

**STRENNA 2021**  
**Moved by hope:**  
**“See, I am making all things new” (Rev 21:5)**

**Introduction**

In every part of the world, in whatever country or religion, the ‘image of the year’ that will remain impressed on everyone’s mind will be the one of an elderly man, all dressed in white, all alone in the wide expanse of St Peter’s Square in Rome on a rainy afternoon towards sunset on 27 March 2020. The man was Pope Francis who has never been alone like this while leading prayer, but at the same time never accompanied by all of humanity in quite the same way. With this gesture he reminded this world of ours, made up of different races, cultures, nations and religions, that God is able to lead even the most disastrous and painful things to what is good. And he invited us to look compassionately at our poor faith.

What we have experienced over these last eleven months is, without a doubt, a challenge we have been faced with and that we cannot ignore as if nothing had happened or as if it were somehow in the past.

**1. A GLOBAL SITUATION THAT CHALLENGES US AND ONE THAT WE CANNOT IGNORE**

I could not write a single page of commentary on the Strenna 2021 by ignoring what has simultaneously affected all of humanity in all countries. We are going through very difficult times; we have experienced something we could never have imagined or suspected. We have a lot of unanswered questions and we hear dates proclaimed of a proximate end to this pandemic despite the fact that there is no confirmation of this. This has all happened because of COVID-19: an infectious disease caused by a virus hitherto unknown to human beings.

The exceptional nature of the present moment touches us deeply. So much so that not even the social, political and economic crises of recent decades have sown as much fear in the world as this pandemic has. Fear, sorrow, lack of security, tears, loss and desperation have filled the hearts of the rich and poor, the famous and the unsung, elderly and young. Undoubtedly, we are dealing with one of the biggest global crises in the past seventy years. And the decisions that governments need to take will influence the entire world for a long time to come not only the economy but politics, culture, and the very outlook human beings have.

Over these months we have seen so many gestures of generous dedication and sacrifice. Among them all it would seem right to recall the heroic commitment of health workers who have worked to the point of exhaustion; the people who have guaranteed essential services needed for social coexistence; people who have looked after the social order and some politicians, not all, who have honestly taken up their responsibilities with foresight, leaving rivalries aside.

Nevertheless, there have also been some shameful situations marked by selfishness, where there was no willingness to share health items or medical equipment, not understanding that this global economic crisis demands and will demand a global response.

At any rate, the figures speak for themselves. At the end of 2020, 80 million people have been infected and 1,800,000 are dead. Besides, COVID-19 has shown its worst side – isolation, death in total loneliness, the broken hearts of so many families.

There is no doubt that this has shaken many of our presumed certainties. Every country has sought to pass on to its citizens a sense of security. The language employed has been the metaphors of war:

“Let’s fight the virus! We will conquer it”, they say. “We will certainly overcome it sooner or later”. Months ago I was very much struck by the fact that many cities around the world encouraged their citizens with slogans that sought to ward off fear. We found messages like the following:

- ⇒ Paddington Bear in Bristol with a message on a house that read: “The art of survival. Stay safe”.
- ⇒ In Tokyo, the “Tokyo Skytree” building displayed the following message: “Together we will win.”
- ⇒ In Mexico City the Hotel Barceló displayed a message saying: “A united Mexico will resist and emerge stronger”.
- ⇒ In the Belgian city of Antwerp one can read this message on a house: “This too will pass. Better times will come. And they will be glorious.”
- ⇒ In Ontario, Canada, many hotels near Niagra Falls are using lights in the rooms to create hearts and messages of hope.
- ⇒ And in Vancouver, a message painted on the walls of a closed shop at the centre of the city says: “We love you Vancouver. Stay safe. Hang in there. Come back soon. Stay apart and stay connected. We will succeed. We will overcome even this.”

I certainly note all this in a respectful way. It could not be otherwise. But it seems to be so little, so very little, not enough to understand, explain and even involve our heart and our life. I feel that we need something deeper and more vital that will allow us to let what we are experiencing today settle in our hearts and reassure us within ourselves; on the other hand, let us not forget that there are many other pandemics that continue to develop in our world and that hit hard, although not all of them, and because they are far from us they do not make much noise. We as believers and as the Salesian Family of Don Bosco cannot ignore or forget them. I am referring to the 32 outbreaks of war active at the moment while COVID-19 is alive; I am speaking of the arms trade that has not been affected or lessened but increased. I am thinking of other terrible *endemic* situations no less serious than today’s pandemic, even though they do not affect national economies and therefore don’t count. Pope Francis rightly points this out with words addressed to young people, but which reach adults and sometimes entire families. The Pope says that the young are living in “war zones and experience violence in countless different forms: kidnapping, extortion, organised crime, human trafficking, slavery and sexual exploitation, wartime rape, and so forth ... Many young people, whether by force or lack of alternatives, live by committing crimes and acts of violence: child soldiers, armed criminal gangs, drug trafficking, terrorism.”<sup>1</sup>

And then I ask myself: what is meant by this “new normality” we hear spoken of so much? What will remain with each of us after this year? Will there be a crazy rush to recover “lost time”, a lost economy? Will it be just a terrible nightmare, or on the contrary will it leave something positive behind in many people, in how society is organised? Will the “new normality” bring something truly new, change certain things for the better?

I do not know what awaits us, but I feel that there is a journey that we as a Salesian Family can pursue and would do us a lot of good, while at the same time offering our humble contribution to others.

## 2. WHAT DO WE MEAN TO SAY WHEN WE SPEAK OF HOPE?

“Look, I found this out over the last few months: hope is like our blood: we do not see it but it needs to be there. Blood is life. This is what hope is like: it is something that circulates within, that must do so, makes us feel alive. If you do not have it you are dead, finished, there

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<sup>1</sup> FRANCIS, *Christus Vivit*, 72.

is nothing more to say... When you do not have hope it is as if you had no more blood... You might be whole but you are dead. That's the way it is.<sup>2</sup>

During these months I have often thought that the interpretation we make of this time we have to live through cannot be like these other ones. We are not driven by the interests of hotel chains or airline companies. Without denying that what ethically creates jobs and livelihoods is good in itself, re-establishing tourism has not been our focus, nor growth in productivity (they keep telling us twice over to make up for lost time and overcome the setbacks we have experienced).

However right this may be, something is still missing in our outlook, in our interpretation and in what motivates us and moves us to act. This is why it is clear to me that we cannot tackle “what comes after”, cannot confront the “new normality”, without living in *hope*. No future is absolute or definitive if it depends on human beings alone. The human being is projection and always tends towards something else. It seems that what is achieved is always halfway on the way to something new. We always aspire to something more and we are always in expectation.

This is the reason for the choice of theme for this year's Strenna.

So, what is *hope*? What are we talking about when we say *hope*? And what kind of *hope* are we talking about?

It is something that attracts me. There have been many, very many writers who have reflected on hope from a wide range of perspectives.<sup>3</sup> We can talk about hope as a human attitude. We can speak about expectation, to expect and *to hope*. I won't go into all the complex differences – such as if we should pay attention to what St Thomas Aquinas means by distinguishing between hope as a passion, hope and strength [or magnanimity], and hope as a theological virtue); this is neither the time nor place for that. What I want to say is that the human being is called to hope. And whether they want to or not, they always need to choose, with greater or less awareness, between opening to a horizon of fullness or closing themselves within the confines of tangible “hopes”, the kind we can feel and touch.

This natural openness of the human being to hope is not the same as Christian hope even if it is part of the very identity of the person, man or woman.

Just as we say in philosophy, using the Cartesian principle: ‘I think therefore I am’, we could also say: ‘I am alive, therefore I hope’. Because without hope, life would not be life, it would lack meaning in itself since in fact human existence cannot resist living in desperation, in other words “without hope”.

However, *hope* is not simply desire since desire always tends towards something concrete and determined. Nor can *hope* be reduced to mere optimism whose aim lies in calculations and predicting a positive result. Hope, on the other hand, fully concerns the person and has to do with dedication and trust. Indeed, the human being is a projection and a tendency towards “something more”, towards what is beyond the foreseeable, towards something truly new.

What I described earlier tells of a world that has many *marks of inhumanity* about it. I believe this is undeniable and clear to everyone. We do not want it to be like this but in fact it is so. But even in this world with so many marks of inhumanity we can live with a different attitude. There are those who live by complaining, negativity, with hardened hearts. Fortunately, there are also many who try to live moved by an energy that leads one to go looking for life, trying to do what is best, focusing on living by love and service (that heal of their own accord), working under the impetus of hope. When we live moved by *hope* we experience that love, service and a heart filled with humanity and filled

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<sup>2</sup> G. COLOMBERO, *La Malattia, una stagione per il coraggio* [Illness, a Season for Courage], Paoline, Rome 1981, p. 66.

<sup>3</sup> Just to quote some of those we find in theology and the history of philosophy, we could begin with St Paul, St Augustine of Hippo, St John of the Cross, Luther, Bultmann and J. Moltmann. And then R. Descartes, E. Kant, Baudelaire and M. Heidegger, G. Marcel and J.P. Sartre, Le Senne, Bollnow; and some Spaniards like Miguel de Unamuno, Ortega y Gasset and the great writer Manuel Machado.

with meaning for a world that still knows so much, too much inhumanity. From our point of view, *hope* for the human being is an ingredient of love. This is what St Paul is saying when he says, in his precious hymn to the Corinthians, that love “hopes all things” (1 Cor 13:7).

### 3. WHAT INTERPRETATION CAN WE OFFER AS BELIEVERS?

Surely in a few months this pandemic will come to an end. Other “pandemics” that bring the scourge of inhumanity with them will not disappear with a vaccine. It is certainly the right thing to do to study the coronavirus pandemic and find a vaccine. Sooner or later there will be one. They are already on the way and we are very happy about it.

Many heart-wrenching questions have been pondered in many hearts over these months. The question of the meaning or otherwise of all this has been there. It is a legitimate question and a very human one. This harsh reality of pain and sickness the world is going through today seems to drive people more to scandal and protest than to faith; to doubt rather than to trusting abandonment. But just the same, faced with this human cry or along with it there is always (for us believers) God.

Christian faith constantly shows how God, through his Spirit, accompanies the history of humankind, including in the most adverse and unfavourable of situations. He is the God who does not suffer but has compassion, according to the beautiful expression of Bernard of Chiaravalle: “*Impassibilis est Deus, sed non incompassibilis*” (God does not suffer but he is not lacking in compassion).<sup>4</sup> We read in the history of salvation that God never abandons his people but always remains united with them, especially when their pain becomes so overwhelming. God has not left us, has not gone away, but is suffering in and with those who are suffering because of this scourge, and he continues to save just as he has saved through so many who risk their lives for others, the many who serve and dedicate themselves to others in such a professional way.

In all this time, it may seem to many that this discretion of God’s, who intervenes only with the silent call of his love, is unbearable<sup>5</sup>. And yet this is the authentic reality of God who shows solidarity in accompanying us, making himself close; far from the image of the God of power who intervenes to change things “magically”.

Instead, we speak of God who is “making all things new” (Cf. Rev 21:5), because this is his plan. Thanks to the work of his Son’s redemption, the human being along with other creatures, comes into life leaving behind the groans and suffering that creation was earlier filled with and that is now renewed by his re-creating intervention. It is as if God himself were inviting human beings to look at what he is accomplishing in history and that he will bring to completion at the end of time. As Christian communities we are called to discern the present and interpret God’s action as he keeps the promise made at the Covenant, that he would accompany his People (and each individual) with his powerful presence in the face of evil and at the same time with tenderness for those who trust in him.

Faced with this, we believers feel enlightened by faith that becomes hope. As Pope Benedict says: “Redemption is offered to us in the sense that we have been given hope, trustworthy hope, by virtue of which we can face our present: the present, even if it is arduous, can be lived and accepted if it leads towards a goal, if we can be sure of this goal, and if this goal is great enough to justify the effort of the journey.”<sup>6</sup>

Christian hope is historical and is based on deep trust in God, the God of Jesus Christ who never abandons his people and is always with him.

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<sup>4</sup> BERNARD OF CHIARAVALLE, *Sermons on the Canticle of Canticles*, XXVI, 5 in *PL* 183, 906.

<sup>5</sup> As we also read in a well-known expression of Christian Duquoc in which he affirms the total autonomy of history.

<sup>6</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 1.

It is a hope that goes beyond anything that can satisfy human expectations tied to the “here and now”, this present moment, sustained only by our own resources or by the human and material means at our disposal. The hope we are speaking about is based on God’s promise, and this is its best guarantee.

The hope that moves us makes every little human hope fruitful, showing the great values in which humanity has invested its best energies: truth, goodness, justice, solidarity, peace, love, etc., and they do not turn into utopias but become concrete and partial realisations of the great plan that God has always prepared for all humanity and that becomes definitive in Christ. This is the hope that moves us.

Man's great, true hope which holds firm in spite of all disappointments can only be God – God who has loved us and continues to love us “to the end,” until all “is accomplished” (cf. *Jn* 13:1 and 19:30). Whoever is moved by love begins to perceive what “life” really is... begins to perceive the meaning of the word of hope.<sup>7</sup>

A reliable hope makes us live in the certainty that the future is fully guaranteed. So, hope is linked to having God with us. Such hope totally changes the present, not only because when the future is known as a positive reality the present becomes more bearable, but because this knowledge of the future, through faith, changes the way we live. Living with God is not the same as living without God. He is a God who opens a way even in the deserts of life, challenging disillusionment and scepticism, fear and disenchantment. This is why the hope that moves us leads us to *ask God for the gift of faith*, to ask to trust him who achieves all things in all people, and to trust others.

### **Time of trial as a time of choosing<sup>8</sup>**

The believing response to the hope that God gives rise to is based on the Gospel as God’s power for the constant transformation and renewal of life.

In his direct kind of language Pope Francis invites us to be “more people of the spring than of the autumn”.<sup>9</sup> The Christian sees the “buds” of a new world rather than the “yellow leaves” on the branches. We do not take refuge in nostalgia and complaint, because we know that God wants us to be heirs to a promise and tireless nurturers of dreams. With a certain faith in God who “comes” and intervenes [*ad-viene* and *inter-viene*].

With the arms of Christian hope – the arms of Christ’s cross – we embrace the entire world and consider nothing or nobody as lost or a failure.

But some questions continue to be legitimate ones: Who do we wish to be, faced with the reality we are called to live through? And how do we want to live through all this? Because we would be losing a great opportunity if we were not to capitalise on the experience we are going through, the pain included.

There are certainly many people who as citizens and from a civilian perspective, with a clear awareness of our humanity and without any faith perspective, are attempting to tackle this situation and this crisis. Quite legitimately so.

But among these there is also us. And today’s world needs the witness of our lives; the witness of us who have found the meaning of our lives in the encounter with Christ and in the God of Jesus Christ. St Paul reminds the Ephesians that before they met Christ they had “no hope” and were “without God in the world” (Eph 2:12). It is true that he knew they had their gods, but no hope came from their

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 27

<sup>8</sup> FRANCIS, *The Holy Father’s meditation at the extraordinary moment of prayer at the time of the pandemic*, Vatican City, 27 March 2020.

<sup>9</sup> FRANCIS, *General audience, Wednesday, 23 August 2017*.

myths. Despite the gods they were without God.<sup>10</sup> However, knowing God through his Son meant receiving a hope for them, and it also means that for the men and women of today. This is because *faith becomes hope*, “*Faith is Hope*”.<sup>11</sup>

The outlook of faith in the encounter with Jesus Christ is what makes our way of looking at faith, our way of feeling it in our heart different. Thus, the way of making decisions and discerning what is or is not of value is marked by that person-to-Person encounter. This is why a theologian who reflected very much on *hope*, like J. Moltmann, said that “when faith is transformed into hope, it does not calm people but makes them restless, does not make them patient but impatient. Instead of conforming to a given reality, they begin to suffer from it and oppose it.”<sup>12</sup>

#### **4. A LOOK AT OUR ORIGINS AND THE MANY WITNESSES OF FAITH IN OUR FAMILY**

When we look at the experience of Don Bosco’s life, we become aware that hope is a plant with deep roots that began long ago; roots that become stronger through difficult seasons and ways that require much sacrifice.

This was the case from John’s earliest years at the Becchi, having lost his father, and with Mamma Margaret who had to face up to times of famine and all the problems of life together at home. When he had the very human hope that there might be a future for him, the one he dreamed of, being able to count on the help and protection of Fr Calosso, the death of the old parish priest dashed that hope. The family circumstances and the attentive and perceptive watchfulness of a mother who sought the best for her son – although her maternal heart suffered because of it – led John to become a migrant at twelve years of age.

But it was precisely in these circumstances that the word and even more so the example of his mother opened John’s eyes to a broader horizon, and made him capable of looking upwards and ahead.

It would be the same again at the crucial moment of his choice of vocation, where Margaret would ask her son not to worry about her and her future and never to attach his heart to earthly securities: “If you decide to become a secular priest and should unfortunately become rich, I will never pay you a single visit! Remember that well!”<sup>13</sup>

Years later it would be Don Bosco, turning his gaze to the Crucifix, who would revive the heart of his discouraged, tired mother, rekindling in her that hope that would lead her to remain faithful until her death to the mission she shared with her son from the beginnings of the Oratory at Valdocco.

This strongly rooted hope would be so necessary for everything that Don Bosco experienced and that he brought into being from when he was in Turin until his last breath.

The tree is recognised by its fruits. The way in which so many young people’s lives were made to rise from situations of abandonment and desperation to the point of achieving sanctity, shows how much hope had taken its abode in Don Bosco’s heart; it was from this superabundance that he reached out to and transformed the lives of those he met.

Even in his most intense years of work, Don Bosco was never a solitary hero. He always had by his side Him who revived the flame of faith, hope and charity in him. It was an accompaniment of the “on earth as it is in heaven” kind. And also unlimited trust in Mary was the constant nourishment of hope for him. The more this trust was expressed in humanly impossible undertakings – we think of the building of the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians and the beginning of the missions in South America – the more Don Bosco was the first to “see what miracles are”.

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. BENEDICT XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 2.

<sup>11</sup> This is the title Pope Benedict chose for the first part of his Encyclical *Spe salvi*.

<sup>12</sup> J. MOLTSMANN, *Experiencias de Dios*, Sígueme, Salamanca 1983, pp. 103-104.

<sup>13</sup> *BM I*, 221-22 [English edition].

Believing that there was always a point accessible to good in every heart, in every one of life's experiences, even one that seemed to be quite off-course, was the result of this being in tune with heaven, but it was also the result of the fundamental experience of accompaniment and supervision which Don Bosco the priest had treasured here on earth. It was at Fr Cafasso's school that Don Bosco learned to walk alongside the most desperate, in the prisons and in the poorest parts of Turin at that time. This was how Don Bosco not only "learned to be a priest,"<sup>14</sup> but to become a pastor of that flock with a heart like that of those formidable sowers of hope who walked with him on the same streets of Turin's poorest peripheries: Cafasso, Cottolengo, Murialdo. Hope is formed and formed together: it is a fruit of the Communion of Saints "on earth as it is in heaven".

There is one moment in the history of the Oratory that we simply must recall because it is so close to the worldwide difficulty we all find ourselves immersed in due to the pandemic. It is the end of July 1854. Cholera breaks out in Turin. We know the story so there is no need to repeat it here. The vision of faith and the practice of charity, including in a heroic way, was no private virtue, a characteristic just of Don Bosco or a few super-generous types; it was the lifestyle of that small educative community. Hope is a community virtue, one that is nurtured through mutual example and through the strength of fraternal communion. This is also the witness of the Valdocco Oratory during the cholera, just like the experience of so many educative and pastoral communities during COVID times, and at the forefront are communities of doctors, nurses and health workers who have given and continue to give their lives to save the lives of others.

Moments of crisis like this bring out another feature of hope as Don Bosco lived it. He firmly believed in Providence. A faith and trust that grew ever greater with the passing of the years. It is a thread that ran throughout his entire life and through everything he gave life to. It is perhaps the most tangible way in which one can contemplate "a splendid blending of nature and grace" in him:<sup>15</sup> what he believed in his heart set his everyday steps and choices in motion, opening paths of hope for so many even when it seemed there were no more ways out.

### **So many other testimonies of hope**

We find valuable examples and life models in Salesian holiness that encourage us to hope as a virtue and attitude of life in God. Let me make just a brief, quick reference to some.

Our confrere **Blessed Stefan Sandor (1914-1953)**: offers us a real example of what it means to move from division to unity and then to communion. The strong sense of his vocation as a Salesian brother led him to make a real choice in defence of life; he deeply believed that his life had to be lived in the midst of his people and culture, which was going through moments of uncertainty and desolation. His upright attitude restores our perspective of "*knowing how to stay*" with our field of mission to enlighten those who risk losing hope, to strengthen those who feel they are failing, and to be a sign of God's love when he "appears" to be absent from history. Blessed Stefan surmounted the walls created by the division between peoples and the enslavement to ideological totalitarianism, going out to meet others and overcoming all kinds of personal or social fears.

The story of **Blessed Sister Maddalena Morano (1847-1908)** is a very beautiful one. She stood out as a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians for an apostolic daring that made her what Don Bosco always wanted from his daughters in the spirit of Mornese: to be living monuments of the Virgin. As "born teacher", she knew that the liberating act in her Salesian mission meant teaching her girls to open the frontiers of their hearts and minds so as to transcend the narrow confines of an oppressive

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<sup>14</sup> G. BOSCO, *Memorie dell'Oratorio di San Francesco di Sales*, in ISS, *Fonti Salesiane: Don Bosco e la sua opera*, LAS, Roma 2014, p. 1233 [Note: also available in the English edition of *Salesian Sources*, Bangalore]

<sup>15</sup> *Costituzioni e Regolamenti SDB*, 21.

culture of poverty and lack of opportunity. She knew how to teach perseverance and not to give into threats; her feminine strength became the kindest and most convincing expression of the responsibility we have towards our vulnerable brothers and sisters. As a solution to the calamitous times she had to endure, she pointed out new directions to those threatened by isolation and taught them the immensity of the goodness of God.

In the **Servant of God Fr Charles Braga (1889-1971)** we find an example of pastoral intelligence, be it in his tireless dedication to the missions or in his accompaniment of members of the Salesian Family. Without losing heart, but with the hope of those who place their faith in Christ our Lord, he had the patience that Don Bosco recommended so much for knowing how to accompany young people as they built a mature personality. This patience was the fruit of the love that flowed in his missionary heart, enabling him to build bridges rather than barriers between cultures. The call he felt to promote unity among people helped him to overcome the differences that could arise among others, convinced that he was always sustained by the divine grace that generates a culture of encounter.

Another valuable example is **Blessed Joseph Kowalski (1911-1942)**. How much faith and courage were needed to give peace to others even when there was nothing else he had to offer other than his own life! Jesus' oblation love in offering his life for humanity gave us the greatest example of love. It is profoundly echoed by Joseph Kowalski: a confrere who was a witness to peace in the midst of war, who was serenity in the midst of confusion and mercy in the midst of hatred.

**Servant of God Antonino Baglieri (1951-2007)** is another model. The path to holiness so often requires a change of values and vision. This was the path experienced by Nino who, after long suffering, discovered the great opportunity to be reborn to a new life in the Cross. Nino was always accompanied by his mother, who with love and compassion always believed in him and his talented life; he was also surrounded by lay and religious friends who reminded him of the beauty of communion. He let himself be touched by the community that strengthened him, both in his personality and in his faith, and saved him. He understood that by allowing himself to be encountered by others he discovered who he was and gave meaning to his existence, marked entirely by divine mercy – even from his sickbed – to be a 'craftsman of peace and joy'.

These and so many others are giants of the faith who lived a life of charity and understood what it means to have *hope* in all the significance that word has. Those who hope know that they are not walking alone, and they also know that they need people to accompany and guide them on this journey. Pope Benedict XVI expresses this so beautifully: “The true stars of our life are the people who have lived good lives. They are lights of hope. Certainly, Jesus Christ is the true light, the sun that has risen above all the shadows of history. But to reach him we also need lights close by – people who shine with his light and so guide us along our way.”<sup>16</sup>

## 5. A SALESIAN INTERPRETATION OF THE PRESENT MOMENT

This is our time. It is the time we have been given for living. It might be most appropriate to ask ourselves what the best way should be for dealing with the post-pandemic period, and perhaps discover the value of *hope* at a time when most people are experiencing fear or just cannot wait for the moment to come when they can forget what has happened this year. But can we really forget what has happened, forget the families who have lost relatives? Forget almost two million victims? Forget the faces of the weakest ones of our society? Forget so many people who have worked on the front line? Would it be right to forget all this? No, certainly not. Indeed, it would be the worst thing we could do.

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<sup>16</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 49.



Thus, we ask ourselves if what we have been going through may be teaching us something, and if we are ready to change something, to rethink some of our values or life views...

⇒ We hope that the *confinement* we have experienced will help us to *open ourselves up*. We are constantly on the move, in a hurry to respond to everything often in a frenzied rhythm. Unexpectedly, “compulsory quiet” came our way, and perhaps it closed us in a bit on ourselves, within our homes, our families, in compulsory but essential quarantine. Many kinds of fear appeared: fear of the other, especially of the other nearby or not too far away; the fear of contagion coming from who knows where and generating and causing the greatest uncertainty. This is why “open up” must be the order of the day. Open up spaces, settings, windows onto life. Open ourselves to encountering the other. Abandon everything that closes us in, recover the meaning of our openness, our openness of heart. Recover the vision of a broader horizon.

⇒ From growing *individualism* to greater *solidarity* and *fellowship*. God's imprint on humanity is particularly evident in the ability to reach out to others in an act of solidarity with his creation. Selfishness is the opposite act, because it seeks self-satisfaction, makes us self-referential, generates and feeds the ever-growing culture of individualism that ends up manifesting how small we are. During the pandemic we undoubtedly realised that we are too vulnerable, fragile and dependent. All of us. Not just a few. Under the same collective unimaginable and heartfelt threat, all of humanity feels it needs others. We live in need of each other, of mutual care. We do not want to be alone. May this time teach us to bank more on solidarity and fellowship in the face of the “virus of individualism”. How right Pope Francis is! Solidarity is the best victory over loneliness. “Solidarity finds concrete expression in service, which can take a variety of forms in an effort to care for others. And service in great part means ‘caring for vulnerability, for the vulnerable members of our families, our society, our people’. In offering such service, individuals learn to ‘set aside their own wishes and desires, their pursuit of power, before the concrete gaze of those who are most vulnerable... Service always looks to their faces, touches their flesh, senses their closeness and even, in some cases, “suffers” that closeness and tries to help them. Service is never ideological, for we do not serve ideas, we serve people.’”<sup>17</sup> There are many who await our smile, our word, our presence.

⇒ Moving from *isolation* to the culture of *encounter*. It is certainly not easy to come out of our own isolation, especially when we think it is a value. In fact, it is often easier to remain isolated including out of fear of others’ closeness. But in the human heart burns the flame that ignites the absolute necessity to be together: in family, with friends, in the local association, in a volunteer group, with school mates, with colleagues at work, with our football team. This time of vulnerability offers us room for new kinds of empathy and reconnecting. It is the “culture of encounter” of the other as other. “Isolation and withdrawal into one’s own interests are never the way to restore hope and bring about renewal. Rather, it is closeness; it is the culture of encounter. Isolation, no; closeness, yes. Culture clash, no; culture of encounter, yes.”<sup>18</sup>

⇒ From *division* to greater *unity* and *communion*. From this perspective we are aware that it is not possible to generate a culture of encounter without safeguarding unity; the same unity that the Spirit of God grants to those who enter into communion with him, and that unites us and spurs us on to live the same calling: that of being God’s beloved children. A lesson we have learnt from the harsh experience of isolation, of journeying apart in the boat of life because of closed borders (geographical and even spiritual), has allowed us to realise that in the end ‘we are all in the same boat’. We are united by the

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<sup>17</sup> FRANCIS, *Fratelli tutti*, 115.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

humanity that we are. But a humanity that has been affected. COVID is the first crisis to strike everyone worldwide without distinction. It is a huge paradox: a virus that has created division through fear now brings us together, urges us to be interested in one another. It unites us in an empathy made up of altruism, solidarity, concern. So many expressions of the common good and, we hope, of compassion and mercy. It also brings us together in the search for solutions. And probably the selfishness that divides is a much more ancient and dangerous disease than COVID, one that existed earlier and must be cured. I hope that with the arrival of a vaccine for the virus we can finally vaccinate ourselves against the lack of communion, achieving victory over division. What unites us is the medicine of the Gospel of hope and joy that makes us all the more human and children of God.

⇒ From *discouragement, emptiness and lack of meaning* to *transcendence*.

From claiming that we are “the absolute masters of our lives and of everything that exists” we have come to feeling that we are very fragile. Many families have found it necessary to invent a thousand different stories to explain to children why it is that they have to stay at home, far from their grandparents, their schoolmates and neighbours, without the possibility of going away for a fortnight or twenty days. I recall the image in the film “Life is beautiful” (1997) where a father (Benigni), in the most unfortunate situation where they are in a concentration camp, invents a game to justify what they are going through for his son. That game becomes his salvation.

The emptiness of this time has been very damaging. We have moved from many certainties to the uncertainty of an unstable and insecure terrain. An emptiness that differs from nihilistic ideologies and which, in any case, opens us up to the need for transcendence.

The Lord speaks to us in this time. And what is he asking of us? What is he offering us? How are we welcoming it? “Amid this storm, the façade of those stereotypes with which we camouflaged our egos, always worrying about appearances, has fallen away, revealing once more the ineluctable and blessed awareness that we are part of one another, that we are brothers and sisters of one another.”<sup>19</sup> Here we are then: in extreme situations God continues to speak to us through the hearts of people who see and respond in an original, different way, a way that makes a difference.

### **We are not saved by our own strengths alone. No one is saved alone**

“A worldwide tragedy like the Covid-19 pandemic momentarily revived the sense that we are a global community, all in the same boat, where one person’s problems are the problems of all. Once more we realized that no one is saved alone; we can only be saved together. As I said in those days, ‘the storm has exposed our vulnerability and uncovered those false and superfluous certainties around which we constructed our daily schedules, our projects, our habits and priorities... Amid this storm, the façade of those stereotypes with which we camouflaged our egos, always worrying about appearances, has fallen away, revealing once more the ineluctable and blessed awareness that we are part of one another, that we are brothers and sisters of one another.’”<sup>20</sup>

Gone is the time for the belief that we can do everything with our own resources, on our own, like ‘giants of vanity’ for whom nothing is impossible.

We must overcome the facile narcissism that has convinced us that the universe bows down before us, deluding ourselves that we possess a “superpower” over everything and everyone ... We have learned, because of this disease, how vulnerable we are; how much we need each other and that alone we are nothing. We discover that the neighbour across the street is important: to say hello to everyone we meet; to erase anonymity and believe in “us” as part of me, without which we cannot live. The others are “me” declined as “we”, much more dependent on the richness of humanity in its values of beauty and shared life. Let us abandon fears. Let us create bonds. Let us grow. Let us stop rejecting

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<sup>19</sup> FRANCIS, *Fratelli tutti*, 32.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*.

the other because they are other, different, foreign, etc... Let us start from an “us” that joins the plural and the different with the particular, rich, unique, unrepeatable and beautiful that belongs to each person, to each of us, precious as we are in ourselves.

We cannot be afraid to rediscover the fraternity that unites us as children of God, greatly loved in the Son (cf. Eph 1:5). Because of this we understand solidarity, fraternity, care for others, respect for the value of life, the dignity of the person, the truth of the other which is more than ever now a virtue. We are too precious to give in to the empty selfishness of a disease called indifference, and to self-contemplation or self-referentiality. Especially with regard to our dear young people who are “the burning bush”, the “holy ground” that saves us. It is they, our great hope, who project us towards a common future with many examples of sharing and common projects: in favour of creation and the environment, of our common home, and justice, freedom; peace and universal fellowship.

New responses are needed. A courageous life that is the bearer of something truly new. To be ultimately like Don Bosco today, when cholera is called “coronavirus”, it is necessary to go, to go out, to be a presence and a response.

### **More than ever: presence is witness!**

That is exactly right: more than ever, presence and witness are needed. Our presence, and as a testimony, the joy that comes from our faith “that hopes”, because “faith and hope go forward together”.<sup>21</sup>

And this especially for the young who we cannot leave on their own (more so now than ever!): they are waiting for us with open arms so that we can once again inhabit their lives, with the strength of a love capable of conquering everything, because in all this only love can triumph! We must once again dream the dream of the young. We must put ourselves in that situation which enables us to overcome what fear has prevented from becoming reality. Oratories, youth centres, schools, training centres, social works, parishes: each of our works must allow itself to be flooded by the living, generous and revitalising heart of each young person who transforms homes (walls of silence) into spaces of life (of the life of young people). We want that life! That is the life that saves us! We listen to the cry of young people who ask for presence, attention, accompaniment, availability, and who also ask us to show them the true face of God. If we pay attention to them, if we listen to them, they will ask us with greater intensity to speak to them first of all about this Lord who enlivens our hope and who does not allow us to become discouraged or to give up (cf. 1 Pet 3:15). They will ask us to offer them the “bread of life” that nourishes our “being for them” and our “being among them”, to generate that life that the Lord wishes to give at this moment in history: the life that will have no end. It is the good news of the resurrection that revives our hope and makes us new people for a new time. Because this world will end. And only what we have loved will remain.

## **6. A SALESIAN FAMILY THAT WITNESSES TO HOPE**

As we have had occasion to experience, the circumstances tied to the pandemic over these months have revealed some signs of a blurring of hope. But I want to insist on and point to some of the fully understood signs of the beauty of evangelical hope we have experienced, signs that place us on a path where we can express the power of the Salesian charism when it is lived in hope. I feel that as Don Bosco’s Family in the Church and the world this is the testimony expected of us: the ability to live in hope.

Some proposals for continuing on this path.

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<sup>21</sup> FRANCIS, *General audience Wednesday, 20 September 2017.*

## 6.1. Let us rediscover that “**faith and hope go forward together**”.<sup>22</sup>

***Commitment: let us imitate Don Bosco and his great capacity for enthusing his youngsters to live life as a celebration and “faith as happiness”***<sup>23</sup>

We are all sustained not by abstract ideas and beautiful promises, but by hope founded on *the experience of God’s love* poured out on us through the Holy Spirit who moves everything towards good.

But hope does not go forward alone. In order to hope we need to have faith. Christian hope *makes faith tenacious*, able to withstand the shocks of life; it allows us to see beyond every obstacle, it opens our eyes and allows us to place our life and history within an interpretation made in the light of God’s salvation. Therefore, hope is *waiting for the gift of life every day, waiting for the presence of God*, a God who is Father (Abba), who is intimate and personal. He is a God who is *concerned and interested in our fate*, and places himself on our path with his patience and mercy. While we recognise our poverty and fragility, God gives us his heart. The encounter of personal and community poverty with his fatherly heart lets mercy shine forth.

So then, aware of our fragility and how difficult the task is today of educating and forming people, more than ever we need to be sowers of hope, provocateurs of true hope, whisperers of this same hope. Don Bosco did this in a passionate and almost natural way. And we are involved in this because we truly believe that it is hope that sustains life, looks after it, protects it. “It is the most divine thing that can exist in the heat of mankind.”<sup>24</sup> During this catechesis the Holy Father referred to the great French poet Charles Péguy, who left us with beautiful pages on hope. In one of them he says in a poetic way that God is not so surprised by the faith of human beings, not even by their charity. What really fills him with wonder and moves him is the hope of the people “That those poor children”, he writes, “see how things are going and believe that they will be better tomorrow morning”.

With this kind of trust as educators and people who accompany families, ordinary folk and the people of God in general, I invite you: *let us never lose hope; let us cultivate an outlook on life that is rich in hope*, and never let it die out in our hearts. Let us be lights that invite to hope through the testimony of how we live. Let us pass on happiness in the simple but genuine way we live our faith.

## 6.2. Let us learn that **prayer is the school of hope**<sup>25</sup>

***Commitment: let us journey with the young and their families by praying, learning to pray better and exercising hope by praying better and better.***

“A first essential setting for learning hope is prayer.”<sup>26</sup>

A characteristic of our Salesian spirituality is to perceive God as being very close, very much present in events and with whom, in our simplicity, we can enter into dialogue “with our heart”, a simple, childlike dialogue.

As members of the Church, we are aware that we are born like her in prayer and that prayer sustains her growth and ours as well. Prayer that is a *school of hope*. By presenting our fragility in this personal encounter with Love, we learn to let ourselves be loved by him. Ultimately, we are called to develop *an inner climate of trust* in the Lord, entrusting ourselves to him as the centre of everything. He who makes it possible to live to the full. So, let us put our thoughts, desires, activities, sufferings, hopes, dreams into God's heart, drawing them up in his heart.

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>23</sup> 20th Special General Chapter of the Salesians of Don Bosco, no. 328.

<sup>24</sup> FRANCIS, *General audience Wednesday*, 27 September 2017.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. BENEDICT XVI, *Spe Salvi*: title of the first part of the Encyclical, no. 32.

<sup>26</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 32.

The spiritual life nurtured by prayer is *unifying*, it gives meaning to events, meaning to the various things we do and experience and with prayer we discover the meaning of the *gratuitousness of life*, of our life and the lives of the people entrusted to us. This perspective of prayer as a gift is essential for the spiritual journey, knowing that everything has been given to us by the Lord.

In the Encyclical that Pope Benedict XVI offered the Church there are some concrete examples of hope in prayer such as the experience of Vietnamese Cardinal Nguyen Van Thuan who, during thirteen years of imprisonment – nine of which in solitary confinement, in a human situation that would have been one where any person would have despaired of listening to God, being able to talk to Him – it was the power of his hope that enabled him, after his release, to become a genuine witness of hope, “to that great hope which does not wane, even in the nights of solitude”<sup>27</sup>

As Don Bosco’s family, the Salesian Family, we will take significant steps if, on all the branches of this leafy tree loved by the Spirit, we advance in this school of hope born of prayer and if we also journey alongside our young people and other people.

### **6.3. Let us grow by living with a sense of the fatigue of daily life.**

***Commitment: let us help the young and their families, and the People of God, to discover the gifts that God gives us, without complaint, proposing objectives that enthuse them and take away monotony and mediocrity.***

Let us make daily life a valuable opportunity for experiencing, despite fatigue and tiredness, that there is a Love that surpasses us and in the awareness that our work is not indifferent in God’s eyes and therefore not indifferent either for the development of life, of our life, and of history itself that we are trying to build and of the Kingdom of God that we want to help bring about.

I believe that this can be a magnificent horizon for educating to hope. In the first instance for the certainty that comes from faith, that confirms that not only does God not allow himself to be ever outdone in generosity, but that he acts and always surprises, even amidst our difficulties.

The *extraordinary* takes place only when we begin to *experience* the little ordinary things; daily life, the life of every Christian, is made up of repeated gestures, hard work and without too much sense of satisfaction, but it is also made up of subdued though intimate joys, real encounters, and surprises that surprise the soul.

The passing of the days demands a patient return to oneself, an awareness of one's own life. *Hope and patience* are the two attitudes to be witnessed to as Christians in our fast-paced world. The proliferation of fear in our societies is also due to the fact that we have lost the sense of waiting, and therefore of patience and hope. For this reason, hope and patience are closely linked, and the act of hoping already contributes to overcoming the time of trial.

This is also possible because there is a “natural trust” typical of our Salesian spirit that leads us to trust in the natural and supernatural resources of every individual, especially of every young person, and that urges us not to lament the times in which we live, but to appreciate the values in the world and in history (including in these difficult times), and to “hold fast to what is good” (1 Thess 5:21). In fact we share the belief with Card. Nguyen Van Thuan that the habit of complaining is like a contagious epidemic whose symptoms are pessimism, loss of peace, fear and loss of the passion for life that comes from being united with God.

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem.*

Don Bosco had experienced that nothing can compensate for the value of authentic relationships, of feeling loved, of feeling part of a family, at home. These relationships were *a powerful form of protection in the face of the poverty and loneliness of his boys*. In fact he was a master at rediscovering the concrete nature of happiness in little things, in paying attention to everyone, revealing how much the treasure of our preventive System was preserved in affectionate encounters and in seeing to close ties. Little gestures that are sometimes lost in the anonymity of daily life; gestures of tenderness, affection, compassion that are decisive and important just the same for others' hope. They are *familiar gestures of attention to detail and the details of every day* and they ensure that life has meaning and that there is communion and communication among us.

#### **6.4. Let us live hope especially in times of difficulty and loss.**

***Commitment: Let us allow ourselves to be educated by God. Let us trust him especially in times of darkness.*** St Teresa of Avila, a great mystic, recognises that dryness is God's invitation to "move forward".

We have all gone through times of difficulty and loss in life. In one way or another we have been called *to come to terms with certain painful and humanly difficult personal experiences*. At times our days, our activities, our prayer and all of daily life, may appear unexpectedly empty, dull.

But with *the suffering and pain present in every human life*, we are given a jolt of wonder and hope. Indeed, "the greatness of humanity is essentially determined by its relationship with suffering and with those who suffer."<sup>28</sup>

Suffering and pain seem to be part of everyone's life at one time or another. Jesus did not love suffering, nor did he ever justify it. Indeed, in the encounter with those marked by pain, he is moved and often heals the sick person, showing that it was not at all God's will. Faced with this, instead of withdrawing passively into ourselves, all tired and discouraged, we are asked to cultivate courage, which in the moral and spiritual life is indicated by the term *fortitude*. In fact, this indispensable strength for the quality of life is linked to awareness of faith.

Many believers are recognised precisely in their moments of greatest difficulty and suffering, when they appear burdened by problems greater than themselves. These trials are not interpreted as occasional mishaps, but as *a moment of necessary purification* and an invitation to abandon the criteria adopted until now, in order to have a more intimate experience of God, allowing themselves to be educated by Him and in this way also fulfil the mission received. We are asked to walk in trust, even in dark moments.

As believers we are convinced that only God has the power to transform the most extreme and difficult moments of our existence into the *sure hope* that our suffering, pain and sadness are not in vain or useless.

It is as if the individual finds him or herself before a crossroads where they must decide whether to give up or instead let new human and spiritual energies emerge. In this latter case there is struggle, tension, conflict but they are sterile; we are called *to keep hold of hope in dark times* because the Gospel always proclaims good news: life can start over again, we can always be born again. "*Spes ultima dea*", the ancients used say: "Hope is the last to die". Hope is the last bastion of life. It is like the light at sunset: it still manages to give life to objects before they blend into the darkness and allows us to see our way home before night descends and all is wrapped in darkness.

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<sup>28</sup> FRANCIS, "Un plan para resucitar" a la Humanidad tras el coronarivirus [A plan to restore humanity after the Coronavirus] (PDF), in *Vida Nueva Digital*, 17 April 2020, p. 38.

## **6.5. Hope as a decisive return to the poor and excluded.**

***Commitment: in our family, fidelity to the Lord with Don Bosco passes above all through the preferential option for the poorest, the most abandoned and the excluded.***

This is why charismatically today more than ever, we are expected to distinguish ourselves as the Salesian Family by this original option for the poor and the excluded, the discarded, the abandoned, the voiceless and those without dignity. There is no other way for us. Fidelity to the Lord in Don Bosco requires us to recognise ourselves in the pain of others.

In full communion with the tradition and the purest teaching of the Church, from the first Latin and Greek fathers to the most recent pontiffs, we cannot but be and feel responsible for this world and for the life of each person. *Every injustice against the poor is an open wound that is an open attack* (even if we do not believe it) on our dignity. We should never forget that we do not live only for ourselves. This is why hope makes charity persevere. *Jesus invites us to this stubborn love*, to keep our minds and hearts as open as possible to his action which comes as suddenly as the negative situations we encounter; to become and be an effective ‘field hospital’ for all and especially for injured young people. This requires more courage, more trust and more commitment from us. This is not the time to “pull the oars back into the boat”!

As a religious family born from Don Bosco’s pastoral heart, we are “the hope of those who have no hope”: the most needy and vulnerable young people who are at the centre of God’s attention, and who must always be our privileged beneficiaries.

They are not a “wall” for us but a “door”: what the poor teach us is the authority of the suffering and the marginalised. Let us commit ourselves to bring hope into the hearts of these people, to give them comfort, to lift the weak and needy, to meet the various human and spiritual needs that challenge us every day. Hope heads in the direction of ethics and action. In this, Christian hope differs from a vague optimism – as I have already said.

We must not be robbed of hope, Pope Francis tells us, nor must we kill off the various signs of hope and rebirth that emerge from the world. Indeed, how many people happy to love Jesus by serving him in the poor, people who are generous and empathetic *provide us with precious teachings expressed through their lives!* We thank the Lord for these examples of a consistent and loving life. Men and women for the poor, a sign of hope that the Lord has put on our path: they are the lives spent and given to their brothers and sisters by these “normal” but heroic people, a simple but rocky heroism, founded on the Gospel lived and proclaimed.

## **6.6. Recognising ourselves in the other’s pain.**

***Commitment: to be faithful to Don Bosco today, the Father of our Salesian Family, means being actively on the side of those who suffer any kind of injustice.***

“How dangerous and harmful this is, for it makes us lose our amazement, our excitement and our zeal for living the Gospel of fraternity and justice!”<sup>29</sup> Pope Francis writes in his *Evangelii Gaudium*. And this has to do as much with the injustices, which derive from the economic systems that are the cause of so much poverty, as with all kinds of human suffering.

Reading the Gospel, there is no doubt that the economy and goods must be at the service of people, especially those who live in conditions of real poverty. Therefore, a Christian with an authentic social conscience and a sense of justice, and even more so we consecrated and lay people of Don Bosco's Family, cannot accept a form of economy based exclusively on the

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<sup>29</sup> FRANCIS, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 179.

“logic of growth” (so hoped for after this pandemic) , if this is the sure cause of the increase in poverty and the poor: two realities that always go hand in hand.

Therefore, to say no to an economy of exclusion is to say no to any political and economic initiative that forgets the weakest. Christians and members of the Salesian Family must feel uneasy in this situation. Faced with these realities, one cannot remain “neutral” or “without an opinion”. The dignity of our brothers and sisters is at stake and we will certainly have to “get off” the pedestal of our securities to look at their reality without shame. This is what the Lord Jesus did, even though he was considered socially and politically incorrect.

And even if I know that what I will say will later prove uncomfortable for us – for me first of all – I believe in conscience that *we must feel as unbearable for our consciences the pain others feel* and that translates into the situation of the homeless, forced migration, people who “no longer matter”, wars, attacks, persecution for racial or religious motives, sexual abuse, human and organ trafficking, networks of prostitution, abandoned minors, child soldiers: an infinite torrent of painful realities.

It is because we love this wonderful world in which God has put us and because we love the humanity to which we belong – with the kinds of dramas I have just described and with the effort of seeing that nothing seems to change radically – because we also love the longings and hopes and the earth as our common home, because this is our today, the today of our post-pandemic world ... it is because of all this, this is a precious opportunity to position ourselves clearly and to educate our young people in social and political commitment in the light of the Gospel and the hope it radiates.

#### **6.7. Converting to hope is believing in the plan of the Gospel.**

***Commitment: for this reason, as the Salesian Family of Don Bosco, we cannot fail to show who is the reason for our Hope, the God of Jesus Christ and his Gospel.***

In the greatest crises so many certainties disappear, “certainties” that we thought we had, meanings attributed which, in reality, turn out to be unreliable. But, in fact, *the great values of the Gospel and its truth* remain when opportunistic or temporary philosophies and thoughts fail. The values of the Gospel do not vanish, they do not become “liquid”, they do not disappear. For this reason, as the Salesian Family of Don Bosco we cannot give up showing what we believe in.

Evangelisation must be for us an existential and true joy, rooted in the Mystery of Christ, the incarnate, dead and risen God who penetrates the innermost part of human reality. The Gospel is the absolute message of joy that infuses strength and the boldness to overcome all sadness (Cf. Rm 9:2): The Gospel is the vital breath of hope: hope in the Lord who is in our midst and who continually comes to meet us; a hope that generates joy, a hope that encourages us and launches us into a concrete commitment in favour of others and in history, a hope that makes us feel, as Don Bosco's Family, that we are God's mediation for others, signs and bearers of his love: a hope that opens us up to eternal life that has already begun here.

“Faith also means believing in God, believing that he truly loves us, that he is alive, that he is mysteriously capable of intervening, that he does not abandon us and that he brings good out of evil by his power and his infinite creativity ... . Let us believe the Gospel when it tells us that the kingdom of God is already present in this world and is growing, here and there, and in different ways.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 278.



How we should be encouraged at thinking that none of us is hope in ourselves, but that each of us can be the echo of hope for others, that *genuine hope* that is the most *Divine* reality that can exist in the heart of humankind.

Because “If Jesus overcame the world, he is capable of overcoming in us all that opposes goodness. If God is with us, no one will steal from us that virtue which we absolutely need for life. No one will rob us of hope.”<sup>31</sup>

### **6.8.A concrete commitment to take up as the Salesian family**

Let us distribute and read (alone, as a family, in groups) the latest Encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, which puts fraternity at the centre of everything. It offers us a beautiful reflection on how to heal the world, repair the common home from human and environmental damage, and reduce the consequences of growing social and economic inequality. With the Pope, we are sure that we will succeed in safeguarding the heritage that the Creator has placed in our hands, only as brothers and sisters, overcoming the temptation to divide and overpower one another. Only together will we build a better world that gives hope to future generations.

### **6.9.A truth to be explored as the fruit of this Strenna**

With the clear aim of leaving a very special memory, I conclude the commentary on the Strenna 2021 with a few lines that express very well what I have shared in these pages and which I invite you to internalise, before making a final reference to our Mother Mary who awaits the birth of her beloved Son, immersed without any pretence in the great plan of redemption.

“We Christians live by hope: death is only the penultimate word, but the last word is God's, the word of resurrection, of the fullness of life and eternal life. When we abandon ourselves to trust in God and trust in him we have a certainty that gives us serenity, that is, that *we do not have everything in our hands*, but *are in God's hands*. Christians shape their life not with their own strength, but with the strength of the Holy Spirit. In times of uncertainty we must trustfully abandon ourselves to his guidance.”<sup>32</sup>

## **7. MARY OF NAZARETH, MOTHER OF GOD, STAR OF HOPE**

Mary, Mother, you know well what it means to have trust and *to hope* against all hope, trusting in God's name.

Your “yes” to God reawakened every hope for humanity.

You experienced powerlessness and loneliness at the birth of your Son; you preserved in your heart the announcement that a sword would pierce your heart (Cf. *Lk* 2:35); you suffered when you saw your Son a “sign of contradiction”, misunderstood, rejected.

You knew the hostility and rejection aimed at your Son until, at the foot of his cross on Golgotha, you understood that Hope would not die. That is why you remained with the disciples as a mother. – “Woman, here is your son” (*Jn* 19:26) – as the Mother of Hope.

“Holy Mary,  
Mother of God, our Mother,  
teach us to believe,  
to hope and to love with you.  
Show us the way to his Kingdom!  
Star of the Sea,

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<sup>31</sup> FRANCIS, *General audience Wednesday, 27 September 2017*.

<sup>32</sup> W. KASPER – G. AUGUSTIN, *Comunione e Speranza. Testimoniare la fede al tempo del coronavirus*, [Communion and Hope: Witnessing to faith at the time of the coronavirus] LEV, Vatican City 2020, p. 121.

shine upon us  
and guide us on our way.”<sup>33</sup>  
Amen.

Fr Ángel Fernández Artime, S.D.B.  
*Rector Major*

Rome, 25 December 2020  
*The day of the Lord's birth*

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<sup>33</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 50.