

MARY URGES US TO BEAR WITNESS TO HER PRESENCE

Our devotion to Mary Help of Christians, which we emphasize particularly in this month with the novena and the feast in her honour, commits us to **witness her maternal presence to all those who are far from God or who are experiencing difficult trials** such as war, illness or injustice. Through prayer and example, we are called to approach the hearts of those who are far from God and his grace. Mary Help of Christians is with us and intercedes for each of us, so that with love and courage we can witness the faith, and encourage people to look to her and consecrate themselves to her Immaculate Heart.

She sends us in order that, like small lights in the world guided by her maternal love, we may shine clearly with full splendour. Prayer will help us, because prayer saves us and saves the world. She exhorts us not to be afraid to tell the truth, and not to be afraid to change ourselves and the world by spreading love, making her Son known and loved, so that love may reign in our lives: a love that is living, a love that attracts and a love that gives life. It is up to us to acknowledge it, live it and spread it.

The aspect that characterizes our association is **the popular dimension of the Salesian charism, which finds a typical expression in popular piety**. The term "popular piety" designates those diverse cultic expressions of a private or community nature which, in the context of the Christian faith, are inspired predominantly not by the Sacred Liturgy but by forms deriving from a particular nation or people or from their culture.

Popular piety has rightly been regarded as "a treasure of the people of God" and "manifests a thirst for God known only to the poor and to the humble, rendering them capable of a generosity and of sacrifice to the point of heroism in testifying to the faith while displaying an acute sense of the profound attributes of God: paternity, providence, and his constant loving presence. It also generates interior attitudes otherwise rarely seen to the same degree: patience, an awareness of the Cross in every-day life, detachment, openness to others and devotion". (Directory of Popular Piety No. 9). In the Salesian tradition, it is good to remember the practice of having statues of Mary Help of Christians in homes and in neighbourhoods, as a reminder of the presence of Mary and stirring up a spontaneous movement of faith, prayer, and charity. Another growing reality in our Association is the message of thanks for graces obtained through the intercession of the Help of Christians, and of the saints, blessed, venerable and servants of God of the Salesian Family. This is a practical way of living the Communion of Saints, experiencing the closeness, intercession, and the help of so many brothers and sisters who support us and accompany us in the trials and struggles of life.

We are in the month of Our Lady. We gather in many parts of the world to honour Our Lady under the title Help of Christians. We express our thanks to her for the way she is renewing our Association and we commit ourselves to making our ADMA groups grow in number and in quality.



9. *Accompanying, discerning and integrating fragility*

Fr Silvio Roggia, SDB

Chapter VIII of *Amoris Laetitia* is perhaps the chapter that has led to most discussion because it focuses on the 'fragility' that is part of human love in family life. Pope Francis invites us to look at our fragility with the eyes of Jesus:

"I encourage the faithful who find themselves in complicated situations to speak confidently with their pastors or with other lay people whose lives are committed to the Lord. They may not always encounter in them a confirmation of their own ideas or desires, but they will surely receive some light to help them better understand their situation and discover a path to personal growth. I also encourage the Church's pastors to listen to them with sensitivity and serenity, with a sincere desire to understand their plight and their point of view, in order to help them live better lives and to recognize their proper place in the Church." [Relatio Synodi 2014, 24] (AL 312).

Attention to those who are fragile and wounded is not an exception to the rule, to be hidden in a small footnote. On the contrary, Francis's example and words from the first day of his election to this day are asking us to start right there, precisely with those who are finding most difficulty.

Here I would like to reiterate something I sought to make clear to the whole Church, lest we take the wrong path: "There are two ways of thinking which recur throughout the Church's history: casting off and reinstating. The Church's way, from the time of the Council of Jerusalem, has always been the way of Jesus, the way of mercy and reinstatement. The way of the Church is not to condemn anyone for ever; it is to pour out the balm of God's mercy on all those who ask for it with a sincere heart. For true charity is always unmerited, unconditional and gratuitous." [Relatio Synodi 2014, 25] (AL 296).

This is the wavelength of Chapter VIII: full acceptance of the novelty of the Gospel teaching on the family, continuing to make it shine out and to proclaim it joyfully to all; and one-to-one closeness to those who are struggling and finding obstacles on their path, without excluding anyone. The season of Easter is in perfect harmony with this way of understanding and acting. On the one hand, we have the highest point of all that the Father, Son and Spirit do and offer for our salvation: the passion, death and resurrection; Eucharist; Pentecost and so on. On the other hand, this immensity of life is entrusted to the testimony of frail people like us: Peter who disowned the Lord and the others who fled from Gethsemane; The first Christian community rich in faith but also with problems, not just the external ones associated with persecution but also the problems and fragility of believers, as can well be seen in the Acts of the Apostles and Paul's letters.

The light of the fullest ideal

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis has insisted on the right of all to receive the light of the Gospel in its appealing beauty, giving priority to the essentials, without filters and without burdening the proclamation with too many things that end up obscuring rather than favouring the acceptance of the good seed (see EG 34-39).

Amoris Laetitia as a whole is a gospel, good news expressed in our time about the beauty and grandeur of the love between man and woman from whom the family is born, fruit of faith in Jesus, our way, truth and life. In Him we become truly human and truly the children of the Father.

"Christian marriage, as a reflection of the union between Christ and his Church, is fully realized in the union between a man and a woman who give themselves to each other in a free, faithful and exclusive love, who belong to each other until death and are open to the transmission of life, and are consecrated by the sacrament, which grants them the grace to become a domestic church and a leaven of new life for society." (AL 292).

And here the Pope uses the educational system of Don Bosco: to prevent or anticipate as much as possible. If we are committed with all our strength to let this light shine, offering it to those who are growing up and

preparing for married life, we are laying the foundations so that the joy of love becomes a lifelong project. And if we are generously investing the energies of Christian communities in order to 'consolidate marriages', many fragile situations will find the help that will turn a moment of crisis into a growth opportunity.

"In no way must the Church desist from proposing the full ideal of marriage, God's plan in all its grandeur: "Young people who are baptized should be encouraged to understand that the sacrament of marriage can enrich their prospects of love and that they can be sustained by the grace of Christ in the sacrament and by the possibility of participating fully in the life of the Church." [Relatio Synodi 2014, 26] A lukewarm attitude, any kind of relativism, or an undue reticence in proposing that ideal, would be a lack of fidelity to the Gospel and also of love on the part of the Church for young people themselves. To show understanding in the face of exceptional situations never implies dimming the light of the fuller ideal, or proposing less than what Jesus offers to the human being. Today, more important than the pastoral care of failures is the pastoral effort to strengthen marriages and thus to prevent their breakdown." (AL 307).



The law of gradualness

One of the best descriptions of Don Bosco was that of Pius XI, who had known him personally when he was still a young priest, and who was later the Pope who proclaimed him a saint on Easter Sunday 1934. What is the work of Don Bosco? "Don Bosco's work is to make saints," Pius XI loved to say. In fact, the founder of ADMA never failed to propose holiness to all. He was never satisfied with easy cheap goals for his young people. But he did not stay in the pulpit waiting for those who were already perfectly "in the grace of God" to come to hear his sermons. He started in the prisons of Turin and planted his tent on the outskirts of Valdocco in order to give a home to thousands of children who were discarded by society. Valdocco at that time was the equivalent of the poorest and most dangerous slums of today's major cities.

I believe here is the secret and strength of what the Pope is asking of us in this chapter. Never lose sight of heaven, without hiding in a corner of this earth, even if we are close to the people God loves most, precisely because they are in greater difficulty. There is a wonderful article of the Salesian Constitutions of Don Bosco, where it says: "Imitating God's patience, we encounter the young at their present stage of freedom. We then accompany them, so that they may develop solid convictions and gradually assume responsibility for the delicate process of their growth as human beings and as men of faith." (art. 38).

Saint John Paul II proposed the so-called "law of gradualness" in the knowledge that the human being "knows, loves and accomplishes moral good by different stages of growth". [Familiaris consortio, 34] This is not a "gradualness of law" but rather a gradualness in the prudential exercise of free acts on the part of subjects who are not in a position to understand, appreciate, or fully carry out the objective demands of the law. For the law is itself a gift of God which points out the way, a gift for everyone without exception; it can be followed with the help of grace, even though each human being "advances gradually with the progressive integration of the gifts of God and the demands of God's definitive and absolute love in his or her entire personal and social life". [Ibid., 9: 90] (AL 295)

Does this not describe the real life of every family? Parents definitely want the best for their children. The

way to go forward together to the goal, however, is not smooth and does not correspond to the good desires in people's hearts and the good intentions they share. There are difficulties, limitations, and sometimes very heavy external conditioning. And then there are all the fragilities and mistakes of personal life. This was also the case with the new 'family' that accompanied Jesus in the years of his public life: despite the fact that the Twelve had listened to the gospel directly from the Master's lips, they denied and betrayed him.

"It is a matter of reaching out to everyone, of needing to help each person find his or her proper way of participating in the ecclesial community and thus to experience being touched by an "unmerited, unconditional and gratuitous" mercy. No one can be condemned for ever, because that is not the logic of the Gospel! Here I am not speaking only of the divorced and remarried, but of everyone, in whatever situation they find themselves. Naturally, if someone flaunts an objective sin as if it were part of the Christian ideal, or wants to impose something other than what the Church teaches, he or she can in no way presume to teach or preach to others; this is a case of something which separates from the community (cf. Mt 18:17). Such a person needs to listen once more to the Gospel message and its call to conversion. Yet even for that person there can be some way of taking part in the life of community, whether in social service, prayer meetings or another way that his or her own initiative, together with the discernment of the parish priest, may suggest." (AL 297).

I cannot help but look again at Don Bosco, to see how Pope Francis wants us to behave towards those who are going through situations of fragility without losing sight of the renewing power of the gospel. Just a stone's throw from the house where he grew up in Becchi - in a family sorely tested by his father's premature death and many forms of poverty - there is a statue of young John Bosco walking on a tightrope. The artist had a brilliant insight: the string is taut not because it is tied to two trees, but because there is a group of angels playing tug-of-war with a group of boys. It is on this tension between heaven and earth that John Bosco walks straight towards those boys with his heart in heaven

"The Church has the mission of proclaiming God's mercy, the pulsating heart of the Gospel, through which it must reach the heart and mind of every person. The Bride of Christ makes its own the way of behaving of the Son of God, reaching out to everyone and excluding nobody. [*Misericordiae Vultus*, 12]. The Church knows that Jesus is a Shepherd of one hundred sheep, not ninety-nine. He wants them all" (AL 302).

Pastoral ministry of merciful clarity

Pope Francis suggests that not everyone is enthusiastic about the approach he offers to the fragility of marriage and family life.

"I understand those who prefer a more rigid pastoral care that will not give rise to any confusion. But I sincerely believe that Jesus wants a Church attentive to the good that the Spirit pours out in the midst of fragility: a Mother who, at the very moment in which she explicitly expresses her objective teaching, does not give up on the good she can do, even if she runs the risk of getting dirty with the mud of the road. [EG 45]" (AL 308).

There is no room here to enter the lively dialogue that *Amoris Laetitia* has given rise to, especially on the possibility of access to the Eucharist by those who live in situations that do not conform to Christian marriage. There is a delightful intervention by Cardinal Francesco Coccopalmerio, president of the Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts, which I think may be enlightening for those who want to know and reflect further on this issue. It is accessible through this link: <https://goo.gl/9eCOB4>

Seeds to be opened

Zacchaeus and the sycamore tree, and the first stone

It may be enlightening to accompany the reflection on Chapter VIII of *Amoris Laetitia* by meditating on two gospel passages that show Jesus' thinking and the pastoral line he took in two situations of fragility, which were very irregular and contrary to the standard of the mosaic law as it was lived at his time.

Luke: 19,1-10 Zacchaeus, come down immediately, today I want to stop at your house.

John 8.1-11 Has no one condemned you? Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on, sin no more.

The 24th of the month: a profound Marian sign that makes us a family

The Salesian Luis Valpuesta, of venerable memory, was a man who was passionate about providing good literature for the young by means of small simple leaflets. Guided by his evangelical zeal, he used to distribute many leaflets. One of them had the title: "To say 24 is to say Mary Help of Christians". The 24th is more than a simple number. The celebration of the 24th is a sign of the profound Marian dimension of the Salesian Family. It generates joy, trust, apostolic dynamism and makes it a family. The General Regulations of the Salesians of Don Bosco explicitly point to this unifying sign when they speak of dialogue with the Lord.

The monthly commemoration of Mary Help of Christians did not start by chance. This gesture inspired by Marian popular piety sprouted from a living community that experienced daily the maternal protection of Mary Help of Christians. That community was the Salesian house in Montevideo (Uruguay) and from here the practice passed to the whole world. Fr Paolo Albera of the Superior Council visited the Salesian Houses of America on behalf of the Rector Major, Blessed Michele Rua. When Fr Albera arrived in Montevideo in 1899, he met the pleasant surprise of the celebration of the 24th of each month in honour of Mary Help of Christians. When he reported this to Turin, Don Rua wasted no time in introducing this commemoration in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians in Valdocco and recommending it to all Salesian homes.

When Fr Pablo Albera became the successor of Don Bosco, he recommended the spread of this Marian practice to all Salesian houses. He did so in a few heartfelt well-chosen words, full of affection for Our Lady and also rich in ecclesial and Salesian spirit. Fr Albera said: "This is something which is of great interest to me, that all possible solemnity be given to the commemoration of the 24th of each month as is already the case at the Shrine of the Powerful Help of Christians in Valdocco, to pray fervently for the intentions of the Holy Father and for the good of our Society."

The celebration of the 24th of the month is still very much alive. Everywhere there are manifestations of gratitude, trust, and passionate love for Mary Help of Christians. The celebrations on the 24th of each month are a replica of 24 May, the feast of Mary Help of Christians. At the end of his "Letter from Rome" (1884), Don Bosco says that this feast is the prelude of the feast we will celebrate together in Paradise.

In the celebrations of the 24th there is always the blessing composed by Don Bosco and the song "Rendidos a tus plantas", and we gather around the Mother of God. These are celebrations that revive the "Da mihi animas". They are open out-going celebrations. Celebrating Mary our Help must make us



aware that we too must be "Helpers". It would do very little good if we stayed praying in the Church and did not go out to the margins. We know that Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio of Buenos Aires, today Pope Francis, was the first to arrive every 24th of the month at the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians in the Almagro district, and he used to pray there for a long time at the Shrine of Our Lady. It is true "To say 24 is to say Mary Help of Christians". (Miguel Aragón Ramírez, SDB).

FAMILY CHRONICLE

Philippines - ADMA Meeting with the Spiritual Animator



On Saturday 1 April 2017, on the occasion of the visit of Fr Pierluigi Cameroni, Spiritual Animator, a meeting was held in Manila for ADMA members of the metropolitan area. Members of the Northern Philippines Provincial Council took part as well as a significant number of young people from the ADMA group of San Idelfonso in Makati. Fr Cameroni had come to the Philippines in connection with the cause of the Servant of God, Fr Carlo

Braga. At the meeting, he presented the main lines of ADMA and invited the members to continue the ongoing journey with special attention to families and young people. The President of the group, Maria Junifer, and the provincial spiritual animator, Fr Remo Bati, welcomed the participants. In the afternoon, Fr Pierluigi presided over the Eucharist in the National Shrine of Mary Help of Christians in Paranaque, and on Sunday 2 April in the parish church of S. Idelfonso, where there is a fervent group of ADMA Youth animated by the parish priest Fr Antony Malavino. In all these meetings, the popular dimension of ADMA was felt through a widespread devotion to Our Lady with the spread of statues of Mary Help of Christians in families for the daily recitation of the Rosary, with simple catechesis and with Marian animation of groups of young people, boys and girls. In the late morning of Sunday there was a meeting with the Provincial Council of ADMA chaired by Ms Maria Junifer Maliglig, where they shared experiences and guidelines. There was a call for the renewal of ADMA with attention to accompanying families, the growth of the identity and responsibility of lay people, and the enhancement of popular religiosity.



The paper can be read at the following site:

www.admadonbosco.org

and here: www.donbosco-torino.it/

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ADMA PRIMARY - FIRST STEPS IN FAMILY LIFE

Forty couples participated, in a climate of joy, at the first meeting of "First steps in Family Life", organized by ADMA and the Youth Ministry Team of the Salesian District of Piedmont and Valle d'Aosta for young couples in the first years of marriage or couples who have already set the date (although it is not a pre-marriage course).

The proposal is one of the initiatives of the Salesian Family in response to the Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* and the Strenna of the Rector Major, to promote ministry towards families especially in the early years of family life.

As babies when they are born they cannot walk or talk, so also married couples need to learn the secrets to be happy in married life from the grammar of relationship, affection, being man and woman with their differences and complementarities. Young married couples need to be formed and accompanied to enjoy the grace of 24-hour marriage and helped to live it to the full and overcome the inevitable challenges. They easily understand the importance of not isolating themselves, but of building networks of relationships, of the joy of dialogue and forgiveness. Gradually they discover the beauty of living in trust, open to the gift of life and the joy of becoming parents.

The course was also an opportunity to experience communion and complementarity between the states of life. In fact the team that accompanied the young couples with a great spirit of communion was composed of married couples, sisters and priests.

They had a chance to deepen their understanding of the beauty and richness of the Sacrament of marriage, the cornerstone of married life, the secret of forgiveness, the importance of prayer and spiritual direction - and the joy of being parents. But above all, they gained the awareness that in marriage it is necessary to put Jesus in the centre, to learn to say "thank you", "sorry" and "please" and that they win when both win.

Everything was done in the Salesian style and in the family spirit to offer not only a formation opportunity, but also an opportunity to share experiences and form relationships between couples. The round of meetings ended with a retreat at Muzzano on 1-2 April, during which the couples studied aspects of the spirituality of married life, helped by a talk from the Provincial, Fr Enrico Stasi.

With gratitude we entrust these and all young couples to Jesus and Mary, we pray that they will support them, certain that in the end the smile will accompany them on their journey.



East Timor - Lenten Retreat

The Association of Mary Help of Christians (ADMA) of Timor Leste met on 31 March - 1 April 2017 at the Community of San Domenico di Lospalos for the Lenten retreat at national level. The participants came from different houses: Fatumaca, Venilale, Baucau, Dili, Maliana (Kailako), Laga, Quelicai, Vemasse, Bucoli, Fuiloro and Lospalos, for a total of 305 participants. They included the national president Maria Fatima Belo and the whole council, together with the National Spiritual Animator Fr Manuel da Silva Ximenes, SDB. Fr. Rolando Fernandez, a 34-year-old Philippines missionary in Timor-Leste, was the preacher of the retreat on the theme: "Communion in Christ? Living like Him!"



Japan - The First Spiritual Retreat of ADMA

During the wonderful spring period near Kawaguchi Lake, at the foot of Mount Fuji, the first spiritual retreat took place with 40 members from two Japanese ADMA groups (Tokyo started in 2010 and Hamamatsu in 2012). The retreat was led by the spiritual animator Fr Angel Yamanouchi and the Provincial, Fr Mario. Two Salesians helped by hearing confessions in other languages (Fr Dong Tan Hien in Vietnamese and Fr Ambrosio da Silva in Portuguese and English). There was also Sister Teresa Matsumoto, FMA animator.

During the retreat, we welcomed 23 new members of the Hamamatsu group: 9 Brazilians, 7 Japanese, 5 Peruvians and 2 Filipinos. We are also pleased with the presence of many candidates from different nationalities interested in becoming members of ADMA.

The enrolment of the 23 new members was introduced with the prayer of the Rosary animated by the Tokyo group in three languages (Japanese, Portuguese and Spanish) with a brief meditations by Fr Angel on Mary, model of the Christian disciple. The time for confessions followed. In the spiritual climate of Pentecost, the 23 new members pronounced the commitment formula and the Eucharistic



blessing confirmed their decision to give witness, as members of ADMA and as disciples of Jesus, in Japanese society. A fraternal meal followed. (Fr. Mario Yamanouchi - Provincial).