



Valdocco - TURIN -2nd – 6th October 2024

THE EXTRAORDINARY GENERAL WORLD ASSEMBLY

Fr Stefano Martoglio
The Vicar

Dear friends, past pupils gathered at this important world meeting of the Association, thank you for your invitation. I was very happy to express my availability; for me, given the Salesian past pupil that I am, before anything else it is an honour. Indeed, first of all the son of a Salesian past pupil who wanted to send me where he himself had studied.

Our being here is very important, first of all for the place you have chosen for this meeting, the place where it all began.

Allow me to start out from this.

1. The profound meaning of finding ourselves here in Don Bosco's house

The profound meaning of finding ourselves here in Valdocco, is the great opportunity for renewing our identity, recognising and being grateful for the gift of a Catholic education that we have all received, and doing so here at Don Bosco's school, in the house that brings us all together as "the Father's House". All of us together, here, in the name of the Association.

Let us briefly go into some aspects that being here together reminds us of and invigorates us with.

First of all, this being here in the house of Don Bosco reminds us strongly that all of us are involved in carrying out the *mission* that Jesus himself entrusts us with, collaborating with him in his plan of salvation. "The Salesian spirit finds its model and source in the *very heart of Christ, apostle of the Father*". First of all, we are spiritually born here, to be good Christians and upright citizens.

Being here, coming back here, makes each of us stronger, we who are "called and sent for the *building of the Kingdom* of which we are the witnesses. This task is both a *community and a personal* one at the same time.

Secondly, our being here in Valdocco reminds us of the very nature of the "**Family of Valdocco**". Our education, which is within us, has built our personal and family life. It is an expansion of the natural family with the following characteristics as recalled by Fr Rinaldi:

"Not coercion but the bond of fraternal charity, in order to form a single heart, to acquire perfection in the exercise of every work of spiritual and corporal charity towards young people,... more than a society, Don Bosco intended to form a family founded almost solely on the gentle, loving, vigilant fatherhood of the superior and on the fraternal affection of his subjects, indeed, while maintaining the principle of authority and respect, he did not want distinctions, but equality between everyone and everything" (Fr Philip Rinaldi, 50th anniversary of the approval of the Constitutions, 1924; ACS January, p. 179).

A spiritual family in which everything is transfigured in the style of a family atmosphere: being with Don Bosco, working for young people, living in a family spirit. This is within each of us. We know it well.



Don Bosco's house renews the profound identity of the Christian and believer that education has generated in each of us. Hence it is not just that we went to a school run by Salesians that constructs our identity, but that we identify ourselves with the education received. We know it well!

OUR BEING HERE IS A SENSE OF BELONGING: I AM AT HOME!

To live fraternal life in communion, I must have the “**sense of being at home**” (cf. C. 16: “*Don Bosco wanted everyone to feel ‘at home’ in his establishments...*”). Feeling at home is the test that verifies my sense of belonging. It is an attitude that translates into looking after everything that happens in it, from the deepest things to the most external, structural aspects: everything, in its own way, is part of me, of my life, which cannot and should not leave me indifferent. Looking after the people.

Re-appropriating the family spirit:

“Working together without living together, turns society from a family into a business. And the deepest suffering (if we read the famous letter from 1884) was what Don Bosco experienced when he saw his community slowly slipping away from being a family to being a business.”

*Once more to guide your reflection, let me add that the family can degenerate not only into a **business**, but also into a **barracks** and an **apartment building or block of flats**. In a nutshell:*

*A **business’s** purpose is **financial statements**. Working, striving with all one’s might so that no budget goes into the red, and so that there are good dividends. After work, everyone goes where they want, does what they want, has the friends they want. And blessed is the one with the best-stocked wallet.*

*The **barracks**, military life, has **objectives** as the supreme goal. They must be reached at any cost. It is not the bodies that are counted in war, but the objectives achieved. In the end they give medals to the bodies, pensions to the mutilated and the widows, but the only thing important is having ‘achieved the objectives’. No matter if someone has gone crazy because of this, lost their health, was killed, or was unimportant. This is just the normal price to pay.*

*The **apartment building**, a dwelling in a block of flats, has ‘**do not disturb**’ as its watchword. Everyone can do what they want, even the strangest things, so long as they don’t disturb the neighbours, who also have to be masters at doing what they want.*

***Family** instead, is **loving each other** as brothers and sisters, putting up with each other, helping one another, suffering together. Working for a purpose shared by all, with the pleasure of doing it together and being together, with attention given first to people rather than to (albeit important) objectives”.*

Rediscovering the “taste” of being together, bringing this into our families and our homes to fulfil Jesus’ promise: “*For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am in the midst of them*” (Matthew 18:20).



2. Walking together is changing to being faithful, continuity in change

Fidelity to the heart of Don Bosco, which we received in education, and which has made us who we are and built our believing life and our humanity, must be accompanied as time goes by. It must continue to grow.

This is both a personal and community task. Being faithful is accompanying the stages of our life. Fidelity is change. We must believe this; the opposite is a formal kind of fidelity that blocks the accompaniment of the stages of our life and extinguishes our fidelity. This applies to us, but it also applies to our associations and the life of the Church.

Here we enter certain profound elements that we must never cease to cultivate, so we do not die out

*** Sharing and involvement:** *“Rejoice with those who rejoice, Weep with those who weep” (Rom 12:15); “...that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it” (1 Cor 12:25-26).* To share is to get involved. We cannot live out our fidelity alone. Our growth is our involvement; otherwise, whatever you think you have inside you, you end up losing it... because you stopped living it and sharing it.

*** Communication:** To become brothers and sisters, we need to get to know one another.

Communicate the things that matter: announce the Gospel to each other, tell your brother and sisters your own story of salvation.

Know how to listen: “God has given us two ears and one tongue; in his wisdom he tells us that we must listen at least twice as much as we speak”: “Blessed are those who know how to listen and be silent: they will learn many new things”. Be good: “Blessed are you if you know how to kindly interpret the attitudes of others even against appearances: you will be judged to be naive, but this is the price of love.” In-depth listening. Educating ourselves to dialogue.

*** Shared responsibility:** we can all give something, no-one excluded: we must roll up our sleeves and not expect everything from others: we cannot remain kids for life. Be adults: Jesus said, *“unless you change and become like children” (Matthew 18:3)* and not, *“Unless you remain like children”*. Gospel childhood is profound maturity and responsibility!

All within the diversity of views, without division or opposition: *“Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you should be in agreement and that there should be no divisions among you, but that you should be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, ‘I belong to Paul’, or ‘I belong to Apollos’, or ‘I belong to Cephas’, or ‘I belong to Christ.’ 13 Has Christ been divided?” (1 Cor 1:10-13).*

Learn to dream, plan, work, evaluate together. From a “consumer” community, to an “involved” community. The bicentenary of Don Bosco’s dream reminds us of this, and many other things.

Trust! Trust and create possibilities.



* **Witness:** “Witness is the only **language capable of convincing the young** that ‘God exists, that his love can fill a life completely’ (C. 62). It is essential, therefore, that we live and share our faith life with transparency and strength.

Our houses by now are houses made of... glass! “Who and what you are screams so loud I can’t hear what you’re saying.”

Witness, there where you are, with those with whom you live, starting with your family. Your testimony speaks of what truly and strongly believe. Witness, testimony, is our humanity first of all. The thing that the world needs most is to have witnesses; witnesses of the good life of the Gospel learned in the houses of Don Bosco.

3. Carlo Gastini’s dream, to bring Don Bosco into the world and remain united with Don Bosco.

Let us carry Carlo Gastini’s dream within ourselves as past pupils: what you have found in Don Bosco’s house you must bring to everyone. Make present and alive the educational heart that you have received by bringing the spirit of Don Bosco to the world with his humanity, his professionalism and his sense of the presence of God.

During this year we have reflected at length on the profound meaning of young John Bosco’s dream at nine years of age; the dream is a deep expression of what you carry in your heart and have in the depths of yourself. Let the dream accompany your life and mark your present, because it outlines your future.

The heart of Gastini’s dream, which the Past Pupils Association embodies, is right here: what you experienced in Don Bosco’s house sets your life on fire, you can’t help but bring it to everyone. This dream, then, has two very important sides to it:

- Those who pass through Don Bosco’s houses must be able to have a strong experience of faith and life, in education, which will give a future to their entire life. The experience of the Salesian Congregation shows that the first point is not that those who come to you in schools and vocational training are believers – often they are not even Christians.

The central point is that in the education received in the Salesian house where they were, the feel the presence of the Master of the House. From Valdocco to any other Salesian house, to feel the sense of the presence of the “Master of the House”, whom we know to be God, is to open the young person to a sense of life that will give strength to his or her humanity.

Whatever religion they belong to, a humanity that you know is just and open to the transcendent from the spiritual dimension. Justice, being upright citizens, always arises from a vision of people and society that goes beyond the people themselves.



- But the dream is also that Don Bosco is known and “multiplied”: Don Bosco’s houses live from the help and solidarity of an infinite number of past pupils who have had a good life experience in their education, and then see to being able to make others have the same experience; creating the social and economic conditions for this to happen.

Each one mobilising according to their possibilities and their social “position”; with one specific common denominator: restitution.

I want what I have received to be a possibility for many others too. Restitution is the precise moral awareness of what you have received. If you are not aware of what your education has “built” you have nothing to give back; it does not even come to mind.

The Congregation is very clear about this: without infinite mediations of providence, we cannot do anything. Very often the mediations of providence are our past pupils, who recognise and want to give back what they have received.

- Gastini’s Dream is also that we must do all this together to always bring Don Bosco with us, to render the “spirit” of our education alive and current in the different situations and stages of life. Hence an Association!

We cannot possibly do it alone; we need to establish the social circumstances in which to continue that which was begun in us in education from “providence”, in order to keep it alive and current.

We know that this is true, we have personal experience of it; but we also know that this is difficult. As the years go by, it fades.

For this reason, renewing Carlo Gastini’s dream is knowing how to renew our Association, in different situations and contexts, but with the same spirit.

Renewing ourselves in order to maintain the spirit of the beginnings. This is a great task, an obedience to reality in the spirit of faith that always makes us concrete.

Bearers of Solidarity and peace

A brief word on a very important point: our being upright citizens is to be bearers of solidarity and peace. Without peace, there is no chance of life. Being workers for peace is the ongoing way for us to be upright citizens.

Being bearers of peace is not making peace with the injustices and inequalities that increasingly mark humanity. An Association like the Past Pupils is a social body that could work miracles to get humanity on the road.

Being bearers of solidarity is recognising that what I have, what I have been given, or what I have built, can never be mine alone. Everything that is only mine and only for me, sooner or later collapses on top of me.



Our world is clearly showing us that without solidarity and without peace, it is increasingly complex and dangerous.

Solidarity is the quintessence of the spirit of a received education that puts people at the centre, with the dignity that comes only from openness to the transcendent, to the Creator.

Pilgrims with young people, anchored in the Hope that is Christ in our lives

Let us remember with the theme of the Strenna that will accompany us in 2025 that Christian hope is the one kind that does not disappoint, that does not deceive because it is based on the certainty that nothing and no one can ever separate us from the love of God. This certainty is recalled by the apostle Paul (*Rom 8:35,37*). Therefore, the Word of God assures us that in the midst of darkness we perceive the light and acquire the strength that comes from the Lord himself and from his resurrection.

Certainly, it is the path of life, of every life, and above all the life of every Christian, a path that must be supported with special moments, special occasions, powerful opportunities. These are needed to nurture and strengthen the hope that leads us to encounter the Lord and to live with true and full meaning.

Going on pilgrimage – something that we will experience in a thousand ways and in a thousand places with young people throughout the Jubilee year – is something common for those who want and need to leave their places of comfort, to abandon those spaces in which each of us has comfortably settled and perhaps even felt disenchanted, unmotivated. Going on pilgrimage will require us to make an *effort* on many occasions, to *be silent* and to choose to *go to what is essential*.

We will have to adopt this attitude along with the young people. This will benefit us greatly and will allow the Lord to encounter each of us, whenever and wherever he deems appropriate, but always touching the most precious and profound part of our heart, our spirit, our being. And we need to be available for the encounter at that moment. We should not be afraid of “*risking*” when it is a matter of encountering the Lord. He never disappoints, especially if we cling to him, are *anchored to him*.

This is the spirit that the Strenna passes on to us in a very appropriate way to live our personal life and that of the Association together with every young person in the world. Young people inside, at any age. Because we are faithful to our own beliefs and to the education received.

Let us entrust this to Mary Help of Christians, whose sanctuary is at the centre of this house so that it is always at the centre of our personal life and that of the Association.