



SOCIETÀ DI SAN FRANCESCO DI SALES

CASA GENERALIZIA SALESIANA

Via della Pisana 1111 - 00163 Roma

Il Rettor Maggiore

Prot 17/0298

Colle don Bosco, 16 August 2017

Dear Brothers and Sisters of the Salesian Family,

I am writing this letter as we look forward to the beatification of Venerable Titus Zeman which will take place in Bratislava (Slovakia) on 30 September. I have purposely decided to date this letter on the day when we remember the birth of our Father and Founder Don Bosco. Two years ago, we celebrated solemnly the bicentenary of his birth. It is appropriate that Fr Titus Zeman's martyrdom be recognized as a fruit of the holiness of our Family in the light of that Bicentenary. In 2013, we had the beatification of Blessed Stephen Sandor, a Hungarian Salesian Brother who offered his life for the salvation of young people in the world of work, in the same context of persecution.

Titus Zeman was born in Vajnory, near Bratislava (Slovakia) on 4 January 1915, the first of ten children in a rather humble family. At the age of ten he recovered unexpectedly from illness through the intercession of Our Lady. He promised to "be her son forever" and to become a Salesian priest. He overcame the opposition of his family which lasted for two years and in 1927 he began to realize his dream. He asked his family to sell a field in order to pay for his studies, and added: "If I were dead, you would have found the money for my funeral. Please use that money to pay for my studies."

This kind of determination was seen all through Fr Zeman's life. The communist regime took control in Czechoslovakia and persecuted the Church. In 1946 Fr Titus defended the image of the crucifix and was dismissed from the school where he taught. Providentially he escaped the dramatic "night of the barbarians" and the deportation of religious on 13-14 April 1950. He then decided to accompany some young Salesians as they crossed the Iron Curtain to reach Turin, where the Rector Major Fr Peter Ricaldone welcomed him. They succeeded in two crossings in the summer and autumn of 1950 but in April 1951 the expedition failed. Fr Zeman faced an initial week of torture and then ten months of preventive detention with serious torture before his trial on 20-22 February 1952. He was given twelve years in detention (1952-1964) and a further period of nearly five years' conditional freedom when he was constantly spied upon and persecuted (1964-1969).

In February 1952, the Attorney asked for the death penalty on charges of espionage, high treason and illegal border crossing. This was commuted to twenty-five years' hard labour in prison. Fr Zeman was branded as a "man destined for elimination" and had to endure life in forced labour camps. He was forced to handle radioactive uranium without any protection. He

spent several hundred days in an isolation cell with only one sixth of the food ration given to others. He became seriously ill with heart, lung and neurological disorders. On 10 March 1964, when he had completed half his sentence, he was allowed to leave the detention centre on conditional freedom for a period of seven years. He was physically unrecognizable and had to endure a period of intense spiritual suffering due to a ban on the public practice of his priestly ministry. Eventually he was granted an amnesty and died on 8 January 1969.

The testimony of Fr Titus is the incarnation of Jesus' vocational call and pastoral preference for young people, especially for young Salesian confreres. This preference was to manifest itself, as in the case of Don Bosco, in a real "passion", seeking their welfare, dedicating all his energies, all his strength, and his whole life for them in a spirit of sacrifice and offering. "Even if I lost my life, I would not consider it wasted, if I knew that at least one of those I had helped had become a priest in my place." In this way, he interpreted and lived what our Constitutions say in Article 28: "To meet the needs of his people the Lord continually calls some to follow him, and enriches them with a variety of gifts in the service of the Kingdom. We are convinced that many young people are rich in spiritual potential and give indications of an apostolic vocation. We help them to discover, accept and develop the gift of a lay, consecrated or priestly vocation, for the benefit of the whole Church and of the Salesian Family."

Fr Titus lived his vocation and his special mission by which he felt called to work for the salvation of vocations with a great spirit of faith. He embraced his hour of "*Calvary*" and of "*sacrifice*", bearing witness to his capacity, by a grace from God, to face the offering of his life, his passion of prison and torture, and finally death, with Christian, consecrated and priestly awareness. Evidence of this is the rosary of fifty-eight beads, one for each period of torture, which he made from bread and thread, and above all his reference to the *Ecce homo*, as the one who accompanied him in his sufferings, and without whom he would not have been able to face them. He guarded and defended the faith of young people in times of persecution, against communist ideological re-education and retraining, carrying out an intense and risky programme of guarding and safeguarding vocations. His faith journey was always resplendent with virtue, the result of an intense interior life that was expressed in a courageous mission in a country where communism tried to eradicate every trace of Christian life. The whole life of Fr Titus was spent in encouraging others to that "fidelity to vocation" which he had displayed in following his vocation. He had a total love for the Church and for his religious vocation and apostolic mission. His courageous undertakings were the fruit of this unified and unifying love.

The heroic testimony of Blessed Titus Zeman is one of the most beautiful pages of faith written by the Christian communities of Eastern Europe and our Congregation in the years of persecution by the communist regimes of the last century. In him we see particularly a splendid dedication to young consecrated and priestly vocations, which was decisive for the future of faith in those territories.

For the whole Church, and especially for our Congregation and for the Salesian Family, the gift of the beatification of Fr Titus is a strong stimulus for a renewed commitment to witness to the faith in times of vocational fragility and abandonment, and also a renewed effort in promoting and accompanying vocations to priestly ministry, to consecrated life, and to marriage. His martyrdom was the result of a heroic "pastoral charity," like that of the Good Shepherd, who does not abandon the flock at the arrival of the wolf, as the mercenary does. The Good Shepherd gives his life out of love and expects no payment in return. He was the guide of the

young, but above all the bond of unity. He considered each one as important as if he were a hundred, with a readiness to leave everything in order to save each one. He respected the freedom of each person, guiding young people in discernment and supporting them in choices that only they can and must take ("they can come and go..."). When Fr Zeman decided not to cross the River Morava alone he put himself at risk of being captured in order to stay with his young people. Sometimes he would adjust his pace to that of some diocesan priests who were in difficulty. In all this he really embodied the image of the Good Shepherd. The "da mihi animas" linked to the "caetera tolle" of our motto found living expression in the voluntary offering of his life by our confrere, as well as by his practice of the Salesian "preventive method" in extreme situations.

In this perspective, I believe that the testimony of Fr Titus and the event of his beatification are of great relevance also in reference to the preparation and celebration of the forthcoming synod on the theme: *Young people, faith and vocational discernment*. In his clandestine activities, Fr Titus somehow embodied the fundamental steps in the process of discernment, which is the main tool with which young people are offered the opportunity to discover and realize their vocation in the light of faith. His faith, inspired by the Word of God, was the source of his decision to accompany the young confreres in the hour of persecution, becoming their companion on the journey and willingly accepting this gift of grace, which became fruitful through his concrete and consistent choices. He was able to make important decisions and orient his actions in situations of uncertainty and in the face of conflicting inner urges, trusting in the grace of God, in the assistance of Mary Help of Christians and in obedience to his superiors. He was convinced that faith "is no refuge for the fainthearted, but something which enhances our lives. It makes us aware of a magnificent calling, the vocation of love. It assures us that this love is trustworthy and worth embracing, for it is based on God's faithfulness which is stronger than our every weakness." (Lumen Fidei 53).

I want Fr Titus to become, in our educative-pastoral communities and in our formation centres, our model and patron in the task of accompanying the younger generations, in accepting the call to share in the joy of the young people. Fr Titus is for us the incarnation of those reference figures spoken of in the Preparatory Document of the Synod: "The role of credible adults and their cooperation is basic in the course of human development and vocational discernment. This requires authoritative believers, with a clear human identity, a strong sense of belonging to the Church, a visible spiritual character, a strong passion for education and a great capacity for discernment."

The courage of Blessed Titus Zeman's faith, his profound capacity for discernment and his devotion to young people even to the point of martyrdom, are proof that Don Bosco's charism is alive in time and in history, and a stimulus to us to renew our vocation and pastoral and educational mission, in the changed circumstances of time and place.

For young people who are now on a journey of vocational growth towards Salesian life or going through the early stages of initial formation, Fr Titus's testimony, as well as that of his Hungarian contemporary, the Salesian Brother, Blessed Stephen Sandor, is a great encouragement to continue with generosity and trust in the road they have undertaken. Titus and Stephen held precious the gift of their call to follow the Lord and serve young people as Don Bosco did. They could easily have escaped but they chose to remain faithful at the cost of their lives. This is the paradox of the gospel: "Anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but

anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it." (Mt 14:25). Vocation is much more than a choice of work or a career. It is worth much more. It is worth one's life, and it is worth giving one's very best, entrusting oneself without reserve to the One who calls us and sends us.

I share the joy of the Church and of the Salesian Family in Slovakia, and I invite all of our communities and groups of the Salesian Family to celebrate in a worthy manner the memory of the new Blessed, to get to know the witness of his martyrdom and to invoke his intercession for perseverance and fruitfulness of vocations. As a young boy Titus made a promise to Mary Help of Christians that he would be "her son forever". May she bless each one of us on our vocational journey and accompany us with her motherly presence!



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