

*"Truly, nothing is more beautiful than to know Christ
and to make him known to others"
(Sacramentum Caritatis, n. 84.).*

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 2010 Strenna. As a real spiritual and pastoral program, it will help us to strengthen our Salesian identity, to 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. 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 Salesians’ 26th General Chapter, wrote:

“May evangelization 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 secularized ones, it is necessary to find new ways of making Jesus known, especially to the young, so that they may discover his perennial fascination.”¹

Therefore, on the occasion of the centennial of the death of Father 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 evangelization 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 program of happiness which he offers us in the Beatitudes, let us tell them how beautiful life is once he has been encountered and how much joy there is in being embraced by him and being drawn into the cause of the Kingdom of God.

¹ Benedict XVI, Letter to Fr. Pascual Chavez Villanueva, on the occasion of the 26th General Chapter, March 1, 2008, n. 4; cf. SDB GC26, p. 91.

The commitment to evangelization flows from the identity of the disciple, who after setting out to follow the Lord Jesus becomes 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.”² It is true, we are Salesians and as such we carry out our mission of evangelizing by *educating* and of educating by *evangelizing*. This is not just a slogan nor a meaningless expression. It indicates the close link that exists between evangelization 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 child, of the adolescent, of the young person, and is clearly directed toward the all-round formation of the individual, opening him up to the transcendent. Evangelization 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 as the result of his being conformed to Christ.

The 2010 Strenna 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 witness to the beauty of the encounter with Christ, the Word of God, who is living among 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 evangelization of the young. It could be useful to take it in hand again and meditate on it.

Here, then, is the spiritual and pastoral program for the year 2010:

“Sir, we want to see Jesus.”

**In imitation of Blessed Michael 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 SDBs and of the FMAs.

The Salesians’ 26th General Chapter shows its awareness of the urgent need to evangelize and of the centrality of proposing Jesus Christ: We perceive evangelization 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 center should be the proclamation of Jesus Christ and of his Gospel, together with the call to conversion, to the acceptance of the faith, to 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.”³

The 22d General Chapter of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians then recognizes 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

² Benedict XVI, cf. *Deus caritas est*, n. 18.

³ Benedict XVI, Letter to Fr. Chavez, n. 4; cf. SDB GC26, p. 91.

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 going out of oneself toward new frontiers to make a gift of oneself: love grows through love.⁴ 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 evangelized became the first evangelizer. Carrying Jesus to others, she offers her service, brings joy, makes love an experience.”⁵

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 baptized 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, having the mind of Christ, 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 evangelizers. 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. Evangelizing means putting in some yeast with such power as to 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; evangelizing 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 evangelizing, 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” (John 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

⁴ Cf. Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, n. 18.

⁵ FMA GC22, *The greatest of these is love*, n. 33.

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.”⁶

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 it be done to me according to your word” (Luke 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. Luke 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” (John 2:5), and during his ministry she is to be found among the disciples who “hear the word of God and keep it” (Luke 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: “Woman, this is your son” (John 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 evangelization 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 evangelization implies an inner dynamic that 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” (Psalm 26:8). And one of the disciples dared to ask Jesus, “Lord, show us the Father and we shall be satisfied” (John 14:8). This tells us that evangelization is a personal meeting and a person is evangelized precisely when he or she 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” (John 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 realized 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 realizing 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 recognize 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 recognizing 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

⁶ Pascual Chavez, “It would not be right for us to neglect the Word of God,” Greetings at the opening of the Assembly of the USG, Rome, November 21, 2007.

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 recognize 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 recognize 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 do not 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 that 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 evangelization 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-centeredness, 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 August 5, 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.**”⁷ Here, then, is why the young – especially they – have a need, not always recognized or expressed, of patient and understanding guides.

As regards attitudes toward religion in general and to Christianity in particular, information about the young leaves no room for doubt. Keeping their distance, soon giving up contact, and 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 Father Juan Edmundo Vecchi, dealt with this situation very precisely. “The world of youth is mission territory as far as the numbers involved are concerned of those

⁷ *L’Osservatore Romano*, English ed., 12/19 August 2009, p. 15.

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.”⁸

“It should be recognized that young people are interested in God. All research confirms this. A high percentage say that they feel the need for God and are convinced of his existence. They do not feel the need for any religious practice or for consistent moral behavior, however, 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 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, toward 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.”⁹

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 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” (Mark 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 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 decided to stay with him.

⁸ Juan Edmundo Vecchi, “L’areopago giovanile,” Note di Pastorale Giovanile (NPG), 1997, n. 4 (May), p. 3.

⁹ Juan Edmundo Vecchi, “Parlare di Dio ai giovani,” NPG 1997, n. 5 (June), pp. 3-4.

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 comes 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 labors, 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 does not mean immediately meeting him. “Finding” Jesus in some kind of strong religious experience that 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. Mark 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.”¹⁰ This is the unanimous testimony of the four evangelists.

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

¹⁰ Juan Edmundo Vecchi, “Educare alla fede: l’incontro con Cristo,” NPG 1997, n. 3 (April), p. 3.

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. John 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 recognize him as Lord.

The Emmaus account, the model for the meeting between the believer and the Word incarnate (cf. Luke 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 that are always relevant. The account in Luke offers us a *precise program for evangelization*, in which is described who it is who evangelizes and how one evangelizes: it is Jesus who evangelizes through his word and through the Eucharistic gift of himself walking with the disciples.

5.1. The aim of evangelization: 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. Luke 24:22-23; Mark 16:11). Only at the end of the journey when they see Jesus repeat the gesture of breaking the bread do they recognize 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” (Luke 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. Luke 24:22-23). Today, like yesterday, or more than yesterday, we have to deal with the obstacles that evangelization encounters. The first is disinformation, because not only do people say little about Jesus, but they are trying to make him disappear from today’s culture, from organized 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 interreligious 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 recognize him as the only Savior 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 companion 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; but it is 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. Luke 24:35,32).

One has to have doubts about a form of evangelization which, over and above its methods and intentions, does not start from the evangelizers' 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 evangelization 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 discovered the desire to tell of their lived experience and returned 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 that comes from the Word of God, the love that 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 which 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 do not 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 is forgotten. There are even those who see it as a pretext of the Church so as to monopolize 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 on and study his word with all the means available, drawing from it new significance, re-actualizes his presence in its celebrations, seeks to throw the light that comes from his mystery onto the events and onto 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 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."¹¹

¹¹ Juan Edmundo 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 evangelization 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 evangelization: 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" (Luke 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 their disenchantment with 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 that, representing Jesus, is close to their problems and their worries, that not only shares their journey and their fatigue but also knows how to talk to them, puts itself on their level, takes an interest in what worries them, accepts their uncertainties. How can the Salesian Family represent the Risen Lord if it is not concerned about them, if it does not 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 (Luke 24:17-24). But knowing so many things about Jesus did not bring the disciples to recognize 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 that they did not manage to see him alive. The stranger really had to 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 fulfillment 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 their search for meaning in life and in their 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.¹²

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 of it. Invited to stay, and still unrecognized, Jesus repeats his gesture without saying anything. Among those who already believe, Eucharistic practice is the password for his real presence.

The two on the way to Emmaus did not recognize the Lord as they were walking along the road with him and were learning from him to understand the meaning of the events that 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. Luke 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 center in the celebration of the Eucharist."¹³ An education to the faith that 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 evangelization";¹⁴ it is the "source and the summit of Christian life."¹⁵

"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: 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 people as the Risen Savior.

"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 fulfillment who has an influence on us on account of the profundity of his teaching and the example of his life. What is missing, however, 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: therefore, re-kindling 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.

¹² Cf. *Dei Verbum* 25.

¹³ *Presbyterorum Ordinis* 6.

¹⁴ *Presbyterorum Ordinis* 5.

¹⁵ *Lumen Gentium* 11.

“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, who 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 into his offering to the Father and strengthens our giving ourselves to others. 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.”¹⁶

5.3. Motivation for evangelization

The urgent need to evangelize 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.”¹⁷ And immediately after the approval of the Constitutions (1874), on November 11, 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 evangelizing 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 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.¹⁸ This does not excuse us, however, from being missionaries; rather it engages us even more strongly.

5.4. Re-thinking pastoral work

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

Centrality of the person of Jesus Christ

Evangelization does not have the Lord Jesus as its contents only; 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 human beings. The source of the whole work of evangelization 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

¹⁶ Juan Edmundo Vecchi, “Lo riconobbero nello spezzare il pane,” NPG 1997, n. 8 (November), pp. 3-4.

¹⁷ BM IX, 35.

¹⁸ Cf. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 19.

consequences. Among these, I mention first of all the need to bridge the gap between the contents and the method of evangelization; and in the second place the urgent need to keep a balance between starting from the questions of those whom we are evangelizing 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 that puts exclusively at the center listening to the Word frustrates the effectiveness of the Word itself.

The witness of the evangelized and the evangelizing 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 evangelization. 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 fullness of a love which expands and in which one participates. Precisely on this account, at the center of evangelization is the witnessing presence of a community that forces people to examine their consciences because of the way it lives, and not simply a pastoral plan that draws together a variety of more or less like-minded individuals. Therefore, assuming particular significance is the person of the evangelizer, who is first of all a believing disciple and then a credible apostle, or rather a credible apostle precisely because he or she is already a believing disciple.

Evangelization and education

Within the Salesian Family the need is felt to re-think the relationship between evangelization and education, overcoming the mere repetition of generic formulae. In this regard the Salesians' 26th General Chapter affirms: "In the Salesian tradition we have expressed this relationship in various ways: e.g., 'upright citizens and good Christians' or 'evangelizing by educating and educating by evangelizing.' We note the need to continue to reflect on this delicate relationship. In any case we are convinced that evangelization 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 evangelization."¹⁹ The development of this work finds its point of reference in the clear affirmation of the same capitular text, according to which "we safeguard both the proclamation in its entirety and the gradual way in which it is offered,"²⁰ without giving in to the temptation to change the gradual nature of the pedagogical processes by selecting only parts of the message or by delaying the explicit proclamation of Jesus Christ, making a personal encounter with the Lord impossible.

Evangelization in different contexts

Evangelization also requires that special attention be 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 evangelized, the secularism which threatens lands that 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, interreligious, and intercultural 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, recognized in the apostolic exhortations which followed the continental synods, are challenges for the entire

¹⁹ SDB GC26, n. 25, p. 35.

²⁰ Ibid.

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 evangelization. The Church has recognized the serious difficulties in which the family finds itself and accepts the need to offer 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 to family ministry. So, during the 26th 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."²¹

5.5. Processes to implement in order to change

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

- from a mentality that favors roles of direct management to one that favors an evangelizing presence among the young;
- from an evangelization made up of events lacking continuity to a systematic and integrated evangelization program;
- 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;
- 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, 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 evangelization so as to reach the heart of culture, especially that of the young, those for whom we work;

²¹ Benedict XVI, Address to the GC26 Chapter Members, March 31, 2008; cf. GC26, p. 125-126.

-- recovering the centrality of God in personal and community life, ensuring a high level of spiritual life in the community and making intelligible the witness of the community in its following of Christ;

-- 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 neediest, the most marginalized, 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 that permit us to share our life with the young, creating a new style of presence which is more decisively evangelizing, locating ourselves where we can be more fruitful on the pastoral, spiritual, and vocational levels.”²²

6. Like Father Michael Rua, disciple and apostle

Whoever reads the history of the Salesian Congregation, 150 years after its foundation and 100 years after the death of Father Rua, the first successor of Don Bosco, cannot but recognize 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 Father Rua.

6.1 “The most faithful one”

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

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 October 29, 1972, the day of his beatification, forever delineated the human and spiritual figure of Father Rua. Again in that homily,²³ proclaimed under the dome of Saint Peter’s, the Pope described the new blessed with words that identified his fundamental characteristic: fidelity. “Successor of Don Bosco, that is, continuer: son, disciple, imitator.... 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 this “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 so began the remarkable process shared 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

²² Pascual Chavez Villanueva, *Sotto il soffio dello Spirito: Identità carismatica e passione apostolica*. Retreat to the FMA chapter members (Turin: LDC, 2009), p. 17.

²³ Cf. *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* LXIV (1972), no. 11, pp. 713-718.

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 on any holy book.”²⁴

6.2 Fruitful Fidelity

At Don Bosco’s death, more than one cardinal in Rome was convinced that the Salesian Congregation would quickly disintegrate; Father 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,” Father Barberis testified under oath, “Bishop Cagliero called together the [superior] chapter with some of the older confreres, and a letter to the Holy Father was drawn up in which all the superiors and the older confreres declared that in total agreement they would accept Father Rua as superior, and not only would they submit to him, but they would receive him with great joy.... On February 11 the Holy Father confirmed Father Rua in office for twelve years according to the Constitutions.”²⁵

Pope Leo XIII had met Father Rua and knew that under his direction the Salesians would continue their mission. And so it happened. The Salesians and Salesian houses multiplied like the loaves and fishes in the hands of Jesus. Don Bosco had founded 64 houses; Father Rua took the number to 341. At the death of Don Bosco the Salesians were 700; in Father Rua’s 22 years as Superior General they became 4,000. The Salesian missions, which Don Bosco had tenaciously begun, during his lifetime had spread to Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego, Uruguay and Brazil; Father 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, Father 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, he re-awakened in them his spirit, he informed himself in fatherly fashion but carefully about the life of the confreres and their works, and he 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 Father Rua, the aspect that makes us understand him.... The marvelous fruitfulness of the Salesian Family...had in Don Bosco its origin, in Father Rua its continuation. It was this follower of 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 Father 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.... Father 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 mold of Don Bosco, but with growing dimensions of its own.... We give glory to the Lord who wanted...to offer to his apostolic labors new fields of pastoral work, which impetuous and disordered social development opened up before Christian civilization.”

²⁴ Angelo Amadei, *Il Servo di Dio Michele Rua*, vol. I (Turin: SEI, 1933), p. 30.

²⁵ *Positio* 54-55.

Reading through, even only rapidly, the impressive number of Father 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 he opened up Salesian work to new fields of pastoral ministry.

7. Suggestions for putting the strenna into practice

After these references to Father 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 Salesian Family commissions at local and province level.

7.1. In the local and provincial Salesian Family commissions, to reflect on how best to implement what is suggested in section 5.4, that is, how to *re-think the pastoral approach*, 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 evangelization, attention to the variety of circumstances and the involvement of families.

7.2. Starting from the "Mission Statement of the Salesian Family," to identify in the local and provincial commissions the best ways to plan and organize together *experiences of the evangelization of the young*, promoting the "spiritual and prayerful reading of the Sacred Scriptures" also among themselves and making themselves more and more evangelizers among their peers.

7.3. To foster collaboration among the Salesian Family at provincial 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 evangelizers of their peers.

7.4. To 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 evangelization of the young. In the case of Latin America, to use the "continental mission" issued by the Assembly of Bishops held at Aparecida; in the case of the Africa and Madagascar Region, to 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 Father Joseph Gr nner, provincial of Germany, on the picture "Don Bosco puppeteer," painted by Sieger Koeder, a retired parish priest in the diocese of Rothenberg-Stuttgart and a friend of the Salesians. As soon as I saw the picture, I was fascinated by the powerful and thoughtful representation of our dear Founder and Father.

It is truly an icon of "Don Bosco evangelizer, 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 a zealous evangelizer 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 to become apostles of the young.

Don Bosco evangelizer, 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” (Luke 6:36)

We might be surprised by the way the priest-artist Sieger Koeder has painted Don Bosco. He does not 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 center 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 backdrop. 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 by putting at the center “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 toward 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. Luke 15:11-32), is not only the subject of the puppet show but also 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 color as the puppet representing the prodigal son; perhaps he symbolizes 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 youngsters 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 youths. 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 favorite place to carry out his mission as pastor and evangelizer: accepting the youngsters where they were but opening them up to "higher things" and directing them toward "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 toward 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 people, of the love of God who is readier to forgive and 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, the workshop, and the classroom as much as in the chapel: the witness to the fatherly mercy of the "Good God," who never gives up on people, but leads them 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 Chavez Villanueva
Rector Major
[December 31, 2009]