

STRENNA 2012 COMMENTARY

«I am the good shepherd »



LET US MAKE THE YOUNG
OUR LIFE'S MISSION
BY COMING TO KNOW
AND IMITATE DON BOSCO

2012



DIREZIONE GENERALE OPERE DON BOSCO
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The Rector Major

Commentary on the Strenna for 2012

*"I am the good shepherd.
The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep" (John 10:11)*

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

Just a short time ago we began the period of three years of preparation for the bicentennial of Don Bosco's birth. This first year offers us the opportunity to draw closer to him in order to know him from close up and always better. If we do not know Don Bosco and we do not study him, we cannot understand his spiritual journey and his pastoral decisions; we cannot love him, imitate him, and invoke him; in particular, it will be difficult for us to inculturate his charism these days in the various contexts and in the different situations in which we find ourselves. Only by strengthening our charismatic identity will we be able to offer to the Church and to society a meaningful and fruitful youth service. Our identity is directly linked

to the image of Don Bosco; in him the identity becomes credible and visible. For this reason the first step that we are invited to take in the three years of preparation is precisely coming to know the history of Don Bosco.

1. Knowledge of Don Bosco and a commitment on behalf of the young

We are being invited to study Don Bosco and, through the events of his life, to come to know him as educator and pastor, founder, guide, and legislator. It is a matter of a knowledge which leads to love, to imitation, and to invocation.

For us members of the Salesian Family, he ought to be what St. Francis of Assisi was and continues to be for the Franciscans, or St. Ignatius of Loyola for the Jesuits, that is to say, the founder, the spiritual teacher, the model for education and evangelization, especially the one who began a world-wide movement, capable of bringing to the attention of the Church and of society, with a powerful outcry, the needs of the young, their circumstances, their future. But how can we do this without turning to history, which is not the custodian of a past already buried in time, but rather of a living memory that is within us and challenges us about the present?

An approach to Don Bosco using the methods proper to historical research leads us to understand and appreciate better his greatness as a human being and as a Christian, his practical talents, his skills as an educator, his spirituality, his work, fully understood only if deeply rooted in the history of the society in which he lived. At the same time, even with a fuller knowledge of his life story, we are always aware of God's providential intervention in his life. In this historical study there is no *a priori* rejection of the valid and respected image that generations of the Salesians, Salesian Sisters, Salesian Cooperators, and members of the Salesian Family have had of the Don Bosco they knew and loved, but there is and must be a presentation and re-working of an image of Don Bosco for today, one that can speak to today's world, making use of a new language.

The image of Don Bosco and his activity should be seriously re-constructed, beginning from our cultural horizons: the complexity of life today, globalization, post-modern culture, and the difficulties of the apostolate, the decline in vocations, the "questioning" of consecrated life. Radical, or epochal, changes, as my predecessor Fr. Egidio Viganò called them, force us to re-think and revise the image in another light, in view of a fidelity that is not mere repetition of formulas or formal allegiance to tradition. The historical significance of Don Bosco also has to be re-discovered, beyond his "works" and certain relatively original pedagogical elements, but especially in his practical and affective perception of the universal, theological, and social *problem of "neglected" youth*, and his great ability to communicate this to large crowds of co-workers, benefactors, and admirers.

Being faithful to Don Bosco means knowing him through his life-story and in the history of his times, making his inspirations our own, letting his motivations and choices become ours. Being faithful to Don Bosco and to his mission means cultivating within ourselves a love for the young, especially the poorest, which is constant and strong. This kind of love will lead us to respond to their deepest and most urgent needs. Like Don Bosco, we feel moved by the difficulties they face: poverty, child labor, sexual exploitation, lack of education and vocational training, trying to find their place in the work place, their lack of self-confidence, their fear about the future, the absence of any meaning to life.

With deep affection and selfless love, we try to be present among them, discretely yet confidently, offering sound suggestions for them to follow on their way as they make their choices in life, and experience happiness in the present and in the future. In everything, we become their companions on the journey and competent guides. In particular, we try to understand their new way of living their lives; many of them are “digital natives” who through the new technologies are seeking opportunities for social mobility, the possibility of intellectual development, the possibility of economic progress, instantaneous communication, the chance to take the lead. In this area too we want to share their lives and their interests; animated by the creative spirit of Don Bosco, we educators approach them as “digital immigrants,” helping them to overcome the generation gap with their parents and the world of adults.

We take care of them throughout their journey of growth and as they mature, giving them our time and our energy, and staying with them as they grow through childhood to become young adults.

We take care of them when difficult situations such as war, hunger, or lack of future opportunities lead them to abandon home and family, and they find themselves facing life alone.

We take care of them when, after completing their studies and qualifications, they are looking out anxiously for their first place of employment, and setting about fitting into society, sometimes without much hope or prospect of success.

We take care of them when they are building up their world of affections, their family, accompanying them, especially when they become engaged and in the early years of their marriage, and when their children arrive (see GC26, nn. 98, 99, 104).

We are particularly anxious to fill the deepest void of their hearts, helping them seek and give meaning in their lives, and above all offering a way for growth in knowledge and friendship with the Lord Jesus, in the experience of a living Church, in real commitment, and a way of experiencing their lives as vocation.

Here, then, is the spiritual and pastoral program for the year 2012:

**Let us make the young our life's mission
by coming to know and imitate Don Bosco**

Already the many groups in the Salesian Family are fully committed to this task, which will prove to be of great help to all of us as together we look at our dear Father Don Bosco. Therefore let us continue to move ahead together more and more as a Family.

2. Rediscovering the story of Don Bosco

Over a century after his death, Don Bosco continues to be of interest to many people in many countries. Also outside Salesian circles, he is considered a person of significance. In spite of the fact that, of necessity, the exaggerations that were attached to him for many decades, and which captured the attention of the public, have been removed, Don Bosco still remains a person highly esteemed and popular. A long line of Popes and cardinals, bishops

and priests, scholars, Catholics and non-Catholics, politicians of different persuasions, in Italy, in Europe, and in the world recognized him and still recognize him as someone with a message – one which is modern, prophetic, historically conditioned, but open to many contemporary possibilities, potentially relevant in the most widely varied times and places.

The centennial of his death, the 150th anniversary of the founding of the Salesian Congregation, and now the preparation for the bicentennial of his birth, and other special occasions have triggered a considerable number of publications and newspaper articles. Besides high quality academic studies and research projects, other more modest ones have appeared, which leave themselves open to reservations regarding their interpretations, because of unfounded critical premises in some, and insufficient historical analysis in others.

In fact Don Bosco's is a fully rounded personality that cannot be reduced to simple formulas or newspaper headlines; his is a complex personality shaped by circumstances at one and the same time ordinary and exceptional, by concrete, ideal, and hypothetical projects, with an everyday style of life and activity, but at the same time with a special rapport with the supernatural. Such a person can be adequately understood only by considering his many-sided and pluri-dimensional personality; otherwise, by presenting one or other of these aspects, perhaps consciously or unconsciously, instead of a complete profile, one runs the risk of giving a false picture.

Sometimes one can remain perplexed when faced with books in which apologetics and the idealistic descriptions of Don Bosco are given excessive space, in which the adulation of his memory prevails at the expense of his real personality, at times limited to certain stereotypes to which Don Bosco can never really be reduced. This applies particularly at the present time when the number of lives of saints written with a new critical approach is multiplying; a new kind of hagiography in fact has come to the fore, basing itself on well-founded historical interpretations and a renewed theological interpretation of the spiritual experience of the saints. For this reason, it is my hope that a modern "hagiography" of Don Bosco will be prepared. While this has to be based on recent historical studies, it ought to give rise to love for him, the imitation of his life, the desire to follow him on his spiritual journey; and the same can be said for a new hagiography directed to the young.

3. Reasons for the study of the history of Don Bosco

There are undoubtedly quite a number of reasons leading us to study Don Bosco. We need to know him as our Founder, since our fidelity to the institution to which we belong demands it. We need to know him as Legislator, insofar as we are bound to observe the Constitutions and the Regulations which he himself or his successors have given to us. We need to know him as Educator, so that we may live the Preventive System, the most precious heritage he has left us. We need to know him, in particular, as our Teacher of the spiritual life, since as his sons and disciples we draw on his spirituality; in fact he has given us a key to the understanding of the Gospel; for us, his life is the criterion for our following the Lord Jesus in a particular manner; in this regard I wrote a letter to the Salesian confreres in January 2004 "Looking at Christ through the eyes of Don Bosco" (AGC 384).

Nowadays we are growing more aware of the risk we are running if we do not strengthen the links that keep us united to Don Bosco. Historical knowledge, well-founded and affectionate, helps to keep these links alive; initial and ongoing formation ought to foster Salesian studies. More than a century has now passed since Don Bosco's death; all the

generations who came in direct or indirect contact with him, and with those who knew him personally, have passed on. As the chronological, geographical, and cultural distance increases between us and him, so too more and more does the affectionate climate, that familiarity even psychological, that made Don Bosco and his spirit, simply by seeing his picture, something spontaneous and familiar to us. What has been handed down to us can be lost; the vital link with Don Bosco can be broken. Should we no longer see things in terms of our common Father, of his spirit, of his praxis, of the criteria that inspired him, as the Salesian Family we shall no longer have citizens' rights in the Church and in society, being deprived, as we would be, of our roots and our identity.

In addition, keeping alive the memory of one's own history is the guarantee of having a sound culture; without roots there is no future. Therefore it is quite important to work on the historical memory and to make use of it, as a reminder of our common roots which urge us to re-think the problems of our own times with a more mature awareness of our past. That is the guarantee, while taking into account historical transformations and inevitable changes, that our Family will continue to be the bearer of the charism of the origins, and to make itself the vigilant and creative guardian of a fruitful tradition.

Obviously, knowledge of the past should not become a form of conditioning. It is necessary to know how, in a critical manner, to distinguish between the essential historical significance and gratuitous exaggerations and unfounded subjective interpretations; in this way, attributing charismatic historical truth to reconstructions which have little to do with "real history" will be avoided. A similar way of approaching history is sometimes used in order to avoid the serious problem of the reconstruction of the historical context. A healthy process of discernment is needed in the interpretation of the history of Don Bosco. The warning of Pope Leo XIII will always be valid for us: the historian should never say anything untrue nor be silent about the truth. If a saint has a weak point it has to be honestly recognized. Recognizing the imperfections of the saints has the threefold merit of respecting historical accuracy, of emphasizing the absolute nature of God, and of encouraging us poor vessels of clay, showing us that in the heroic follower of Christ, blood was not water.

The urgent need for a deeper and more systematic knowledge of Don Bosco has been emphasized in recent decades by the official documents and authoritative statements of my two predecessors. This is how I expressed it myself in a letter at the end of 2003 (AGC n. 383, pp. 14-17):

But Don Bosco succeeded in staying young and hence in harmonizing with the future through being always among his boys.... In the Valdocco experience there was clearly a maturing of the mission and hence a transition from the joy of "staying with Don Bosco" to "staying with Don Bosco for the young"; from "staying with Don Bosco for the young in a stable manner" to "staying with Don Bosco for the young in a stable manner with vows." Remaining with Don Bosco does not exclude a priori a study of the times that modeled or conditioned him, but it requires us to live with his commitment, his options, his dedication, his spirit of enterprise and pushing ahead.... All this makes of Don Bosco a fascinating person, and in our case a father to love, a model to imitate, but also a saint to invoke.... We are well aware that the more the time separating us from our Founder increases, the more real is the risk of speaking of Don Bosco only on the basis of well known incidents and anecdotes without any real knowledge of our charism. Hence the need to know him through the medium of reading and study; to love him affectively and effectively as our father and teacher through the spiritual legacy he has left us; to imitate him and try to reproduce him in ourselves, making of the Rule of life our personal life plan. This is what is meant by returning to Don Bosco, to which I have invited the whole Congregation – myself included –

from my first "good night," by means of a process of study and love that tries to understand, the better to throw light on our life and present-day challenges. Together with the Gospel, Don Bosco is our criterion of discernment and our goal of identification.

What I have in mind is not very different from the reflection of Fr. Francis Bodrato, the first provincial in Argentina, who on March 5, 1877, wrote in a letter to his novices:

*Who is Don Bosco? What can I say to you about him? I can tell you the truth as I know it and have heard it from others. Don Bosco is our beloved and most loving father. We who are his sons all say this. Don Bosco is a man of Providence for these times. This is what the learned people say. Don Bosco is a philanthropist. This is what the philosophers say. And I say, while agreeing naturally with what these people have told us, that Don Bosco is truly that friend that Holy Scripture describes as a great treasure. Well then, we have found this true friend, this great treasure. Mary Most Holy has given us the light by which to recognize him and the Lord allows us to have him. Woe, therefore, to anyone who loses him. If you only knew, my dear brothers, how many people there are who envy us our lot... And if you come to believe with me that Don Bosco is that true friend of Holy Scripture, then you will see to it that you keep him forever, and take care to imitate him in yourselves. (Francesco Bodrato, *Lettere*, edited by B. Casali [Rome: LAS, 1995], pp. 131-132).*

Not for nothing does the introduction, as well as articles 21, 97, and 196 of the current Constitutions of the Salesian Congregation present Don Bosco to us as "guide" and "model," and the Constitutions themselves are described as his "living testament." Similar expressions can also be found in the rules of life of the other groups of the Salesian Family. For all of us who see in Don Bosco our point of reference, he continues to be the founder, master of the spirit, the model for education, the one who began a movement on a world-wide scale capable of very effectively turning the attention of the Church and of society to the needs of the young, to their situation, to their future. We cannot but ask ourselves whether nowadays our Family is still the force it was; whether we still have the courage and the imagination that Don Bosco had; whether at the dawn of the third millennium we are still capable of taking up his prophetic stance in the defense of the rights of man and of God.

The urgent need for the knowledge and the study of Don Bosco by the Salesian Family, by the individual groups, by communities, by associations, and by individuals having been pointed out, the path has still to be followed; the path indicated is not yet the path followed. It is up to each one to identify the steps to be taken, how and in what way opportunities are to be created so that this task may be carried out in the course of this year. We cannot arrive at the celebration of the bicentennial without coming to know Don Bosco better.

4. Function of history in bringing things up to date

To achieve this aim, it is not sufficient that within each one of us there be an awareness of the greatness of Don Bosco. The indispensable condition is to know him well, over and above the very attractive anecdotes that surround our dear Father and also the edifying literature on which entire generations were formed/brought up. It is not a question of going in search of cheap remedies to face, as a Family, the current "crisis" in the Church and in society, but of coming to know him in depth so that he can be "made relevant" at the dawn of this third millennium, in the mild cultural climate in which we are living, in the various countries in which we are working. What is needed is a knowledge of Don Bosco which is to

be arrived at in the continuously striking of the right balance between our asking ourselves questions about the present, and our seeking answers which come from the past; only in this way will we be able once again today to inculturate the Salesian charism.

Attention has to be paid to the fact that at the moment of "changing historical times" a charismatic movement can grow and develop only on the condition that the founding charism is "reinterpreted in a vital manner" and does not remain a "precious fossil." The Founders experienced the Holy Spirit in a precise historical context; on this account, it is necessary to identify the contingent elements of their experience, insofar as the response to a determined historical situation has value for as long as that contingency lasts. In other words, the "questions" posed by today's ecclesial community and those of the current socio-cultural situation cannot be considered as something "extraneous" to our historical research; this has to determine what is transitory, and what is permanent in the charism, what needs to be left aside, and what needs to be taken up, what is at some distance from our present circumstances and what is close to them.

It is not possible to start putting this into practice without looking at history, which – as I have already said – is not the custodian of a past already buried in time, but rather a living memory that is within us and challenges us about the present. Any updating that is undertaken while ignoring the progress of historical studies would be of little real use. In the same way, research and writing undertaken in an amateurish fashion without clear theories, appropriate methods, and sound working instruments, and without a vital and up-to-date approach to historical writing, do not produce good results from either the historical or the updating points of view. The writing of history implies a constant process of a critical revision of previous judgments made, a revision that is necessary since we have to recognize that the past cannot be set up as a sort of monument only to be looked at, precisely because it is linked to the persona one wants to come to know.

Nor should we undervalue the fact that the life-story of Don Bosco is not only "ours"; belongs also to the Church and to the human family, and therefore should not be missing from the ecclesiastical and civil history of individual countries, even more so since Salesian history is a history which consists in dynamic interaction, in relationships of dependence and collaboration and sometimes of conflict with the social, political, economic, ecclesial and religious, educational and cultural worlds. Now we cannot expect "the others" to take into account our "history," our "pedagogy," our "spirituality" if we do not offer them modern instruments of knowledge. Dialogue with others can only occur if we have the same linguistic code, the same conceptual methods, the same skills and professional approach; otherwise we shall be on the fringes of society, removed from the cultural debate, absent from those places in which solutions are found for current problems. Exclusion from the cultural debate taking place in every country would also be an indication of the historical insignificance of the Salesians, their social marginalization, the absence of their contribution to education. For this reason I look forward to a renewed commitment in the preparation of qualified people for study and research in the field of Salesian history.

Salesian literature, Salesian publications, Salesian preaching, the circulars of those in positions of responsibility at various levels, communication within the Salesian Family all need to be on top of the situation. The traditional popular nature of Salesian literature, its widespread dissemination, ought not to mean superficiality in its contents, disinformation, the repetition of an untrustworthy past. Whoever has the gift or the opportunity to write, to form, to educate others needs to ensure that he is constantly updated regarding the subject he talks or writes about. Popular media products need to be of a high quality and of the greatest possible reliability.

The study of Don Bosco is a necessary condition in order to be able to communicate his charism and to propose its relevance. Without knowledge there can be no love, imitation, or invocation; and then only love urges us to that knowledge. It is a question therefore of a knowledge which comes from love and which leads to love: an affective knowledge.

5. Over a hundred years of historical writing "at the service of the charism"

Salesian historical writing in over 150 years of life has made considerable progress, from the first modest biographies of Don Bosco in the 1870s and 1880s, to the encomiastic biographies inspired by a interpretation of his life and of his work which was theological, anecdotal, and concerned with wonder-working, which from the 1880s well into the 20th century were distributed widely. The solemn occasions of Don Bosco's beatification and canonization were naturally the occasions for a series of writings and works of a spiritual and edifying nature. Similarly, in the area of pedagogy one could mention the valuable series of writings and discussions on Don Bosco the educator, following the introduction of Don Bosco's preventive method of education in academic programs in teacher training colleges in Italy.

In the period immediately after the war and in the 1950s, the new generations of Salesians began to express a sense of unease with the hagiographical literature of the past. The need arose for a hagiography of the Founder which was not aimed merely at edification or being an apologia, but rather at the truth about him in all its many aspects: a hagiography, in other words, that would place him in his historical context, and as such would observe all the necessary critical requirements. In some way this meant breaking out of a by-now consolidated circle, in order to encourage the taking of a fresh look at the history of Don Bosco, philologically informed and with the sources thoroughly examined, conducted according to up-to-date historical methods. It was necessary to go beyond the point of view of the first Salesians, which undoubtedly was that of the providentially-inspired, theological wonder-worker, in which the concrete circumstances and the forces at work at the time tended to disappear.

Similar approaches to the study and further understanding of Don Bosco, which for some time had been promised, were given a strong impetus by the invitation of the Second Vatican Council to return to the genuine human and spiritual circumstances of the origins and of the Founder in view of the necessary renewal of consecrated life (Cf. *Perfectae Caritatis, Ecclesiae Sanctae*). This demanded, as an indispensable requirement, a knowledge of the historical facts. Without going back to the roots, updating in fact runs the risk of becoming arbitrary and uncertain speculation. And so in the new cultural climate of the 1970s, making use of assumptions, trends, methods, modern research tools, as used in the most serious historical research projects, further study was undertaken into a knowledge of the patrimony and heritage of Don Bosco, full of events and guidelines. The historical significance of the message was identified, the inevitable personal, cultural, and institutional limitations were described, which almost paradoxically indicated the reasons, then as they do now, for the vigorous growth in the present as in the future.

6. Toward an interpretative reading of Salesian history

As a first requirement of renewal, the Second Vatican Council asked for a return to the

sources. In this regard the Congregation published dozens of volumes of the *Opere Edite* ("Published Works") and those unpublished of Don Bosco; the Center of Don Bosco Studies at the UPS and the Salesian Institute Historical made themselves responsible for them. Thanks to their work, thousands of pages of Don Bosco's writings are available to us, in editions which are academically produced and revised, so as to make possible the necessary *philological analysis*. How, in fact, is it possible to understand the famous "letter from Rome" which Fr. Lemoyne drew up on behalf of Don Bosco, without fully knowing the difficult disciplinary situation in Valdocco at the time, and which in the same years produced the "circular on punishments"? Has a letter written in Don Bosco's own hand, labored, full of corrections, additions, and postscripts, the same value as a circular, perhaps even written by a collaborator of his, and simply signed by Don Bosco? What significance should be given to work contracts signed by Don Bosco, if we compare them with earlier ones or contemporaneous ones drawn up by others in Turin?

To the philological analysis needs to be added the *historical-critical analysis*, which takes into account both the explicit contents of the sources, and also what a superficial reading of them does not reveal, but what the sources imply. No text, and even less those of Don Bosco, a well known person "incarnated" in history, can be explained without reference to the time in which it was written, within a certain context, in reference to certain particular people, for a certain purpose. As I have said, writings by Don Bosco and about Don Bosco contain an interpretation of the Gospel influenced by the period, its ideas, mental structures, perspectives, language, and values.

The two preceding operations lead to the third and more important one: the *vital and updating analysis*, capable of re-expressing, re-thinking, re-presenting the contents of the sources. In this regard it is necessary to adapt some hermeneutical criteria, without which the interpretation of Don Bosco's expressions, his theoretical and practical positions, of the practical ways of living a relationship with God and with society, could indeed prove to be counterproductive. The simple repetition of Don Bosco's phrases could in fact lead us to betray the Salesian identity. In fact, it is a question of texts and testimonies of a "culture" very much of the past, of a tradition and of a theology which are certainly no longer ours, and therefore not immediately intelligible to us.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the Salesian Congregation made a great effort for renewal, and the renewed Constitutions are the mature fruit of this. The Salesians produced a historical-spiritual reflection, which in itself was an interpretative study of Salesian sources, and at the same time of the "signs of the times." If we run through the analytical index of these Constitutions we are in for a welcome surprise: the name of Don Bosco appears about 40 times. In the first 17 articles it is present a good 13 times; but even where the name is not explicitly used, the reference to his thought, to his praxis, to his writings is constant. And just to think that in the 19th century, the Holy See insisted on there being no mention in the Constitutions of the name and the writings of the Founder! The same applies to the constitutions, regulations, and plans of life of the other groups of the Salesian Family.

Forty years after the Council, it necessarily has to be recognized that historical research on the life and work the human and spiritual experience of Don Bosco has made notable progress thanks to studies which have adopted the changed frames of reference, have taken due account of the new ways of inquiry and the modern categories of evaluation, have had recourse to new perspectives, starting from the analysis of the unpublished documents or new interpretations of documents already well known. The new critical hagiography has had at least two positive effects: above all that of showing us the real face of Don Bosco and the true greatness of our Father; in the second place that of taking into

account Don Bosco in secular history.

Until a few decades ago, in fact, secular historical writing displayed something of an allergy to Don Bosco and did not devote space to him, perhaps on account of the sugary tones, the miraculous sensationalism, which filled the edifying biographies overindulgent toward the marvelous. Nowadays, on the contrary, Don Bosco is taken seriously. Naturally the person presented in these cases cannot but reflect the historical criteria of the various authors, their mentality, their ideological presuppositions, their aims, the quantity and the quality of the available sources, the way these are examined and then variously interpreted, the cultural climate of the time.

All of this corresponds to the new sensitivity in our Family which has a greater love for its vocation and mission. As I indicated earlier, the approach to Don Bosco, using the methods appropriate to historical research has led us to better appreciate his greatness, his practical talents, his gifts as an educator, his spirituality, his work, fully understood only if deeply rooted in the history of the society in which he lived. We do not reject *a priori* that which is valid in what we have received concerning Don Bosco's image, handed down by generations of Salesians and members of the Salesian Family. Nowadays we need a re-think and further reflection that gives us an image of Don Bosco which is relevant, which speaks to the world of today in a new language. The validity of the image offered depends, in fact, on the extent to which it is accepted and shared

7. What image of Don Bosco today?

In the face of this Salesian literature which is necessarily still evolving, it is clear that nowadays too we have to answer a series of questions.

Who was Don Bosco? What did he say, do, and write? With what style of life and action did he succeed in expanding his charitable works? What connection is there between his thought and his action? Where did his ideas come from; how did they develop and what was new about them? What understanding did he have of himself and of his message at the beginning of his work, and what perception did he gradually acquire as the years passed? What perception of him, of his work, and of his message did his first lay and ecclesiastical collaborators have, the first Salesians, the FMAs, the Cooperators, the pupils and past pupils? How was he understood and judged by his contemporaries: the Pope, bishops, priests, religious, political and civil authorities, those wielding economic and financial power, believers and non-believers, the crowds?

What was the image of Don Bosco that was constructed and handed down by "historical tradition," by the contemporary chroniclers and biographers, by the witnesses at the processes, by the commemorations and the apotheoses of the anniversaries and significant dates (1915, 1929, 1934, 1988, 2009)? What interpretations were given to his historical "mission"? That it was a providential response to the needs of a Church under persecution? A Catholic response to what the times demanded? A solution to the "problem of poor and abandoned boys," to the social problem, to cooperation among the "classes"? The promotion of the popular masses, while respecting the established order? A missionary and civilizing activity?

What was special about Don Bosco? That he was the inventor of a "pedagogy" suitable for dealing with boys "in danger and dangerous"? That he was a teacher of spirituality for

young people at risk, for the lower classes, for the developing peoples? That he was the saint of joy, of human values, of encountering everyone without discrimination? Or perhaps all this and more besides?

Today this image of Don Bosco needs to be reconstructed; for a fidelity that is not repetition, servile to formulas or personal detachment, it is necessary to see him in another light. It is not sufficient to limit ourselves to some spiritual reading or some article by an academic; it is necessary that we examine Salesianity more deeply, all together, in order to arrive at a shared view that is learned, professional, and profound, that knows how to give due weight to the historical, pedagogical, and spiritual patrimony inherited from Don Bosco, that is familiar at some depth with the youth situation, that has a clear understanding of the characteristics of the Christian in the society of today and of tomorrow, with the relevant commitments "according to the needs of the times." In other words, it is a question of re-examining the institutions and structures of associations and education, of re-interpreting the Preventive System in contemporary terms, of presenting to the world and to the Church a particular style of Salesian educator.

Nowadays, rather than a crisis of identity it is perhaps a question of a crisis of credibility. We seem to be held under the tyranny of the *status quo*, an unconscious rather than intentional resistance. While convinced of the truth of the theological values with which our Christian and consecrated life is imbued, we experience the difficulty of reaching the hearts of those to whom we are sent, for whom we ought to be signs of hope; we are shaken by the irrelevance of the faith for them as they build their lives; we are aware that we are not in touch with their world, aware of a remoteness, not to say exclusion, from their plans; we see that our signs, gestures, and languages do not appear to have any impact on their lives.

Perhaps there is a lack of clarity about the role we have in the mission to which we dedicate ourselves; some perhaps are not convinced that our mission is useful; perhaps they are unable to find work which matches their aspirations, because we don't know how to bring about renewal; perhaps they feel imprisoned by emergency situations which are more and more pressing; perhaps there is more lack of esteem *ad intra* than *ad extra*. History can come to our aid in the process of bringing the charism up to date; I limit myself to indicating just some aspects, in particular giving more attention to the first.

7.1. Evolution of the works and those for whom they are intended. For Don Bosco the opening of new works was determined by the demands of the situation. The poor cultural preparation of the boys led at Valdocco to the opening of an elementary school on Sundays, and then in the evening, and then on a daily basis, especially for those who could not attend the public school; then other schools, various workshops, and in this way to the complex of the "house attached" at the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales. This first work, from being simply a place for the boys to gather together on feast days for catechism and for games, became a place of all-round formation; for a certain number of boys without visible means of support it becomes a home, a place to live. To the playground and the church in which a program had developed with the possibility of the sacraments, of elementary religious instruction, of recreation, of interesting activities, of religious and civil celebration, of gifts, other structures were added to offer the opportunity of learning a trade, and so avoiding having to go into factories in the city, too often immoral and dangerous for boys already burdened with a previous difficult past. Then later other Salesian houses were founded, other secondary schools – boarding schools, other junior seminaries entrusted to the Salesian Society, which had just begun.

Mixed in together at the first oratory were former reformatory boys, young immigrants, and

in general boys without any strong links to their own parishes. Then a little higher up the scale, accepted in the oratory and the hostel there were students and artisans far from "home," who went into the city to learn a trade, or to do their studies, which prepared them for employment. To a certain number of boys belonging to this category, or those with particular difficulties, or else with greater economic means, the possibility was given of learning a trade in organized workshops, or of doing their studies in classes set up for secondary education. This group normally included two different social categories: the "poor working class" and the "middle class." Then particular needs led to the setting up of schools: elementary, technical, grammar, vocational training, agricultural, day, secondary also for the upper-middle class, where it was a question of providing an alternative to similar lay or Protestant establishments, or to ensuring a fully Catholic education according to the Preventive System.

Don Bosco considered that the option for the poorest was compatible with the large-scale provision of elementary and secondary schools for the "middle classes." He did not reject anyone, but he preferred to give his attention to the middle and the working class, as being the ones most in need of help and assistance. But the way the process of paying "fees" worked out did not leave much room for the extremely poor or the moderately poor, except in the case of limited groups of youngsters supported by public or private charity. Then a separate category consisted in those young people, among the most poor and most at risk to be found in mission lands, lacking the light of faith. Naturally missionary activity does not stop at the young, but tries to involve everyone in the vicinity, nor is it limited just to straightforward pastoral action, but extends to all aspects of civil, cultural, and social life, according to what Don Bosco himself said in a letter of November 1886: bringing "religion and civilization to those peoples and nations which so far are without them." Without taking account of class, special consideration was also given to boys who showed an inclination toward the ecclesiastical or religious state; this is the most precious gift that can be given to the Church and to civil society.

Finally, account has to be taken of the large areas of marginalization of "poor and abandoned youth" in situations that are particularly serious, sometimes tragic, which remain outside Don Bosco's activities: the emerging group of young people more and more engaged in new industrial activities who needed to be assisted, protected, and formed socially and in the context of trade unions; the world of real juvenile delinquency existing in Turin; works for the care of minors already, or on the way to becoming, delinquents, with some of whom moreover he was to some extent in contact; the immense continent of poverty and indigence, not only in the city but also, and often worse, in the countryside; the vast world of illiteracy and of progress through arts and trades; the world of unemployment and of emigration; and again the world of mental and physical handicap.

Now this page of history obliges us to reflect from the *current perspective*. Who nowadays are the ones for whom our works are primarily intended? Which works suit their needs? Has the disappearance in the renewed Salesian Constitutions of the list of typical Salesian works which had the oratories in the first place perhaps contributed to the reduction in the number of our classic oratories, even replaced by high schools and universities?

7.2. Abandoned youth. As I said at the beginning, the historical importance of Don Bosco needs to be investigated, in addition to the works, and some relatively original ways of doing things, his intellectual and emotive perception of the universal, theological, and social significance of the problem of "abandoned youth," and his great ability in communicating this perception to large numbers of collaborators, benefactors, and admirers.

Let us ask ourselves then: Are we his faithful disciples today? Are we, like Don Bosco, still experiencing that inner conflict between the ideal and its fulfillment, between an intuition and putting it into practice in the social circumstances in which he found himself working?

7.3. Response to the needs of the young. Considering the fact that Don Bosco's activities in assisting and educating the young developed on the practical level with a certain degree of "opportunism," it also needs to be said that his "response" to problems was not based on a particular "plan" put into operation on the basis of a preconceived overall view of the social and religious situation in the 1800s. Coming up against particular problems he responded in an equally immediate and localized way, until gradually the variety of youth situations led him to look at the overall "problem of youth" everywhere. In the heroic life of Don Bosco there were no long-term plans or strategies worked out at his desk – all of the things quite rightly nowadays considered indispensable – but effective solutions emerged to immediate problems, often unforeseen.

What does all this mean for us today as we are living in a "global village," where everything is known in real time, where we have available to us a whole variety of specialized sciences? How does one pass from a policy of emergency to a planned policy? On the basis of what precise criteria can we make our practical decisions within history as it unfolds, and not from outside? How can we avoid the twofold risk of losing unity and identity, by wanting to do everything, by abandoning stable works and moving on to others which are transitory and not well thought out, using up resources on short-term projects; and the risk of giving an absolute value, and making permanent, features of the Founder which were contingent, finishing by being satisfied with what we have already had, already known, with a fossilized tradition, defended, in all good faith, as being fidelity to the past?

7.4. Flexibility in responding to needs. From the historical analysis we discover the genius and the ability of Don Bosco, in pursuing his vocation to "save" the young, in coordinating educational works aimed at the boys of the urban working-class populations with a variety of further activities with other objectives. Around the small Oratory at Valdocco Don Bosco succeeded in gathering together thousands of boys, in winning over the agreement and the support of the Church authorities to an ever greater extent, almost complete. And the closure of some works such as the Guardian Angels Oratory in Turin, of some isolated Salesian houses such as Cherasco, Trinità, was not a sign of retreat but of a reorganization and a re-launching. Proof of this is the expansion of his mission with works aimed at the formation of youth: the founding of the FMAs, the missions, the Cooperators, the *Salesian Bulletin*. These various initiatives highlight the constant process of reorganization, re-launching, and further development.

So now, is it not clear that in all that we do, what must be considered important is not only or not mainly the appearance, but the reality of what is re-launched and developed in a wise reorganization? Is there perhaps a risk that often the forced closing of so many of our works appears to be a simple matter of cutting back, rather than a decision made in view of further development?

7.5. Poverty of life and tireless work. In those notes which tradition has called his "Spiritual Testament," Don Bosco wrote: "From the time that comfort-seeking once appears in individuals, in rooms, and in houses, the decline of our Congregation will begin.... When the desire for ease and comfort grows up among us, our pious Society will have run its course" (Pietro Braido, ed., *Don Bosco educatore: Scritti e testimonianze* [Rome: LAS, 1992], pp. 409, 437).

Nowadays, drawing our inspiration from Don Bosco, do we not have to have the courage to say that when a religious community becomes absorbed in the TV and in the newspapers for hours on end it is a sign that at least in that particular place we have run our course? What can be said when a Salesian center is reduced to four small boys with a football and a TV, and cannot find the time to bring youngsters together to involve them in the work being done, but can do so in order to go on cultural outings? Perhaps that work has already run its course too, given that the number of young people in a local Salesian work is not everything, but that it does remain the thermometer to indicate the reason for there being a house in that particular place.

8. Suggestions for putting the strenna into practice

Starting from the knowledge of the history of Don Bosco, the main focal points and the tasks arising from the strenna for 2012 could be the following. Each group of the Salesian Family can make further practical applications.

8.1. *Pastoral charity* is a particular feature of the whole of Don Bosco's life-story and is the guiding force of all his many activities. We could say that it is the concise historical perspective through which to read his whole life. The Good Shepherd knows his sheep and calls them by name; he quenches their thirst with clear water and allows them to graze in green pastures; he becomes the gate through which the sheep enter the sheepfold, and gives his own life so that the sheep may have life in abundance (cf. John 10:11ff). The greatest power of Don Bosco's charism is the love drawn directly from the Lord Jesus, imitating him and remaining in Him. This love consists in "giving everything." From this stems his apostolic vow: "I promised God that until my dying breath I would dedicate myself entirely to my poor boys." (BM XVIII, 216; cf. C. SDB 1).

This is our trademark and our credibility with the young!

8.2. In Don Bosco's story we come to know of much *hardship, self sacrifice, privation, suffering*, and of the many sacrifices he made. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. Through the needs and requests of young people, God is asking each member of the Salesian Family to sacrifice himself for them. Living the mission is therefore not a vain activity for activity's sake, but rather conforming our hearts to the heart of the Good Shepherd who does not want any of his sheep to be lost. It is a deeply human and deeply spiritual mission. It is a path of asceticism, for there is no animating presence among young people without asceticism and sacrifice. Losing something, or rather, losing everything to enrich the lives of our young people, is what gives support to our dedication and our commitment.

8.3. Through the minutes of the founding of the Salesian Congregation, and especially through the historical development of the multifaceted work of Don Bosco, we can come to know the purpose of the Salesian Family, as this purpose was detailed little by little. We are called to be apostles of the young, of popular settings, of poor and mission areas. Today more than ever, we commit ourselves to a critical understanding of media culture, and we use the media, in particular new technologies, as potential multipliers of our activity in being close to and supportive of young people. While we are in their midst as educators, we involve them as our first collaborators, as did our Father Don Bosco, and we give them responsibility, help them to take the initiative, enable them to be apostles of their peers. In this way we can open up the great heart of Don Bosco more and more; he wanted to reach

and serve young people throughout the world.

8.4. Our good intentions cannot remain empty declarations. Our knowledge of Don Bosco needs to be translated into a *commitment with and for the young*. As with Don Bosco, God awaits us in today's youth! We therefore need to meet them, and stay with them in the places, circumstances, and frontiers where they await us. This is why we need to go out to meet them, always taking the first step, walking with them. It is heartening to see how the Salesian Family throughout the world is doing its best for the poorest young people: street children, excluded children, young workers, young soldiers, young apprentices, neglected orphans, exploited children, but a heart that loves is always a heart that asks itself certain questions. It is not sufficient to organize activities, initiatives, and institutions for the young; what is needed is an assured presence, contact, a relationship with them: it is a matter of taking up the practice of assisting again, and rediscovering that presence in the playground.

8.5. Even today, Don Bosco asks questions. By getting to know his story we must listen to the *questions Don Bosco* addresses to us. What more can we do for poor young people? What are the new frontiers in the areas where we are working, in the country in which we are living? Besides the above-mentioned poverty, how many other kinds of poverty weigh down today's young people as they struggle on their way? What are the new frontiers where we must become involved today? We must think about the reality of the family, the educational emergency, the confusion in affective and sexual education, lack of social and political involvement, a retreat into one's personal private life, spiritual weakness, the unhappiness of so many young people. We hear the cry of young people and offer answers to their deepest and most pressing needs, their practical and spiritual needs.

8.6. From the experience of his personal life, we can know the *responses Don Bosco gave* to the needs of young people. In this way we can better consider the responses that we have already put in place and which other responses still need to be created. Of course there are difficulties. We have to "deal with the wolves" who want to devour the flock: indifference, ethical relativism, consumerism that destroys the value of things and experiences, false ideologies. God is calling us, and Don Bosco encourages us, to be good shepherds in the image of the Good Shepherd, so that young people will still find fathers, mothers, friends; and above all, that they can find Life, True Life, the abundant life offered by Jesus!

8.7. The *Memoirs of the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales*, written at the explicit request of Pius IX, are an essential point of reference for coming to know Don Bosco's spiritual and pastoral journey. They were written so that we might come to know the prodigious beginnings of the vocation and work of Don Bosco, but especially, so that taking up Don Bosco's motivations and choices, we as individuals, and as each group of the Salesian Family, may continue along the same spiritual and apostolic journey. They were regarded as "memories of the future." So in the course of this year, let us commit ourselves to getting to know this text, communicating its contents, disseminating it, and especially putting it into the hands of young people: it will become an inspirational book as they make their vocational decisions.

9. Conclusion

As usual, I want to conclude this presentation of the stenna with a very telling anecdote. Before this however, I would like to recall here the "dream at nine years of age." In fact, it

seems to me that this page of autobiography provides a simple, but at the same time, a prophetic presentation of the spirit and the mission of Don Bosco. In it the field of work entrusted to him was described: the young; the aim of his apostolate was pointed out: to make them grow as individuals through education; a method of education that would be effective was offered him: the Preventive System; the context in which all that he did, and today all that we do, was presented: the marvelous plan of God, who, first of all, and more than anything else, loves the young. It is He who enriches them with all kinds of gifts and makes them responsible for their development, so that they can take their rightful place in society. In God's plan, not only are they assured of success in this life, but of eternal happiness too. Let us therefore listen to Don Bosco, and we will hear the "dream of his life."

"The boy of the dream"

It was at that age that I had a dream. All my life this remained deeply impressed on my mind. In this dream I seemed to be near my home in a very large yard. A crowd of children were playing there. Some were laughing, some were playing games, and quite a few were swearing. When I heard these evil words, I jumped immediately amongst them and tried to stop them by using my words and my fists.

At that moment a dignified man appeared, a nobly-dressed adult. He wore a white cloak, and his face shone so that I could not look directly at him. He called me by name, told me to take charge of these children, and added these words: "You will have to win these friends of yours not by blows but by gentleness and love. Start right away to teach them the ugliness of sin and the value of virtue."

Confused and frightened, I replied that I was a poor, ignorant child. I was unable to talk to those youngsters about religion. At that moment the kids stopped their fighting, shouting, and swearing; they gathered round the man who was speaking.

Hardly knowing what I was saying, I asked, "Who are you, ordering me to do the impossible?"

"Precisely because it seems impossible to you, you must make it possible through obedience and the acquisition of knowledge."

"Where, by what means, can I acquire knowledge?"

"I will give you a teacher. Under her guidance you can become wise. Without her, all wisdom is foolishness."

"But who are you that speak so?"

"I am the son of the woman whom your mother has taught you to greet three times a day."

"My mother tells me not to mix with people I don't know unless I have her permission. So tell me your name."

"Ask my mother what my name is."

At that moment, I saw a lady of stately appearance standing beside him. She was wearing a

mantle that sparkled all over as though covered with bright stars. Seeing from my questions and answers that I was more confused than ever, she beckoned me to approach her. She took me kindly by the hand and said, "Look." Glancing round, I realized that the youngsters had all apparently run away. A large number of goats, dogs, cats, bears, and other animals had taken their place.

"This is the field of your work. Make yourself humble, strong, and energetic. And what you will see happening to these animals in a moment is what you must do for my children."

I looked round again, and where before I had seen wild animals, I now saw gentle lambs. They were all jumping and bleating as if to welcome that man and lady.

At that point, still dreaming, I began crying. I begged the lady to speak so that I could understand her, because I did not know what all this could mean. She then placed her hand on my head and said, "In good time you will understand everything."

With that, a noise woke me up and everything disappeared. I was totally bewildered. My hands seemed to be sore from the blows I had given, and my face hurt from those I had received. The memory of the man and the lady, and the things said and heard, so occupied my mind that I could not get any more sleep that night.

(Memorie dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales, critical edition by Antonio da Silva Ferreira [Rome: LAS, 1991]; Memoirs of the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales, trans. Daniel Lyons, SDB [New Rochelle: Salesiana, 2007], pp. 34-35).

Don Bosco writes in the *Memoirs of the Oratory* that this dream "remained deeply impressed on my mind for the whole of my life," so that today we can say that he lived in order to change the dream into reality.

Well then, what our dear Father took as his plan of life, making the boys his purpose in life, and devoting all his energies until his last breath for them, is what we are all being called to do.

The anecdote, which this time I take from history, illustrates very eloquently Don Bosco's desire to be for his boys a sign of love that would never fail. I heard it told for the first time by a confrere from the Australian Province, Fr. Lawrie Moate, in an introductory address on the occasion of a celebration of jubilees of Salesian life, at Lysterfield on July 9, 2011:

"And our music continues"

Imagine the courtyard of a prison in an 18th-century European colony. It is dawn, and while the sun begins to fill the eastern sky with golden colors, a prisoner is brought out into the yard to be executed. He is a priest, condemned to death for his opposition to the cruelty with which the natives in the colony were being treated. He is standing against a wall and gazes at the firing squad, his fellow countrymen. Before blindfolding him the officer asks him the traditional question about his final wishes. The reply surprises everyone: he asks to be able to play his flute for one last time. The soldiers are put "at ease" while they wait for the prisoner to play. When the notes begin to fill the silent morning air, the whole prison is flooded with music which, sweet and enchanting, fills with peace that place[which is] a daily witness to violence and sadness. The officer is worried because the longer the music lasts, the more absurd his task seems to be. He therefore orders the soldiers to open fire. The

priest dies instantly, but to the amazement of all present the music continues its dance of life. Death is outfaced.

Where does this sweet music of life come from?


In a society totally committed to silencing Christ's message, I think it is our vocation to be among those who continue to make the music of Life heard. In a world doing everything it can to prevent the young from hearing the insistent invitation of Christ to "come and see," it is our privilege to have been drawn to Don Bosco and to have been encouraged to play the music of the heart, to bear witness to the transcendent, to exercise a spiritual fatherhood, to lead youngsters in a direction corresponding to their dignity and their most genuine desires.

This is the dance of the Spirit! This is God's music!

My dear brothers, sisters, all the members of the Salesian Family, friends of Don Bosco, all young people, I wish you all a happy New Year for 2012 full of God's blessings, and with a renewed commitment to continuing to make the music heard, our music, which fills the lives of the young with meaning, and makes them discover the source of joy.

With my best wishes to everyone and a remembrance in my prayers,

Rome, December 31, 2011.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Pascual Chavez V." in a cursive style.

Fr. Pascual Chavez Villanueva
Rector Major