

# **Interview with Fr. VÁCLAV Klement, new Southern Africa (AFM) Provincial**

*Fr Václav Klement has held various positions in the General Council: Councillor for the East Asia-Oceania Region (2002-2008), General Councillor for the Missions (2008-2014), Councillor for the East Asia-Oceania Region (2014-2020) and Extraordinary Visitor “ad nutum et pro tempore” (2020-2022). In December 2022, the Rector Major, Fr Ángel Fernández Artime, with the consent of the General Council, appointed him as*

*the new Superior of the Southern Africa Vice-Province for the six-year period 2023-2029. Here is the interview granted on the occasion of his new appointment.*

**1. Tell us a little about your family background and where you come from.**

I give thanks to God for my family of humble origin, but deep in faith, growing up with three younger brothers, a hardworking father and tender-loving mother. Both parents grew up in the same parish youth group and were known for their life-long commitment to youth education in their free time. Our vibrant parish with many outstanding diocesan priests after Vatican II was a daily school of living faith in action, especially in the context of atheist education in all public schools I

attended in Czechoslovakia until 26 years of age. Not easy to imagine the persecution going on for 40 years, with all 15,000 religious men and women dispersed, their mission works destroyed and called to hand over their charism to an underground situation. I came to know, only after the communist regime collapse, that my uncle, a factory worker who lived in the same small house, was a religious, indeed a bishop of the underground Church.

**2. What is it about religious life, especially Salesian consecrated life that attracted you and made you choose it? Which Salesians influenced you the most?**

I would say, that my aspirations, dreams and personal preparations

'simply' clicked with the first explicit invitation to join the first underground Salesian vocation 'Come and See' encounter. I was deeply touched, amazed, attracted by all those senior Salesians who were able to hand over the Salesian vocation and charism after hard years of prison, forced labour and a tough life. I can't forget my first encounter with the 'Salesian Bulletin', stories of Salesian family saints and especially Salesian spirituality environment – family spirit, apostolic drive and deep faith. Since there were no 'official formation structures' until 1989, the Salesian charism was passed on through close personalized spiritual accompaniment. Not just one novice-master, but three Salesians who took care of me during that special year!

Until now the Salesians of Don Bosco are the most numerous religious men congregation in the Czech Republic.



### **3. What did you do before you entered religious life?**

Actually, for me 'to enter religious life' was not like to 'enter a Salesian house'. During those 'blessed' times of the communist totalitarian regime there were 400 SDBs in my homeland but no 'official' Salesian house. Half of the Salesians were really living and working underground, while another half were involved in the diocesan structures of the Church. In my vibrant home parish (second Czech city of Brno) since my childhood I was involved in many services as altar server, boy

scout, choir member, volunteer or youth leader. At the age of 10 I got a life of Don Bosco in my hands for the first time, but the first living Salesian I met only at the age of 22, after the end of 2 years of military service. Those years 'before' becoming a Salesian were a time of hard studies, hard work in the parish, as a youth leader in different ways, while living as a second class citizen being a fervent young Catholic.

4. After having lived so many years of Salesian Consecrated Life, how would you sum up your life as a Salesian priest so far?

At the age of 65 it is probably time to 'sum up' my life already, right? Hard to say in just a few words. My life motto has changed over the years

and since 2008 I stick to the Asian version of *Da mihi animas, cetera tolle*: All for Jesus, Jesus for all! It means to live each task, mission in my life with enthusiasm, joy and passion. The last 20 years at the side of the Rector Major I have never 'looked back', always trying to contribute to the growth of the Salesian charism with the best of my strength. Well, life is starting at 65!

5. Share the most memorable event in your life as a Salesian of Don Bosco? Well, I treasure too many rich Salesian memories. First the Czechoslovakia underground formation time, like the 24-hour walk in the mountains to reach a secret provincial day gathering or listen to sharing of confreres who spent years

in prison and forced labour camps. Really, it is very difficult to mention 'the most memorable' event: every day during the 16 years in Korea was a special time, then as the first regional councillor for East Asia – Oceania (EA0) it was probably our first Team Visit (2005) with its Vision-Mission workshop, or the EA0 Salesian Brothers Congress in Vietnam (2018). There are too many events to give thanks to God for during my whole life. It is never enough to tell and give thanks for these stories and events! If you access the EA0 (East Asia-Oceania) news 'AustraLasias' on the [www.bosco.link](http://www.bosco.link) you may know a little bit more!

6. Have you any regrets in life?

Yes, my regrets are always of the same nature. At the end of the 'day'



(after an event, apostolic mission, after accomplished entrusted task) I regret that I didn't give my whole heart to this task or mission. Concretely, that I didn't listen enough to this confrere or lay mission partner, that I didn't give my best to the process going on (maybe a discernment, preparation of a regional event).

7. What advice would you give to a young person who is considering religious life? What message do you want to send to young people regarding the missionary vocation? Would you like to become consecrated to God? Would you like to follow Jesus like Don Bosco and his family members? 'Give your heart completely to Jesus!' – I would like to share this invitation of Don Bosco in all-

encompassing youthful language to be attracted to this lifestyle of 'becoming bread for others'.

Would you like to be deeply happy? Share your faith with those who are not so privileged to encounter Jesus face-to-face! During the past 30 years I have met most of the 14,000 Salesians and found that the most happy among them are usually the missionaries who left everything behind, their own country and culture, to be the light of Jesus as missionaries! Without sharing the faith the Church would cease to breath.

8. When you heard that you were appointed as provincial, what was your reaction?



Yes, it was a huge surprise and somehow a shock. Just two days before Christmas 2022, already prepared for another extraordinary visitation, this time in South Asia, I was called by the Rector Major. Fr Ángel asked me to accept this unexpected new obedience. During my whole life I have never said 'No' to Don Bosco. Since this new call happened at Valdocco, I had plenty of time to digest this dramatic change in my life and pray over it and for each of the AFM (*Africa Meridionale*, Southern Africa) confreres on the first day and then slowly start the mindset change from South Korea to Southern Africa. On January 1, 2023 I went on pilgrimage to walk from Valdocco to Becchi, to ask Don Bosco to bless all of us in the AFM!

This call was not much different from 1996, when Fr Juan E. Vecchi reached me by phone in the Philippines during an East Asia-Oceania regional congress of Salesian Cooperators. It was an overwhelming shock, not allowing me to sleep the whole night, absolutely unexpected, since I was not even a provincial council member and had just reached Korea 10 years before this new calling.

**9. What would you say are the leadership qualities that you bring to your new role as provincial?**

I'm happy to share with my Salesian confreres, lay mission partners, Salesian Youth and Salesian Family members my life, faith, Salesian convictions for the next 6 years. Leading is possible mainly by life witness; this is my deep personal

conviction. As every disciple – missionary of Jesus, probably the first contribution is my personal life witness as a passionate Salesian, missionary, communicator, friend of the young, deeply in love with Don Bosco.

During the recent past I have assisted many provinces in their discernment process of reshaping, growing, visioning, and moving forward. After two years as a rector, six years as provincial of Korea and 20 years with the Rector Major's council as extraordinary visitor I would like to share this experience with the dynamics of Salesian charismatic growth. As Don Bosco Salesians we are very rich in the spirit, living in the family with so many saints (living or helping from heaven). As my personal animation

style, I like to bring everyone's attention to cherishing and making these treasures fruitful in Lesotho, eSwatini and South Africa.

Animation and government in the Catholic community and in the Salesian family is rooted in deep listening. Not by accident do we ponder the 127 questions of Jesus in the Gospels. Also the current GC28 theme ends with a question mark: *What kind of Salesians for the Young people of Southern Africa?* I love sharing questions and 'wasting time' listening and walking with each confrere.

Returning after 21 years to the service of authority, after serving many years as councillor, is a challenge. However, fostering a family spirit and teamwork, investing in the lifelong formation of all the

confreres, and getting closer to Don Bosco are the main qualities I'm longing for as I start my service of leadership.

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# **In memoriam. Don Sergio DALL'ANTONIA, sdb**

*Fr Sergio Dall'Antonia, Salesian missionary and founder of the Salesian presence in Romania, ended his earthly pilgrimage in Bacau, Romania, on 21.02.2023, at the age of 83.*

Sergio Dall'Antonia was born in Pieve di Soligo (Treviso, Italy), on 11 April 1939. His parents were Sonia and Angelo Lombardi. The family included an older brother, Francesco, and a little sister, Mariella, who died at the age of one. He was baptised on 14 April, receiving the names Sergio and Livio. His mother died when he was seven.

He attended primary school in the village and secondary school at the Salesian school Astori, in Mogliano Veneto, where the family had moved. Thanks to contact with the Salesians, he understood the divine call and at the end of the fifth year of grammar school asked to be a Salesian. He finished his novitiate on 15 August 1954 under the guidance of Fr Vigilio Uguccioni, in Albarè di Costermano,



becoming a full Salesian.

After his high school and philosophical studies at Nave (1955-1958) and at Foglizzo (1958-1959), he returned to the Province for his practical training, which he did at Tolmezzo (1959-1961) and then at Pordenone (1961-1962), making his perpetual profession on 13th August 1961.

After his theological studies at Monteortone (1962-1966), concluded with his priestly ordination (02.04.1966) in the Marian Sanctuary of Monteortone, his superiors singled him out as a possible future teacher in the studentate, and so he was sent to Rome, to the Pontifical Salesian University, to study morals (1966-1970). Due to health problems,

after his moral studies, he returned to the house in Pordenone (1970-1973) as a catechist and teacher. He thus began to manifest good organisational, artistic and animation skills, which would make him famous.

The Salesian San Luigi house in Gorizia had him for about fifteen years (1973-1986): here he became the soul of the Salesian Youth Tourism Association of Isontino. He organised festivities for young people and parents, art exhibitions, but above all he became the promoter of the famous "Friendship March", in spring, and "Pedalling in Friendship", in autumn. They would remain in local memory as the only events that in the *Iron Curtain* years allowed people to cross the border into Yugoslavia by

merely displaying the event's registration card. These events ended with a hot plate of pastasciutta offered to all participants, Italians and Yugoslavs, by the Army field kitchens housed in the courtyards at San Luigi.

For another decade he returned to Pordenone (1986-1996), always working in the field of education, until the Lord – through his superiors – asked him to go to Romania to open a Salesian presence. It was not easy at 57 to move to an unknown, former Communist, Orthodox-majority country and learn a language that would serve him no other purpose than communicating God's love to young people. However, thanks to his willingness (which characterised him throughout his life) he left and

became the founder of two Salesian houses: first in Constanța (1996-2001) and then in Bacău, where he would remain until the end of his earthly pilgrimage.

The memories of those who knew him describe him as a person who spoke little but did a lot, being a great and tireless worker. Always in the midst of the children, he entertained them with intelligent imagination and creativity. In the proclamation of the Christian message, he also entered the world of the Internet with a youthful spirit, running no less than four blogs, pulling from his repertoire for the young “things old and new”.

A man of faithful prayer, he prayed the Liturgy of the Hours entirely in

front of the tabernacle and loved to meditate on the rosary with his confreres every evening after dinner. He was a great devotee not only of the Holy Eucharist, but also of Our Lady. He gave proof of his faith in visits to nearby Marian shrines and did not miss the feasts of the Blessed Virgin. He was faithful in his fortnightly confession and available as a confessor, appreciated by his confreres, the religious of the area and the faithful.

He leaves a memory as a patriarch, as the “Don Bosco of Romania”.

His steadfast faith is also reflected in his spiritual testament, which we reproduce below.

*My Jesus, forgive me! May I love you forever!*

*In the event of my death, I consent to some organs useful for the life of another person being taken from my body, with the consent of my Superior of the Salesian house to which I belong. I willingly give them up as a humble sign of the Charity of Christ who made himself all things to all people to lead them back to the Father.*

*I ask forgiveness of my loved ones, my confreres and the young people for the evil done, the bad example set and the good not done or neglected. May the Church accept me in her forgiveness and in her prayer of suffrage. If anyone feels they have offended me in any way, let them know that I forgive them wholeheartedly and for ever.*

*May Jesus and Mary be my gentle friends for ever. May they accompany*

*me by the hand to the Father in the Holy Spirit, obtaining mercy and forgiveness for me. From Heaven, where I hope to reach by the Infinite Mercy of God, I will love you forever, pray for you and ask every blessing for you from Heaven.*

*Fr Sergio Dall'Antonia*

Eternal rest grant unto him, O Lord, and may perpetual light shine upon him. Rest in peace!

We report below his last published video.

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# God gave Don Bosco a big heart

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*...without boundaries, like the shores of the sea. I feel that heart beating every day*

His name is Alberto. I do not know his young mother's name.

He lives in Peru. She lives in Hyderabad (India).

What unites these two stories, two lives, is that I met them during my time of service, Alberto in Peru and the young mother in India the following week.

What they have in common is the



precious golden thread of God's caress through the welcome that Don Bosco gave them in one of his houses. The heart of the Salesians changed their lives, saving them from the situation of poverty and perhaps death to which they were condemned. And I believe I can say that the fruit of the Lord's Passover also passes through human gestures that heal and save.

These are the two stories.

### **A grateful young man**

A few weeks ago I was in Huancayo (Peru). I was about to celebrate the Eucharist with more than 680 young people from the Salesian youth movement of the Province, together with several hundred people from that city, 3200 metres above sea level in

the high mountains of Peru, and I was told that a former student wanted to greet me. It had taken him almost five hours to get there and would take another five hours to return.

“I will be very happy to meet him and thank him for his nice gesture,” I replied.

Just before the Eucharist began, the young man approached me and said he was very happy to greet me. “My name is Alberto and I wanted to make this journey to thank Don Bosco in person because the Salesians saved my life.”

I thanked him and asked him why he was telling me this. He continued with his testimony, and each word touched my heart more and more. He told me that he was a difficult boy; that he had given a lot of trouble to

the Salesians who had taken him into one of the homes for troubled boys. He added that they would have had dozens of reasons to get rid of him because "I was a poor devil, and I could only expect something bad from the world and from life, but they were very patient with me."

He continued: "I managed to make my way, I continued to study and, despite my rebellion, time after time they gave me new opportunities, and today I am a family man, I have a beautiful little girl and I am a social educator. If it had not been for what the Salesians did for me, my life would be very different, perhaps it would even already be over."

I was speechless and very moved. I told him that I was very grateful for

his gesture, his words and his path, and that his testimony of life was the greatest satisfaction for a Salesian heart.

He made a simple gesture and pointed me to a Salesian who was there at the time, who had been one of his teachers and one of those who had been very patient with him. The Salesian came up smiling and, I think with great joy in his heart, confirmed to me that this was indeed the case. We shared lunch together and then Alberto returned to his family.

## **A happy mother**

Five days after this encounter, I was in southern India, in the state of Hyderabad. In the midst of many greetings and activities, one

afternoon I was told I had a visitor. It was a young mother with her six-month-old daughter waiting for me at the reception desk of the Salesian house. She wanted to greet me.

The baby was beautiful and, as she was not frightened. I could not resist taking her in my arms and blessing her too. We took some souvenir photos, as the young mother had wished. That was all in this meeting.

There were no more words, but the story was painful and beautiful at the same time. That young mother was once a “throwaway” child, living on the streets with no one. It is easy to imagine her fate.

But one day, in the providence of the good Lord, she was found by a

Salesian who had started taking in street children in the state of Hyderabad. She was one of the girls who managed to find home with other girls. Together with her educators, my Salesian confreres made sure that all her basic needs were met and taken care of.

So this little girl, picked up from the street, was able to flourish again, to embark on a life journey that has led her today to being a wife and mother and, so incredibly important to me, a teacher in the big Salesian school where we were at the time.

I could not help but think how many other such lives, saved from despair and anguish, there are in the Salesian world, how many of my good

Salesian confreres and sisters kneel down every day to “wash the feet” of the little and big Jesuses on our streets.

This is the key to how many lives can be transformed for the better.

How can we not see in these two facts the “hand of God” reaching out to us through the good we can do? And that it is all of us who, in any part of the world, in any situation of life and profession, believe in humanity and believe in the dignity of every person, and believe that we must continue to build a better world.

I write this because good news must also be made known. Bad news spreads itself or finds people interested in it. These two real-life stories, so close in time for me, confirm once

and a thousand times more how valuable is the good we all try to do together.

And also what a Salesian song poetically expressed: "I say that John Bosco is alive, don't ever think that such a Father can abandon us. He is not dead, the Father lives, he has always been there and remains, he who took care of abandoned and orphaned youngsters, of street children, alone, whom he helped to change... I say that John Bosco is alive and has undertaken a thousand initiatives. Can't you see his solicitude as a father now working all over the world? Do you not hear him intoning his hymn to so many daughters, so many sons, who bear these reflections of the Father we love? He lives when his Salesians are like this." I wish



you all a Happy Easter; and to those who feel distant from this certainty of faith, I wish you all well, with much warmth.

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# **The Italian Lira from 1861 to 2001 and 2022. The currency in Don Bosco's time**

*The Italian Lira, with its subdivisions into 100 centimes, was the official currency of Italy from*

*1861 to 2002 when it was ultimately replaced by the European currency, the Euro. It was the currency in Don Bosco's time and in the early history of the Salesian Congregation.*

The Italian Lira (abbreviated as £ or Lit.) was first minted by the Republic of Venice in 1472. In 1806, it was adopted by the Napoleonic Kingdom of Italy, also known as Regno Italico, founded in 1805 by Napoleon Bonaparte, when he had himself crowned as ruler of the northern and central-eastern part of what is now Italy. Ten years later, in 1814, following the dissolution of the Napoleonic state, the currency of the Kingdom was maintained only in the Duchy of Parma and the Kingdom of Sardinia. After another two years, in 1816, King Victor Emmanuel I of Savoy

introduced the Savoy lira, which remained in circulation until the birth of the Kingdom of Italy in 1861, when it became the Italian lira. This currency remained in circulation until 2002, when it was replaced by the Euro.

When we follow the history of Don Bosco and the Salesian Congregation, we always comes across the difficulty of correctly quantifying the financial efforts that were made to support and educate thousands, indeed tens of thousands of boys, as the Italian currency has undergone great variations over the years. The difficulty increased even more with the adoption of the European currency, when in 2002 the exchange rate was set at 1936.27 Italian lira for one Euro. And there have been

further significant variations due to inflation.

We propose below a calculation table of the revaluation of the Lira from 1861 to 2002 with the possibility of an update to 2022.

Italian lira -> Euro

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lire of the year	<input type="text" value="1861"/> ▼	<input type="button" value="calculate"/>	euro of the year 20

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lire of the year	1861 ▼	calculate	euro of the year 20
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### Euro -> Italian lira

		=	
euro of the year 2001	calculate	lire of the year	1861 ▼

		=	
euro of the year 2022 (+ 38.7%)	calculate		