

The community encounter laboratory of synodality

Dearest Sisters,

As we continue the post-chapter journey, we still allow ourselves to be questioned by the call to formation that unfolds in the fabric of daily life, "To renew ourselves daily with the strength of the Holy Spirit, we live *docibilitas* as openness to let ourselves be formed-transformed by life, by others, by every existential situation. This dynamism makes the person free to learn how to learn from life and throughout life by promoting a fruitful, convincing, contagious, happy vocational animation and witness as educating communities of evangelical and charismatic values" (*Acts GC XXIV*, n. 35 I).

In harmony with the invitation of GC XXIV to consider formation rooted in daily experience, we pause to reflect particularly on the *weekly conference*, as indicated in article 124 of our Regulations.

In today's language, it is easier to speak of a community encounter than of a conference, a term used by Don Bosco from when the Constitutions were handwritten.

After the foundation of the Institute, Mother Mazzarello immediately demonstrated her fidelity to this point of the rule. "From 15 September, the first Sunday after the departure of Monsignor the Bishop, the vicar began to put into practice the article of the rules that prescribes the weekly conference to the community" (*Cronistoria II*, 11).

It seems to me necessary to clarify the word conference because, in addition to the meaning of relationship and discourse on a specific theme, it also indicates in many contexts, the encounter. In this sense the term means dialogue, evaluation, interchange between members who have a specific identity and are called to offer their original contribution in view of shared paths and common operational guidelines. Therefore, it is in this second meaning that we can understand and revitalize an ordinary experience, and precisely for this reason incisive, of our community life and of our formation.

It will be the attitude of each one and the wisdom of those who animate the community that will make the weekly appointment an exercise in synodality, as happened in Mornese. It is this experience, among other formative opportunities, which can help transform our personal and community life little by little and give it a new apostolic and missionary impulse.

Listening to written sources and Salesian tradition

Since its origins, the weekly conference has been an encounter of sharing in the simplicity of family life and in the commitment to grow together in holiness. It is considered an important occasion for ordinary formation. It should be remembered that in the reality of people's life and growth, there are two fundamental values that contribute to maturation: relationships and everyday life.

In the text of the handwritten Constitutions of 1871 at n. 21, and in that of 1878 at no. 26, we read, "All the sisters will attend the conference that the superior will hold every Sunday, to instruct them in their duties, as well as to correct those defects that could slow down the fervor and observance in the community".

In Mornese, the conference was considered a typical experience of the weekly rhythm of the community in which fraternal communion and participation were lived with serenity and commitment on the part of all. Mother Mazzarello's style was very familiar. Her way of speaking, simple and direct, devoid of sophistication, nurtured a climate of communion and spirituality, without any pretense to impress, but with the sole purpose of contributing to the good of the sisters and the girls. It was a precious opportunity to recall the inner life, the truth, the centrality of Jesus in life, the true source of freedom from what could impede or delay the journey of fidelity to the Salesian vocation.

We read in the *Cronistoria* that at the first conference, “Mother introduced herself with her usual humility saying that it was not only she, poor vicar, who had to run the house according to the Rule and the desires of Don Bosco, but that each sister must and could manifest her own ideas and opinions so that all could proceed better in every sense” (*Cronistoria* II, 11).

It is a conference that touches life, moves mind and heart. “None of those present knows how to express the effect of a conference like this, but each one senses that Mother spoke as one inspired, like a saint; and many cry because they are very moved” (*Cronistoria* II, 11).

The words of Mother Mazzarello are always a call that involves in participation, arouses thoughtfulness, and interior renewal. Sr. Giuseppina Pacotto, for example, after a conference, follows Mother and finds the time and the opportune way to make her say something more and confront herself at a vital level. Mother responds to her questions with simplicity and practical wisdom. (cf. *Cronistoria* III, 301)

The effect that the community encounter with Mother Mazzarello provokes is efficacious and constructive. It restores energies, arouses enthusiasm, hope, creativity; nourishes the joy of fraternity and releases the dynamism of a spiritual contagion, to the point that she herself could state, “At Mornese we used to steal sacrifices from one another; we continue this way, and always more, always more.” (*Cronistoria* III, 281)

Mother Mazzarello did not know the word synodality, but she lived its meaning in her relationship with the sisters. She involved them in a *journey together* and fostered reciprocal trust, putting the person in the condition to be able to give and to receive. With simplicity, she activated a way of animation that facilitated the sharing of resources and of creativity in communion. It is a relational strategy aimed at the vitality of everyone, so that each one could express the fruitfulness of the charism and feel herself personally involved in the mission entrusted to everyone (cf. *Rooted in the Covenant. Formation plan of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians*, 131).

This is what is recalled in Article 35 of the Constitutions:

“We will therefore, participate actively
in these key moments of co-responsibility;
giving our contribution
to community dialogue
in order to reach the best decisions;
accepting with serenity
the possible sacrifice
of our personal opinions and initiatives.
The Superior will lead this discernment
in a way that promotes
communion within the community...”

Timeliness and effectiveness of an experience in a synodal style

In order for the conference to be a fruitful formative opportunity, the most appropriate conditions must be created. It is necessary to foster a community climate in which synodality is habitually

exercised, where people willingly participate in the life of the community and feel co-responsible in the common mission. A good cohesion of the community members makes it possible to harmonize the needs of organizational logic with the beauty of intuition, a glance, imagination, which often leads to fresher and unexpected results.

The conference, or community meeting, becomes a synodal moment in which the community possesses and expresses its particular 'sense of smell' to identify new ways of maturation and apostolate (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 31). Indeed, it becomes a space for discernment which activates the possibility of interpreting experience through which the fundamental meanings of fraternal life and mission pass. It becomes a space for sharing and a laboratory in which, together, one can hear and understand the Lord's call as a *community in outreach* towards the needs of salvation of the most disadvantaged young people, with courage, faith, clarity of purpose, and love of our Founders.

If the conference is lived as an experience that touches life, it becomes the place to strengthen the charismatic identity as Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and makes the Holy Spirit present in each one and in all. It also favors the growth of the sense of belonging to the Church, to the Institute, to the community, to the educational mission, an essential condition for living the Salesian vocation fully, responsibly, and joyfully. The community encounter can arouse questions and reflections, because it offers the content and provides perspectives, ignites the desire for research, for communion, creates the premises for verification, motivates us to take steps towards conversion.

Sometimes we complain that we don't have topics to discuss, but we just need to broaden our gaze a little to realize that they are many and easily available. We can start from the Word of God, from the magisterium of the Church, from Mother's circulars (which it is good to read in their entirety and promptly in community), from the Constitutions, from ecclesial and Institute events that nourish our identity, offer us criteria for reading the signs of the times, the educational needs, and for discerning the most appropriate and effective evangelical and charismatic responses.

It can be the best moment to reflect on the mission entrusted to the community, sincerely wondering if the Gospel is adequately proclaimed, constantly returning attention to the essentials: the primacy of God, the advent of His Kingdom, the responsibility that the charism shine forth in us and in the environment where we live and work.

We can verify if we are truly living and bearing witness to Salesian spirituality, if in each one and as a whole, the young people and people who meet us can perceive the joy of belonging to the Lord. If we face hardships together on the journey of fraternity and shared mission with lay men and women, we will be able to find new solutions and renewed charismatic vitality.

The conference is also an opportunity to highlight the energies of the community, to bring them together, to direct them towards communion and the mission entrusted to us. This is why it is always important to deal with the territory, with the people, with the challenges of the context in which we are inserted. It is also an opportunity to arouse sensitivity to dialogue with today's culture, nourishing knowledge and discernment to distinguish, recognize, and retain what is good, according to the Pauline principle, "*Test everything; retain what is good*" (1Thess 5: 21).

To understand even more the importance of this formative moment in the life of the community, it is necessary to clarify that this experience must be valued to the maximum; it must not be easily replaced; it cannot be delegated or neglected. It is a precise commitment of the Animator and also of the community. The conference is a personal and community responsibility that requires adequate preparation; it cannot be improvised.

It is convenient for the community to keep in mind the proposed path, because this facilitates listening and participation. Making what you are saying concrete helps to identify yourself, to get involved. Consistency, linearity, and essentiality in addressing the topic optimize the effectiveness of communication.

The support of any audiovisual material to encourage the imagination and enliven the argument is a useful supplementary element, but certainly not exhaustive. I know I can count on your commitment, fidelity, and creativity.

We entrust to Mary the preparation for the solemnity of Holy Christmas. Let us listen once again to her invitation: *"Do whatever he tells you"* (Jn 2:5). It is the only word that Mary addressed to humanity. In this mandate there is a sharing of life and love. She who pronounced her Fiat now says to the servants. *"Do"*. It is an authentic reflection of her inner life. She who believed the Word now shares her faith with others, helps us to believe and obey. At Cana, she is helper and mediator; she is a missionary who puts us in contact with Jesus, who has filled her life with joy (see *Acts GC XXIV*, n. 20).

May the experience of Christmas, amidst the uncertainties and hopes of this our history, make us experience the same joy that filled Mary's life in welcoming Jesus and giving Him to the world as Savior.

Also, in the name of the sisters of the General Council, I wish to extend my best wishes for a holy Christmas of peace and hope to you, your families, the educating communities, the children, the young people who frequent our houses, especially those most in difficulty.

A special greeting to the Rector Major Fr. Ángel Fernández Artime, to the Salesian confreres, and to the members of the Salesian Family.

We are particularly close to the sisters and the educating communities who live in difficult situations, in lands where there is war, violence, and poverty. Upon all of humanity, we invoke the gift of true and lasting peace.

I greet you with affection.

Rome, 24 November 2022

Affectionately, Mother