**SALESIAN FAMILY**

**SPIRITUALITY DAY 2023**

**Turin – Valdocco – Basilica of Mary Help of Christians**

**January 12, 2023**

***Homily***

The letter to the Hebrews in the passage that has been proclaimed exhorts us to do a cardiological examination on the state of health of our heart, a real check-up:

a first pathology that is denounced is sclerocardia, hardness of heart, the inability to listen to God's voice, closing oneself to his voice, not knowing how to recognize the signs of God's love and providence;

A second disease is the "misguided heart", a heart that marches at the wrong pace, a sort of genetic, hereditary disease, the result of the transmission of defects that disorients and leads astray;

 We speak as well of "perverse heart": a heart far from God, a heart closed to God and his love, prisoner of evil.

The heart is made for God, as Pope Francis reminded us in the Apostolic Letter written for the fourth centenary of the death of St. Francis de Sales. “At the very thought of God, one immediately feels a certain delightful emotion of the heart, which testifies that God is God of the human heart”.[4] These words are a perfect synthesis of his thought. An experience of God is intrinsic to the human heart. Far from a mental construct, it is a recognition, filled with awe and gratitude, of God’s self-manifestation. In the heart and through the heart, there comes about a subtle, intense, and unifying process in which we come to know God and, at the same time, ourselves, our own origins and depths, and our fulfilment in the call to love. We discover that faith is no blind emotion, but primarily an attitude of the heart, whereby we entrust ourselves to a truth that appeals to our consciousness as a “sweet emotion” and awakens in response, as he was wont to say, an enduring benevolence towards all of creation. In this light, we can understand why Saint Francis de Sales felt that there was no better place to find God, and to help others to find him, than in the hearts of the women and men of his time. He had learned this, from his earliest years, by developing a keen insight both into himself and into the human heart.

Moreover, as a remedy for pathologies of the heart, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews invites us: "Rather, exhort one another every day, as long as this lasts today, so that none of you may persist, seduced by sin".

I believe that the experience of the Family Spirituality Day is a time of grace to renew our hearts together and let ourselves be renewed by our brothers and sisters with whom we share this experience of grace. The Rector Major writes in this year's Strenna: "We were born charismatically as a community and as a communion of people from different social backgrounds, state of life, professional profile ... united by the same mission and motivated by the same charismatic charge that Don Bosco knew how to communicate. This is the nature of the Oratory in the years of its foundation... It is undeniable that we were born from the beginning as a group of the People of God: it is the nature of our charism and our mission. Only together, only by living in communion, will we be able to do something meaningful today. We know well that Don Bosco, from the beginning of his mission at Valdocco, involved many lay people, friends and collaborators so that they would participate in his mission among the young. From the outset he "arouses sharing and co-responsibility on the part of ecclesiastics, laity, men and women". It is, therefore, despite our resistance, a point of no return, because, in addition to corresponding to Don Bosco's action, the operational model of the mission shared with the laity proposed by GC24 is in fact "the only one practicable in the current conditions".

On this journey we are sustained by the witness of St. Artemis Zatti who was a true man of communion and builder of community and family with his sick, with confreres, lay people, religious, doctors and nurses. Pope Francis, in the beautiful meeting we had with him on the occasion of the canonization of Artemide Zatti, in presenting him as "a relative 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 today's world: "Thus a hospital has become the "Father’s inn", sign of a Church that wants to be rich in gifts of humanity and grace, dwelling place of the commandment of love of God and of one's brother, a place of health as a pledge of salvation. It is also true that this enters into the Salesian vocation: the Salesians are the great educators of the heart, of love, of affectivity, of social life; great educators of the heart".

We have the testimony of the Servant of God Vera Grita whose centenary of birth we will celebrate next January 28. She attended Mass in Savona, in the Salesian parish of Mary Help of Christians, and was assiduous in the sacrament of Penance. Salesian Cooperator since 1967, she fulfilled 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", with the "Word", to communicate to her the Work of the Living Tabernacles. Under the impulse of divine grace and accepting the mediation of spiritual guides, Vera Grita responded to God's gift by witnessing in her life, marked by the fatigue of illness, to the encounter with the Risen One and dedicating herself with heroic generosity to teaching and educating the students, providing for the needs of the family, and witnessing to a life of evangelical poverty.

We always need to purify our hearts, making our own the supplicant prayer of the leper of the Gospel: "If you want, you can make me cleansed!". Jesus had compassion on him, stretched out his hand, touched him, and said to him, "I will, be cleansed!"

The leprosy of the heart disfigures us, and isolates us from others, depersonalizes us and places us under the merciless judgment of others. The leper of the Gospel is striking for his courage, for his will to heal, for his thirst for life. Healing finds its most powerful ally in the leper. First of all, he overcomes with vital enthusiasm the barriers posed by society between him and others and draws close to Jesus, then says to him: "If you want, you can purify me". Jesus' gaze is not a gaze of judgment and condemnation, but of compassion, of intimate participation that brings the leper back to life, that regenerates him. Jesus makes a gesture that expresses the whole mystery of the incarnate God, of the God who touches the flesh of man, sick and wounded, to heal and save it.

We are called to experience God's compassionate love for us, of a God rich in mercy, and to become in turn signs and bearers of God's love for those we meet.

As did Blessed Luigi Variara, whose centenary of death we are commemorating this year and who was a sign of God's compassionate love for the lepers of the hospital of Agua de Dios in Colombia, where he founded the Congregation of the "Daughters of the Most Holy Hearts of Jesus and Mary". Some of them were lepers or children of lepers.

Luigi Variara had a look of compassion because he had allowed himself to be looked at by God both when a boy here in the courtyard of Valdocco he was touched by the paternal and intuitive gaze of Don Bosco as he will remember: "I was frantically looking for a way to put myself in a place where I could see him at my pleasure, because I ardently desired to know him. I approached as much as I could, and as they helped him into the carriage, he gave me a sweet look, and his eyes rested intently on me. I don't know what I felt at that moment... it was something I don't know how to express! That day was one of the happiest for me; I was sure that I had known a Saint, and that that Saint had read in my soul something that only God and he could know"; and when Don Rua whispered in his ear on the day of his perpetual profession these words: "Variara, do not vary". They are looks, they are words that mark a life, a mission.

Today's young people also ask us for that compassion, that look, that word that changes hearts and lives, as the Rector Major reminds us again at the end of the Strenna: "I would like to conclude the message of this year's Strenna with a last word that is addressed to our young people and to the journey we want to make 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 Salesians and young people for the Salesian mission, with our common desire 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."

In fact, young people are preparing 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. For this reason, they are also the first to learn that they are called to be that leaven in the human family".

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