

«WE WANT TO SEE JESUS»
Message of the Rector Major to the SYM
In the centenary of the death of Don Michael Rua

My Dear Young People,

Here I am faithfully keeping our appointment on the occasion of the Feast of Don Bosco, “father and friend of youth.” This year, our meeting, which I regret is only a virtual one, even though no less real and genuine for that, coincides with the beginning of the centenary of the death of Don Rua, the first successor of Don Bosco and, without doubt, his most faithful and successfully formed disciple.

This in fact is one of the main reasons for the choice of the theme for the Strenna which I have offered to all the Salesian Family for this year 2010: *“In imitation of Don Rua, as authentic disciples and zealous apostles let us bring the Gospel to the young.”*

And so I want to be the first to welcome the spiritual and pastoral programme of the Strenna and through this message, as a sort of personal inner reflection, I offer you the Gospel and I want you to see Jesus, so that you too may become His disciples, witnesses and apostles.

Often when I meet you I notice in you a great desire to find the Lord. Perhaps you don’t manage to express this desire very clearly, but nevertheless I hear your deepest desires, those dwelling in your hearts. I take you by the hand and I bring you to my Master, my Lord and my God.

«Fr Pascual, we want to see Jesus!»

If you really want that, you will have to have sound feet and open ears. Because Jesus walks on. And he never stops! In order to find him you will have to hear the music made by the grains of sand raised by his feet. Everything becomes new as he walks by, and his journey never ends.

He is always a stride ahead, and His word is like Him, constantly on the move, always in the process of giving everything, making known everything about Himself. Two thousand years have passed, but He seems to have just passed by. History is still shaking from His passing by, as though a bomb had exploded. And the world is no longer what it was before. No one has ever spoken about God as this man has; no one has loved us as He has; no one has given Himself totally as He has even to destroying Himself. No one like Him has commanded the wind, the sea, the evil spirits who torment and destroy in a man what is best in his humanity; no one like Him has defeated death and conquered sin. He is different from everyone else.

For this reason, there are many who hate Him, just as they hate those who don’t conform to present ways of thinking.

«I have nowhere to sleep when night falls. I have nowhere to hide if someone is looking for me. Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests; I am living without protection amid dangers and threats. Someone who wants to get ahead following the usual methods won’t find what he is looking for with me.»

To those He meets He says: «The time has come to change!».
«God is here in your midst, and nothing and no one can stop Him any more ».

«He is the one that we are looking for. Go, take him our request »

It is not necessary. He knows what you want. On the shore of the lake, the people crowd round Him and ask Him: «What is your message?» Jesus looks at the fishermen who are casting their nets. His reply is very different from what we would have expected. He doesn't call a meeting or give a conference, but says: «Come! Why are you still fishing? Instead, save those who are drowning, men and women up to their necks in the water! I need you! I want to make you fishers of men ».

And they leave their nets, their boats, their parents, wives and children. They go with him. «Do you really want to know who I am? Walk with and you will have an answer!» Jesus says. It takes courage to go against the tide. It's uncomfortable leaving the dull tranquillity of days which are always the same and starting out on a fresh journey.

One day a young person like yourselves comes looking for Jesus and asks Him: «Master, what must I do to become what God wants me to be? Tell me the secret of that happiness!»

Jesus replies: «You know God's commandments: Do not kill. Do not commit adultery. Do not steal. Do not bear false witness. Honour your father and your mother »

«Master,» – the young man replies – “I have kept all these from my earliest days ». Jesus looked steadily at him and loved him, and He said: «There is one thing you lack to reach the goal; go home, sell all your goods and give the money to the poor. Then come and follow me ». But the young man's face fell, and he went away.

Following Jesus doesn't mean taking **one** decision. It means taking **the** decision. It means risking everything, putting everything on just one card. It means making one's own the decision He took for us: «I assure you there is no greater love than this: laying down your life for your friends ».

And to make all this clearer, Jesus gives an explanation using two parables: «The Kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field which someone has found; he hides it again, goes off happy, sells everything he owns and buys the field. The Kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls; when he finds one of great value he goes and sells everything he owns and buys it.»

Jesus even uses a paradox: in another parable he praises an unfaithful and dishonest steward, guilty of forgery, fraud, false accounting and corruption. Just to point out that that man uses all his wits to ensure his future: he is foresighted. He is dishonest, but consistent in taking direct measures: quite unscrupulously he pursues his own interests.

Dear Young People, my friends and Don Bosco's friends, you cannot live without knowing what really matters, without knowing what the meaning of life is, since life is all that you have.

The only certain card you can play, risking everything, is Him, Jesus.

«But, Fr Pascual, the Kingdom of God is not for us. It is too high and too difficult »

If Jesus loves you and calls you, you can get up, you can move! You can change direction, begin a new journey. It's enough to know, feel and want to be loved by Him It's enough to change your habits, have second thoughts about your convictions. That's what the first disciples did, called by name one by one, without delay they set off walking behind Him.

In every person's life there's a day, an hour which leaves an unforgettable memory. It's the time when something new happens, and it's the time when a life changes completely. «It was about four in the afternoon, » John recalls, when they met Jesus.

God – and the Scriptures provide many examples – makes His choices without bothering a scrap about gifts or personal qualities; rather, quite often and paradoxically He chooses the weakest, the poorest, the most ignorant in the world. Sometimes He calls in a peremptory fashion, almost violently, as in the case of Paul, thrown to the ground on the way to Damascus. Often, on the contrary, He does it in a simple persuasive way. That was the sort of invitation addressed to the two disciples of John the Baptist

More often than not, to call a person God makes use of a human intermediary: the Baptist for Andrew and John, Andrew for his brother Simon, Philip for Nathanael. That's how it was then ...! And today? Today He's making use of me to call you! Come! I invite you to get to know Him!

It's true. It wasn't easy for the disciples to understand the "reasoning" of their Master, but in the end they came to realise that other than from Him they would never have found words capable of giving the light and strength to reach that fullness of life which Jesus spoke to them about.

And not only them. Zacchaeus, a publican, that is a tax collector, was a revenue officer who gathered taxes for the Romans. In the eyes of the people he was a 'collaborator', a traitor, despised and hated by the 'real' Jews. It is precisely this Zacchaeus, traitor and dishonest, who gets word that Jesus is about to enter Jericho. He has heard people talk about this man. Deep within himself he feels a strong attraction: he would like to know or at least to see Jesus. He leaves his tax office and runs to where the crowd is thronging round the Master. There are too many people, and, small as he is, even by jumping up and down he can't see any thing. So he runs on ahead and climbs up a tree. The rich, powerful, and certainly hated Zacchaeus, crouches among the branches of a sycamore tree. In his great desire he loses all his dignity and becomes ridiculous in the eyes of the people. They all laugh at him, and Jesus too has to smile, but then looking deep into his heart He calls to him: «Zacchaeus come down, because I must stay at your house today ». Zacchaeus comes down and runs home.

The religious authorities of Jericho and the well-thought-of Jews are annoyed, angry and hurt. They all mutter away saying: «He has gone to stay at a sinner's house!». They are shocked and give the impression that they understand nothing anymore. The world is upsidetown: the Messiah at home with sinners!

But Jesus always does that sort of thing. He upsets our selfish and hypocritical world, He disturbs and overturns it, and takes no account of the established order of things. He turns established values on their heads in order to put a totally new social order in their place.

Jesus is in Zacchaeus' house and He doesn't tell him to leave his wife, sell his house, give his goods to the poor and follow him. He just says: «Today I'm staying with you ».

There are two kinds of calls by Jesus. To the young rich man He says: «Go, sell everything you own and follow me. Don't bring any luggage, you won't need it, I will provide for you. I shall be your Good». To Zacchaeus on the other hand he says: «Today I'm going to stay with you ». This second call is no easier than the first. In fact, it totally transforms Zacchaeus and his whole way of living.

When Jesus says He wants to live with us and we receive him into our home, then many things inside us change, and our way of living is revolutionised. When we welcome Jesus into our lives, He frees us from everything that is not God.

Only one thing matters: to welcome Him! And in order to do this it is necessary to be ready and on the watch: at the moment you hear His call you have the possibility of becoming a free person, capable of giving yourself so as to place your life at His service and that of others.

«Do you really believe then that God has need of us?»

As a start, Jesus wanted to have people around Him: twelve friends, a community, a group of people. Then He did much more: He presents Himself and the Church as a vine: «I am the true vine. Make your home in me as I make mine in you. As a branch cannot bear fruit all by itself, but must remain part of the vine, neither can you unless you remain in me. I am the vine. You are the branches. Whoever remains in me with me in him bears fruit in plenty; cut off from me you can do nothing.»

Through His friends the same blood flows. «I am you and you are me» He affirms. «And this is the sign by which we will be recognised: its name is Eucharist. We are the same body. In us the same blood flows. Now you are my hands, my feet and my heart.»

After having crucified Him, His enemies think: we have got rid of him! Once and for all we have buried Jesus of Nazareth. But you can't stop the sun rising. You can't stop the One who can conquer death from being the Living One. You can't stop the One who is the source of Life from being Alive. Nothing is more alive than God. And that last evening, at the Eucharist, Jesus says: "Now you are me!" Jesus is alive in us!

My dear young people, you can be geniuses, organisers, inventors, famous people, successful men and women... But all this is nothing compared with the possibility of being an instrument in God's hands.

You cannot have a fruitless life which each day shrivels up a little more. Instead you can be loaded with fruit. It is your responsibility: «My Father is the vinedresser," Jesus explains. "Every branch in me that bears no fruit he cuts away, and every branch that does bear fruit he frees from everything that prevents it from bearing even more. You are already free through the Word that I have spoken to you.»

You can be the lips through which God continues to speak to human beings, instruments to proclaim true freedom. You can be the eyes which are able to see in the darkness of the world in order to show to others the presence of God and His Kingdom. You can be the ears which, surrounded by noise and music from *iPods*, manage to hear what seems no longer audible: the voice of those who weep, of those who beg for help, of those who call for respect and dignity, and of those who demand justice and bread. You can be the hands and the feet which go out to people, raise them up and stand them on their own two feet in the name of Jesus. Then you will discover that you have received far more than you have been able to give.

This is the secret of happiness «Happiness lies elsewhere, where you haven't thought about, Jesus says. Happiness can be made only with God.»

A young Jewish girl in Nazareth, His mother, had already proclaimed this before He was born: «I shall sing my most beautiful song for my God because He is all-powerful. He has done great things in me and holy is His name. His mercy remains for ever with those who serve Him. He has given proof of his power, he has destroyed the proud and their plans. He has cast the powerful from their thrones, he has raised up the oppressed. He has filled the poor with good things, but has sent the rich away empty.»

God is on the side of the defeated, of the poor, of those who suffer, of the poor and the peacemakers. «The poor are happy, joyful, blessed, in peace, in harmony with themselves, with the world and with God because their hands and their hearts are open to receive God's gifts and they trust in His strength. Happy are those whose hearts are pure, who are not selfish, or self-centred but have their fixed on God, Happy are those who work for peace and fight for justice.

«You are the salt of the earth, and therefore you can prevent this world becoming corrupt. You have to be flaming torches because there is still too much darkness in the world. You are not being asked just to carry a light. You yourselves have to be the light! You have to be fire and to give light you have to consume yourselves, like the log which burns ».

Blessed are you if you decide to walk with Jesus, if you are prepared to take the risk of changing your dreams into light; but above all, you will be happy if you remain in Him and not just with Him. Free to bear fruit, that is, the visible works of practical love, which is made up of the truth, of dedication, of the total sacrifice of life if that is necessary.

At the last evening, Jesus stood up, removed His outer garments and, taking a towel, wrapped it round His waist; He then poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel He was wearing. Just as the slaves did. Immediately afterwards He said «What I have done, you must do, for each other».

Form a crowd of people who love each other, so that seeing you others may believe in God.

We are a new people. We are the Family of God, we are the true vine which the Father lovingly cultivates. We receive the sap of the Spirit of Jesus and we are the branches which bear fruit ... Our names are Benedict of Norcia, Francis of Assisi, Dominic Guzman, Ignatius Loyola, Teresa of Jesus, Francis of Sales, Don Bosco, Mother Mazzarello, Don Rua, Dominic Savio, Laura Vicuña, Bishop Versiglia, Callixtus Caravario, Joseph Calasanz, Joseph Kowalski, Zephyrinus Namuncurá, the Young Martyrs of the Poznań Oratory, Piergiorgio Frassati, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Damian of Molokai, Joseph Quadrio, Nino Baglieri... We... We are so many. A family which every day welcomes the Word. A vine which every day offers the fruits of the Spirit.

Walk therefore with heads held high. You have your life in your hands. Be fully aware of who you are. Keep on you feet, even if alone, even when faced by a crowd. You can bow down only before God and in order to lift up those who have fallen. Love God with all your heart and those living near you as yourselves.

Jesus ends his sermon on the mount with these words: «Anyone who puts into practice what I say is like a sensible man who built his house on rock. When the rain came down, floods rose, gales blew and hurled themselves against that house, it did not fall because it was founded on rock.²⁶ But everyone who listens to these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a stupid man who built his house on sand. When the rain came down, floods rose, gales blew and struck that house, and it collapsed and fell! »

Watch out for yourselves: build your life on rock or you will crumble away.

«Fr Pascual, Jesus expects all this from us?»

Serving God is very simple. God is not a tyrant. God speaks to you like a Father and a friend.

«You have not chosen me as a friend, but it is I who have chosen you and made you my friends. So your work will increase and bear fruit which will last for eternity. If you follow the path I show you, Jesus says, you will see that it is a beautiful thing to belong to God and that the weight which the faith asks you to carry is not heavy ».

You need to take a deep breath, lift yourselves up, you need to feel that you people who are free. My message is an invitation to a celebration. Your life is made for a celebration and we are all on our way to a feast. The future is a banquet full of joy among friends and God will feast with us.

Jesus says that his word is sown within us, as in a field, but the human heart is a difficult and heavy soil, hard and choked by thorny brushwood.

And yet you are the field. If you begin to listen to the Word you could find something precious.

You could, first of all, find yourselves. And you will find God within you. «You do not have to be afraid, but you cannot do anything without Him. And He needs you..»

He knows us very well, just as we are. He knows the personal world of shadow and light within us; better than we do, he knows the mysterious mixture we are.

He knows what we are capable of. Others may be disappointed because they had their dreams for us and they projected their hopes on us. God on the other hand is never disappointed. Because I am the one He loves, as I am today...!

God does not live in the future and He does not live in the past, but in the present. He is the present and He sees me in my present situation.

Even the friends of Jesus thought that they had to be great and powerful in order to bring about the Kingdom of God; He, on the other hand said: «To be useful to God you have to be small like a child ».

A child is a person who still has his whole future before him.. A child has dreams and trust.

Walk straight on with your heads held high. You have a future before you and it's worth going for. Children are weak: what they most lack is strength. However, what they have is trust. And when everything goes well they know they are loved.

And they have the future before them. You have a word to say in your lives and with your lives.. A consoling word, a liberating word, a word of hope, open to the future. Have the courage to say it. Have the courage to be what you are and to be so wholeheartedly: persons who are authentic, free, who have a vocation.

Do not be afraid! Let us go towards the other shore with courage.

This ocean of dangers and threats is certainly very large and our boat is small and fragile. But in our boat we are carrying Jesus the Son of God. Who can make us afraid?

My dear young people, I love you and I heard your request to help you see Jesus. I have helped you to see Him and I have brought you to Him. I hope and pray that now, like the disciples of the Baptist, you will be able to say: «We have found the Christ,» and that you will set about leading others to Jesus.

I finish by leaving with you a prayer by Cardinal Newman. Make it your own and translate it into a plan of life.

INTO YOUR HANDS

God has created me to do Him some definite service; He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. I have my mission - I may never know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next. I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons. He has not created me for naught. I shall do good, I shall do His work; I shall be a preacher of truth in my own place, while not intending it, if I do but keep His commandments and serve Him in my calling.

Therefore, my God, I will put myself without reserve into your hands. What have I in heaven, and apart from you what do I want upon earth? My flesh and my heart fail, but God is the God of my heart, and my portion forever.

(Cardinal J.H. NEWMAN)

With affection and great appreciation.

Rome, 31 January 2010

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