time to head for Emmaus. On their journey, with their anguish, there is also the opportunity for an encounter with Christ. But they are not to travel alone. The young need a Church which representing Jesus is close to their problems and their worries, which not only shares their journey and their fatigue, but also knows how to talk to them, puts itself on their level, taking an interest in what worries them, accepting their uncertainties. How can the Salesian Family represent the Risen Lord, if it is not concerned about them, if it doesn't ask itself about their "joys and hopes" and "sadness and anxiety" in other words if it is not concerned about their lives?

During the journey: from knowing many things about Jesus to letting him speak

On the journey, the stranger seems to be the only one who has no idea about what happened in Jerusalem (Lk 24,17-24). But knowing so many things about Jesus did not bring the disciples to recognise him; they knew the *kerygma* but they had not arrived at faith, they knew so much about him but they were not capable of seeing him; they knew so much about a dead man, so that they did not manage to see him alive. The stranger had to really make an effort to make them see what had happened in God's light. Jesus set himself to interpret his life for them presenting it as the fulfilment of the promises. In order to understand they had to let him speak.

Like Christ, the Salesian Family must give up nourishing the young with vague hopes, false expectations; instead it must teach them to accept what happens in them and around them, helping them to interpret the events in the light of God according to his word. If we do not bring them to the conviction that everything that happens is part of a divine plan, the fruit and proof of a huge love, how will the young succeed in feeling loved by God? To succeed, we have to become their companions in the search for the meaning in life and in the search for God. There we have a way, still little taken in the Church, urgently needed

for young people: For ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.¹³

The decisive stage: welcoming Jesus into one's home

Arriving at Emmaus, the disciples still had not come to the personal knowledge of Jesus, they had not identified the Risen One in the stranger who accompanied them. In reality, Emmaus was not the goal of their journey, but a decisive stage in it. Invited to stay, and still unrecognised, Jesus repeats his gesture without saying anything. Eucharistic practice is among those who already believe the password for his real presence.

The two on the way to Emmaus did not recognise the Lord as they were walking along the road with him and were learning from him to understand the meaning of the events which had happened. What Jesus had not been able to do with his accompaniment, with his conversation, with the interpretation of the Word of God he did with the eucharistic sign.

The eyes to contemplate the Risen One are opened when he repeats the gesture which best identifies him (cf. *Lk* 24,30-31). When the bread is broken in community, Jesus emerges from anonymity. "No Christian community, however, is built up unless it has its basis and centre in the celebration of the Eucharist".¹⁴ An education to the faith which forgets or delays the *sacramental* encounter of the young with Christ, is not the way to find him. The Eucharist is and must remain "the source and summit of evangelisation";¹⁵ it is the "source and the summit of Christian life".¹⁶

"Like us, young people find Jesus in the church community. In the life of the church, however, there are times when Jesus reveals himself and communicates in a very particular way:

¹³ Cf. DV 25.

¹⁴ PO 6.

¹⁵ PO 5.

¹⁶ LG 11.

these are the sacraments, especially Reconciliation and the Eucharist. Without the experience to be found in them knowledge of Jesus remains inadequate and limited, to the extent that it is not possible to distinguish him among men as the Risen Saviour.

In fact there are those who, while sharing the social life and the ideals of the Church, would only place Jesus among the great sages, among the religious geniuses; perhaps they would consider him as the high point of human fulfilment who has an influence on us on account of the profundity of his teaching and the example of his life. However, what is missing is any personal experience of the Risen Lord, of his power to give life, of communion in him with the Father.

It has rightly been said that the sacraments are a real memorial of Jesus: of what he did and still does for us today, of what that means for our life: re-kindling therefore our faith in him by which we see him better in our life and in events.

They are also the revelation of that which seems hidden in the cracks of our life experience, of which we then become aware: in the sacrament of Reconciliation we discover the goodness of God at the beginning and throughout the unfolding of our life; in its light we appreciate its slipping by and we try to build it up in a new way. They are energy, transforming grace since they communicate to us the life of the risen Christ and engraft us into it; they give us an understanding that is not theoretical but lived of its importance, its characteristics and its possibilities.

They are prophetic, the pledge of a promise of communion and happiness that has been given to us and in which we trust. In the sacrament of Reconciliation our eyes are opened and we see what we can become according to God's plan and wishes for us; we are given the Spirit again which purifies and renews us. It has been said that it is the sacrament of our future as his children, rather than of our past as sinners. In the Eucharist Christ incorporates us in his offering to the Father and strengthens

our giving ourselves to men. It inspires in us the desire and gives us the hope that both the love for the Father and for our brothers and sisters will become a grace for everyone and everything: we proclaim his death and resurrection, come Lord Jesus".¹⁷

5.3 Motivation for evangelisation

The urgent need to evangelise is not proselytism, but the expression of a passion for the salvation of others, the joy of sharing an experience of the fullness of life in Jesus. Someone who has met the Lord cannot remain silent: He has to proclaim him. Staying quiet would make him dead again; and He is living! The missionary spirit incarnates the command that Jesus addresses to the disciples: «you will be my witnesses to the furthest ends of the earth» (*Acts* 1,8).

Don Bosco made his own this appeal of Jesus from the very beginning of his work taking the gospel to the poorest boys. Speaking about the Congregation he said: "this Society's origins are found in simple catechetical instructions".¹⁸ And immediately after the approval of the Constitutions (1874), on 11 November 1875, he sent the first missionary expedition to Latin America. As the Salesian Family we are invited to make our own what was the original inspiration of Don Bosco: the evangelising and missionary dimension of his life, but also his charism. All this represents a fundamental point of the spiritual testament that he left us.

The missionary spirit is particularly alive today, since the world has once again become "mission territory". On the other hand nowadays there is a different way of understanding missionary activity, of carrying out the "missio ad gentes". This is

¹⁷ J.E. VECCHI, "Lo riconobbero nello spezzare il pane", NPG 1997, n. 8 (November), pp. 3-4.

¹⁸ BM IX 35.

done while respecting the various cultural contexts, in dialogue with the other Christian confessions and the different religions, with a commitment to human development and to leavening culture.¹⁹ However this does not excuse us from being missionaries, rather it engages us even more strongly.

5.4 Re-thinking pastoral work

If we want to evangelise today, in addition to giving priority to the need to evangelise we need to renew pastoral work. Here then are some observations in this regard.

Centrality of the person of Jesus Christ

Evangelisation does not have the Lord Jesus only as its contents; He is its principal subject. In fact Jesus Christ does not propose a message that can be separated from his person, so that his words, his actions, his earthly experience can be reduced to simple means of communication. He himself is the content of his proclamation because he is the living and effective Word through which God communicates himself to man. The source of the whole work of evangelisation is the personal encounter with Christ. Obviously it is not a question of a simple exhortation but a clear indication which leads to the truth, and which has very relevant consequences. Among these, I mention first of all the need to bridge the gap between the contents and the method of evangelisation, and in the second place the urgent need to keep a balance between starting from the questions of those we are evangelising and presenting them with Christ and him alone. This requires of us that we examine whether our pastoral methods are consistent with the centrality of the proposal of Jesus Christ. A method which puts exclusively at the centre listening to the Word frustrates the effectiveness of the Word itself.

¹⁹ Cf. EN 19.

The witness of the evangelised and the evangelising community

Witness is a key element in pastoral activity. The priority of witness arises quite logically from the centrality of the person of Jesus Christ in the work of evangelisation. This does not primarily arise from our giving a response to human needs, but from the encounter with a personal mystery of grace to which one bears witness; therefore it is not a question of starting from a void or an empty space but of starting from the fulness of a love which expands and in which one participates. Precisely on this account at the centre of evangelisation is the witnessing presence of a community which forces people to examine their consciences because of the way it lives, and not simply a pastoral plan which draws together a variety of more or less like-minded individuals. Therefore assuming particular significance is the person of the evangeliser who is first of all a believing disciple and then a credible apostle, or rather a credible apostle precisely because already a believing disciple.

Evangelisation and education

Within the Salesian Family the need is felt to re-think the relationship between evangelisation and education, overcoming the mere repetition of generic formulae. In this regard the XXVI General Chapter of the Salesians affirms: «In the Salesian tradition we have expressed this relationship in various ways: e.g. “upright citizens and good Christians” or “evangelising by educating and educating by evangelising”. We note the need to continue to reflect on this delicate relationship. In any case we are convinced that evangelisation offers education a model of fully developed humanity and that education, when it succeeds in touching the heart of the young and developing the religious meaning of existence, encourages and accompanies the process of evangelisation».²⁰ The development of this work finds its point of reference in the clear affirmation of the same

²⁰ GC26 SDB n. 25.

Capitular text, according to which «we safeguard both the proclamation in its entirety and the gradual way in which it is offered»,²¹ without giving in to the temptation to change the gradual nature of the pedagogical processes into selecting only parts of the message, or in delaying the explicit proclamation of Jesus Christ, making a personal encounter with the Lord impossible.

Evangelisation in different contexts

Evangelisation also requires special attention being given to the different contexts. The urgent need for proclaiming the Risen Lord impels us to confront situations that resonate in us as both an appeal and a concern: peoples not yet evangelised, the secularism which threatens lands which are of ancient Christian tradition, the phenomenon of migration, new and dramatic forms of poverty and violence, the spread of movements and sects. Every context presents its own challenges to the proclamation of the gospel. We also feel called to respond to certain opportunities such as ecumenical, inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue, the new sensitivity for peace, safeguarding human rights and protecting the environment and all creation, the many expressions of solidarity and voluntary movements. These elements, recognised in the Apostolic Exhortations which followed the Continental Synods, are challenges for the entire Church and require us to find new ways for proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ while respecting and appreciating local cultures.

Attention to the family

Special attention needs to be given to the family which has the primary responsibility for education and the first place in evangelisation. The Church has recognised the serious difficulties in which the family finds itself and accepts the need to of-

²¹ *Ibidem.*

fer it extraordinary help in its formation, its development and the responsible exercise of its role in education. For this reason, we too are called to see to it that youth ministry is always more and more open family ministry. So during the XXVI General Chapter Pope Benedict said to us Salesians: «In the education of youth it is extremely important that the family play an active role. Families frequently have difficulty in facing the challenges of education; they are often unable to make their own contribution or are absent. The special tenderness and commitment to young people that are characteristic of Don Bosco's charism must be expressed in an equal commitment to the involvement and formation of families. Your youth ministry, therefore, must be decisively open to family ministry. Caring for families does not mean taking people away from work for young people; on the contrary, it means making it more permanent and effective».²²

5.5 Processes to implement in order to change

To face up to the demands of evangelisation and to undertake a re-evaluation of youth ministry, it is necessary to change our way of thinking, modify structures and to set in motion some processes of change. It is necessary to move:

- from a mentality that favours roles of direct management to one that favours an evangelising presence among the young;
- from an evangelisation made up of events lacking continuity to a systematic and integrated evangelisation programme;
- from an individualist mentality to a communal style which involves the young, families and lay people in proclaiming Jesus Christ;
- from an attitude of pastoral self-sufficiency to one of sharing in planning by local Churches;

²² BENEDICT XVI, *Address of His Holiness at the Audience to the Chapter members*, 31 March 2008; cf. GC26, p. 125.

- from considering the effectiveness of our presence in terms of the esteem of others, to understanding it in terms of fidelity to the Gospel;
- from a mentality of cultural superiority to one of positive acceptance of cultures different from our own;
- from considering the Salesian Family only as a chance to meet, get to know, and exchange experiences, to a commitment to making it a true apostolic movement on behalf of the young.

I am convinced that «to respond as disciples of the Lord Jesus we have no other alternative than a spiritual life, an intense life filled with faith, hope and charity lived at depth and with the radical approach of the evangelical life, a life illuminated by obedience, poverty and chastity. This is our prophetic message! Jesus has taught us and has communicated his spirit to us so that we might be the salt of the earth, the light of the world and the leaven in society, called to give light and to shine out, to preserve and to give taste, to make grow and to transform.

All this implies:

- taking up with creativity and enthusiasm the new evangelisation so as to reach the heart of culture, especially that of the young those for whom we work;
- recovering the centrality of God in personal and community life, ensuring a high level of spiritual life in the community and making the witness of the community in its following of Christ intelligible;
- putting our money on the creation of a community with a genuine family spirit, with a wealth of human values and completely dedicated to the service of the young, especially the poorest, the needy, the marginalised, so as to make it a home and a school of communion;
- giving a new significance to the Salesian presence among the young, making choices according to our charism which permit us to share our life with the young, creating a new

style of presence which is more decisively evangelising, locating ourselves where we can be more fruitful on the pastoral, spiritual and vocational levels».²³

6. Like Don Michael Rua, disciple and apostle

Whoever reads the history of the Salesian Congregation, 150 years after its foundation and a hundred years after the death of Don Rua, the first successor of Don Bosco, cannot but recognise, that our charism flows from the very mission of the Church, that what drives it is the pastoral zeal which Don Bosco acquired at the school of Cafasso, that, in a word, we are being sent out by Jesus to carry out his own ministry and his own work, but with the smiling face of Don Bosco and with the determination of Don Rua.

6.1 “The most faithful one”

Therefore at this point I must refer to Don Michael Rua, the model for us as Salesians of what it means to be disciples and apostles. The celebration of the centenary of his death offers us a stimulus to be disciples and apostles of Jesus in the footsteps of Don Bosco, of whom he was the first successor.

He «was the most faithful, therefore the most humble and at the same time the most valiant of the sons of Don Bosco». With these words Paul VI, on 29 October 1972, the day of his beatification, delineated for always the human and spiritual figure of Don Rua. Again in that homily,²⁴ proclaimed under the Cupola of Saint Peter's, the Pope described the new Blessed with words which identified his fundamental characteristic: fidelity. «Successor of Don Bosco, that is continuer: son, disciple, imitator...

²³ PASCUAL CHÁVEZ VILLANUEVA, *Sotto il soffio dello Spirito. Identità carismatica e passione apostolica. Retreat to the FMA Chapter members*, LDC Turin 2009, p. 17.

²⁴ Cf. AAS an. and vol. LXIV, 1972 n. 11, pp. 713-718.

He made the example of the Saint a school... his life a history, his rule a spirit, his holiness a type, a model; he made the spring a stream, a river». The words of Paul VI raised to a higher level the earthly life of "slight and worn-out profile of a priest". They disclose the diamond which glistened in the meek and humble fabric of his days.

It had all started long before with a strange gesture. Eight years of age and having lost his father, with a broad black band fixed to his jacket by his mother he had stretched out his hand for a medal from Don Bosco. But instead of a medal Don Bosco had given him his left hand while making a sign as though cutting it in half. And he said to him: "Take it, little Michael, take it". And before those wide-open eyes which gazed on him transfixed, he said six words which were to be the secret of his life: "We two will always go halves".

And slowly the remarkable shared process began between the holy master and the disciple who went halves with him in everything and always. Michael began to take in Don Bosco's way of thinking and behaving. He was to say later: "Watching Don Bosco even in his tiniest actions made a greater impression on me than reading and meditating any holy book".²⁵

6.2 *Fruitful Fidelity*

More than one Cardinal in Rome, at the death of Don Bosco, was convinced that the Salesian Congregation would quickly disintegrate; Don Rua was 50 years of age. It would be best to send a pontifical Commissioner to Turin to arrange the union of the Salesians with another Congregation of proven tradition. "In great haste", – Fr Barberis testified under oath – "Bishop Cagliero called together the Chapter with some of the older ones and a letter to the Holy Father was drawn up in which all the Superiors, and the older confreres declared that in total agree-

²⁵ A. AMADEI, *Il Servo di Dio Michele Rua*, vol. I, SEI Turin 1933, p. 30.

ment they would accept Don Rua as Superior, and not only would they submit to him, but would receive him with great joy... On 11 February the Holy Father confirmed and declared Don Rua in office for twelve years according to the Constitutions".²⁶

Pope Leo XIII had met Don Rua and knew that under his direction the Salesians would continue their mission. And so it was. The Salesians and Salesian houses multiplied like the loaves and fishes in the hands of Jesus. Don Bosco had founded 64 houses; Don Rua took the number to 341. At the death of Don Bosco the Salesians were 700; with Don Rua, in 22 years as the Superior General, they became 4,000. The Salesian Missions, which Don Bosco had tenaciously begun, and during his lifetime had spread to Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego, Uruguay and Brazil; Don Rua multiplied the missionary outreach and Salesian missionaries arrived in Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, China, India, Egypt and Mozambique.

So that fidelity to Don Bosco might not diminish, Don Rua was not afraid to travel far and wide. His whole life was studded with journeys. He went to his Salesians wherever they might be, he spoke to them about Don Bosco, re-awakened in them his spirit, informed himself in fatherly fashion but carefully about the life of the confreres, about the works, and left written instructions and words of advice so that fidelity to Don Bosco might flourish.

6.3 *Dynamic Fidelity*

In the same homily at the beatification Paul VI declared: «Let us meditate for a moment on the characteristic aspect of Don Rua, the aspect that makes us understand him... The marvellous fruitfulness of the Salesian Family... had in Don Bosco its origin, in Don Rua its continuation. It was this follower of

²⁶ *Positio* 54-55.

his that served the Salesian work in its expansion, developed it according to the letter but with ever-inspired newness».

Paul VI continues: «What does Don Rua teach us? To be continuers... Imitation in the disciple is not passiveness or servility... Education is an art that guides the logical but free and original expansion of the pupil's potential qualities... Don Rua is really qualified as the first continuer of the example and work of Don Bosco... We are aware of having before us an athlete of apostolic activity, still in the mould of Don Bosco, but with growing dimensions of its own... We give glory to the Lord who wanted... to offer to his apostolic labours new fields of pastoral work, which impetuous and disordered social development opened up before Christian civilisation».

Reading through even only rapidly the impressive number of Don Rua's letters, of his circular letters, the volumes which describe his work as the Successor of Don Bosco for 22 years, one discovers in an impressive manner that what the Pope said is true: his fidelity to Don Bosco is not static but dynamic. He was really aware of the changing times and of the needs of the young, and fearlessly opened up Salesian work to new fields of pastoral ministry.

7. Suggestions for putting the Strenna into practice

After these references to Don Rua, who did so much to develop the Salesian Family, here are some ideas which will be useful so that the groups of the Salesian Family may together be engaged in bringing the gospel to the young. They are offered to the individual groups but also to the Consultative Committees of the Salesian Family at local and Province level.

7.1 In the local and Provincial Consultative groups of the Salesian Family to reflect on how best to implement what is suggested in section 5.4, that is how to *re-think the pastoral ap-*

proach, so as to make effective the choices regarding the centrality of the proposal of Jesus Christ, personal and community witness, the reciprocal relationship between education and evangelisation, attention to the variety of circumstances and the involvement of families.

7.2 Starting from the “*Mission Statement of the Salesian Family*”, identify in the local and Provincial Consultative groups the best ways to plan and organise together *experiences of the evangelisation of the young*, promoting the “spiritual and prayerful reading of the Sacred Scriptures” also among themselves and making themselves more and more evangelisers among their companions.

7.3 Foster collaboration among the Salesian Family at Province and local level, so as to carry out the *mission to youth*, as an updated form of proclamation and catechesis, involving the young people themselves as evangelisers of their peers.

7.4 Make good use of the **Apostolic Exhortations** at the conclusion of the continental Synods in order to identify priorities and approaches suited to the specific contexts for the evangelisation of the young. In the case of Latin America, use the “Continental Mission” issued by the Assembly of Bishops held at Aparecida; in the case of the Africa and Madagascar Region, follow the guidelines of the Synod of Bishops of October 2009.

8. Conclusion

As usual I conclude this presentation of the Strenna with a story, which this time is offered to us by the commentary given by Fr Joseph Grünner, Provincial of Germany, on the picture “Don Bosco puppeteer”, painted by Sieger Koeder, a retired parish priest in the Diocese of Rottenburg-Stuttgart and a friend of the Salesians. As soon as I saw the picture I was fasci-

nated by the powerful and thoughtful representation of our dear Founder and Father.

It is truly an icon of “Don Bosco evangeliser, sign of the love of God for the young”. Like all icons it needs to be studied and appreciated as a whole but also in the details. I hope that reflecting on it encourages each one of us to be zealous evangelisers of the young, convinced that in the Gospel we are giving them the most precious gift: Christ, the only one capable of making them understand the meaning of their lives, of challenging them to make demanding choices in their lives and themselves become apostles of the young.

***Don Bosco evangeliser,
sign of the love of God for the young***

Meditation on the painting of Don Bosco by Sieger Koeder

“Be merciful even as your Father is merciful” (Lk 6,36)

We might be surprised by the way the priest artist Sieger Koeder has painted Don Bosco. He doesn't show him according to any of the many existing photographs, for example among his boys, nor even as the “typical saint” Instead the painting shows Don Bosco as he really was and continues to be, revealing his innermost being. In this way the painting also becomes a beautiful illustration of what our Father describes in his letter from Rome in 1884, as the centre of his preventive system.

Don Bosco: exciting puppeteer

On the right we see Don Bosco, dressed in his cassock, standing behind a dark curtain which serves as a back-drop. He is hidden from the view of the spectators, though they can see the two puppets he is holding up. From his face we can see his concentration and also his enthusiasm: he is smiling, and is obviously totally absorbed in what he is doing. He seems to enjoy the enthusiasm of the spectators.

Don Bosco: educator full of ideas

He knows how to fascinate boys, youths, adults, to win them over with games and entertainments of the simplest kind, making use of words or of the press, devoting himself to them with his creativity and his great sensitivity. He makes use of everything to win them over for what he considers is the mission entrusted to him by Providence. He does so putting at the centre “the message” of which he is only the mediator not the protagonist.

Don Bosco: passionate catechist

The two puppets in Don Bosco’s raised hands – one representing the father, the other the son being embraced by the father- are symbols of his plan of life: to make poor and abandoned boys and also the working classes understand the mystery of God’s immense love and his infinite mercy towards everyone. The biblical narrative of the merciful father who had always kept in his heart the memory of his prodigal son, and had always hoped for and awaited his return (cf. Lk 15,11-32), is not only the subject of the puppet show but the dominant theme of Don Bosco’s whole life. The painting shows the culminating point of the biblical story: the merciful father dressed as for a feast, hugs the prodigal son who has now returned, restoring to him the dignity and all the rights that he had before, and in this way opening up new prospects for his life.

Don Bosco: merciful father

Don Bosco does not “play” the father like an actor in a show, but he becomes and is so in reality, taking as his model the father in the story in the Bible. In the lower part of the painting, to the right of the curtain, Don Bosco is shown in the act of protecting one of his boys, who is looking attentively at Don Bosco. This boy is painted in the same blue colour as the puppet representing the prodigal son; perhaps he symbolises the older brother in the parable, who is not yet ready nor in the right mood to accept the father’s mercy. Equally, it could be that it represents the many boys to whom Don Bosco offered a safe place where they could experience security, charity, affectionate and effective love in contrast to all that they had experienced on the streets and in prison.

Don Bosco with his boys

Don Bosco's audience are children and boys who are closely following what he is doing. Don Bosco, for a second time, has been represented on the left hand side of the picture: standing among them and embracing them affectionately, as the merciful father does in the show. The youngsters are fully absorbed in what is happening on the stage, listening to the message, and at the same time, experiencing its effect: with Don Bosco they can feel at ease, accepted for what they are. Don Bosco's charity can be felt and becomes a sensitive and persuasive experience. This is the love of the "father, brother and friend".

Don Bosco: with a message for the world

The picture has set the scene under the open sky outside the walls of the city which can be seen in the background. In his day Don Bosco went to the inner city of Turin walking here and there around the streets and squares looking for and meeting children and youngsters. He entered their world, went to meet them, in a certain sense putting himself on their level, as is described in the letter from Rome. That was his favourite place to carry out his mission as pastor and evangeliser: accepting the youngsters where they were but opening them up to "higher things" and directing them towards "heaven" Don Bosco is painted, one might say, with his feet on the ground in the real world and with his eyes and his hands towards the heavens, and he never forgot neither the one nor the other.

Don Bosco: a witness with an invitation

In the liturgy for the ordination of a priest the Bishop invites the one he is ordaining: "Now live what you preach!" That is what Don Bosco did for the whole of his priestly life. He was convinced of the infinite and unfailing love of God for men, of the love of God who is more ready to forgive and to build up what is weak than to punish. Don Bosco was a persuasive witness through his whole being and all that he did, in the playground and in the work-shop, in the class-room as in chapel: the witness to the fatherly mercy of the "Good God", who never gives up on man, but leads him from separation and solitude to a return "home".

This painting by Koeder shows us a man to admire but more than that it is an invitation from Don Bosco to us: "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful".

Dear confreres, members of the Salesian Family, friends, as disciples in love with Jesus and as his convinced and joyful witnesses and apostles let us bring the young to Christ and bring the Gospel to the young.


Fr Pascual Chávez Villanueva
Rector Major