

**PRESENTATION OF THE THEME FOR
STRENNA 2026
“DO WHATEVER HE TELLS YOU”**

Believers, free to serve

Year after year the Strenna is offered as an opportunity for the entire Salesian Family to come together around a particular theme, so that – through prayer and reflection, listening and sharing – each Group’s call can find food for its own spiritual, charismatic and pastoral journey.

In light of the Jubilee experience, **STRENNA 2025, *Anchored in hope, pilgrims with young people***, gave us the opportunity to walk together with the whole Church to contemplate the mystery of Christ, the source and support of our hope. Around the theme of the hope that does not disappoint, we were able to contemplate how the mystery of a creator God who visits us in his Son continues to sustain us today through the power of the Spirit. It has helped us to recognise the signs of God in daily life – the concrete reality that reflects the mystery of God’s love for us. Hope is strength and confirmation of the “already” that we are experiencing and contemplating. It is also a source of courage and joy for the “*not yet*”.

The event of the **150th anniversary of the first Salesian missionary expedition** has been a very concrete and real opportunity, through which we have rediscovered how the strength of hope for Don Bosco generated the courage in his heart that sustained him in discovering God’s plan and the firm commitment to put it into practice. Reading this event in depth, we can say that hope was the driving force of Don Bosco’s pastoral heart. It is hope that has enabled him to read the signs of the times and to look at the world sustained by his faith in God.

This historical event took place at a particular moment in Don Bosco’s life: alongside the missionary expedition, he was committed to sending the Salesians to France, as well as establishing the Salesian Cooperators Association. So it was a period of great enthusiasm for our Father, who always prioritised openness and availability to God’s will in his heart. Guided by hope, Don Bosco was deeply rooted in faith.

While it is true that Don Bosco lived in Turin, it is even more true that his heart and mind were everywhere in the world. His hope – once he discovered God’s plan – became a source of certainty and full conviction that this must be followed, with faith, to the end, without fear and without hesitation.

The first Salesians sensed the strength of hope that animated Don Bosco's heart and mind. It is no coincidence that later on, they themselves would understand and interpret it as **“Don Bosco, man of faith, Don Bosco, believer, Don Bosco, united with God.”**

Various discussions and reflections that emerged from the World Salesian Family Consulta meeting held at the beginning of June 2025 focused on the question of **“faith”**: if the strength of hope is based on faith, a life truly full of hope leads to a deeper and more authentic relationship of faith with Jesus, the Son of the Father, made man for us and who continues to be present among us with the strength of the Spirit.

Let me offer you some points that will then be developed in STRENNNA 2026.

1. A call to listen

“Do whatever he tells you” is not just a simple biblical quote, but a very real spiritual and pastoral manifesto. The invitation, the command, is spoken by Mary right at the beginning of the Gospel. The context that envisaged a moment of celebration suddenly risks ending badly, a total failure: there is not enough wine. In this situation of crisis and difficulty, Mary, the caring mother, simply invites the servants to be attentive to what Jesus will say when “his hour” comes.

It is well worth re-reading this Gospel passage.

Gospel of John, 2:1-11

¹On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. ²Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. ³When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, ‘They have no wine’. ⁴And Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.’ ⁵His mother said to the servants, ‘Do whatever he tells you.’

⁶Now standing there were six stone water-jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. ⁷Jesus said to them, ‘Fill the jars with water.’ And they filled them up to the brim. ⁸He said to them, ‘Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.’ So they took it. ⁹When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom ¹⁰and said to him, ‘Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.’

“Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

Mary's words to the servants at Cana (Jn 2:5) contain a pedagogy of listening as well as of response, a pedagogy that opposes all forms of passive obedience. Mary does not simply say “obey”, but invites the servants to a personal, active and pro-active listening: “whatever he tells you”. It is an invitation to trust in the person of Christ, a trust that becomes a gesture of responsibility that in turn generates authentic freedom.

The subtitle of the Strenna, “**Believers, free to serve**”, completes the picture by tracing an existential trajectory: freedom is born of faith, and service springs from freedom, that is, a freedom which, when lived, makes others free. This is not a chronological sequence, but a vital dynamic, where each element feeds and is sustained by the others. One cannot be a believer while remaining distant and detached from that which can and must generate life, joy and communion. Believing means placing a wager, staking everything you have. Believing pushes us outside the comfort zone of merely “commenting” on history. Believing is an experience that gives birth to and contributes to the construction of a more just society. Believing becomes energy that fuels these processes towards a more successful humanity.

2. A path towards a generative faith

The Strenna proposal follows a progression that echoes the Christian method of discernment: **recognise – interpret – choose**. It is a path that avoids both blind and submissive activism and a disembodied and overly private and individualistic spirituality. It is an invitation to take the direction that opens up before us when we accept the invitation of the Word with faith, a direction marked by trust and responsibility. It is the direction that characterises the best Salesian tradition: helping young people to have and show confidence, accompanying them and educating them to make choices that empower them, in view of the goal of forming “good Christians and upright citizens”.

2.1. Welcoming the signs of the times

We must first reflect on the urgency of “**embracing time and history**”. The history we live in, with all its challenges, must be “encountered” with empathy. This attitude expresses a gesture of active love towards the reality that surrounds us. As educators and pastors who are believers, we refuse to fall into the trap of immobility that causes us to passively endure events. Ours is a call to “recognise” the challenges with

spiritual intelligence. It is a crucial and decisive step: recognition is the result of discernment, that is, of the ability to interpret what happens in depth. Only in this way can catastrophic and defeatist interpretations be avoided.

For those of us involved in educational and pastoral processes, we can say that the image of “history as a treasure chest that holds and reveals God’s action” is particularly relevant and evocative. The treasure chest suggests that, as humans reveal themselves before our eyes, only by paying close attention can we perceive how divine action is present, even if hidden, gently active. Eyes of faith are necessary for God’s action to be discovered, grasped and taken up. It is a deeply Salesian approach: Don Bosco knew how to grasp the action of “providence” in the most complicated stories, the most difficult situations. And he was able to transform every apparent obstacle and difficulty into opportunities for the integral growth of young people and the propagation of the Kingdom.

2.2. **Being rooted in faith**

The second movement leads directly to the heart of the Christian experience. Reading events in the light of Christ is a fundamental option that only matures as the result of constant commitment. Jesus Christ cannot be perceived as an “object” of faith. Jesus Christ, Son of God made man for us, is **logos**, that is, a criterion that helps us understand reality. It is an approach which, enlightened by the power of the Holy Spirit, overcomes every form of dualism between the sacred and the profane.

Only this healthy relationship with Christ can reveal the divine in the human to our mind and heart. Only in this way does the call to discover how “God’s will emerges from the events we experience” become particularly meaningful. This mature approach of faith recognises that God not only speaks through Scripture and the Magisterium, but (and this touches deeply on our vocation) also comes to meet us through the concrete history of young people and those we encounter on our journey. Their stories are a continual revelation of – and call to – God’s presence.

All careful discernment requires and sustains a sound spiritual formation. A central and indispensable element is the encounter with the Word. Hence the strength that sustains this dynamic. It is through systematic contact with the Word that we grow in a healthy way. Only when we are nourished and enlightened by it do we realise that the Word of God is not mere information but spiritual food, light for the daily journey. We can say that the Word, when we really listen to it – **ob-audire** – not only “informs” us, but goes beyond, “shapes” us and “transforms” us.

2.3. The freedom of the call

The third passage touches on the delicate question of Christian freedom in a culture where there is so much confusion in this regard. Only when we engage in “free listening” do we experience the “liberating power” of the good news. Listening which is forced, listening which is conditioned by fear and self-interest has no impact; indeed the end result can even be damaging. Free listening is really free when we feel that it is becoming a real experience of joyful acceptance of the divine will. It is the freedom of the children of God that once experienced and lived, makes us avoid dangerous arbitrariness in the pastoral field.

We see this from experience: when “every action” is “lived and guided by the Word,” the contours of an integral spirituality emerge, where there is no separation between prayer and action, between spiritual life and commitment in the world.

The experience of Cana, then, calls us to be attentive to the “danger of a self-referential faith, conditioned by our own reason”, that is, to a faith based on “what I think” as expressed in the phrase we often hear (and perhaps even say): “in my opinion”. This is almost a faith that bows to the demands of our “reason”.

In the Salesian context, faith and reason are always considered allies, pursued with the awareness that the necessary balance is a delicate and urgent journey. The risk of a purely horizontal approach arises from selfish choices that claim to measure everything with exclusively human criteria. The consequence is that faith, and consequently any proposal for faith education, is reduced to a mere rational proposal.

Here we have the invitation to clarify the fact that it is not a question of devaluing reason, but of preventing it from becoming the only criterion of judgement, obscuring the dimension of mystery and grace. These are indispensable dimensions for any ecosystem of integral education.

2.4. Generous service

The fourth and final movement leads to the culmination of the direction we have taken: service. “Rooted and free - we serve”. This is the culmination of the entire journey: from being rooted in faith to freedom, from freedom to service, all as a natural expression of the gradual growth of the love received.

The invitation to “cooperate fully” resounds with particular strength for all believers. The adverb “fully” emphasises the importance of the total, without reserve. It is the language of every true journey of faith, where the believers discover themselves to be active collaborators in God’s work.

From this we can understand the power of the expression “boldness of faith”, which echoes one of Pope Francis' favourite expressions. Genuine faith is not timid but courageous; it is willing to take risks on behalf of the Kingdom. It is the boldness of those who know they can count not on their own strength but on God’s power

The Cana event ends with “the joy of sharing”, a distinguishing mark of the Salesian charism. It is not a superficial, emotional, trivial or ridiculous joy. It is a genuine and deep joy that comes from sincere sharing that strengthens the experience where we all feel we are part of a project bigger than ourselves, God’s project.

3. The commemorative dimension

The reference to the 150th anniversary of the Salesian Cooperators is not only celebratory but programme-oriented towards what the Lord continues to ask of us. Don Bosco’s prophetic dream is still relevant today, recalling both the “vision” he communicated and our current responsibility as heirs and promoters of his charism. The 150th anniversary thus becomes not only a memory of the past but a relaunching into the future.

It will be a year where we will have the opportunity to study, reflect, thank and celebrate the experience of the Salesian Cooperators, who continue to express and experience a moment of grace. While we thank the Lord for his providence both for the Salesian Cooperators Association and for all the Groups of the Salesian Family, let us deepen our knowledge of the charismatic dimension that the Spirit of God has brought about through Don Bosco. The past is a beautiful legacy that propels us towards a future in which we are even more prominent believers and free to be worthy servants in the cause of God’s kingdom.

Conclusion

In a time of great change and challenges, along with unprecedented opportunities, **STRENNA 2026** aims to be a spiritual journey that offers a compass for personal growth in faith and growth in pastoral experience at the community level. In this regard, we are called as Groups of the Salesian Family and local communities to begin by listening to reality rooted in faith in Christ. In this way, we live our calling with true freedom. It is a freedom

that urges us to make choices in favour of young people and all those who are lacking the “wine” of hope. It is a freedom that leads us to strengthen our commitment to integral human advancement..

From the beginning, Don Bosco “imagined” a great movement of people who, together with him and like him, could contribute for the good of youth. Well, this is Don Bosco’s dream that continues today. The celebration of the 150th anniversary of the Salesian Cooperators strengthens the determination in all of us to be servants of young people as they face today’s challenges. This determination bears witness to our faithful and generous response to the words that Mary addresses to us today: “***Do whatever he tells you.***”