

STRENNA 2020

«*Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven*» (Mt 6,10)

“GOOD CHRISTIANS AND UPRIGHT CITIZENS”

Note: While I was presenting the commentary to the Strenna 2019 in Turin Valdocco to the Salesian Family, some were already asking for the draft of the Strenna 2020, so that they could have it for the beginning of the educative pastoral year in some parts of the world.

I do this with joy, while insisting that this is only an outline, a draft with the essential points that I will develop when I prepare a meditated, interiorized, and calm reflection, one that is, as far as possible, profound and understandable at the same time.

I would like the Strenna to continue to help us to have a central thread in the pastoral guidance of the New Year in every part of the world. I bless you all.

After the meeting of the World Council of the Salesian Family in Turin in May, I decided to propose for the Strenna of 2020 a theme that, in the form of a pair, embodies the essence of our Salesian education. We received it from Don Bosco himself: to help our boys, girls and young people to be "good Christians and honest citizens". We need to deepen more and more our identity as evangelizers and educators of the faith.

There is a growing fragility, and sometimes inability, in being apostles and missionaries of the youth. And at the same time there is the risk of not educating our young people to a strong sense of citizenship, social justice and evangelical values that lead to interiorize, as a life program, service to others, commitment to public life, personal honesty and "allergy" to all types of corruption, sensitivity to the world of migration, to creation and the "common home" that has been given to us, in the commitment to protect the defenceless, those who have no say, and who are discarded.

I wonder: if we can't educate to these values, what are we getting? And what evangelization in the name of Jesus are we carrying out?

Therefore, this educative commitment is today an expression of the word of Jesus: "*Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven*"¹. This is and will continue to be Don Bosco's true "policy of the Our Father".

0. What do we mean by "policy of the Our Father" in Don Bosco?

Since the reference to Don Bosco is so direct and on one of the most sensitive themes in his history "within" the social - political - ecclesial context in which he lived, I think it is important to pay attention to what our sources have to say on this subject. It is necessary to have a clear idea of what the involvement in the "polis" of his time was like for Don Bosco: his great "ayes" and his most firm "noes", which certainly cannot be transferred unchanged in our context.

This year's Strenna allows us to reconstruct what Don Bosco thought and what his way of doing and acting was, among the youth, with the intention of preparing them for the society in which they found themselves, subject to spinning changes, in the midst of the industrial revolution where poverty for many reached extreme levels: immense social and economic inequality, the growth of the phenomenon of begging, the abandonment of "migrant" children... All this in 19th century Italy.

¹ Mt 6,10.

- a. Starting from the Biographical Memoirs, the expression "policy of the Our Father" used by Don Bosco on the occasion of a meeting between him and Pope Pius IX in 1867 is well known:

As soon as Don Bosco was in the presence of Pius IX, the Pope said to him with a smile: «With what policy would you get away from so many difficulties?».

«My policy - Don Bosco replied - is the same as Your Holiness's. It is the policy of the *Our Father*. In the Our Father we beg every day that the kingdom of the Heavenly Father come on earth, that is, that it be extended more and more, that it be more and more felt, more and more alive, more and more powerful and glorious: *Adveniat regnum tuum!* and this is what matters most"»².

- b. In any case, this conviction, which we must understand in depth and in all its meaning (as we will do in the development of the text of *Strenna*), is also illumined by other thoughts of Don Bosco's like the following:

«We do not really do politics with our work; we respect the established authorities, we observe the laws to be observed, we pay taxes and we keep going, asking only that they let us do good to the poor youth, and save souls. If we wish, we also do politics, but in a way that is totally harmless, and rather to the advantage of every government. Politics defines itself as the science and art of well governing the State. Now the work of the Oratory in Italy, France, Spain, America, in all countries where it has already settled, practicing especially to relieve the neediest youth, tends to reduce the number of rascals and vagabonds; tends to lessen the number of petty criminals and thieves; tends to empty prisons; tends, in a word, to form good citizens, who far from bothering the public authorities will be their support, to maintain order, tranquillity and peace in society. This is our policy; this is what we have only dealt with so far, this is what we will deal with in the future. And it is precisely this method, which has allowed Don Bosco to do good first to you, and hence forward to many other young people of all ages and countries»³.

- c. It is this same "policy" that pushed Don Bosco to give *effective answers to new and persistent emergencies for the good of his children*.

1. Good Christians

✓ Living in the Faith of the Lord and with the guidance of the Spirit

There is a passage from the letter to the Ephesians that expresses the beauty and greatness of the love to which we are called; a horizon that must never fail whatever the context in which we are sent. *Nothing can take away the dignity and divine greatness that lies within and before every human life as its destiny*. The fact that it is Paul who says this, who had before him a world still all pagan, makes these words even more encouraging:

For this reason, I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with

² MB VIII, 594

³ G. BOSCO, *Parlata agli ex allievi*, in ISS, *Fonti Salesiane. 1. Don Bosco e la sua opera. Raccolta antologica*, LAS, Roma 2014, 106-107.

power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge - that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God⁴.

✓ **Living in the Listening of God who speaks to us. Living what is announced. With the need to evangelize and offer the first proclamation and catechesis**

«This society in its beginning was a simple catechism»⁵. This brings us back to our origins and our roots. From Don Bosco we learned the evangelizing passion to bring every child, every young person to the encounter with Jesus. That is why we can never stop being evangelizers of the youth, knowing that «evangelization aims at a process of growth which entails taking seriously each person and God's plan for his or her life »⁶.

Our being educators and evangelizers of young people requires, on our part, above all, from personal experience, that we can say to young people with words, gestures, actions that God loves them, that «for Him, you have worth; you are not insignificant. You are important to Him»⁷.

✓ **True Christians and educators today with Salesian spirituality**

- Emphasizing the spirituality of God in daily life
- with a way of living Salesian spirituality where the atmosphere of friendship of the educator and the youth is a great help for personal growth. With the tradition of St. Francis of Sales, growing in faith, even with the help of a guide, will not be possible if there is no true friendship, that is, communication, mutual influence; a friendship that comes to be truly spiritual.
- «The relationship between Salesian formator and young people must be marked by "the greatest cordiality", because "familiarity brings love" and love brings confidence. This is what opens hearts and young people reveal everything without fear (...), because they are certain that they are loved»⁸.

✓ **Good Christians in the challenge of non-Christian environments**

- Fr. Tom Uzhunnalil's testimony, our confrere prisoner in Yemen for 557 days, attests how his spiritual interiority and faith kept him "healthy in mind and spirit" in an extreme human situation. Where he gave testimony, even in silence, with his life.
- To be able to live a dialogue and a testimony that are prophetic.

⁴ *Ephesians* 3:14-19.

⁵ *MB IX*, 61

⁶ *EG* 160

⁷ *ChV* 115

⁸ A. GIRAUDO 154, quoting G. BOSCO, *Due lettere da Roma, 10 maggio 1884*, in P. BRAIDO (de), *Don Bosco educatore*, cit. 378-384.

✓ **Good Christians in the challenge of *post-believing or post-Christian environments***

- A challenge that is, above all, a precious gift we have to offer the Church and that the Church and the world ask of us. Perhaps no charismatic family in the Church is more involved with such a vast number of people, the majority of whom are young, who are not Christian because they belong to other faiths or are no longer believers.
- This puts us on a missionary path unique in its potential for witness and evangelization. The Church asks us not only to take steps but to be forerunners in the Church on this front, where the whole future of young people is played out.

✓ **A faith lived together, and in an outward-bound exit from ourselves**

- The spiritual dimension of all Salesian pastoral activity must be lived and presented adequately and without dichotomies. It has much to empty itself of, to commit itself to, so as to see and live our fatherhood in the world, with others, as a witness of human brotherhood, which is the evangelical reason for treating others (of every age, race, culture and religion) in the awareness of being children of the same God. To call and treat others as brothers and sisters is to recognize God as Father, and to recognize God as Father means to see the others as brothers and sisters.
- In this synthesis we identify the basis of all Christian spirituality that is committed to making the world a place of encounter with God and to making the encounter with Him an opportunity to build a better world.
- Pope Francis helps us in this when he states: «When an encounter with God is called an “ecstasy”, it is because it takes us out of ourselves, lifts us up and overwhelms us with God’s love and beauty. Yet we can also experience ecstasy when we recognize in others their hidden beauty, their dignity and their grandeur as images of God and children of the Father. The Holy Spirit wants to make us come out of ourselves, to embrace others with love and to seek their good. That is why it is always better to live the faith together and to show our love by living in community and sharing with other young people our affection, our time, our faith and our troubles. The Church offers many different possibilities for living our faith in community, for everything is easier when we do it together»⁹.
- This is a real invitation to live with ever greater intensity the ecclesiology of communion, where the GIFT that each one is and has in their state of life is discovered and valued to the utmost only when it is 'given' to others, put at the service, in an outward-bound 'exit' that begins first of all by reaching out to the closest ones...

2. HONEST CITIZENS

✓ **The youth are waiting for us in the "house of Life".**

- The expectations of the youth are more and more pressing and dramatic if we look at them with a broad look. Surely, we can say that the youth population in the world has never been so numerous as it is today and proportionately has never been so 'poor and needy' as it is today, for the number and perhaps even for the living conditions.
- There remains, nevertheless, «the most delicate and precious portion» of society, as Don Bosco defined it. So, it is a very open field for the Salesian Family, but you must help us to look at it.

⁹ ChV 164.

- I believe that there is a risk in various Salesian quarters of remaining easily "within the walls", contenting ourselves with those who enter our doors.
- For this reason, a great cry from young people is this of going out to face the 'real' problems they have: the meaning of life, the lack of opportunities, formation, job placement...

✓ **To educate ourselves and our young people in Citizenship and social commitment.**

- As emerges from the documents of the synod (all three) there is a justice and a citizenship of which the youth are becoming prophets, which goes beyond that of the states to which they belong. There is greater justice than the one expressed by national juridical systems and by our governments. There is a citizenship of the world, as a common home and home of the future, which undoubtedly belongs more to the new generations than to ours.
- We should educate ourselves to the courage of this demanding vision of justice (*Laudato si'*, *Evangelii gaudium*...) that aims at sustainable development (the *sustainable development goals* of the United Nations, the various *Global Compacts*, in particular the recent one on migration that some nations shamefully did not sign).
- We should also make ourselves heard against more short-sighted visions centred on narrower interests of the category – see the ecological sensitivity of the youngest and the closure on these issues of many governments.
- Today there is a lack of credible leaders in the world, and this also questions us about our educational processes.

✓ **Educate ourselves and our young people in political commitment and service.**

- Here I believe there is so much ground to recover, as Church, as Salesian Congregation and as Salesian Family. Although this is an appeal that returns in a more or less strong form in all the documents (from synods to general chapters), in fact, the "social doctrine of the Church", which is like the "*magna charta*" of this commitment, is a little the "Cinderella" of the educative and pastoral action.
- There are young people in our houses and also young men and women religious of our Salesian Family who wonder if the ultimate goal of our works should really be the "production" of graduates with the best qualifications for a very competitive society, without ever questioning the socio-economic model that lies behind all this ...
- It is also the point where the diversity from Don Bosco's approach will be felt more: precisely in order to be faithful to his spirit today we must use expressions almost opposite to his. The *Our Father* asks us to teach young people, not only as individuals, but as a group, to become more the protagonists of the common good, even in the explicitly administrative and political field.
- We must understand well what we mean by political service and how a Christian cannot back down.
- It will be a "long battle", especially with us, consecrated men and women, who have not grown up with this mentality, but it is a cry of the world and of the young people of today.
- A light is the reality of volunteer work, as a gradual and pedagogical path for a greater commitment to the transformation of society.

✓ **To educate ourselves and our young people in honesty and to keep ourselves free from corruption.**

- The potential of the Salesian Family in this field is truly enormous, as is the reality of the Salesian cooperators and past-pupils in the "world", their presence in politics and in sectors of influence.
- It is a strong call to our internal coherence. Especially in the relationship with the laity.
- It will also be an opportunity to take steps in creating or making more visible a culture of social ethics.

✓ **Sensitive and co-responsible in a world on the move and of migration.**

- Young migrants were the first beneficiaries of Don Bosco's Oratory.
- The majority of this migration of peoples, never before so great in history, is made up of young people. Is not this a direct appeal to the Salesian Family, which is the most widespread in all continents? Shouldn't we become SPECIALISTS in this field (by investing in "higher education", as is done for technology or philosophy...)?
- If we are not the ones to 'create culture' on this open front of human life that will expand more and more in the future, who else? Who in the Church must be more prophetic on this front? Perhaps the Carthusians?
- It seems to me that it is not madness to think of our **Salesian Youth Movement** as a *movement for young people on the move*.

✓ **Taking care of the common house as the young people ask of us (*Laudato si'*,13)**

- The commitment to the common house (the vision of ecology proposed by *Laudato si'*) is not an extra commitment: it is a horizon that questions the whole of our culture, faith, lifestyle, mission... education and evangelization. There is not much to invent because in this (both in ecology and the rights of minors) the direction to follow was already clearly traced by the Magisterium of the Church since a long time and is now strongly traced by Pope Francis. How do we let ourselves to be converted...?
- Integral ecology also speaks to us of an integral educational proposal (in its human and spiritual values).

✓ **In the defence of human rights and especially the rights of minors.**

- The purpose for which we have been raised by the Holy Spirit in Don Bosco as Salesian Family is to give our whole life to minors, to the youth, to the boys and girls of the world, giving priority above all to the most defenceless, to the most needy, to the most fragile, to the poorest.
- For this reason, we must be experts in the defence of all human rights, especially the rights of minors, and ask for forgiveness to the point of tears when we have not done so. We cannot be accomplices of any abuse, meaning by this the abuse of "power, economic, conscientious, sexual" – as it was defined at the Synod on *Youth, Faith and Vocational Discernment*¹⁰.

¹⁰ DF 30.

3. WITH THE HELP OF MARY, OUR MOTHER

The presence of Mary in Don Bosco's educational system has a fundamental importance that we cannot overlook or neglect.

Don Bosco presented her to his children as Immaculate, as the simple and sweet woman who joyfully lives the project that God has for her. He also presented her as the Help of Christians, as a loving Mother, worried that all her sons and daughters could fully live the dream that God has on each of them.

In the perspective of an education that helps boys, girls and young people, and all of us as educators and evangelizers of the Salesian Family, Mary's presence has a dimension not only devotional, but also "political": she is the Mother who helps her sons and daughters to live fully their commitment to God and to the created world. This is the "policy of the Our Father".

May our Mother Help of Christians intercede for all of us.

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