

## A holiness that generates life with a missionary heart

Dearest Sisters,

I am happy to join you in this month of February, and with you I thank the Lord for the successful outcome of the Triennial Verificas which we have celebrated so far with the *Middle East-Europe* (CIME), *Africa and Madagascar* (CIAM) Conferences, with the Conference of the *Indian Provinces* (PCI), and with that of *East Asia* (CIAO). These meetings allowed us to know and understand more closely the vitality of the Salesian charism in the three Continents. We experienced, once again, the unity of the Institute and its clear charismatic identity in the daily experience of "already and not yet" that, through grace, keeps alive the desire to live and work *together* for the Lord and His Kingdom.

In this Circular, I wish to dwell on the person and holiness of Blessed Sr. Maria Troncatti, whose birth we are celebrating this month (Corteno Golgi - Brescia, 16 February 1883), while waiting to know the date of her canonization.

From the rich figure of this missionary, I wish to deepen with you her being a *Mother, Missionary, Artisan of peace and reconciliation*. This is for all of us a time of special grace, a call to renew ourselves as an Institute in order to continue, with courage and joy, the path of holiness that God today asks us to take.

### First of all, Mother

Each Educating Community is called to take on the responsibility, in the educative relationship, of an evangelical pedagogy of the following of Christ and of the incarnation of the Salesian charism. Young people are waiting for witnesses who can propose paths of initiation to the great human and Christian values, and credible models of life. This is precisely the style of accompaniment lived by Mary Domenica Mazzarello, a humble and wise animator who, through her motherhood, generated life in the people entrusted to her.

Also, in Sister Maria Troncatti emerges in a clear way, the maternal dimension that generates an abundance of life around itself and finds its source in a deep intimacy with the Lord. We can describe We can describe Sister Maria as a happy woman, passionate about Jesus and for Jesus. The secret of her unconditional giving comes from constant prayer, from standing in the silence of the night and dawn before her Lord; from letting herself fill her heart with His Love. During the day, she walks with the rosary in her hand, entrusted to the protection of Mary, Help and Guide in every activity, in moments of joy, sacrifice or danger. She is tireless in her service to the poor, the little ones, the sick and discouraged, 'her' dear Shuar. With the tenderness and love of a mother, she gives herself to wounded humanity by witnessing, especially in the Ecuadorian Jungle, the Father's love for all His children. Precisely by the Shuar Indians, she is affectionately called *madrecita*, "mama". They see her, in fact, always solicitous to go out to meet those who are in need of help and hope. She cares for body and spirit by evangelizing, while distributing medicine, caring, and wise advice. They call to her from far away to treat, comfort, assist the dying. Even a murderer, who desires to be prepared to confess and to die well, wants Sister Maria close to him until the end, convinced that her presence prevents the devil from putting despair in his heart.

Sister Maria writes to her family members with astonishment, "If you saw how much they love me! When they see me go away on horseback, they plead with me, "*Madrecita*, come back soon!"

With maternal patience, she teaches the indigenous people and colonists, groups in constant conflict, to forgive each other.

In the moments of greatest difficulty, she gazes at the Crucifix, which supports her and gives her the courage to face with faith daily fatigue and to use her creativity.

Mother Yvonne Reungoat, on 25 August 2019, in her message for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Sister Maria Troncatti, wrote, "We can say that she is a frontier woman, a prophetic Daughter of Mary Help of Christians, who lived the requirements of enculturation with the sensitivity and intuition of the Saints, because to enculturate oneself is a matter of love and those who love understand, adapt, become close."

With this maternal love, she conquers hearts and manages to find a solution for every problem, without surrendering to difficulties. The power of her maternity is also revealed in situations of particular emergency or risk, such as when she intensely prays that "her children" be spared from the waves of the treacherous Upano river, which she knows to be dangerous. She never loses confidence in Providence, because she is sure of the presence of God in her missionary life. Strong in this certainty, she does not spare herself to intervene for the good of "*her Shuar children*." She performs simple and effective maternal gestures. She welcomes children whom no one wants, gives everyone affection, security, and serenity, becomes an educator and catechist, opening up prospects for a future illuminated by hope.

One of the most significant aspects of her maternity is her trusting affective relationship with Mary Help of Christians. At her school, she learns early on that she can be a 'helper' for the people in her care. In her, Marian filiality is not only a feeling, but it is consciously lived as an itinerary of Christian and Salesian formation. For this reason, it becomes a source of educative maternity in the style of the preventive system. We know that the essence of the Salesian vocation is of a maternal character, not moved by abstract principles, but by the vital needs of people, in respect for each person's personal rhythms. It is a delicate and affectionate motherly love, but firm and determined. This was the case for Sister Maria in her life as a missionary Daughter of Mary Help of Christians.

We recall what Don Bosco leaves as a message to his sons and daughters, "In my condition, without means, without personnel, it would have been impossible to work for the young if Mary Help of Christians had not come to the rescue with special lights and with copious help, not only material but also spiritual" (BM XI, 256-257).

Let us welcome these words as a mandate that our Founder today addresses also to us Salesian educators, to entrust our educative evangelizing mission to Mary in the awareness that, as it was for Don Bosco and for Sister Maria Troncatti, she is the one who guides us, helps us, keeps our eyes open to new realities with a missionary and prophetic heart.

## **Missionary**

The missionary dimension is an essential element of the identity of the Institute (cf. C 75). This is so beginning with our Baptism, as Pope Francis reminds us, "I am a mission on this earth, and for this reason I am in this world" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 273).

The first community of Mornese experiences from the very beginning, the missionary joy that guides it to witness to Jesus, not only in one's own land but in the world. The 'mystic' of living together blossoms in the momentum towards broad horizons and becomes a climate, a fire that burns and radiates light and warmth. Here we see the evangelical, but also human dynamics of the mission. Life grows and matures to the extent that we give it for the life of others. From here springs the sweet and comforting joy of evangelizing.

In 1922, Sister Maria Troncatti is in the community of Nizza Monferrato as an expert Red Cross nurse, veteran of the First World War of 1915-1918. In the girls' infirmary, young Marina Luzzi is dying of double pneumonia. Sister Maria entrusts to her missionary dream to bring to Mary Help of Christians, "to go among the lepers". As she is dying, the young girl prophesies that she would not go among the lepers, but to Ecuador. In fact, three days after the death of Marina, Mother Caterina Daghero assigned her to the people who live in the Ecuadorian Amazon forest.

To understand how passionate Sister Maria is about her missionary work, it is interesting to read what she wrote to her family in 1936, before leaving for Ecuador, "Do you tell me not to ask to go to the missions? I do not ask because I want to do the holy will of God. But if the Superiors send me, I

*go with all my heart.* My thought is always on the missions." With all her heart was the yardstick of her missionary passion, so much so, that when the Mother General sends her to work in the Amazon jungle, she says that she is "happier every day" with her religious and missionary vocation. In a letter of 1939, she wrote, "I will say something in confidence. Here with the natives, I am very content; much more than being in the city of Guayaquil among the aristocracy. Here, in the middle of this forest, far from all the lies of the world..."

We grasp in Sister Troncatti the ability to see the essential, to listen and respond to the cry of the poor, for this she wishes to get out of the patterns of well-being, rigid structures and securities. In the homily of her beatification, which took place on 24 November 2012 in Macas (Ecuador), Card. Angelo Amato highlighted her missionary spirit very well, *"Sister Maria, animated by grace, became an untiring messenger of the Gospel, expert in humanity, and a profound conqueror of the human heart. She shared the joys and hopes, the difficulties and sorrows of her brothers and sisters, big and small. She was able to transform prayer into apostolic zeal and concrete service to others."*

We can well affirm that she lived the Salesian "I will go", typical of Valdocco and Mornese, with generosity and total gift, contagion with the "I will go" Juan, who died happy for having saved the life of Sister Maria from the insidious violence of the Upano river.

In the magazine *Missionary Youth* of 1931, Sr. Maria recounted how the preventive system produced fruits of transformation in the hearts of the young and the *Shuar* people. "It's been 15 weeks now that once a week, we go to the Kivari of the two nearest Kivarias, to bring the light of eternal truth among those in darkness and to raise those poor hardened souls, giving their bodies the help that is possible and urgently needed. They themselves come to pick us up at the residence to accompany us through the difficult paths, and to help us cross the famous *Upano river*. This is done partly in canoes and partly on the shoulders of the same *Kivari*, who feel glorious with the sweet weight!"

In the ravages of epidemics, especially the very serious one of smallpox, which does not spare the poor *kivarettes*, the "doctor" gives herself ceaselessly among the sick and convalescents. With competence and foresight, she organizes nursing courses for young women who have the aptitude. For others, there are courses in sewing, hygiene, childcare, culinary art, and meetings for marriage preparation. Her main concern is the formation and promotion of women who, in the *Shuar* culture, are often penalized by being dependent on husbands-masters or exploited for the most strenuous work activities, regardless of their mission of motherhood and child care. What Don Bosco said also caught on in that part of the world, "That young people are not only to be loved, but they themselves must know they are loved," until they are transformed "from wolves into lambs", especially by loving-kindness and self-giving, able to give their own lives for their educators.

Sister Maria Troncatti, passionate about the Salesian mission, infects people and her own Sisters by radiating her great love to the young, so that they may be happy in time and eternity. Her boldness and the courage of her faith also nourish the commitment of the young women to be "true missionaries". We can rightly say that the community where Sister Maria works is a true "outgoing" community, which lives the mission in a synodal way!

### **Artisan of peace and reconciliation**

In her 47 years of missionary life, Sister Maria has one single goal: to help people meet Jesus; she thirsts to "give Him souls". While she attends to the wounds of the tormented bodies of the *Shuar*, who kill each other in the name of the law of the jungle, which is revenge, she seeks every way possible to speak to them about forgiveness, reconciliation, the Gospel. With unspeakable courage and determination, she acts in defense of the rights and prospects of the indigenous peoples when the colonists lord it over them. However, without distinction she cares for the one and the other, helps them to live in a more fraternal way. She dialogues and advises the colonist women to sow among the people words of goodness, justice, fraternity, equality knowing that through the educative power of women, it is possible to form future generations for a more respectful coexistence and the acceptance of diversity. She works tirelessly to ensure that in the schools and boarding schools the

Shuar girls and 'white' girls live peacefully together. In the clinics where she operates and, in the hospital, "Pius XII" founded by her, there are no separate treatments, as was done elsewhere. For her, everyone has the same right to receive care from their *madrecita* and from her community. With creativity, Sr. Maria also learns how to weave in order to sew clothes for those who need them, but above all, to make gestures of humanity and reconciliation among "her children", so loved and so different.

At the end of the 1960s, tensions between the two ethnic groups grew stronger because of land ownership and a climate of hostility was revived. On 4 July 1969, some settlers set fire to the mission of the Salesians, because they consider them on the side of the Shuar and promoters of their dignity. Sister Maria suffers a lot and fears it may be the beginning of another disaster. It is in that moment that she has the inspiration, generated by her motherly heart, to offer herself to God as a victim of reconciliation between the two very beloved populations. She finds no other way to better identify herself with Jesus, "There is no greater love than this: to give one's life for one's friends" (Jn 15:13). With the power of persuasion and kindness, Sister Maria manages to stop the emerging vendettas and to be listened to as a messenger of peace and of forgiveness.

In the general confusion that invades the mission, when the false rumor is spread that the missionaries are organizing plots to the detriment of the Kivari entrusted to their educative action, Sister Maria does not let herself be broken. She goes into the houses, to Macas, "speaking with her heart" to the people without concealing tears of sincere bitterness, so much so that whoever has committed evil feels the duty to atone. Just over a month later, as she was about to leave for Quito where she would be making her spiritual exercises, on 25 August 1969, the day of the plane crash, Sister Maria shared with the Sisters her conviction that peace and tranquility would soon return. In fact, after her death, both the settlers and the Shuar feel even more strongly the presence of their *madrecita* who had educated them to forgiveness and resume living together with a new strength of fraternity. A rainbow remains in the sky until the moment of her burial and is the sign that peace has been restored between heaven and earth and between the two peoples.

Contemplating the most beautiful face of the Institute - Saint Mary Domenica Mazzarello, Sister Maria Troncatti, nearing canonization, our Blesseds and Servants of God who lived in full fidelity to the Constitutions - open our heart to the great Hope, with the grace and boldness that come from God. With gratitude, we sing the *Magnificat* for the holiness recognized by the Church in these Sisters and for many others who live daily, giving love, hope, and joy.

Pope Francis reminds us that holiness is not made of a few heroic gestures, but of much love expressed in everyday life. The saints are our companions on the journey, who have lived holiness by embracing their vocation with enthusiasm and therefore have become luminous reflections of the Lord in history (cf. Homily, 15 May 2022). We entrust ourselves to Mary Help of Christians so that together with the Educating Communities and the many young people we meet, we can shine as little lights in daily life and be signs of the foreseeing and merciful love of the Father, as Sister Maria Troncatti was.

On 16 February, the 29<sup>th</sup> GC of the Salesians began and, in the greeting that I addressed to you all at the opening, I promised that we would accompany the work of the chapter with prayer, affection, and esteem. Their walk together in deep communion is a strong sign of hope for the Salesian Family, for the Church, for our Institute, and for young people all over the world. Mary Help of Christians, Don Bosco, and our Saints guide them and support them in looking to the future with courage and foresight.

I wish you a good continuation of the Jubilee Year; that it may truly be a time of grace and conversion to continue our common path of holiness with a missionary heart.

Rome 24 February 2025

Affectionately, Mother