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The Salesians Celebrate 100 Years in the United States

Centennial Celebration Of the Salesian Presence in the United States of America

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Homily for the Feast of the Presentation
San Francisco: February 2, 1997**

For the beginning of our centennial celebration we are gathered together here as a family in the place where the Salesians established their first presence in the United States of America. When we compare our present-day situation with that at the moment of our arrival we find much for which we must be grateful to God. The number of Salesians, men and women, has multiplied more than a hundredfold, especially if we add in also the laity who belong to our Family. Our works have developed greater quality and have been distributed over the vast area of this country. From a simple mission to immigrants they have developed into schools, technical schools, parishes, oratories and study centers. The name and spirit of Don Bosco has penetrated into society. His method of approach to the young and his style of education have been received with harmony and consent. The hundred years have not gone by in vain. Our investment in personnel, projects and energy has borne fruit. The seed sown by the first Salesians and Daughters of Mary Help of Christians has developed into a tree.

There are still more possibilities to be explored. The Salesian vocation is by no means exhausted; there is still much to be said and done. The present celebrations lead us to ask what has been responsible for the development which today makes us happy and for which we give thanks to the Lord. The response is suggested by the mystery of the life of Jesus which is commemorated in the liturgy today: his presentation in the temple—the total offering of Jesus to the Father: “Mary and Joseph brought him to the temple to offer him to the Lord.” The liturgy will tell us that it was he who consecrated himself to the Lord from the depth of his heart, at a moment when he saw the whole of his life spread out before his eyes: the period of his growth in age, wisdom and grace at Nazareth

under Mary's guidance, the mission in which he would become the light and revelation for many; his complete self-donation on the cross; life in the service of the Father.

Today all consecrated persons, men and women, celebrate their own particular day. They recognize and include themselves in the action of Jesus; they place their lives in the Lord's hands and their energies at the service of his plans. From this flows the first and principal explanation of their success: it is holiness, the sense of God which holiness diffuses; love for the young, of which holiness is the seed; and the good works which holiness creates.

This is a conclusion from the past and a practical guideline for the future which must be clearly passed on to individuals and communities.

We are accustomed to present Don Bosco with those features and characteristics which make him so original, lively and congenial, and these are in fact real traits. But little by little as we study more deeply his soul and personality, we become aware that everything that is so attractive about him has its source in his relationship with God, his love and admiration for Jesus Christ and his complete trust in him—that personage he saw in his first dream when he received his mission.

Don Bosco too offered himself to the Lord for the young when he said: "I have promised God that I would give of myself to my last breath for my poor boys." That was his program: to rescue them from delinquency and wretchedness and prepare them for life; but especially to reveal to them the fullness of the life to which God was calling them. Nothing in the life of Don Bosco can be explained without this first and fundamental reference. And his sons, spread all over the world, have this same conviction and work with the same end in view.

Sanctity or holiness may not be words that we are accustomed to use very often. Certainly they are not found with any frequency in the mass media. But when a holy person appears, the world sits up and takes notice. It becomes aware of the fact; it is a sign which gives rise to questions and turns people's minds to what is good. It revives hope in a different kind of world and shows us a new way of living our life. Nothing can express this better than the person and the experience of charity of Don Bosco.

Don Bosco's holiness had a particular characteristic: he showed it, and others felt it, through a humanity which was welcoming, affable, resulting in friendship. To be with him was a pleasant experience. You always learned something and learned it willingly. He made you feel at ease, even when your ideas differed. People who wanted to do something for those in the greatest need always found they had a point in common with him. The Salesians have expressed this in a wonderful way in their Constitutions: "He was deeply human, rich in the qualities of his people, open to the realities of this earth, and he was just as deeply the man of God, filled with the gifts of the Holy Spirit and living as though seeing him who is invisible."

He has been described as utopian but practical; as shrewd but yet sincere, an affectionate father and demanding educator, trusting in God, and at the same time accurate in matters of organization and in searching for funds for the support of his works.

He could live peacefully in the midst of the hustle and bustle of our towns and cities with their mixtures of cultures and religions; he would always feel at ease with those who worked for the defense and advancement of the poor and defenseless; he would urge Christians to draw on their faith in all its richness for life and action.

Humanity and holiness made easy for him the road to the young; they willingly opened their hearts to him and gave him their willing collaboration; he became an accepted part of a society which always considered him as a friend, a committed citizen, an open-minded priest. Never one without the other. Never holiness without its human countenance. Never a smiling face unless it was founded on a solid spirituality. He was a messenger of the Gospel speaking with the appropriate language, the right means and images well suited to people of today and of all time.

From this holiness was born a manner of loving and dealing with the young which reproduced the Gospel image of the Good Shepherd. In Salesian terminology we call it the "preventive system." It implies welcome and understanding; kindness and friendship; the ability to meet even with those who remain aloof, and get a word and a smile from those who are closed in on themselves, downcast and discouraged. With the first boy of his oratory Don Bosco began by getting him to smile. But it is also a committed way of life, the development of energies which lie hidden in the individual, an eagerness for generous undertakings. Don Bosco was a dreamer who could get his boys dreaming too. He demanded a necessary discipline that was based on reason and the ability to work and study. All who have passed through his houses, the past-pupils or alumni, are grateful above all that they were taught to live, in the true and fullest sense of the word, and that they were shown how to succeed in life.

We are now beginning the second hundred years relying on the same principles. We have made the effort to insert ourselves into American society through our witness of God, love for the young, and a pedagogy which blends together in a wonderful manner reason, faith and love. We have tried to put down our roots. Now is the time to grow to full citizenship. The period ahead of us is full of possibilities. This is clear from the demands of today's young people; those in spiritual need who are looking for reasons and meaning in life; those on the fringe of society who are struggling to attain a life worthy of an individual. We are challenged by the characteristics of a society which guarantees complete freedom and leaves space for the initiative of those with enterprise. We are encouraged by the generosity of those who have supported and worked with us in the past, and whom we see so extraordinarily willing to cooperate in good works.

We are urged on by the idealism of the young who want to create new and better conditions of life both here and in other parts of the world. They, indeed, see things against a broader canvas and in a universal perspective. They have experienced the failure of a shortsighted outlook limited to the material content of life, and want to rely on justice, solidarity and the spirit of peace.

But drawing profit from the great possibilities which our vocation and our spirit can express is not without its price. We have to pay for it in terms of authenticity of life and clarity of our mission. This is why we have to approach the future with the conviction that our trump card is holiness: that is, the awareness of the presence of God, the Christian view of life, faith in Gospel values, and hope in the seeds of education we offer to the young.

"Keep your feet on earth, but let your hearts be in heaven," was the advice Don Bosco gave to his sons. And the same recommendation he gives to us for the next stage of our journey.