

STRENNA 2023

AS THE YEAST IN TODAY'S HUMAN FAMILY.

The lay dimension of the Family of Don Bosco

On the occasion of the Salesian Family World Advisory Council meeting held in May 2022 in Valdocco, Turin, I was asked to explore the theme of the lay dimension of the Salesian Family through the Strenna for 2023: a family that seeks to be always faithful to the Lord in Don Bosco's "footsteps". This comment is intended to respond to this request.

First of all, I would like to remind you that the Strenna 2023 is aimed at **two target groups**.

The first are teenagers and other young people in all the presences of Don Bosco's Family around the world – as the first "beneficiaries" of the Salesian mission. In fact, from the outset they have been in Salesian houses and at the centre of the attention of any group in our family and they must be able to know – as Christians or even as believers of other religions – the strength of this message of the Lord: "be salt of the earth and light of the world", *be the yeast in today's human family*. It is a very beautiful commitment, a beautiful way of living one's vocation; and, at the same time it is a valuable challenge addressed to us educators who have the task of accompanying young people on their journey of life, so that it may be lived in the name of commitment and responsibility, in the search for fraternity and justice for each and every one.

At the same time, the Strenna is addressed to all the groups of the Salesian Family, invited to rediscover (or to discover) the *lay dimension* proper to our family and the vocational complementarity that exists and that must always exist among us.

In the light of what most characterises our pedagogy and our spirituality, we intend to help adolescents and other young people especially to discover that each of them can be like the leaven that Jesus speaks of, like that good yeast that helps the "bread" of the *human family* to grow and become bigger and tastier. And each of them can be a true pro-active agent, because, in their own way, they are "a mission on this earth."¹

For **Don Bosco's Family**, this is a message that strongly urges it to rediscover its lay dimension. In fact, it is a family where the majority of the members are lay people: men and women of many nations and distributed across all continents. This variety that distinguishes us is already a gift in itself and is a responsibility that we cannot shirk. Being so rich in cultures and so widely connected and present in the world is the fruit of the history of the mission and charism in which we were generated and which are a gift of the Spirit. Being **together** as a people of God (*laós*

¹EG, 273; ChV, 25.

= people, hence the Italian word 'laico' and the English 'lay', that is, a member of the people) for the good of young people from the East to the West of the globe, from the South to the North, is in full harmony with what the Church has been insistently demanding for a long time, and it is what our fragmented world needs more and more.

As **consecrated men and women in the Salesian Family**, we are likewise invited to be “leaven in the dough of the bread of humanity” and to live with one another, allowing ourselves to be enriched by the evangelical secularity of so many brothers and sisters. Indeed, we share most of our days with them. Therefore, secularity is already in our DNA as consecrated Salesian men and women, because we were generated in the family which Don Bosco gave life to in the first Oratory and which, from its origins, was made up of consecrated and lay people. We were born with this intense closeness and sharing between states of life and vocations. In short and to put it succinctly: *we are called as a Family to give of ourselves and to complete each other.*

1. The yeast of the Kingdom

*And again [Jesus] said:
“To what should I compare the kingdom of God?
It is like yeast that a woman took
and mixed in with three measures of flour
until all of it was leavened” (Lk 13:20-21)*

Yeast goes to work silently. Leavening takes place in silence, just like the work of God's kingdom; it works “from within”.

And indeed, who has been able to hear the yeast as it goes to work on the flour and dough it has been mixed in with while it is leavening it all? This image makes it possible to understand how God's Kingdom acts. The Apostle Paul presents the kingdom by recalling the essentials: “For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (*Rom 14:17*). This is the inner and invisible action of the Spirit; it is yeast placed in the heart. And just like yeast, whose activity takes place through contact, so does the Gospel.

The parable of the yeast, chosen as the theme of the Strenna 2023, is a parable of great evangelical wisdom and pedagogical and educational relevance, expressing the nature of the kingdom of God that Jesus lived and taught.

There are various possible interpretations and emphases. My choice of interpretation for this year's Strenna is precisely to present yeast as an image and symbol of the fruitfulness and growth of the kingdom of God. It is a kingdom in the hearts of people, which fertilises the richness of the gift of the call to life, the vocation where God has planted us, directing the mission of the laity and of the entire Family of Don Bosco throughout the world.

“A little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough” (Gal 5: 9). It is surprising how a small quantity of flour doubles or triples in size once a small amount of yeast is added. The Lord tells us that *the Kingdom of God is like the yeast* with which flour (dough) is leavened when making bread. Yeast, as Jesus emphasises, is not the largest element in terms of quantity. To the contrary, very little of it is used. but what distinguishes it is that it is ***the only living ingredient*** and because it is alive it has the *ability to influence, condition and transform the whole batch of dough*.

We can say, therefore, that the Kingdom of God is

A humanly small and seemingly irrelevant reality. To become a part of it, one must be poor of heart; not trusting in their own abilities, but in the power of the love of God; not acting to be important in the eyes of the world, but precious in the eyes of God who prefers the simple and the humble. Certainly God’s kingdom requires our cooperation, but it is above all the initiative and gift of the Lord. Our weak effort, seemingly small before the complexity of the problems of the world, when integrated with God’s effort, fears no difficulty. The victory of the Lord is certain: his love will make every seed of goodness present on the ground sprout and grow. This opens us up to trust and hope, despite the tragedies, the injustices, the sufferings that we encounter. The seed of goodness and peace sprouts and develops, because the merciful love of God makes it ripen.²

2. The Kingdom of God continues to grow in our world, amidst light and shadow

In the Gospel, the Kingdom comes with Jesus himself: it is his presence, his word – he, the Word made flesh. It is his way of living with people, mingling with people of all social backgrounds, among whom he prefers those whom others exclude. There is a passage from the Gospel according to Matthew that opens a window on the way of being the Kingdom of God as lived by Jesus.

*But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him.
When Jesus became aware of this, he departed.
Many crowds followed him, and he cured all of them, and he ordered them not to
make him known.
This was to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah:
“Here is my servant, whom I have chosen,
my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased.
I will put my spirit upon him,
and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles.
He will not wrangle or cry aloud,
nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets.
He will not break a bruised reed
or quench a smouldering wick
until he brings justice to victory.
And in his name the Gentiles will hope” (Mt 12: 14-21).*

Here, it is Jesus himself who works as leaven among the most ordinary people, among the poor and the sick in need of healing.

²FRANCIS, *Angelus*, Rome 14 June 2015.

“And he cured all of them”: this is the ‘lay’ face of Jesus amid the *laos*, the people, where no distinction is made between social class or origins. They all seem to be united by poverty and the need for help – a vulnerability that is not foreign to him as the first verses show where the open hostility of the Pharisees is spoken of: a warning sign of the cross that is approaching and where his becoming poor to enrich us will reach full completion (Cf. *2 Cor 8: 9*).

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news” (*Mk 1: 15*). This is found 122 times in the Gospel and 90 times on Jesus’ lips. As the great theologian Karl Rahner has expressed so many times, it is clear that the centre of Jesus’ preaching is the kingdom of God. Jesus lived the Kingdom fully, demonstrating God’s unconditional love for the least by deeds, and his lifestyle was adopted by the Twelve through osmosis and continued in the early Church: “the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these” (*Jn 14: 12*).

Even today we recognise that so much good is done and that it grows at all latitudes in this Kingdom under construction. And we likewise recognise that there is so much sorrow and pain: sorrow and pain that is the direct consequence of our way of being and acting as a *human family*.

We are called to open our eyes and hearts to God’s way of acting that establishes his Kingdom in his way. It is by attuning ourselves to his way of being and acting that we collaborate with him, as workers in his vineyard. Otherwise it ceases to be “of God” and becomes only our work.

The universal openness that characterises us as a Salesian Family is in full harmony with the Gospel of the Kingdom. The proximity to so many and diverse human communities in about 75% of the countries of the world is already in itself a formidable potential for unity and mission. More than 99% of the Church is made up of lay people. Let us imagine how the proportion increases if we consider and embrace the entire *human family*: the laity are the dough as well as the yeast of the Kingdom. As St John Paul II wrote more than 30 years ago, in this vast world “the mission is only at the beginning.”³

Sometimes our human contribution or our little effort may seem insignificant, but they are always precious before God. We must not and cannot measure the effectiveness or results of our efforts by placing the value on how much we invest in them, the effort required of us, because the ultimate reason and motive for everything is God. Let us not lose ourselves in excuses that paralyse the mission and construction of the Kingdom. Even for Don Bosco the best could be the enemy of the good: it is not necessary to wait for ideal circumstances to take the first step. Being aware of our limitations, free from sterile triumphalism and self-reference, and at the same time full of trust, confident that “even the most callous [boys] have a soft spot” (*BM V, 237*): this is the style of the Kingdom lived according to the Salesian charism.

³JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris missio*, Rome, 7 December 1990, no. 40.

Looking at reality with God's "eyes" and "heart", we will understand that smallness and humility do not mean weakness and inertia. There is little we can do in the face of much that is required of us. However, it is never "not enough" or irrelevant, because it is God who gives it growth. It is God's strength that comes to our aid. And it is God who ultimately accompanies our commitment, our efforts, our being poor yeast in the dough. Provided we do all we can and always in his name.

3. The *human family* needs responsible sons and daughters

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts.⁴

Thus begins *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution of the Second Vatican Council. In three years' time we will remember the 60th anniversary of its promulgation.⁵ It has marked and continues to mark the horizon within which the Church is called to move: a panorama so familiar to those in the Church and in the world who carry out a mission like that of Don Bosco, where youthful vitality and compassion for those who are poor and suffering are always present.

It is an invitation to feel solidarity and enter without fear in this time that we are given to live, with challenges that seem to grow more and more in intensity, that are increasingly global and where the first to be touched, often tragically, are the youngest cohorts of the population.

It is an encouragement to discover the meaning of our existence in the awareness that my life is never isolated from everyone else's. The "I" and the "we" can only exist and live well together. The parable of the yeast and the proposal of this Strenna help us to attune ourselves to the evolution, over time, of the processes that shape human history. The yeast added to the dough needs its own time to ferment; and we too have a responsibility and a commitment in building this human family so that the world may be more livable, more just, more fraternal.

We know how much good we are surrounded by, but also how much suffering, injustice and pain still grips the world in which we live, as I have already said. Pope Francis reminds us of this, when he says:

Each new generation must take up the struggles and attainments of past generations, while setting its sights even higher. This is the path. Goodness, together with love, justice and solidarity, are not achieved once and for all; they have to be realised each day. It is not possible to settle for what was achieved in the past and complacently enjoy it, as if we could somehow disregard the fact that many of our brothers and sisters still endure situations that cry out for our attention.⁶

⁴GS, 1.

⁵The Constitution was promulgated on the occasion of the celebration of Vespers for the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception on 7 December 1965.

⁶FRANCIS, *Meeting with the authorities, civil society and the Diplomatic Corps*. Santiago de Chile (16 January 2018), quoted in *Fratelli tutti*, 11.

The cry of the poor is growing, the majority of whom are children, teenagers and young adults: we face challenges that are as widespread as they are close to those we find at the beginning of our mission. We are made for this time no less than Don Bosco was for his. We strongly feel the appeal that comes from the *human family* of which we are a part as individuals and as a community; a family marked and wounded by the pressing need for justice and dignity for the least and those cast aside:⁷ in need of peace and fraternity:⁸ in need of care for our common home.⁹

No less strong and radical, in other words at the root of every other yearning, are the need for truth¹⁰ and the need for God.¹¹

Faced with this reality, we must be very conscious of the fact that we cannot postpone until tomorrow the good we can and must do today. We are called to be yeast that transforms the *human family* from within. It is a fundamental mandate and coincides with our own life, with our being human: no one can escape it or consider themselves excluded from it.

Therefore, as members of Don Bosco's Family and inspired by the Gospel dynamic of the yeast, we intend to deepen and recognise *the richness of being part of this human and Salesian Family where so many in this Family are laymen and laywomen, and* where as consecrated persons we must enrich ourselves with this complementarity.¹² Being *lay* is a state of life, a vocation that so overwhelmingly characterises all the presences in the world that identify in various ways with, or are attuned to, Don Bosco's Family. Grateful for this, and as an authentic and united family, we seek to make the most, in our various cultures and societies, of the gift of their lives, the strength of their faith, the beauty of their family, their life and work experience, and their talents in interpreting and living the charism and mission of Don Bosco for the youth and the world of today.

4. The layperson: a Christian who “sanctifies the world from within”

This is how things are: the lay person in the Church and in the Salesian Family is and will increasingly be a committed Christian who “sanctifies the world from within.”

A correct and attentive look at the ecclesiology proposed by the Second Vatican Council allows us to declare that today, especially as Christians, we cannot accept (much less encourage) a dualism between the sacred and the profane in the reality of a world that was created by God. Surely this dualistic drift occurred at a time

⁷Cf. FT, 15-17; 18-21; 29-31; 69-71; 80-83; 124-127; 234.

⁸Cf. FT 88-111; 216-221; ChV 163-167.

⁹See the entire Encyclical *Laudato Si'*.

¹⁰Cf. LF 23-25; FT 226-227.

¹¹Cf. LF 1-7; 35; 50-51; 58-60.

¹²Cf. J.E. VECCHI, *The Salesian Family turns twenty-five*, in M. BAY (EDITED BY), *Passionate educators experienced and consecrated for young people. Lettere circolari ai Salesiani di don Juan E. Vecchi*, LAS, Rome 2013, 137.

when the legitimate autonomy of “secular things”, as opposed to “sacred” or religious things, was not adequately understood.

Since the origins of Christianity and especially since the Second Vatican Council, the Church has clearly recognised the relationship of Christians with the world in which they live; even in a society where being a Christian was and is something marginal.

A splendid description of the Christian in the world is offered in the “Letter to Diognetus” (2nd century AD) – in my opinion a beautiful work of ancient Christian literature:

For the Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe. For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity. The course of conduct which they follow has not been devised by any speculation or deliberation of inquisitive men; nor do they, like some, proclaim themselves the advocates of any merely human doctrines.

But, inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities, according as the lot of each of them has determined, and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life. They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. [...]

To sum up all in one word — what the soul is in the body, Christians are in the world. The soul is dispersed through all the members of the body, and Christians are scattered through all the cities of the world [...]¹³

It is a magnificent and very useful text to understand the Christian secularism that we intend to present and that we have indicated in the title of the *Strenna* with the “lay dimension” of Christian life and of our Salesian Family.

Today, the Salesian Family of Don Bosco is called to live in the world as leaven, co-operating, starting from its condition as believers, in the construction of a better world wherever we are, regardless of nation, culture and religion. The Church has given a name to this broad field of action: the secular nature of the vocation of the laity.

What specifically characterises the laity is their secular nature [...] The laity, by their very vocation, seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God. They live in the world, that is, in each and in all of the secular professions and occupations. They live in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life, from which the very web of their existence is woven. They are called there by God that by exercising their proper function and led by the spirit of the Gospel they may work for the sanctification of the world from within as a leaven. In this way they may make Christ known to others, especially by the testimony of a life resplendent in faith, hope and charity. Therefore, since they are tightly bound up in all types of temporal affairs it is their special task to order and to throw light upon these affairs in such a way that they may come into being

¹³*Letter to Diognetus* (Chap. 5-6; Funk 1, 317-321).

and then continually increase according to Christ to the praise of the Creator and the Redeemer.¹⁴

And it is no less true that the condition of the lay faithful is common to all, and that we all share responsibility for the Kingdom.

Theologically, the secular nature of the whole Church is understood from the meaning of the church-world relationship, and from the common priesthood, prophecy and kingly dimension; every baptised person is a member of a Church that must serve the world to make God's salvific will and his kingdom present, even if each baptised person exercises or develops this secularity in a particular way, so that there is a diversity of ministries and functions and, to a certain extent, of 'presence and situation' in the world, history and society.¹⁵

It is important to understand what this "Christian style" consists of as a way of being present in society, in line with the Second Vatican Council:¹⁶ the way forward for evangelisation and the missionary activity of the Church in a society in which religion can no longer be taken for granted as if it were something obvious and always present.

Recognising the "autonomy of the profane" as a legitimate aspect of secularity, theology is concerned with distinguishing between the autonomy of profane tasks and the kingdom of the religious, with the legitimate right to the coexistence of both realities. In other words, it highlights the legitimate aspect of secularity, which is very different from "secularism" linked to a radical secularisation that is the enemy of all that is religious. Religion in its various "creeds" has every right to exist and to have a "citizenship card". The Second Vatican Council is decisive in this regard:

Now many of our contemporaries seem to fear that a closer bond between human activity and religion will work against the independence of men, of societies, or of the sciences.

If by the autonomy of earthly affairs we mean that created things and societies themselves enjoy their own laws and values which must be gradually deciphered, put to use, and regulated by men, then it is entirely right to demand that autonomy. Such is not merely required by modern man, but harmonizes also with the will of the Creator (...)

Consequently, we cannot but deplore certain habits of mind, which are sometimes found too among Christians, which do not sufficiently attend to the rightful independence of science (...) But if the expression, the independence of temporal affairs, is taken to mean that created things do not depend on God, and that man can use them without any reference to their Creator, anyone who acknowledges God

¹⁴LG, 31. The Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici* (1988), sums up very well that it is the task of all the baptised, albeit in different ways, to be yeast in the world: "The images taken from the gospel of salt, light and leaven, although indiscriminately applicable to all Jesus' disciples, are specifically applied to the lay faithful. They are particularly meaningful images because they speak not only of the deep involvement and the full participation of the lay faithful in the affairs of the earth, the world and the human community, but also and above all, they tell of the radical newness and unique character of an involvement and participation which has as its purpose the spreading of the Gospel that brings salvation." (Cf. *ChL* 15).

¹⁵ R. BERZOSA, «¿Una teología y espiritualidad laical?», *Revista Misión Abierta*, (mercaba.org/fichas/laico).

¹⁶Cf. C. THEOBALD, *La fede nell'attuale contesto europeo. Cristianesimo come stile*, Queriniana, Brescia 2021, 96-146.

will see how false such a meaning is. For without the Creator the creature would disappear.¹⁷

Christian anthropology must seek today, as in the past, to translate the values and the message of salvation transmitted by the Gospel into the language of the different societies and cultures of the world. It is a question of harmonising the legitimate autonomy of man with the validity, authenticity and coherence of the Christian faith. This is the challenge for the believer, for the Christian faithful and for us in our mission as the Family of Don Bosco: respect for everyone, but fear and shame because of our condition as believers – never and with no one!

The Church, through the voice of the Second Vatican Council, reminds us that it is a grave error to separate daily life from the life of faith.

They are mistaken who, knowing that we have here no abiding city but seek one which is to come. For they are forgetting that by the faith itself they are more obliged than ever to measure up to these duties, each according to his proper vocation.

Nor, on the contrary, are they any less wide of the mark who think that religion consists in acts of worship alone and in the discharge of certain moral obligations, and who imagine they can plunge themselves into earthly affairs in such a way as to imply that these are altogether divorced from the religious life.

This split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age.¹⁸

It is about living as Christians in a world that will not be better without the little leaven that Christianity brings to the world created by God. It is from humility, but also from the conviction of the value of our faith, in dialogue with different societies and cultures, that we can contribute to improving the lives of the people around us, renouncing any logic of proselytism or imposition. To put it in the words of a magnificent pastor, and a man of reflection capable of dialogue with culture, Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini: “Wielding a belief, whether scientific, philosophical or theological, to make ends meet by imposing a solution, is a painful premise for an ideology and a source of violence.”¹⁹ But it is also not acceptable for the Christian of all times – and especially today – to practise a comfortable kind of irenics or “do-goodism” that reduces coherence, witness and personal and community authenticity.

And, just as yeast in the dough goes almost completely unnoticed, so does our collaboration in building the Church and a more human, more just society and one that is more in accordance with the will of God, ask us to consider that it is more important to do good than it is to have the good that is done attributed to us. The most important thing will always be to contribute to the good of society and the world, even “without copyright”, without confusing effective action with being at the centre of attention, also recognising that the good done by others is at least as good as ours. If we are not convinced, let us once more read the passage of the Gospel in which the Lord corrects his disciples for having tried to stop the good that others did, even if they were not from “their group”.

¹⁷GS, 36.

¹⁸GS, 43.

¹⁹Cf. C. M. MARTINI, *Los movimientos en la Iglesia*, LEV, 1999, p. 156 (our translation in English).

We must practise interpreting reality as believers who include others, promote dialogue with others, with culture, the media, with intellectuals and with those who think differently and also in opposition to us. These are the virtuous habits that our way of being in the world requires, the “Christian and Salesian style” that we can bring to an understanding of the world and things.

This style will allow us to weave relationships with other consecrated persons, other ordained ministers, other lay faithful, other Christians and with other men and women of other religions. It seems that this is a good way to “work for the sanctification of the world from within as a leaven.”²⁰ A way of doing things that puts us in harmony with “the universal call to holiness in the Church.”²¹ And since the Church is involved in the world in the twofold transcendent and immanent dimension, every Christian must be a sign of the Kingdom of God already present in human history. If piety and devotion, the life of prayer and the sacramental life underline the transcendent profile of this holiness, the social commitment to justice and human brotherhood underlines, for us, the immanent Christian dimension. Like Don Bosco, we live with our feet on the ground and our eyes fixed on heaven. In this regard, a qualified member of our Salesian Family offered us his own vital reflection as a lay person in the world and in the Family of Don Bosco, defining lay believers in the Church and in the Family of Don Bosco as those men and women who have a threefold belonging: to Christ, to the Church and to the world.²²

Pope Francis, in the beautiful meeting we had with him on the occasion of the canonisation of Artemides Zatti, presenting him as “kinsman of all the poor”, reminded us that it is part of our Salesian vocation to be educators of the heart, preparing people, especially young people, for the world of today:

Thus a hospital became the ‘Father’s Inn’, a sign of a Church that seeks to be rich in gifts of humanity and grace, home of the commandment of love of God and our brothers and sisters, a place of health as a pledge of salvation. It is also true that this is part of the Salesian vocation: the Salesians are the great educators of the heart, of love, of affection, of social life; great educators of the heart.²³

Bringing to the Church and the world the gift of the lay charism lived in the Salesian Family is a vocational response that leads us to be present as signs and witnesses, in dialogue, and by offering the humble service of who we are for the common good.

It is from and in lay life itself, which in many cases passes through the specific vocation in the family and a professional role in the world, that the laity, and in particular the Christian laity, the laity of the Family of Don Bosco, are called to establish, promote and support the Gospel values in society and in history, contributing to the *consecratio mundi*, the consecration of the world, to the establishment of the Kingdom of God here and now.

²⁰*Lumen Gentium*, 31.

²¹Title of Chapter V of *Lumen Gentium*.

²²Cf. A. BOCCIA, *Credenti Laici nella Chiesa e nella Famiglia di Don Bosco. Uomini e donne delle tre appartenenze*, Private edition.

²³FRANCIS, *Address at the audience with the Salesian Family for the canonisation of Blessed Artemides Zatti*, Paul VI Hall, Rome, 8 October 2022.

Saint Francis de Sales, whose celebrations we have just finished on the occasion of the fourth centenary of his death, is one of the most unique and fruitful prophets in the history of the Church capable of shedding light on the greatness of each one's vocation. That is how it was for many lay people of every social background whom he personally accompanied, helping them to flourish in the garden in which they were placed by the Lord, to the point of being fully holy. Saint Francis de Sales remains an ever new and irreplaceable source of inspiration for those who recognise themselves as "Salesians", whatever their state of life.

In the recent *Apostolic Letter* that Pope Francis offered to all religious families who refer to the charism of Saint Francis de Sales, the importance of the spirituality that the Saint of Geneva proposed in his time and that today is extremely topical in the theology of the laity is highlighted.

Almost everyone who has dealt with devotion has taken an interest in teaching people separated from the world or, at least, has taught a type of devotion that leads to this isolation. I intend to offer my teachings to those who live in cities, in the family, at court, and who, by virtue of their status, are forced, by social conveniences, to live among others.²⁴

This is why those who think they are relegating devotion to some protected and reserved sphere are very wrong. Rather does it belong to everyone and for everyone, wherever we are, and everyone can practise it according to their own vocation. As Saint Paul VI wrote on the fourth centenary of the birth of Francis de Sales:

Holiness is not the prerogative of one group or of another or of any one person, but an invitation and a command addressed to all those who bear the name of Christian. 'Friend, go up higher.' All are bound to ascend the mountain of the Lord, although not by one and the same path. "The practice of devotion must differ for the gentleman and the artisan, the servant and the prince, for the widow, young girl or wife. further, it must be accommodated to their particular strength, circumstances, and duties."²⁵

Crossing the secular city, looking after our inner self, combining the desire for perfection with every state of life, finding a centre that does not separate itself from the world, but teaches how to inhabit it, appreciate it, also learning to take the right distance from it: this was his intention and continues to be a valuable lesson for every woman and man of our time.

This is the Council's theme of the universal call to holiness:

"Fortified by so many and such powerful means of salvation, all the faithful, whatever their condition or state, are called by the Lord, each in his own way, to that perfect holiness whereby the Father Himself is perfect" (*LG 11*). "Each in his or her own way", the Council says "We should not grow discouraged before examples of holiness that appear unattainable."²⁶

²⁴St FRANCIS DE SALES, *Introduction à la vie dévote*, I, 1: ed. Ravier – Devos, Paris 1969, 23 (*our translation in English*).

²⁵PAUL VI, Epist. Ap. *Sabaudiae gemma*, on the fourth centenary of the birth of St Francis de Sales, Doctor of the Church (29 January 1967), in *AAS* 59 (1967), 119.

²⁶*Gaudete et Exsultate*, 10-11.

Mother Church offers them to us not so that we may try to copy them, but so that they may spur us to walk on the unique and specific path the Lord has designed for us. “What matters is that each believer discerns his own way and brings out the best in himself, what is so personal God has placed in him (Cf. 1 Cor 12: 7).²⁷

The Church is alive, “together with those who are called” according to the original meaning of the term, thanks to the richness of every vocation that defines her. *Every call is at the service of all the others and only in giving oneself can one express and regain one’s full identity.* Gifts are not the private and exclusive property of a group. As baptised individuals we all share in the priesthood of Christ, in the prophecy and kingship of Him who came to serve and give life. Ordained ministry is understood only as a service to the common priesthood of all the faithful. Likewise, what is typical of the lay state is a gift for all who enter into the life and call of every other member of the one body of Christ. The “secular dimension” is therefore also shared by those who belong to consecrated life or to the ordained ministry: the story of Don Bosco offers us splendid evidence of this. Don Bosco was a priest of the diocese of Turin who founded two congregations of consecrated men and women, and two other lay associations; and with all of them, and with many others he knew how to involve people, he immersed himself very intensely in the “world” in which he lived, in the life and problems of hundreds of thousands of young people, fearlessly overcoming great difficulties and borders, with a fruitfulness that inspires millions of people today – beyond national, cultural and religious differences.

Being a Christian and being a lay person opens the way to make the most of the intensity of secular, lay talent, committing it to the infinite wealth of possibilities that are open to those who live in the world animated by faith, hope and charity. The Second Vatican Council proclaimed this clearly:

The laity, by their very vocation, seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God. They live in the world, that is, in each and in all of the secular professions and occupations. They live in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life, from which the very web of their existence is woven. They are called there by God that ***by exercising their proper²⁸ function and led by the spirit of the Gospel they may work for the sanctification of the world from within as a leaven.*** In this way they may make Christ known to others, especially by the testimony of a life resplendent in faith, hope and charity. Therefore, since they are tightly bound up in all types of temporal affairs it is their special task to order and to throw light upon these affairs in such a way that they may come into being and then continually increase according to Christ to the praise of the Creator and the Redeemer.²⁹

It is not the task of the commentary on the Strenna to define all the areas and realities of life in which the presence of the laity is transforming and can become that leaven of the Kingdom of God that no one else could “knead” as effectively and extensively. In any case, in the Church the laity have a broad and complex

²⁷FRANCIS, Apostolic Letter *Totum Amoris Est*, on the Fourth Centenary of the Death of Saint Francis de Sales, LEV, Vatican City 2022, 32-34.

²⁸I point out that parts in italics and in bold are my choice, precisely to highlight the theme that this commentary on Strenna 2023 intends to highlight in a specific way.

²⁹LG, 31.

spectrum of potential and challenges, of situations to face that are at the same time like many appeals for those who wish to be “salt of the earth and light of the world.” It is a journey that this year’s Strenna invites and urges us to resume, intensify and make our own courageously and generously, making the message of the Church herself timely when she says:

The eyes of faith behold a wonderful scene: that of a countless number of lay people, both women and men, busy at work in their daily life and activity, oftentimes far from view and quite unacclaimed by the world, unknown to the world's great personages but nonetheless looked upon in love by the Father, untiring labourers who work in the Lord's vineyard. Confident and steadfast through the power of God's grace, these are the humble yet great builders of the Kingdom of God in history.³⁰

There is no doubt that for all the laity of the Salesian Family today – and for consecrated men and women who live day by day enriched by their vocation and complementarity – the world, society, economy and politics, social action at the service of others, Christian life in daily life are and must always be *a theological place of encounter with God*:

Their [the laity's] own field of evangelising activity is the vast and complicated world of politics, society and economics, but also the world of culture, of the sciences and the arts, of international life, of the mass media. It also includes other realities which are open to evangelisation, such as human love, the family, the education of children and adolescents, professional work, suffering. The more Gospel-inspired lay people there are engaged in these realities, clearly involved in them, competent to promote them and conscious that they must exercise to the full their Christian powers which are often buried and suffocated, the more these realities will be at the service of the kingdom of God and therefore of salvation in Jesus Christ, without in any way losing or sacrificing their human content but rather pointing to a transcendent dimension which is often disregarded, will find themselves at the service of the building up of the Kingdom of God, and therefore of salvation in Jesus Christ.³¹

5. Don Bosco's Family called to be yeast

Don Bosco was able to involve so many people, making them active and enterprising agents of the same dream of salvation for young people. Fr Giulio Barberis carefully noted what Don Bosco said addressing the young people of the Oratory on the evening of the feast of St Joseph, 19 March 1876, just over five months after the departure of the first missionaries for Patagonia. Referring to the field and vineyard of the Gospel parables and the strength of his personal experience of peasant life, he helps young people in Valdocco to understand how everyone can play their part, always precious and important, in the growth of the Kingdom of God. It is a secular, evangelical and ecclesial example of how we are called to bring our talents to fruition together, each according to his or her life story, ability and calling. Thus, Fr Barberis takes up Don Bosco's words which will undoubtedly seem of the utmost theological importance to us:

³⁰ChL, 17.

³¹EN, 70.

Our Divine Saviour, and you understand it well enough, meant by the field or vineyards around him, to speak of the Church and everyone in the world; the harvest is the salvation of souls, since all souls must be gathered up and brought to the Lord's granary; oh how abundant is this harvest; how many millions of people there are on this earth! How much work there is to be done to see that everyone is saved; but *operarii autem pauci*, the labourers are few.

By the labourers working in the vineyard of the Lord is meant all those who in some way work for the salvation of souls. And note well that labourers here does not only mean priests, preachers and confessors, as some believe, who certainly are put there to work and are directly involved in gathering the harvest, but they are not alone, they are not enough. The labourers are those who in some way work for the salvation of souls; like those who work in the fields are not just the ones gathering the grain but all the others as well.

Look around a field and see the variety of labourers. One is ploughing, another turning over the soil; others are using a hoe; someone has a rake or is breaking open the clods and flattening them; others are sowing seed, others still covering it over; somebody is weeding, pulling out darnel, grass, vetches; one is hoeing, another uprooting, another one cutting; others are watering just at the right moment and pressing the seeds *in*; others instead are reaping, making *bundles* of sheaves, there are others loading the cart and pulling it; one is spreading out the wheat while another is beating it; one is separating wheat from chaff; others are cleaning, using a sieve, putting it into sacks, carrying it *to the mill to make flour*; *one is sifting*, another kneading, another baking.

So you can see, my friends, what a range of labourers are needed before the harvest can fulfil its purpose of giving us bread from Heaven. As it is in the field, so it is with the Church; all kinds of labourers are needed, all kinds. No one can say: "Although my behaviour is irreproachable, I would be no good working for the greater glory of God." No, nobody can say that; everyone can do something.³²

We were born charismatically as a community and as a communion of people of different social backgrounds, states of life, professional profiles... all united by the same mission and motivated by the same charismatic drive that Don Bosco knew how to pass on³³. This is the nature of the Oratory in the years of its foundation, from 1841 to 1859: (18 years!), which still strongly reflects this synergy of the People of God who in various ways cooperate to make young people more at risk "good Christians and upright citizens." It is undeniable that we were immediately born as a group of God's people: it is the nature of our charism and our mission.

I am well aware – and I try to pass on this awareness to the whole of our Salesian Family – of a particularly obvious fact: only together, only by living in communion can we do something meaningful today.

I launched a strong appeal to the entire Salesian Congregation regarding our shared mission with the laity – an appeal that serves the whole Family of Don Bosco – and not listening to it would lead, in the not too distant future, to a point of dangerous non-return.

I said:

Our GC24 was certainly a charismatic response to Vatican II's ecclesiology of communion. We know well that Don Bosco, from the outset of his mission at

³²ISS, *Salesian Sources, 1. Don Bosco and his work*, Kristu Jyoti, Bangalore 2014, 812-813.

³³J.E. VECCHI, *The Salesian Family turns twenty-five*, 140-142.

Valdocco, involved many lay people, friends and collaborators in such a way that they could be part of his mission among young people. He immediately 'fostered participation and the sharing of responsibility by ecclesiastics and laity, men and women'³⁴. It is therefore, in spite of our resistance, **a point of no return**, because, in addition to corresponding to Don Bosco's actions, the model of the mission shared with the laity proposed by GC24 is in fact 'the only practicable model in present conditions'.³⁵

Thus we have **a point of no return** for the good of those who decide and have decided to enter into this style of mission, formation, shared life that opens new horizons in the future for the charism of Don Bosco in full harmony with the path that the Church is taking with the guidance of Pope Francis, which is surely prophetic and exemplary.

At the same time there is also another dangerous and risky **non-return** for those who instead fail to or do not want to cross this threshold and remain locked into forms of self-referential isolation: no longer in step with the times in the way of living and interpreting the Salesian presence, and destined to become irrelevant and to become extinct as the years proceed.

The ultimate goal of Don Bosco's mission is, together with the salvation of his young people, the transformation of society. Don Bosco's broad and courageous vision, his tireless diligence, his resilience in the face of obstacles... are explained only with this horizon of social transformation and evangelisation of young people on a world scale.

Don Bosco does not engage in politics but can talk to all representatives of the various levels of government because his commitment is transparently oriented toward the good of young people. No one who cares about human society and service to others – as public service is and should also be for the good of all – can display a lack of interest in this.

Therefore, our common voice can find access and be given an ear far beyond confessional boundaries if together today we embody the same zeal of predilection for young people that was given to us as a charism and that we can only achieve *together as a Family of Don Bosco*.

The complementarity of vocations in Don Bosco's Family, *being united as a Salesian Family, and united with the great number of lay people involved in our presences around the world, together in mission and formation, becomes an unavoidable demand today and even more so in the future, if we do not want to remain irrelevant.*

And communion in the family spirit and within the vast Salesian movement is the great gift we possess as a precious legacy.

6. In the shade of a large tree with beautiful fruit

³⁴GC24, no. 71.

³⁵GC28, *Action Programme 6*, p. 59.

In my letter at the end of the Second Seminar for the promotion of the Causes of Beatification and Canonisation of the Salesian Family, I wrote:

From Don Bosco down to our own times we recognise a tradition of holiness to which we need to pay attention, since the incarnation of the charism that had its origin in him found its expression in a variety of states of life and in different forms, it is a question of men and women, young people and adults, consecrated persons and lay people, bishops and missionaries who in certain historical, cultural and social contexts, different in time and place, made the special light of the Salesian charism shine out, representing a heritage that continues to play an effective role in the life and in the communities of believers and of men and women of good will.³⁶

With humility and a deep sense of gratitude, we recognise in the Salesian Family a great tree with many fruits of holiness. These are men and women, young people and adults who have filled their lives with the leaven of love, a love that is given to the end, faithful to Jesus Christ and to his Gospel.

Ecclesiology shows, as we know, that the different vocations have a common baptismal root and are destined to contribute to the growth of God's people:

In Church Communion the states of life by being ordered one to the other are thus bound together among themselves. They all share in a deeply basic meaning: that of being the manner of living out the commonly shared Christian dignity and the universal call to holiness in the perfection of love. They are different yet complementary, in the sense that each of them has a basic and unmistakable character which sets each apart, while at the same time each of them is seen in relation to the other and placed at each other's service.³⁷

This perspective indicates that the Salesian charism is complete when vocation and mission are lived in the reciprocity and complementarity of the different calls. Precisely this should be the profound meaning of the Salesian Family: a vast apostolic movement for the salvation of young people.

It is interesting to note that, among the 173 Saints, Blessed, Venerables, Servants of God of our Family, 25 are lay people who have embodied the Salesian charism in the family, in the Salesian house, in secular life, in their profession, a privileged space of Christian witness, and in different social, historical and cultural contexts. I think it is very appropriate to recall them as testimony within the commentary on this Strenna:

- Saint **Dominic Savio**, a teenager and expression of youthful holiness, fruit of preventive grace and leader of a long line of young saints.
- Blessed **Laura Vicuña**, a teenager, testifies to the strength of love that gives life and reminds us of the reality of the wounded family.
- Blessed **Ceferino Namuncurá**, a young Mapuche, recalls the value and respect of indigenous cultures and the work of inculturation of faith and the charism.
- Blessed **Francis Kęsy, Czesław Józwiak, Edward Kaźmierski, Edward**

³⁶A. FERNÁNDEZ ARTIME, *Letter of the Rector Major at the conclusion of the 2nd Seminar for the promotion of the Causes of Beatification and Canonisation of the Salesian Family*, Rome 20 May 2018. <https://archive.sdb.org/Documenti/Santita/Seminario_2018/Santi_2_Seminario_2018_RMlettera_en.pdf>

³⁷ChL, 55.

Klinik, Jarogniew Wojciechowski, martyrs of the oratory at Poznan, witnesses of the faith to the point of martyrdom.

- Among the blessed martyrs of the Spanish persecution we meet: **Alejandro Planas Saurí and Juan de Mata Díez**, lay collaborators; **Tomàs Gil de la Cal, Federico Cobo Sanz, Iginò de Mata Díez**, three aspirants to Salesian life; **Bartolomé Blanco Márquez**, layman and engaged to be married; **Teresa Cejudo Redondo**, wife and mother, Salesian Cooperators engaged in the ecclesial, social and associative reality of their environment.
- Blessed **Alexandrina Maria Da Costa**, Salesian Cooperator, who recalls the highest form of cooperation, that of union with the redemptive passion of Jesus.
- Blessed **Albert Marvelli**, a former student of the oratory at Rimini, engaged in the social and political world.
- Venerable **Mamma Margaret Occhiena**, a motherly and female presence at the origins of the charism.
- Venerable **Dorotea Chopitea**, wife and mother, who “welcomed” and gave growth to the Salesian charism, manifesting the choice of a poor life and the ability to be evangelised by the poor.
- Venerable **Attilio Giordani**, husband and father, who embodies Salesian joy in the family, in work, in the oratory, in his mission land.
- Servant of God **Simão**, an Indian Bororo, who shared the Salesian mission with Father Rodolfo Lunkenbein and recalls the need to recognise and welcome the seeds of truth present in every culture and tradition.
- Servant of God **Matilde Salem**, wife and benefactor, who gave of her goods and life for the fruitfulness of the charism in Syria, and testifies to the strength of communion between Christians, and the capacity for coexistence with the faithful of other religions.
- Servant of God **Antonino Baglieri**, Volunteer With Don Bosco, who in sickness knew how to be the leaven of the Gospel.
- Servant of God **Vera Grita**, Salesian Cooperator and teacher, instrument of a mystical work that commits every Christian to make the grace of the Eucharist bear fruit.
- Servant of God **Akash Bashir**, a young former pupil from Pakistan who gave his life for his brothers and sisters.

Among these numerous and varied figures of holiness I would like to point out ones that offer us a significant and original witness of lay holiness and that, in my opinion, show the multifaceted aspect, that is, rich in aspects, sides, shapes and colours, of lay life lived in different contexts, in different centuries, with different vocations, but full of simple holiness in everyday life. That “next door” secular holiness that will always do us so much good to discover. Let’s pause to contemplate them:

- **Margaret Occhiena, “Mamma”**

We know how at the beginning of the oratory, after thinking and rethinking how to get out of difficulties, Don Bosco went to talk about it with his parish priest in Castelnuovo, exposing his need and his fears. “You have your mother!” replied the parish priest without a moment’s hesitation, “let her come with you to Turin.” Mamma Margaret arrived in Valdocco on 3 November 1846, and for ten years she was the mother of hundreds of boys. In 1846 only the oratory was open, and the boys came there especially on Sundays. The *Biographical*

Memories speak of at least 800 who came. Throughout the week, every night, after work in the city, young people came for evening classes. One can just imagine the noise and shouting. The classes took up Don Bosco's kitchen and bedroom, the sacristy, the choir, the chapel. Voices, songs, comings and goings, but it could not be done otherwise. Mamma Margaret was there with them. Certainly priests and even lay people came to help Don Bosco and some women came later to help. But only Mamma Margaret was there, full time, always. This availability made her dear to everyone, and she was therefore venerated by those who knew her. Right from the outset, when she came to Turin, as soon as she became known by people in surrounding suburbs, she was called by no other name than "Mamma".

Here, for ten years, her life fused with her son's life and with the beginnings of the Salesian work: she was Don Bosco's first and main Cooperator; her active kindness was the maternal element of the preventive system. Illiterate – but full of that wisdom that comes from above – she was also a help to many poor street children, children of no one; she put God in first place, consuming herself for him in a life of poverty, prayer and sacrifice.

- **Bartolomé Blanco Márquez, a young all-round Christian**

“I am a worker, I was born of parents who were also workers. I have lived and do live in a narrow setting, one where the lowly class work. Running in my veins, sometimes exacerbated by the fire of youthful enthusiasm, I sense a protest, an energetic protest against those who believe that we are not like them because we have had the misfortune – or perhaps the fate – of being born into poverty, wearing worker’s gear and having rough and calloused hands. But let us clarify our ideas: I am a worker and I am a Catholic.” The person speaking this way is a young man of 19, by profession a chair manufacturer, a chairmaker, at the People's Action rally on 5 November 1933 in Pozoblanco (Spain); an upright and courageous young man with uncommon intelligence, of humble origins, a worker, defender of the rights of the people and of the Church.

Born in Pozoblanco (Cordoba, Spain) on 25 December 1914, he lost his mother in the so-called “Spanish” flu epidemic. Having lost his father at the age of twelve, he had to leave school and start working as a chair maker. When the Salesians arrived in Pozoblanco in September 1930, Bartolomé attended the oratory and helped as a catechist and leader. He found in Fr Antonio do Muiño a director who urged him to continue his intellectual, cultural and spiritual formation by being involved in study groups. Until Bartolomé’s untimely death, this Salesian would be his confessor and spiritual guide. Bartolomé was appreciated by relatives, friends, companions for his ingenuity, apostolic commitment, and his attitude as a leader. Later he entered Catholic Action, of which he was secretary and where he gave of his best. He moved to Madrid to specialise in the apostolate among the workers at the Istituto Sociale Operaio or Social Workers Institute, and distinguished himself as an eloquent speaker and scholar of social issues. Having obtained a scholarship, he learned about Catholic workers’ organisations in France, Belgium and the Netherlands through a trip organised by the Social Workers’ Institute. Appointed delegate of Catholic trade unions in the province of Cordoba he founded eight groups.

When the revolution broke out on 30 June 1936, Bartolomé returned to Pozoblanco and made himself available to the “Civil Guard” for the defence of the city, which surrendered to the other warring faction after a month. Accused of rebellion, he was sent to prison, where he continued to behave in exemplary manner: “o deserve martyrdom, one must offer oneself to God as a martyr!” He was tried and sentenced to death in Jaén on 29 September. After the sentence, while remaining calm and defending himself with dignity, he said: “You believed that you were hurting me while instead you are doing me good because you have chiselled out a crown for me.”

The letters he wrote to his family and fiancée on the eve of his death are clear proof of this: “Let this be my last will: forgiveness, forgiveness and forgiveness; but indulgence, which I want to be accompanied by doing everything possible. So I ask you to avenge me with the revenge of the Christian: reciprocating those who have tried to hurt me with good”, he wrote to his aunts and cousins.

And to his fiancée, Maruja: “When I have a few hours left for my final rest, I just want to ask you one thing: that in memory of the love we had for each other which grows at this moment, you take care of the salvation of your soul as the main objective, so that we can meet in heaven for all eternity where no one will separate us.”

His fellow prisoners kept the moving details of his departure for death: barefoot, to resemble Christ more closely. When they put the cuffs on his wrists, he kissed

the hands of the militia member who put them on him. He did not accept, as they proposed, to be shot in the back. "Those who die for Christ," he said, "must do so facing forward and with bared chest." Long live Christ the King!" and he fell with open arms in the shape of a cross, riddled with bullets next to an oak tree. It was 2 October 1936. He was not yet 22. He was beatified in Rome on 28 October 2007.

- **Attilio Giordani, a layman "à la Don Bosco"**

Born in Milan on 3 February 1913, he distinguished himself since his early years for his great passion for the Salesian Oratory of Saint Augustine and, already at the age of eighteen, for his dedication to the young people who went there. For decades he was a diligent catechist and a constant and brilliant leader, with so much simplicity and joy. He looked after the liturgy, formation, games free time, theatre. He loved God with all his heart and found the resources for the life of grace in sacramental life, prayer and spiritual direction. During his military service, which began in 1934 and ended, in stages, in 1945, he demonstrated an apostolic approach among his comrades in arms. He was employed with the Pirelli Firm in Milan where he also spread joy and good humour, and a profound sense of duty. On 6 May 1944, he married a catechist, Noemi D'Avanzo. They would have three children: Piergiorgio, Mariagrazia, Paola. In his family he was a husband and father, rich in great faith and serenity, chosen austerity and evangelical poverty for the benefit of the most needy. Without taking anything away from the family, he made the oratory his second family, putting his wealth of inventiveness and extraordinary educational skill at the youngsters' service. In agreement with his wife Noemi, he left for Mato Grosso (Brazil) to share his own children's choice of missionary commitment. On 18 December 1972, during a meeting, after speaking enthusiastically and ardently of the duty to lay down one's life for others, he suddenly felt himself failing. He was just in time to tell his son, "Pier, you carry on" and then died of a heart attack. He has been Venerable since 9 October 2013.

His life as an apostolically committed Christian took on such a determined and personal orientation to discover (these are all his words): "The joy of serving Christ"; "not being good just for those who are good"; "Living in the world without being of the world"; "Go against the current"; "Not seeking but giving"; "It is necessary to live what you want to make live." This was something that matured over the different stages of his life: as a teenager, as a young soldier then as a soldier on the Greek-Albanian military front, as shown in his "War Diary". The choice of his fiancée Noemi Davanzo was also motivated by reasons of faith, as she wrote in a letter: "When the Lord brought you to me, he placed before me your love and spirit of dedication to those who are especially beloved of the Saviour. This was the main trigger that prompted me to ask you to be my companion."

Attilio's faith was so great that it is truly a "sign" of God's presence: in the family, in the oratory, in the parish community and for those who meet him: a faith that is more than proclaimed – it shines through his actions and his way of being: "The extent of our belief is manifested in our being."

- **Vera Grita "The little teacher from Savona"**

Born in Rome on 28 January 1923, she lived and studied in Savona where she obtained her teacher's certificate. At the age of 21, during a sudden air raid on the city (1944), she was overwhelmed and trampled underfoot by the fleeing crowd, with serious consequences for her physically, and from then on she remained forever marked by suffering. She went unnoticed in her short earthly life, teaching in the schools of the Ligurian hinterland, where she earned the esteem and affection of everyone for her kind and meek character. She attended Mass in Savona at the Salesian parish of Mary Help of Christians, and was regular in her use of the Sacrament of Penance. A Salesian Cooperator since 1967, she carried out her call in the total gift of herself to the Lord, who in an extraordinary way gave himself to her in the depths of her heart with the "Voice", the "Word" with which he communicated the Work of the Living Tabernacles to her. Under the impulse of divine grace and accepting the mediation of her spiritual guides, Vera Grita responded to the gift of God by witnessing in her life, marked by the constant fatigue of illness, to the encounter with the Risen One and dedicating herself with heroic generosity to the teaching and education of her students, attending to the needs of her family and witnessing to a life of evangelical poverty. She died on 22 December 1969, at the age of 46, in a room the hospital in Pietra Ligure.

Vera Grita attests first of all to an all-embracing Eucharistic orientation, which became explicit especially in her final years of life. She did not think in terms of programmes, apostolic initiatives, projects: she accepted the fundamental "project" that is Jesus himself, until he made her life his own. Today's world attests to a great need for the Eucharist.

Her journey through the strenuous labour of her days also offers a new lay perspective on holiness: becoming an example of conversion, acceptance and sanctification for the "poor", the "frail" and the "sick" who can recognise themselves and find hope in her.

As Salesian Cooperator, Vera Grita lived and worked, taught and encountered people with her strong Salesian sensitivity: from the loving-kindness of her discreet but effective presence, to her ability to be loved by children and families; from the pedagogy of kindness that she carried out with her constant smile, to her generous readiness with which, regardless of the inconvenience, she turned in preference to the least, to the little ones, to the distant, the forgotten; from her generous passion for God and His Glory to the way of the cross, letting everything be taken from her in her illness.

- **Akash Bashir, witness to fortitude and peace.**

A Past Pupil of Don Bosco, he is the first Pakistani whose Cause of Beatification and Canonisation is in process. On 15 March 2015, he sacrificed himself to prevent a suicide bomber from causing a massacre in St John's Church in Youhannabad, a Christian neighbourhood in Lahore, Pakistan. Akash Bashir was 20 years old, had studied at the Don Bosco Technical Institute in Lahore and had become a security volunteer.

What is most striking is how this simple young man was so strong in dealing with evil and fighting murderous violence. The words he said to the bomber before he died – "I will die, but I will not let you enter the church" – express strong faith and heroic courage in witnessing to love without measure. The Gospel of that Fourth Sunday of Lent (15 March 2015) proclaimed Jesus' words to Nicodemus: "For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light,

so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God” (Jn 3:20-21). Akash sealed these words with his young Christian blood. He fought cheek by jowl with the power of death, hatred and violence and made light and truth triumph. He washed his white garment with the blood of the Lamb, making it resplendent (cf. Rev 7:14).

Contact with the world and the Salesian charism reinforced the goodness and generosity in Akash that he had learned in his family and in the Christian community. Akash Bashir is an example of holiness for every Christian, an example for all the young Christians of the world. And he is undoubtedly a clear charismatic sign of the Salesian educational system. Akash is the voice of so many brave young people who manage to give their lives for faith despite difficulties, poverty, religious extremism, indifference, social inequality, discrimination. The life and martyrdom of this young Pakistani makes us recognise the power of the Holy Spirit of God, alive, found in the least expected places – in the humble, the persecuted, the young; in the little ones of God.

- And let us not forget **Artemides Zatti in the year of his canonisation.**

He was certainly a consecrated religious, *but one cannot fail to be struck by the lay dimension of his holiness* spent in the daily exercise of charity in the simplicity of a small hospital and a small village. He is an example and a model of consecration to his people in sacrificial and patient work, having God as its source, its motivation for faith and as the sole and ultimate goal of his life.

Their lives, the lives of all of them and their example are like “leaven in the dough” that continues to grow, and the Kingdom within us and around us.

The lay faithful offer the humus for the growth of the faith³⁸. This expression of Benedict XVI reminds us that Christianity is rooted and develops in the world thanks to the faith and commitment to evangelisation of so many lay people, married people, families and Christian communities. By the grace of Baptism, faith grows and spreads.

Similarly, the above-mentioned lay witnesses of Salesian holiness and many others “*next door*” have also given and continue to offer *the humus for the growth of the Salesian charism*. This company of saints reminds us that before works and roles, the quality of human relationships is the privileged place for the proclamation of the Gospel and the flourishing of the charism.

These testimonies remind us of the universal call to holiness, so dear both to St Francis de Sales – as we have already said – and to our Father of the Salesian Family, Don Bosco, when he proposed the goal of holiness to the young people of the oratory and to ordinary folk as a goal open to all, easy to follow and oriented to endless happiness.

All this by having Mary Help of Christians, the one who welcomed Jesus into her virginal womb and for this reason Mother, Teacher and Guide of the faith, especially in the accompaniment of the young generations on their journey towards holiness. The lives of all of them and their example are like “yeast for the bread.”

³⁸BENEDICT XVI, *Catechesis 7 February 2007.*

7. Our young people as YEAST in today's world

I would like to conclude this year's Strenna message with a final word that addresses our young people and the path we want to take together, because they too want to accompany us as we want to accompany them:

We want to tell you loudly, with all our heart. Being here for us was a dream come true: in this special place that is Valdocco, where the Salesian mission began, together with Salesians and young people for the Salesian mission, with our common will to be saints together. You have our hearts in your hands. Take care of this precious treasure of yours. Please never forget us and keep listening to us. Turin, 7 March 2020.³⁹

In fact, young people prepare for life, we accompany them on this journey, and I have no doubt that a very great service that we would render to them, to society and to the Church is to help them become aware of the social role they must play and for which they must prepare. That is why they are also the first to learn that they are called to be *yeast in in the human family*.

In preparing to write this commentary, I decided to look for and read, precisely for this final section of the Strenna, some of what the last three pontiffs – St John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis – have told the young people, because I was sure that their messages would be abundant and very powerful. And that is how they seem to me: so current, so timely and, dare I say it, so “Salesian”. And at the same time I want to strongly affirm how vast, extensive and demanding is the task that young people have before them in the Church and in the world. If they accept the challenge of being truly today's young people, active in their Christian and social commitment and true “yeast” in the human family.

Pope John Paul II, three years before his death, in one of his speeches proposed⁴⁰ eight great challenges that are genuine proposals of Christian, social and political life and commitment for young people who want to meet significant challenges. In reality, these are eight challenges that some scholars reduce to just one that could be expressed in this way: *putting the human being at the centre of economics and politics*. The task is this: the defence of human life in all situations; the promotion of the family and the eradication of poverty (through debt reduction, promoting development and opening up fair international trade); the defence of human rights and work to ensure disarmament (reduction of arms sales and consolidation of peace after conflicts); the fight against major diseases and access for all to the most necessary medicines; the protection of nature and prevention of natural disasters; and finally, the strict application of international law and conventions.

In turn, in the Encyclical Letter on integral human development, *Caritas in Veritate*⁴¹, **Pope Benedict XVI** lists the current challenges that are urgent and essential for the life of the world and in which today's young people can engage,

³⁹GC28, *What kind of Salesians for the Youth of Today?* Letter of the young people to Chapter members, Annex 3, p. 146.

⁴⁰JOHN PAUL II, *Address to Ambassadors of Countries Accredited to the Holy See*, Rome, 10 January 2002.

⁴¹Cf. BENEDICT XVI, *Encyclical Letter Caritas in Veritate*, Rome, 29 June 2009.

such as: the use of the earth's resources, respect for ecology, the just distribution of goods and the control of financial mechanisms, the fight against hunger in the world, promotion of the dignity of work, human solidarity with the poorest countries, service to the culture of life, inter-religious dialogue and the construction of peace among peoples and nations.

Finally, **Pope Francis** proposes a series of demanding tasks that we have as Christians and that await young people who want to take them on and engage in them with their faith and commitment, since many other young people suffer from such violence and extortion. Among his various writings (Encyclicals, Apostolic Exhortations and Messages to young people),⁴² I would like to recall the following: there are terrible and painful contexts of war (and I cannot fail to mention the unjust war against the Ukrainian people, which we all know because it has lasted for eleven months now); there are many people and young people who suffer from violence that manifests itself in many different ways: kidnappings, extortion, organised crime, trafficking of human beings, slavery and sexual exploitation, war crimes, etc. Some children are forced to become soldiers, to be part of armed gangs and criminals, to be involved in drug trafficking. Not a few children and teenagers are enslaved in the sex trade and trafficking. And there is no shortage of people and young people who are marginalised and even martyred because of their ethnicity or their beliefs. The pain of migration (in inhuman situations) and the scourge of xenophobia cannot be forgotten.⁴³ The discarding of people around the world, racism and the violation of universal human rights are other realities of a world in which there is also so much pain.⁴⁴

Are we aware that all this and much more affects this human family in which we seek to be yeast, salt and light⁴⁵? Could we say that this is a pessimistic view? No, not at all. Pope Francis himself cites many advances that exist today, but that go hand in hand with a “deterioration of ethics”:

With the Grand Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, we do not ignore the positive advances made in the areas of science, technology, medicine, industry and welfare, above all in developed countries. Nonetheless, “we wish to emphasise that, together with these historical advances, great and valued as they are, there exists a moral deterioration that influences international action and a weakening of spiritual values and responsibility. his contributes to a general feeling of frustration, isolation and desperation [...]. We see “outbreaks of tension and a buildup of arms and ammunition in a global context dominated by uncertainty, disillusionment, fear of the future, and controlled by narrow economic interests”. We can also point to “major political crises, situations of injustice and the lack of an equitable distribution of natural resources... [...] In the face of such crises that result in the deaths of millions of children –

⁴²Cf. *ChV*, 72-74; Cf. *FT*, 25.

⁴³*FT*, 38-40.

⁴⁴*Ibid*, 18-24.

⁴⁵I would like to emphasise in a very significant way what the Rector Major Fr Pascual Chávez wrote about the commitment of the Salesian Family to the defence of life, in all its senses and in all its dimensions. This is a very rich list of our current commitments (which also involves young people): Cf. CHÁVEZ, P., *You love everything that exists, and nothing that you have made disgusts you... Lord Lover of Life. (Wis 11:24.12,1)*, in ID., *Circular Letters to the Salesians* (ACG 396 (2006) Letter 019), LAS, Rome 2021, 604-605, 609-617.

emaciated from poverty and hunger – there is an unacceptable silence on the international level.⁴⁶

This reality is an opportunity for all of us, but especially for young people, to feel the Lord's call to live their Christian and also Salesian life (within the family of Don Bosco) as a great task.

This task and challenge had already been recalled by Pope Paul VI at the end of the Second Vatican Council with a message addressed to young people in which he said:

Lastly, it is to you, young men and women of the world, that the council wishes to address its final message. For it is you who are to receive the torch from the hands of your elders and to live in the world at the period of the most gigantic transformations ever realized in its history. It is you who, receiving the best of the example of the teaching of your parents and your teachers, are to form the society of tomorrow. You will either save yourselves or you will perish with it. [...] ...and build in enthusiasm a better world than your elders had!⁴⁷

Today, with deep conviction, I address this request that comes to all of us to be truly yeast in the human family to all of you, dear young people. These challenges demand that you say yes or no to your commitment to building a more just and fraternal world with your life, your formation, your studies, your work and your vocation. These challenges place you at the crossroads of accepting or rejecting a challenging and exciting life in which to put all your strength and energies according to God's dream for each of you.

And certainly you are not asked for any particular, extraordinary heroism, but only – yet this is already a lot – to make your own gifts and God-given to each of you fruitful, committing yourselves to grow in faith, in true Love, in fraternity and in service to all, especially to the least, to those who are most affected by life, to those who have least opportunity.

It seems to me to be a precious proposal for every young Christian and Salesian who wants to be a missionary disciple of the Lord today, and also a challenge and a proposal of such dignity and scope that, without any shame, it can be offered to any young person who wants to live their human condition to the full, whether they are Christians or professes other religious beliefs or seek to an essential and authentic humanism. At the same time it leads you to live outside your “comfort zones” which, like sirens with their songs, can lull you to sleep.

I just referred to humanism and I would like to conclude explicitly with a reference to this “Salesian humanism” with which we can educate all the young people of all nations of the world who are involved in Salesian presences because

For Don Bosco [it] meant giving due weight to all that is positive in the life of individuals, in creation, in the events of history. This led him to accept the genuine values present in the world, especially if pleasing to the young; to place himself in the flow of culture and of human development in his own times, encouraging the good and refusing to lament about the evil; wisely seeking the cooperation of many people,

⁴⁶FT, 29 which also cites the *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*, Abu Dhabi (4 February 2019): *L'Osservatore Romano* 4-5 February 2019, p.6.

⁴⁷PAUL VI, *Message to Youth*, Rome, 8 December 1968.

convinced that each one has gifts that need to be discovered, recognised and put to good use; believing in the power of education which provides support for the young person's development, and encouraging him to become an upright citizen and a good Christian; and always and everywhere entrusting himself to the providence of God, perceived and loved as a Father.⁴⁸

I conclude by thanking the Lord for a beautiful and full life in our Salesian Family at the service of the Gospel, asking the Lord for the whole Church and for us as part of the same Church to accept the joyful task of *evangelising*, because "she was sent by Christ to reveal and to communicate the love of God to all men and nations."⁴⁹

May our Mother Help of Christians help all of us to be missionary disciples, little stars that reflect her light. And let us pray that hearts may open to joyfully receive the proclamation of salvation which is God himself in Jesus.

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Rector Major

⁴⁸Fr. Chavez, *Like Don Bosco the educator we offer young people the Gospel of joy through a pedagogy of kindness. Strenna 2013* (ACG 415 (2013) Letter 038, op.cit., 1240-1241.

⁴⁹*Ad Gentes*, 10.