

STRENNA 2027

CHARITY IS PATIENT, CHARITY IS KIND

'Dedicated' to the integral good of young people

1875 to 1877 were three years filled with significant events in the life of Don Bosco, the Congregation and the Salesian Family.

150 years have passed since that period, but time has not diminished the impact and power of those events – quite the contrary! And in gratefully remembering the past, we find today the capacity to move forward into the future. Commemorating those events, in fact, means recognising the power of the Holy Spirit within them that drove Don Bosco to open up and chart new paths and to pioneer new frontiers of pastoral work in the field of education for young people, especially those most in need.

As the Salesian Family, we have remembered and celebrated the first missionary expedition of 1875 in the spirit of **hope**. A journey lived in the spirit of the 2025 Jubilee, as *pilgrims of hope*. Since that event, the Congregation and the Salesian Family have deepened their call to renew hope in the lives of young people by walking alongside them. The theme '*Anchored in Hope, Pilgrims with Young People*' brought together these two important anniversaries – the 2025 Jubilee and the 150th anniversary of the first Salesian missionary expedition – reaffirming hope as a gift to be lived out and passed on to new generations. Being 'pilgrims' with young people was a clear invitation to walk alongside them as a tangible sign of closeness and a promise for the future.

This mission continues today, sustained by the example and courage of the first missionaries sent by Don Bosco to Argentina. This year also marks the 150th anniversary of the first missionary expedition (1877) of our Sisters, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. This event reinforces that vision of courage and apostolic zeal which has lost none of its appeal or drawing power today.

We then commemorated the foundation of the Salesian Cooperators (1876) by recalling Mary's invitation to the servants at the wedding at Cana: '*Do whatever he tells you*' (Jn 2:5). At the heart of it all, therefore, is the theme of **faith** in Jesus. This invitation is a call for us to be true *believers, free to serve*. We have thus discovered how Don Bosco's insight, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, remains alive and relevant for us today. Like the servants, we are called to listen to Mary's voice and, with her and like her, to follow what Jesus is saying to us today in our own history.

We now come to a third key moment: the gift of the Preventive System. It was in 1877, in fact, that Don Bosco wrote *The Preventive System in the Education of the Young*. As a Congregation, Institute and Salesian Family, we have studied this text in depth; we have analysed it, commented on it and put it into practice. We are fortunate to be the heirs to a serious and profound body of thought and practice developed by so many scholars and practitioners who, with competence, dedication and creativity, have passed on a precious legacy to us. This commitment continues to this day, and for that we are truly grateful. In this way, the educational and pastoral experience – which, from Don Bosco right down to ourselves, manages to engage with the diversity of cultures, to interact fruitfully with various religious traditions across all continents, and to bear good fruit even in difficult contexts – is kept alive, relevant and meaningful. Don Bosco himself reveals the secret to us: **charity**. The virtue which touches the depths of the human heart before any social, cultural or religious category is a virtue that knows no boundaries that might shackle it.

Yes, the Preventive System is the gift of a charism which is spread throughout the world through the Salesian Family. We must first and foremost love it and then come to know it well, for only in this way do we become ever more aware of our responsibility towards the gift entrusted to us. We must approach it with humility and intelligence, avoiding a superficial attitude at all costs. In our encounter with the Preventive System, we are all called to recognise that we are bearers of both prophecy and professionalism. Charism and competence go hand in hand for the integral good of young people.

In light of this journey, I am pleased to announce that the theme of the **2027 STRENNA** will be as follows:

CHARITY IS PATIENT, CHARITY IS KIND

‘Dedicated’ to the integral good of young people

The title draws on the words of St Paul’s hymn to charity, which Don Bosco himself describes as the foundation of the Preventive System: “The practice of this system is entirely based on the words of St Paul, who says: ‘Charity is patient and kind... Love bears all things, hopes all things, endures all things.’”

The second part is a call to be ‘dedicated’ to the welfare of young people. Don Bosco himself writes of this call to be ‘dedicated’ to the welfare of

young people on no fewer than two occasions [and here, following, we use the English translation found in the appendix to the Salesian Constitutions. The Italian original uses the word ‘*consacrato*’ each time]: ‘*The rector must therefore **devote** himself entirely to his pupils.*’ And later he reiterates this by writing that ‘*The educator is one who is **consecrated** to the welfare of his pupils; he must be ready to face every difficulty and every hardship in order to achieve his aim, which is the civic, moral and academic education of his pupils.*’

In light of these thoughts, the 2027 STRENNA will be divided into two parts. **PART I** will be devoted to an in-depth study of the context of St Paul’s hymn to charity, found in chapter 13 of the Letter to the Corinthians. It is, in fact, in the complete section (1 Cor 12:31b–14:1a) that charity is seen as the ‘most excellent way’: the path that leads to conformity with Christ and enables one to fulfil one’s existence to the full.

Charity is the way

The praise of love contained therein arises as a response to a specific situation. The community in Corinth is riven by divisions, rivalries and behaviour inconsistent with the gospel. Instead of seeking the common good, pride and competition have taken hold. This is the context in which Paul points to ‘the most excellent way’: love.

It is the criterion by which we can verify the authenticity of the Christian life and evaluate every gift, choice and action. We may speak all languages, know the mysteries of God, possess extraordinary faith and perform heroic deeds; but without love we are merely noise, and everything we do loses its deepest value.

It is not enough, therefore, to do good outwardly: we must ask ourselves about the spirit that animates our actions. The gifts we have received are neither personal property nor tools for self-assertion. They have been entrusted to us so that they may be placed at the service of others and become a shared good.

For the Salesian Family, revisiting the context of the hymn to charity becomes an invitation to examine how we can foster processes and journeys in which – through an ever more authentic pastoral charity – we become more like Christ for the sake of young people.

In stating that love will never end, Saint Paul urges the community in Corinth not to forget a profound truth: that charisms and knowledge belong to the present age and are partial realities; only love remains for ever, because it shares in the very life of God. Faith, hope and love

define the Christian life, but ‘the greatest’ (we might say the heart, the centre) is love. This message remains valid for us today and becomes a commitment: ‘Strive for love’. A commitment that calls for courage and perseverance, so that charity, a gift of the Spirit, may be both our daily path and our ultimate goal: conformed to Christ as we journey towards full communion with God. To be ‘dedicated’ by fostering the pedagogy of encounter, ready to recognise the spiritual thirst that dwells in the hearts of young people, and wise and generous in accompanying them along appropriate pastoral paths and processes.

In **PART II**, we will examine the Preventive System and its three pillars in the light of the challenges that surround us and which we must address.

Reason – the pedagogy of encounter

Let us rediscover Don Bosco’s Preventive System as a true pedagogy of encounter. At the heart of educational action are not, first and foremost, programmes, activities or structures, but each individual young person with their own name, their own story, their own questions and the potential they carry within themselves.

An educational encounter does not arise simply because an adult and a young person find themselves in the same place. The educator must take the first step, bridge the gap and enter into the other’s situation with respect and empathy. To encounter means paying attention not only to words, but also to silences. It requires time, authenticity and a willingness to allow oneself to be questioned. Young people can easily tell whether a welcome is sincere or merely formal.

Welcoming, however, does not mean merely accepting the young person in their present situation. It also means helping them to discover what they can become, by offering them new horizons and challenges capable of arousing desire, curiosity and hope. All this must be done whilst respecting their freedom, because the young person is not a passive object of the educational process, but a partner in dialogue – indeed, they play a leading role.

The pedagogy of encounter also requires genuinely welcoming environments or settings. The Valdocco experience reminds us that the person comes first and the institution second; first comes the need that is met, and then the structure called upon to respond to it. Even today, many young people seek a welcoming environment without being able to clearly articulate their request. They may experience loneliness,

precariousness, fear of the future and a lack of meaning or of trustworthy adults.

The Salesian courtyard or playground symbolically represents the place where distances are bridged and the educator becomes approachable. By sharing in daily life, he can get to know the young people personally and, at the right moment, offer them that brief yet meaningful little 'word in the ear' so dear to the Salesian tradition.

Finally, no educator can accompany young people on their own. Young people's lives unfold within the family, at school, in sport, at work, in groups or associations, on the streets and in digital environments. A network of genuine adults and trustworthy institutions is therefore essential.

The Educative and Pastoral Community must involve Salesians, lay people, families and local organisations, recognising above all the leading role played by young people. The educational network must not be built solely for them, but together with them, listening to their voices and allowing these to guide the community's choices in a practical way.

Religion – recognising the spiritual thirst

Don Bosco's Preventive System is not merely a pedagogical method but a genuine and authentic spiritual and educational experience. For Don Bosco, to educate means making God's providential love visible and transforming the relationship with young people into a concrete form of evangelisation.

A person cannot be reduced to a set of skills or roles. Every young person is a face, a story and a vocation. Their integral growth also consists in discovering life as a gift received from God and as a call to fraternity, responsibility and self-giving. The ability to recognise this longing plays a fundamental role on this journey, and it develops in three ways: recognising young people and their questions, helping them to recognise the voice that calls from the depths of their hearts, and, together with them, recognising the presence of the living God in their lives.

Recognising young people's questions does not simply mean gathering information. It is an encounter between two freedoms, capable of transforming both the speaker and the listener. It requires time, humility, patience and a willingness to allow oneself to be drawn in. It involves offering young people a genuine space in which to discover what is in their hearts, helping them to articulate and express their desires, doubts and questions, to better understand what they are experiencing and to recognise or rediscover their own dignity.

This attitude reflects the very action of God, who – as Scripture testifies – responds to the cry of his people, especially the poor and the little ones. Today, many young people, despite being constantly connected, experience loneliness and a lack of recognition. For this reason the Church must avoid ready-made answers and welcome and respectfully acknowledge what their questions express, even when they do so in a confused manner.

It is equally important to educate young people to recognise the voice that resounds deep within their hearts. The ceaseless flow of information, notifications and stimuli reduces the space for silence and risks impoverishing their inner life. They must therefore learn to encounter themselves – in their thoughts and feelings, and in their assessment of their behaviour. Don Bosco fostered this inner life by inviting young people to reflect on their day.

We must also learn to recognise what emerges from our life story, allowing ourselves to be challenged by the people, events and needs we encounter. It is by listening to our own inner voice and to the voices coming from outside that the horizon of our life's purpose – our vocational dimension – opens up; for it is precisely in recognising these personal sensibilities and our openness to others that God's call can be revealed.

Finally, the Educative and Pastoral Communities are called to recognise, together with young people, the presence of the living God in each person's life, placing his Word at the centre. As was the case at Valdocco, the gospel must not merely be taught but lived out in daily life. Reading Scripture, praying together, celebrating the sacraments and discerning as a community enables young people to recognise the Lord's voice and to allow themselves to be guided by it.

Loving-kindness – accompanying the pastoral experience

At the heart of the Preventive System lies love. It is through love that the educator can reach the young person's heart, support them, advise them and, when necessary, correct them. The model for pastoral accompaniment is Jesus, the Good Shepherd and the pilgrim on the road to Emmaus. He draws near to the disheartened disciples, walks with them, listens to them and sheds light on their experience through Scripture. Finally, he reveals himself in the breaking of bread.

Pastoral accompaniment therefore means exercising a ministry of compassion: healing wounds, supporting growth and opening the person up to an encounter with God. This approach was evident at Valdocco, where consecrated persons and laypeople accompanied young

people with closeness, gentleness, kindness and friendship: with loving care.

The Salesian approach is founded on the dignity of every young person, created in the image of God and possessing an innate capacity for goodness. Nurturing this dignity involves respecting their freedom and, with empathy, embracing their vulnerabilities and impulses. It also means caring deeply for the network of relationships that support the young person. No one – as young people themselves know full well – grows up alone: a person matures within a network of trustworthy relationships and care.

Whilst addressing everyone, the Preventive System shows a particular concern for the poorest young people. Their presence renews the community and serves as a yardstick for assessing its pastoral projects, ensuring that they are always a response that promotes welcome, integration, protection, justice and mercy.

Every pastoral process, as we know, has the encounter with Christ as its goal. But this is only possible if it is illuminated by genuine love and respect, for faith is not imposed but proposed through a welcoming and benevolent witness, and through the proclamation of the gospel and the liturgy lived out in a joyful and authentic manner. The gradual nature of education is soothed by charity, always whilst respecting freedom. This mission also encompasses nurturing the journey which helps young people to allow themselves to be challenged regarding their future – the vocational dimension.

Finally, every educator starts from an indispensable principle: to accompany others, one must allow oneself to be accompanied. The educator can reach the hearts of young people only if they allow Christ to transform their own. Humility and continual conversion are therefore necessary: to become like little children in order to welcome the little ones, to give what one has received, and to unite one's heart with God.

Conclusion

I invite all members of the Salesian Family to rejoice in this 150th anniversary of *The Preventive System in the Education of the Young*, and to ensure that it becomes a precious and providential opportunity for a deeper understanding of the Salesian charism and for a renewed educational and pastoral commitment to young people.