Dear confreres,

As we begin this New Year 2018, we are called to reflect on this beautiful theme of Listening and Accompaniment. Our beloved Rector Major Fr. Ángel Fernández Artime, has given us this Strenna for this year. Therefore, I thought, in this Circular, we could focus in brief on

**THE ART OF LISTENING AND ACCOMPANIMENT**

In the coming weeks, we shall certainly have the opportunity to study it more deeply, during the Strenna dissemination, in the four regions of our Province.
To choose the topic, the Rector Major met with the Superiors of the Salesian Family in Turin on the occasion of the Celebration of Mary Help of Christians. The choice of the theme of “accompaniment” was the result of that dialogue. “The synthetic phrase of the Strenna,” writes Fr. Artime, “corresponds to the heartfelt request that the Samaritan woman makes to Jesus at Jacob’s well. In her meeting with Him, the woman feels that she has been listened to, respected and appreciated; and so, in her heart she feels impelled to ask for something even more precious: ‘Sir, give me some of this water…the water of life to the full that you are offering me.’”

Following the central theme of this gospel passage, and in the context of the forthcoming Synod of Bishops («Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment »), Fr Artime intends to explore “the importance for all our Salesian Family and for its mission in the world of cultivating the precious art of listening and of accompaniment, with conditions that need to be ensured for the demands and the service involved in both listening and accompanying, in the process of personal, Christian and vocational development.”

The full text of the Rector Major’s presentation is attached with this Circular and is also available on sdb.org website. Here I only wish to ponder on some of the salient features that come with The Art of Listening and Accompaniment.

**The Art of Listening**

The Rector Major says that the starting point for our reflection must be the calm and meditative reading of the gospel passage that we know as “the meeting of Jesus with the Samaritan woman” (Jn 4, 3-42); a meeting that then becomes the icon to refer to in order to see how the Lord relates to her, the sort of relationship He establishes, its results, and the consequences that the meeting with Him has in this woman’s life.

The popularity of social media has taught us that people like to be heard, and the same holds true for all of us. However, hearing isn’t necessarily listening, nor is it necessarily listening well. As G.K. Chesterton said “there’s a lot of difference between hearing and listening.” The truth is, many people come to conversations with agendas, whether that is to make themselves be heard, or to make themselves not be heard, and to actually escape the conversation altogether. This is true even when we conduct ourselves during our meetings at various levels. **Listening and accompaniment are linked together. To listen we have to be in the other’s company and to accompany the other we have to make a conscious effort to listen.** As Diogenes Laertius said: “We have two ears and only one tongue in order that we may hear more and speak less.” The art of listening is an invaluable life skill. Not only will it help you communicate better with others, but it will help you succeed in your apostolic and pastoral mission with the young.
The Bible has numerous references, both in the Old and New Testaments, to the importance of listening and its spiritual benefits as well as admonitions and consequences to the contrary. Given below are just a few which we are all familiar with:

- Then the Lord came and stood and called as at other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak Lord, for Your servant is listening." (1Sam 3:10).
- Israel, if only you would listen to Me! (Psalm 81:8)
- While he was still speaking, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and behold, a voice out of the cloud said, "This is My Beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!" (Matthew 17:5)
- Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand said, "Men of Israel, and you who fear God, listen! (Acts 13:16)
- My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry. (James 1:19)

In all Biblical encounters and exhortations, we see a personal touch. Young people too need this personal touch. They yearn to belong and to relate to people who care about them and value them as individuals. To build this relationship, we need to learn names, know their families, to inspire, motivate and engage them. We need a differentiated approach that begins with the variety of young people in mind. We need to engage families and see parents as part of our pastoral ministry. We need to listen to and support them as they continue to foster the faith life of emerging adults. Parents need to be inspired and equipped to take the lead in the spiritual formation of their children. We need to help families make this transition. For families that are struggling with faith and an active participation in the parish or institution, our work with the young can be a spark that lights up the whole community.

We need to go where the youth and young adults are, including and especially today, even online! The roots of youth ministry are to go to the corners where youth hang out. To do this today, we should be proficient in social media, and use technology as a means to draw them towards a more offline presence and participation with the Salesian community and mission.

**The Art of Accompaniment**

In his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis adds several phrases to the growing vocabulary and vision of the New Evangelization—a vision to which each pope has contributed since the Second Vatican Council. One of these phrases is “the art of accompaniment”:

The Church will have to initiate everyone—priests, religious and laity—into this ‘art of accompaniment’ which teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other (cf. Ex 3:5). (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 169). It is profitable for us to examine Pope Francis’ own presentation of the art of accompaniment in *Evangelii Gaudium* more in depth. He introduces this phrase in Chapter 3, “The Proclamation of the Gospel,” under the fourth section, “Evangelization and the deeper understanding of the Kerygma.” Within this context *it is clear that accompaniment is a means to the end of evangelization, not “accompaniment for accompaniment’s sake.”* Pope Francis explicitly states, “Genuine spiritual accompaniment always begins and flourishes in the context of service to the mission of evangelization” (*EG*,...
173). He beautifully explains: **Spiritual accompaniment must lead others ever closer to God... to accompany them would be counterproductive if it became a sort of therapy supporting their self-absorption and cease to be a pilgrimage with Christ to the Father.** (EG, 170)

Far from the image of a doctor who merely affirms, compliments, or, even worse, spiritually euthanizes a wounded soul, the art of accompaniment points to a kind of bedside manner that is important, and not always obvious to everyone. Pope Francis describes the bedside manner needed in the art of accompaniment as “steady and reassuring, reflecting our closeness,” and as having a “compassionate gaze” (EG, 169). Every art requires practice, and even mistakes along the way, to learn. It involves a “constellation of virtues,” including charity, humility, affability, courage, patience, and hope. This is very true also in the art of accompaniment!

As we have already seen above Jesus DOES manifest accompaniment. In fact, the whole incarnation manifests accompaniment as does his “table-fellowship” in “eating and drinking with sinners.” But Jesus does not merely eat with sinners or become incarnate. He does that in order to lead, to proclaim, to teach, to govern, to sanctify, to summon to repentance, to bestow mercy to the penitent. An example, almost in picture form, of what Jesus does is in the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. As the story opens, two disciples are walking in the wrong direction (away from Jerusalem). The text says: While they were talking, and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them … And he said to them, “What is this conversation which you are holding with each other as you walk?” (Lk 24:16-17).

**On the Road to Emmaus**

**So, he does accompany them!** However, no sooner do they explain their sorrow and reveal their erroneous thinking, that Jesus admonishes them (LK 24:26-27). Hence, in this walk of accompaniment, Jesus sees these men are in error and He tells them so. It is their error that is the cause not only of their sorrow, but also of their “traveling wrong.” But note that he is not there just to walk alongside! What started as a mere accompaniment, led to listening and finally to leading, guiding and teaching! This brings about a definitive change in the lives of these two disciples. He literally turns them around! This is what you and I are called to do with the young who are entrusted to our care! We should be able to make a change in their lives, with prayerful, prudent and patient accompaniment.

**CONCLUSION: The Art of Listening AND Accompaniment**

To conclude, the Strenna for 2018 invites us to a deeper reflection on the role of listening and accompaniment in our own lives and with those with whom we journey. Fr. Angel Artine encourages us to reflect on the scripture passage where Jesus encounters a Samaritan woman by a well. In this exchange, he listens, perseveres and transforms her life. In their context, this was a meeting that would not normally occur. Firstly, Jesus is talking to a Samaritan – with whom a Jew of that era would share nothing; secondly, Jesus was speaking to a woman, and privately too; and lastly that Jesus was speaking familiarly in a public setting, something a religious figure did not do. In short, **here is a transformative encounter** that should not and
would not have occurred if the barriers of the established societies were upheld. But Jesus came to turn the world upside down!

Returning to the Strenna: Let us cultivate the art of listening and of accompaniment. We are encouraged to make particular efforts to journey with young people in the way Jesus journeys with us and the Samaritan woman. This requires that initial encounter. Like Jesus, this encounter begins by listening to the other person and their lived experience. A genuine listening; more than simply hearing the other. From this arises the opportunity for human relationships which offer a transformative power in our own and in their lives. Within this transformative relationship, the role of accompaniment is paramount. Our accompaniment does not end after the first setback and reaches out to those we might avoid by abiding by social norms. We are called to reach out to the margins. To listen to, and not merely hear, the experiences of those we encounter, and to accompany them. This accompaniment is not exclusive to a one-on-one encounter, rather it relates to our communities, our beneficiaries and to all those who need an open ear and a loving heart. We are called to be present amongst the young; to listen to them, not merely to hear; and to accompany them in a genuine human relationship. Like Jesus in his encounter with the Samaritan woman in John 4:3-42, we are called to go beyond the boundaries and barriers which divide us, to encounter the young, wherever and whoever they be, and to show them the same perseverance, listening with our ears and mind and accompanying them with our heart and love. So, as we begin to look to 2018, let us cultivate this art of listening and accompaniment for the benefit of the many young people whose lives influence us and on whom we are called to make a profound impact in return.

NEWS FROM THE PROVINCE

Sincere Thanks

We are immensely grateful to the Rector and community of Lourdes Shrine, Perambur for hosting the INM Ordinations on 27th December 2017. With grateful hearts we sincerely thank His Grace Archbishop George Antonymsamy D.D. for having ordained our young deacons. Gratitude is also due to the Vice Provincial, the Liturgy coordinator and to all the other Salesians and lay people who helped in making this day memorable and meaningful for our eight newly-ordained priests. We continue to pray for them as they begin their pastoral ministry as Ordained Ministers.

Congratulations to the Newly Appointed ING and INS Provincials

Hearty Congratulations to Rev. Fr. Januarius Sangma and to Rev. Fr. Paul Olphindro Lyngkot on being appointed Provincials of Guwahati Province and Shillong Province respectively, by the Rector Major, Rev. Fr. Angel Fernandez Artime. We implore God’s blessings upon them as they prepare themselves to take up the service of authority in these provinces.
INM Community Day & Contribution

As you are already aware our INM Province Community Day will be on 14th January 2018 at Don Bosco, Thalavadi. During the celebration the New Priests & Silver Jubilarians (2017-18) will be felicitated.

The program will be as follows:

10:00 a.m.  -  Cultural Program
11.15      -  Break
11.45      -  Holy Eucharist
1.00 p.m.  -  Lunch

Your generous contribution this year will go to support the Don Bosco Mission, Thalavadi. Let this day be an expression of our fraternity and brotherhood. A vehicle is being arranged from Citadel to reach the place. Kindly inform the Secretary as early as possible in case you wish to join the group.

Strenna Dissemination 2018 in INM

The Strenna 2018 will be presented to the Salesian Family members in our Province on the following days:

5.00 p.m.  -  Tea
5.30 p.m.  -  Strenna Dissemination
8.00 p.m.  -  Supper

06.01.2018  -  Vellore Region  -  Don Bosco, Katpadi
13.01.2018  -  Tirupattur Region -  Sacred Heart College, Tirupattur
21.01.2018  -  Chennai Region   -  The Citadel, Chennai
28.01.2018  -  Pondy Region     -  Don Bosco Boys’ Home, Pondy

I exhort each member of your community to participate in any one of the presentations at your convenience, preferably in your respective region. You may also remind all the members of the Salesian Family in and around your community to benefit from this animation forum.

Kindly inform the Rector of the particular venue regarding the total number of participants from your community.

Thank you for the Consultations

Thank you, dear confreres for handing in the consultation forms for Rectors duly filled in. Those who have not yet done so, kindly do so immediately on or before 6th January 2018. Let us continue to pray that the Holy Spirit may assist us in our discernment regarding the choice of the leaders in our communities.
PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY: 18th – 25th January 2018

The theme for the 2018 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, "Your Right Hand, O Lord, Glorious in Power," taken from the book of Exodus 15:6. Jesus’ earnest prayer to the Father was that those given to Him by the Father would be one, just as He and the Father are one. Let the prayer of Jesus become our own as we pray for Christian Unity during the Unity Octave.

Welcome Back to INM – Fr. Rajkumar Fernando SDB

After having served as a zealous missionary for five years, we welcome back to the Province, Rev. Fr. Rajkumar Fernando. He will offer his expertise in the field of animation in Mount Don Bosco, Kotagiri.

Congratulations Rev. Fr. D. Maria Antony Raj, Principal, Sacred Heart College, Tirupattur, who has been declared duty elected to the Syndicate of the Thiruvalluvar University by the Principals of Affiliated Colleges, for a period of three years from 09.12.2017.

Sincere Condolences - Rest in Peace

Mr. P.J. George (70) younger brother of Fr. P.J. Sebastian passed away on 9th December 2017.

Mr. Irudayaraj (78) father of Fr. Sebastian Muthuraj died on 11th December 2017. The funeral was held on 12th December at St. Mary’s Cathedral, Madurai.

Mr. Sellam Jacob (86) father of Fr. Augustine Sellam died on 15th December 2017. The funeral was held on 18th December in MHC Parish, Kattupadi.

Father Oonupalathinkal Joseph (J. Joseph) a great son of Don Bosco who laboured hard and reaped a hundredfold in the Salesian vineyard of South India breathed his last at 5 a.m. on 17th December 2017. He was born in 1930 in the village of Piravithanam in Kottayam District of Kerala. After his ordination in 1962 he worked in Basin Bridge as Catechist, Egmore as Administrator, Katpadi and Sagayathottam as Rector before becoming the Novice Master at Kotagiri. As Father Maria Arokiam Kanaga rightly observed in his condolence message Father J. Joseph was "a genuine son of Our Lady and Don Bosco, ardent lover of the Lord Jesus, the Salesian Charism and the poor young people. He has been a great leader, a formator, a pioneer, a builder, a conscientious administrator and a reliable superior in so many houses. Above all he was a very prayerful person. He was an indefatigable worker and a man of strong will". Adieu dear Father J. Joseph! Your memory will remain in our hearts for years all our life!

Mrs. Amalapushpam (82), mother of Rev. Fr. Pudumai Doss passed away on the morning of 22nd December 2017. The funeral was held on 23rd December 2017, at St. Roque’s Parish, Chennai.

Rev. Sr. Devasahayam Vittoria FMA (86) passed away on 30th December 2017. The funeral was held on 31st December 2017 at Sacred Heart Home, Katpadi. Our condolences to Sr. Lazar Maria Nirmala, the Provincial and all the sisters of the INM FMA Province.
CONCLUSION

We begin this New Year 2018 with the Solemnity of MARY, MOTHER OF GOD. For us Salesians, as we prepare for the feast of Don Bosco, we are also privileged to have in our Founder, a Father, who nurtured and fostered a filial devotion to Mary, the Mother of God.

January 24th reminds us of our Patron St. Francis de Sales, who inspired Don Bosco with his pure gentleness and meekness. As we begin this year let me quote our Patron who said: “Do not look forward to what may happen tomorrow; the same everlasting Father who cares for you today will take care of you tomorrow and every day”.

On the 26th of January 2018, we also celebrate the 69th Republic Day of our country, INDIA! It is our duty to continue our prayers for our Motherland that all the people in our land, may love and be devoted to our country, learning to live in peace and prosperity, as brothers and sisters and honest citizens.

As imitators of our Father St. John Bosco, may he help us his sons and daughters, to preserve his cherished spiritual heritage and to promote it to all our young people with creativity in the cultural context of today. Let the words of St. John Bosco whose feast we celebrate with joy on the 31st of this month, echo in our hearts – “Entrust everything to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and to Mary Help of Christians and you will see what miracles are.”

I take this opportunity to wish you a very Happy Feast of St. John Bosco!

May he continue to live in you and me!

Affectionately,

Fr. K. M. Jose SDB
Provincial

Date: 01.01.2018
Place: Chennai 600010