

# Towards a renewed missionary outlook

*Salesian missions abroad, one of the characteristics of the Congregation founded by St John Bosco, begun during his lifetime, continue even though the concepts of mission and missionaries have changed due to the needs of the times.*

Today we find ourselves in a different context than the missionary projects that spread the Congregation to America (1875), Asia (1906) and Africa (1980). New perspectives and questions have brought new missiological reflections. A renewed vision of Salesian missions is urgently needed.

In many countries, including countries of ancient Christian tradition, there are urban centres, or neighbourhoods, where people live who do not know Jesus, others who, after having known him, have abandoned him, or still others who live their faith as mere cultural tradition. Therefore, today “the missions” cannot be understood only in geographical terms, of movement towards “mission lands” as in the past, but also in sociological, cultural and even digital terms. Today “missions” are found wherever there is a need to proclaim the Gospel. And missionaries come from and are sent to all continents.

Salesian missionaries collaborate with the Church in fulfilling its mission to evangelise (Mt 28:19-20). Proclaiming the Gospel, especially to the young, is the primary missionary task of every Salesian. Salesian initiatives for human advancement, motivated by deep faith, are a First Proclamation of Jesus Christ. As educators and pastors, every Salesian appreciates the “rays of Truth” in cultures and other religions. In contexts where the name of Jesus cannot even be mentioned, we proclaim Him with the witness of personal and community Salesian life. It is

intentionality in promoting the First Proclamation that can help us overcome the danger of being seen as social service providers or social workers instead of witnesses to the primacy of God and proclaimers of the Gospel.

The young Salesian missionaries today bring a new paradigm of missions and a renewed model of missionaries: the Salesian missionary is not only the one who gives, who brings projects and perhaps collects money, but above all the one who lives with his people, who attaches great importance to interpersonal relationships; he not only teaches, but above all learns from the people he serves, who are not just passive recipients of his efforts. In fact, it is not the doing that counts, but the being, which becomes an authoritative proclamation of Jesus Christ.

Are there still Salesian missionaries who offer their lives for the witness of Jesus? Yes, and they no longer come from Europe as they used to, but come from all over the world and go all over the world. We present some young missionaries who have responded to the divine call.

We speak of 28-year-old Malagasy François Tonga, who went as a missionary to Albania to bear witness to his Christian and Salesian religious identity. His task as a practical trainee in the Salesian house in the capital, [Tirana](#), is to coordinate the school lessons of more than 800 children. It is no small challenge to learn the language and understand Albanian culture, to bear witness in a majority Muslim context, even if – thank God – one does not live in a situation of clash between religions, but of mutual respect. It is a testimony made up of presence and assistance among poor and marginalised children, and of prayer for the young people they meet every day. And the response is not long in coming: young people, parents and co-workers help out and offer a good welcome.

This is also the case of another 28 year old, Joël Komlan Attisso, a Togolese by origin, who accepted to be sent as a

mission practical trainee to the Don Bosco Technical Secondary School in [Kokopo](#), in the Eastern New Britain Province of Papua New Guinea. The mission, with God's grace, of being called and sent to serve everyone – and especially young people – already bears fruit: welcome, openness, help and love is exchanged, even if one belongs to different cultural realities. This brings to mind [Don Bosco's dream about Oceania](#), when he saw a multitude of young people saying: 'Come to our aid! Why do you not do the work that your fathers began?' [...] It seems to me that all this together indicated that divine Providence was offering a portion of the evangelical field to the Salesians, but at a future time. Their labours will bear fruit, because the hand of the Lord will be constantly with them, if they do not demerit of his favour."

We also speak of 30-year-old Vietnamese Joseph Thuan Thien Truc Tran, Salesian Brother, a computer science graduate sent to [Juba](#) in South Sudan, where there is no shortage of commitments: three primary schools, a secondary school, a technical school, a parish, a camp for displaced persons and a pre-novitiate, in all, a complex of about 5000 students. Attracted by the testimony of a Salesian who worked as a doctor in Sudan, [Fr John Lee Tae Seok](#), he decided to say his "yes" of total willingness to be sent on the mission indicated by his superiors, relying exclusively on faith and God's grace, so necessary in one of the countries considered among the most dangerous in the world.

Another young Salesian practical trainee who has given his availability for the missions is Rolphe Paterne Mouanga, from the Republic of Congo (Congo-Brazzaville or former French Congo). Sent to the [Don Bosco Central Salesian House in Santa Cruz](#), Bolivia, in a work that includes oratory, primary school, secondary school and parish, he is one of the first two missionaries from Africa in this country, together with his compatriot David Eyenga. His African origins help him to familiarise himself with the young people who are intrigued

and interested in getting to know him, and this relationship is strengthened through sport, to which he is so much inclined. The cultural diversity of Bolivia is a real challenge, because it is not only a matter of integrating into the local culture but also of being flexible in adapting to every situation. However, the openness, acceptance, cooperation and sharing of young people and co-workers help him in this endeavour. He wants to show himself open and willing to integrate with what he now considers 'his people'.

Rolphe's other compatriot, David Eyenga, was also sent to Bolivia, but to the Salesian house in [Kami](#), Cochabamba: a complex Salesian presence that includes an agricultural technical school, a parish, a work of assistance and social promotion, an internship and even a radio station. Cultural differences are also strongly felt in this area, in the way they relate to others, especially in terms of hospitality, meals, dances and other local traditions. This requires a lot of patience to be able to relate to the local mentality. It is hoped and prayed that the presence of the missionaries will also be a stimulus for local vocations.

Emmanuel Jeremia Mganda, a 30-year-old from [Zanzibar, Tanzania](#) is another young man who has accepted God's call to mission. He was sent to Amazonia, Brazil, among the [Yanomami](#), an indigenous tribe living in communities in [Maturacá](#). His educational tasks in the oratory and religious activity enriched him pastorally and spiritually. The welcome he received, also shown in the name given, 'YanomamiInshiInshi' (Black Yanomami), made him feel like one of them, helped him a lot to integrate, understand and share the love for Creation and the protection of this good of God.

Is there hope that the missions started by Don Bosco, almost 150 years ago, will continue? That Don Bosco's dream – or better said – that Don Bosco's dreams will come to fruition? There is only one answer: the divine will cannot fail, it is enough for the Salesians to give up their comforts and

comforts and to be willing to listen to the divine call.

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## Don Bosco's gaze

But who would believe it? Don Bosco's 'vision' was such that he... saw so many things!

An elderly priest, a former pupil at Valdocco, wrote in 1889: "What stood out most in Don Bosco was his gaze. It was gentle but penetrated to the depths of the heart, and one could hardly resist gazing at him. So, it can be said that his eye **attracted, terrified, arrived** on purpose. In my travels around the world, I have never met a person whose gaze was more impressive than his. Portraits and paintings do not generally represent this feature."

Another former pupil from the 1970s, Pietro Pons, reveals in his recollections: "Don Bosco had two eyes that pierced and penetrated the mind... He used to walk around talking and looking at everyone with those two eyes roving every which way, electrifying hearts with joy."

Salesian Fr Pietro Fracchia, a pupil of Don Bosco, recalled an encounter he had with the saint sitting at his desk. The young man dared to ask him why he wrote like that with his head down and turned to the right, as he wrote. Don Bosco, smiling, answered him: "The reason is this, you see! From this eye Don Bosco can no longer see, and from this other very little!"

"You see very little? But then how is it that the other day in the courtyard, while I was far away from you, you looked at me as vividly, brightly, as penetrating as a ray of sunlight?"

"Well...! You people immediately think and see who knows what...!"

And yet that's how it was. And the examples could be multiplied. With his scrutinising eye, Don Bosco penetrated and guessed everything in the youngsters: their character, intelligence, heart. Some of them purposely tried to escape

his presence because they could not bear his gaze. Fr Dominic Belmonte assured us that he had personally witnessed this: "Many times Don Bosco looked at a young man in such a special way that his eyes said what his lips did not say at that moment, and made him understand what he wanted from him."

Often, he would follow a young man with his gaze in the courtyard, while he was conversing with others. Suddenly the young man's gaze would meet Don Bosco's and he would understand. He would approach him to ask what he wanted from him and Don Bosco would whisper it in his ear. Perhaps it was an invitation to confession.

One night a pupil could not get to sleep. He sighed, he bit the sheets, he cried. The classmate sleeping next to him, woken up by this agitation, asked him: "What's the matter? What's the matter with you?" "What's wrong with me? Last night Don Bosco looked at me!" "Oh, wonderful! That's nothing new. There's no need to disturb the whole dormitory for that!" In the morning he told Don Bosco and Don Bosco replied: "Ask him what his conscience says!" One can imagine the rest.

### **More testimonies from Italy, Spain and France**



Don Bosco at 71 – Sampierdarena, 16 March 1886

Fr Michele Molineris, in his *Vita episodica di don Bosco* published posthumously at Colle in 1974, gives another series of testimonies on Don Bosco's gaze. We refer to just three of them, also as a way of remembering this scholar of the Saint who, in addition to the rest, had a unique knowledge of the places and people of John Bosco's childhood. But let us come to the testimonies he collected.

Bishop Felice Guerra personally recalled the vividness of Don Bosco's gaze, declaring that it penetrated like a double-edged sword to the point of plumbing hearts and moving consciences. And yet "he could not see out of one eye and even the other was of little use to him!"

Fr John Ferrés, parish priest at Gerona in Spain, who saw Don

Bosco in 1886, wrote that "he had very lively eyes, a penetrating gaze... Looking at him I felt forced to look within and examine my soul."

Mr Accio Lupo, an usher for Minister Francesco Crispi, who had introduced Don Bosco to the statesman's office, remembered him as **"an emaciated priest... with penetrating eyes!"**.

And finally, we recall impressions gathered from his travels in France. Cardinal John Cagliero reported the following fact he noticed personally when accompanying Don Bosco. After a conference held in Nice, Don Bosco left the presbytery of the church to go to the door, surrounded by the crowd that would not let him walk. A grim-looking individual stood motionless, watching him as if he were up to no good. Fr Cagliero, who was keeping an eye on him, uneasy about what might happen, saw the man approaching. Don Bosco addressed him: "What do you want?" "Me? Nothing!" "Yet you seem to have something to tell me!" "I have nothing to tell you" "Do you want to go to confession?" "Hear my confession? Not by a long shot!" "Then what are you doing here?" "I am here because ... I cannot leave!" "I understand ... Gentlemen, leave me alone for a moment", Don Bosco said to those around him. The neighbours drew back, Don Bosco whispered a few words in man's ear and he fell to his knees, and went to confession there in the middle of the church.

More curious was the event in Toulon, which happened during Don Bosco's trip to France in 1881.

After a conference in St Mary's parish church, Don Bosco, with a silver plate in his hand, went around the church begging. Don Bosco presented him with the plate a worker turned his face away, shrugging his shoulders rudely. Don Bosco gave him a loving look as he passed by and said: "God bless you!" The worker then put his hand in his pocket and placed a penny on the plate. Don Bosco, staring him in the face, said: "May God reward you." The other, making the gesture again, offered two pennies. And Don Bosco said: "May God reward you more and

more!" The man, hearing this, took out his purse and gave a franc. Don Bosco gave him a look filled with emotion and went off. But the man, as if drawn by some magical force, followed him through the church, went after him into the sacristy, followed him into the city and stayed behind him until he saw him disappear. The power of Don Bosco's gaze!

Jesus said: "The eyes are like the lamp for the body; if your eyes are good you will be totally in the light."

Don Bosco's eyes were totally in the Light!

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## **The Charism of Presence and Hope. A year travelling with Fr Angel**

*The slowdown in the pandemic has allowed the Rector Major to resume his travels to meet the Salesian Family around the world, to animate them to live and transmit the charism of the holy founder, John Bosco. Spain, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Thailand, Hungary, Brazil, India, Italy, Croatia, the United States and Peru welcomed and listened to the successor of Don Bosco. We present the introduction to the book that sets the story of these journeys.*

### **The globetrotter of the Salesian charism**

The book that I have the honour of presenting is quite special. It is the chronicle of the journeys around the world made by the Rector Major of the Salesians over the last fifteen months (from the beginning of 2022 until March 2023), dedicated to visiting the houses of a Congregation that has been present for a long time on all continents and which constitutes the largest "religious family" of the Catholic



Church. It is a family that operates in 136 countries of the world, whose global dimensions drive its leader (and his closest collaborators) to live continuously with suitcase in hand, meeting brothers and sisters scattered across the various nations, to get to know the specific situations, to monitor the effectiveness in the different cultures of the educational charism of Don Bosco, which is the trademark of this unique “multinational” of the faith.



The book, therefore, illustrates one of the most important tasks connected to the role of the Rector Major of the Salesians, that of guiding a worldwide Congregation not only remotely (staying at the headquarters in Rome), but as much as possible seeing it in person, since even in the digital era, face-to-face relationships, personal knowledge, sharing experiences, “being there” at certain special moments, represent the added value of every human and spiritual enterprise. A value, moreover, that is entirely congenial with the human traits of Fr Ángel Fernández Artime, the tenth successor of Don Bosco, who, since he has been at the head of the Salesian Family (since 2014) has already visited around 100 works around the world; in this way aligning himself (on a more limited scale, of course) with the “globetrotter” style of Catholicism that has characterised the most recent pontiffs, especially John Paul II and the current pope.

Fr Artime’s world tour, after having undergone a forced interruption in 2020-2021 (due to the outbreak of the pandemic everywhere), resumed its course with renewed vigour in 2022, with a series of stages that gradually took him to Iberian soil, to two African countries (Zimbabwe and Zambia), in the footsteps of the Salesian mission in Thailand, to Hungary, France, Brasilia and Belo Horizonte, to six provinces of India (on two different occasions), to Croatia, the United States

and Canada, Peru, and in some Italian regions.

## **All-round visits, not just celebrations**



Viedma, Argentina – March 2023

“Touch and go” images or the mere celebration of important events do not suit the Rector Major’s visits. His presence is often requested by Salesian houses or Provinces to celebrate a significant milestone in their history, such as the 100th or 50th anniversary of the foundation, the beginning of a new work, the profession of vows or priestly ordination of new confreres, the commemoration of Salesian figures who are exemplary for the different lands and for the entire Church. However, the celebratory intent is always part of a meeting rich in content and comparisons on the state of health of the Salesian charism in the local situation.

Hence the multifaceted character of these visits, marked by moments of celebration and glances upwards, of ribbon cutting and discernment, of emotional involvement and mutual commitments, of reporting on the situation and focusing on the educational challenges; all moments that involve the various branches of the great family (Salesians, Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, past pupils, etc.), often also Bishops and clergy of the local Church; but above all the young people, since their leadership and active involvement is in the DNA of Salesian pedagogy.

Don Bosco’s successor is not only paid homage (and, in the “hottest” areas of the globe, “welcomed like a king”, honoured with the “robes and symbols of the local authorities”); but he is also made the object of great expectations, of a “word” that both reassures and broadens horizons. Here emerges one of the most precious features of these visits *ad gentes*: the attitude of the Rector Major to act as a “communicating vessel”, a “connector” between what the Salesian Family

experiences and plans in the different areas of the world: from the mature, reflective, sometimes tired pace observed in the old continent, to the energy found in Africa and the East; from the best practices in place in some countries to the difficulties and problems encountered elsewhere. Another comparison concerns the reception in the various Salesian provinces of the indications that emerged from the last General Chapter of the Congregation (the 28th), to ensure that everyone is tuned in to the common objectives.

And it is in bridging the different Salesian areas and “souls” around the world that the Rector Major speaks of the “miracles” he witnesses. When he reminds everyone that what makes the Congregation great are above all the minimal presences, such as the Salesian missionary from the Czech Republic who lives in Siberia, in the middle of the ice, and has a community 1000 km away, which he manages to join no more than once a month; an occasion blessed by the faithful of the place, which makes them say that “God has not forgotten about us”.

Or again when he brings to everyone’s attention the redemption of a land that in December 2004 was hit by the greatest natural disaster of modern times, the tsunami that resulted in 230,000 dead, thousands missing and destroyed entire countries. Precisely in one of the hardest hit areas, a Salesian house was reborn to take in many orphans, who are flourishing again after many years: “12% of these Don Bosco boys/girls have gone to university; 15% have continued their technical studies in our vocational schools; more than 50%, after finishing public school, have found a job with which to start their lives independently.”

### **Key words**

There is a leitmotif in all these visits: the evocation of certain key words that reaffirm the particular mission of the sons of Don Bosco, called to take care of the young, but with a distinctive attention and method, with a “Salesian” pedagogy in fact, which has been the subject of long reflection

throughout history. Some of these “icons” are the aphorisms introduced by the holy founder to summarise his educational intuitions; others are more recent, but have the same nature, they serve to update the Salesian charism over the years, in the face of new demanding challenges.

I resoconti delle visite del Rettor Maggiore alle case salesiane sparse nel mondo, sono ricchi di questi appelli. Anzitutto *“credere nei giovani”*, *“essere fedeli ai giovani”*, aver fiducia nelle loro potenzialità, trasmettere fiducia; il che implica non avere pregiudizi nei loro confronti, accompagnarli con empatia nel loro cammino, sostenerli nei momenti accidentati, condividere valori e suscitare libertà.

Rientra nel richiamo alla fiducia l’impegno di *“dar vita ai sogni dei giovani”*, di far sì che essi tornino a pensare in grande, a non vivere con le ali tarpate; monito questo che sembra applicabile più alle nuove generazioni presenti nelle società mature (in Occidente) che a quelle dei paesi emergenti.



Australia – April 2023

The reports of the Rector Major’s visits to Salesian houses around the world are full of these appeals. First and foremost, “to believe in young people”, “to be faithful to young people”, to trust in their potential, to transmit confidence; which implies not being prejudiced towards them, accompanying them with empathy on their journey, supporting them in difficult moments, sharing values and inspiring freedom.

Included in the call to trust is the commitment to “give life to young people’s dreams”, to make them think big again, not to live with clipped wings; a warning that seems more applicable to the new generations in mature societies (in the West) than to those in emerging countries. There are also many

references to two concepts (love and heart) that are much abused in contemporary culture, but which in Don Bosco's pedagogy represent the strong points of an educational perspective: "loving the young", making them understand that "one loves them" (dedicates one's life to them), and "making oneself loved"; images that derive directly from the Saint's great intuition that "education is a thing of the heart".

Other fruitful images are those dedicated to the enduring "relevance of the preventive system" and to the criterion that can make it effective: the "Salesian sacrament of presence among the young" (as defined by the Rector Major) that fosters knowledge, produces sharing, creates exchange and educational passion.

The most recent icon is the heartfelt invitation to all Salesian communities around the world to "be another Valdocco", to remain faithful to the essential features of a mission born in the 19th century in Turin, but which has universal value in time and space. To be "another Valdocco" means renewing at all latitudes the choice of the field of popular education, spending one's life for that part of society that in Don Bosco's time was the "poor and abandoned youth", and that today takes on the profile of the disadvantaged youth, "at risk", exploited and discarded by society, of those who inhabit the urban and existential peripheries. "Valdocco" is the symbol of the global "human neighbourhood" to which citizenship must be given, which must discover its active role, for full inclusion/emancipation in society.

### **Increasingly multicultural environments**

The Rector Major's world tour also makes it evident how the shape of the Congregation is changing, as a result of recent migratory flows from the South and East of the world (partly due to dramatic events/situations) towards the Old Continent and North America; a demographic evolution that crowds emerging countries and burdens the more developed nations; and more generally, because of the tendency of populations to mix

on planet earth.



Zambia – April 2022

The Salesian environment (like the whole of Catholicism) is also involved in these dynamics and does not cease to change. Africa and the East are today the areas most generous with vocations and with the highest percentage of Salesians in formation; therefore from mission lands they are gradually destined to have an ever greater weight in the balance of the Congregation.

At every latitude, Salesian houses host young people from different cultures, often of different religions and ethnicities; because Don Bosco's charism (though born in a particular cultural and religious context) knows no "confessional" boundaries, it also infects those who live and believe otherwise. Thus this multicultural imprinting now characterises many Salesian environments (oratories and schools) in Europe and North America, and is a constitutive feature of the works of Don Bosco's sons in Asia, Africa and Latin America. In Asia, for example, Salesians are in areas where the population is 90% Muslim or Buddhist, within a context that on the one hand deeply challenges them and on the other requires dialogue and discussion. In these lands with different cultures and religions, in these laboratories of anthropological confrontation, there is a whole baggage of reflections and experiences that deserves to be collected and deepened; also to better position a Congregation and a Church called to bear witness to a specific message in an increasingly global world.

### **New educational challenges**

The Congregation has always considered the education of the young as its inalienable task and as a challenge. But it is a challenge that takes on particular features depending on

historical moments. Today, according to Fr Arttime's dialogues with the young people he met on his world tour, some noteworthy priorities emerge in this field.

On the one hand, education must come to terms with the digital culture that now permeates the experience of the new generations, whose great potential must be understood within the framework of harmonious use to avoid imbalances or penalising consequences. The proposal to set up "digital courtyards", which is circulating in Salesian circles, therefore responds to this need, and does not demonise a tool that is now vital, but accepts it within a constructive approach.

On the other hand, "preparing young people for life" also involves – in the current era – the attention that the new generations must pay to the environmental issue, to the care and protection of a creation endangered by an unwise world system, for which adults have a serious responsibility, but whose immense costs will be borne by the young. Here, then, is another piece that enriches and updates the educational project.

Here and there in Salesian circles (and in the young people who attend them), a greater interest can be seen in "political commitment" understood in a broad sense as a contribution to achieving a more human, less unequal, more inclusive society.



Thailand – May 2022

This is what emerged in particular during the Rector Major's visit to Peru and the United States, where the educational discourse and social voluntary work are certainly considered by young people as "pre-political" activities, but which must increasingly be understood as a commitment to social justice, to reducing inequalities, to allowing everyone a dignified life. Don Bosco's motto of forming young people to "be good

Christians and upright citizens” takes on a new emphasis here, more congruent with the sensibilities and challenges of today’s times.

### **Finally, photos**

Finally, there are the photographs scattered throughout this extensive chronicle, which speak more than words, testifying to the atmosphere of the long journey, giving space to faces, postures, feelings. Where the tenth Successor of Don Bosco appears either presiding at the Eucharist or in shirtsleeves surrounded by young people or confreres: the two icons of a Salesian style that sees in his presence with the young a sign of God’s benevolence.

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## **Servants of God John Świerc and eight Companions Martyrs. Pastors who gave their lives**

*Extremist ideologies, that is, ideas raised to the rank of absolute truths, always bring suffering and death when they seek to impose themselves at any cost on those who do not accept them. Sometimes it is enough to belong to a nation or social group to suffer the consequences. This is the case of the Polish Salesian martyrs presented in this article.*

Nine Polish Salesian priests also belong to the number of victims of Nazism, Servants of God Fr Jan Świerc and his 8 Companions: Fr Ignacy Antonowicz, Fr Karol Golda, Fr Włodzimierz Szembek, Fr Franciszek Harazim, Fr Ludwik Mroczek,



Fr Ignacy Dobiasz, Fr Kazimierz Wojciechowski and Fr Franciszek Miśka, who were killed *in odium fidei* in the Nazi death camps in 1941–1942. As priests, all the Servants of God were engaged in Poland in various pastoral and governmental activities and in teaching. They were completely uninvolved in the political tensions that agitated Poland during the wartime occupation. Nevertheless, they were arrested and martyred *in odium fidei* for the very fact of being Catholic priests.

The strength and serene perseverance preserved by the Servants of God in carrying out their priestly ministry even during their imprisonment represented a real act of defiance for the Nazis: although exhausted by humiliation and torture, in defiance of any prohibition, the Servants of God were guardians to the end of the souls entrusted to them and showed themselves ready, despite human weakness, to accept death with God and for God.

The concentration camp at Auschwitz, known to all as the death camp, and the camp at Dachau for Fr Miśka, thus became places of priestly commitment for these Salesian priests: Fr Jan Świerc and 8 companions responded to the denial of human dignity and life, by offering the power of grace and the hope of eternity through the sacraments. They welcomed many fellow prisoners, sustained them through the Eucharist and confession and prepared them for a peaceful death. This service was not infrequently rendered in hiding, taking advantage of the darkness of the night and under the constant and pressing threat of severe punishment or more often death.

The Servants of God, as true disciples of Jesus, never uttered words of scorn or hatred towards their persecutors. Arrested, beaten, humiliated in their human and priestly dignity, they offered their suffering to God and remained faithful to the end, certain that whoever places everything before the divine will is not disappointed. Their inner serenity and their demeanour, which they showed even at the hour of death, were so extraordinary that they left their torturers astonished, and in some cases outraged.

Here are their biographical profiles.

### ***Fr Ignacy Antonowicz***

Ignacy Antonowicz was born in 1890 in Więśławice, Włocławek County, north-central Poland. In 1901 he entered the Salesian Secondary School in Oświęcim, where he remained until 1905. Between 1905 and 1906 he completed his novitiate in Daszawa. He made his perpetual profession in August 1909 in Italy, in Lanzo Torinese. He was ordained a priest on 22 April 1916 in Rome. Fr Ignacy taught dogmatics at the Theological Studentate in Foglizzo (Turin) between 1916 and 1917. In 1919, during the Russo-Polish War, he was a military chaplain in the Polish army. Between 1919 and 1920 he was in Krakow as a professor in the Theological Studentate. On 1 July 1934 he was appointed councillor of the Polish Province of St Hyacinth in Krakow until the end of 1936. In 1936 he took up the post as Rector of the Salesian Immaculate Conception Theological Studentate in Krakow, which he held until his arrest on 23 May 1941. He was detained for a month in the Montelupich prison in Cracow, then taken to the concentration camp at Oświęcim. He was killed on 21 July 1941. He was 51 years old, with 34 years of religious profession and 25 years of priesthood.



### ***Fr Karol Golda***

Karol Golda was born on 23 December 1914 in Tychy, Upper Silesia. After finishing fourth grade, he moved to the Bolesław Chrobry Secondary School in Pszczyna. He attended sixth grade at the Salesian school in Oświęcim. In June 1931 he went to the House in Czerwińsk to begin his novitiate. On 15 January 1937 he made his perpetual religious profession in Rome. On 18 December 1938 he was ordained a priest in Rome, where he stayed for a further six months to obtain a Licentiate in Theology. In July 1939 he returned to Poland. The Second World War broke out and Fr Karol went to Silesia in

October 1939 and then to Oświęcim where he stayed, as the occupying authorities did not allow him to travel to Italy. Fr Karol Golda was entrusted with teaching theology at the Salesian Institute in Oświęcim and was appointed Prefect of Studies there. He was arrested by Gestapo officials on 31 December 1941 and killed on 14 May 1942, after only three and a half years of priesthood.



### ***Fr Włodzimierz Szembek***

The Servant of God Fr Włodzimierz Szembek, son of Count Zygmunt and Klementyna of the Dzieduszycki family, was born on 22 April 1883 in Poręba Żegoty, near Cracow. In 1907, he graduated from the Jagiellonian University in Krakow with a degree in agricultural engineering. For about twenty years he was involved in the administration of his mother's estates and in the lay apostolate. When he turned 40, the Servant of God's religious vocation came to maturity. On 4 February 1928 he entered the aspirantate in Oświęcim. At the end of 1928 he began his novitiate in Czerwińsk. He made his religious profession on 10 August 1929. On 3 June 1934 he received priestly ordination in Cracow. On 9 July 1942 he was arrested by the Gestapo and taken to Nowy Targ. The following 19 August he was taken to Auschwitz concentration camp, where he died on 7 September 1942, exhausted by suffering and as a result of the mistreatment he had endured. He was 59 years of age, 13 of profession and 9 of priesthood.



### ***Fr Franciszek Harazim***

Franciszek Ludwik Harazim was born on 22 August 1885 in Osiny,

Rybnik district in Silesia. He attended primary school first in Baranowicze, then in Osiny. In 1901, he entered the Salesian Institute in Oświęcim to attend secondary school there. He completed his novitiate in Daszawa in 1905/1906. On 24 March 1910 he made his perpetual vows. He was ordained a priest in Ivrea on 29 May 1915. Between 1915 and 1916 he taught at the Oświęcim High School, of which he was appointed headmaster between 1916 and 1918. In the years 1918-1920 he taught philosophy in the Salesian major seminary in Cracow (Łosiówka). From 1922-1927 the Servant of God held the post of headmaster at the Salesian High School in Aleksandrów Kujawski. In 1927 he returned again to the major seminary in Krakow as a councillor, teacher and educator of clerics. In July 1938 Fr Franciszek was appointed professor at the Krakow-Łosiówka house. He was arrested by the Gestapo in Krakow on 23 May 1941. He was first taken to Konfederacka Street and then, together with the other confreres, to Montelupich Prison. A month later, on 26 June 1941, he was taken to Auschwitz concentration camp. He was killed on 27 June 1941 on the famous Ghiaione. He had not yet turned 56 years of age: of these 34 were of religious profession and 26 of priesthood.



### ***Fr Ludwik Mroczek***

Ludwik Mroczek was born in Kęty (Kraków) on 11 August 1905. In 1917, after attending school in Kęty, he was admitted to the Salesian institute in Oświęcim where he completed his secondary school studies. He did his novitiate in Klecza Dolna completing this on 7 August 1922. He made his perpetual vows on 14 July 1928 in Oświęcim. In Przemyśl he received priestly ordination on 25 June 1933. Ordained a priest, he worked in Oświęcim (in 1933), in Lvov (in 1934), in Przemyśl (in 1934 and 1938/39), in Skawa (in 1936/37), in Częstochowa (in 1939). On 22 May 1941, as soon as he had finished celebrating Mass,

he was arrested and transferred with other confreres to the concentration camp at Oświęcim. Here he died on 5 January 1942: he was 36 years old, 18 years of religious profession and 8 years of priesthood.



### ***Fr Jan Świerc***

Jan Świerc was born in Królewska Huta (today Chorzów, in Upper Silesia) on 29th April 1877. He completed his secondary school studies at Valsalice, Turin. Between 1897 and 1898 he did his novitiate in Ivrea. Here he took his perpetual vows on 3 October 1899. On 6 June 1903 he was ordained a priest in Turin. In 1911 he was appointed Rector of the Krakow House by the then Rector Major Fr Paul Albera. From September 1911 to April 1918, he was Rector of the Lubomirski Institute in Krakow. In 1924, for a period of seven months, he was engaged as a missionary in the Americas. From November 1925 to October 1934, he was Rector and Parish Priest in Przemyśl. On 15 August 1934 he was appointed Rector of the Lviv House. In July 1938 he took up the post as Rector and Parish Priest of the house at 6 Konfederacka Street in Krakow from 1938-1941. On 23 May 1941 he was arrested by the Gestapo together with other confreres and taken to prison in Montelupich. On 26 June 1941 he was transferred to the Auschwitz concentration camp and, after just one day, he was killed: he was 64 years old, 42 years of religious profession and 38 years of priesthood.



### ***Fr Ignacy Dobiasz***

Ignacy Dobiasz was born in Ciechowice (Upper Silesia) on 14th January 1880. Having completed primary school, in May 1894 he

went to Italy, to Turin Valsalice, to do his secondary school studies there. On 16 August 1898 he entered the Salesian novitiate in Ivrea. He made his perpetual vows at San Benigno Canavese on 21 September 1903. He completed his philosophical and theological studies at San Benigno Canavese and at Foglizzo between 1904 and 1908. On 28 June 1908 he was ordained a priest in Foglizzo. He then returned to Poland: he carried out his pedagogical and pastoral activities in Oświęcim (in 1908, 1910, 1921 and 1923), in Daszawa (in 1909), in Przemyśl (1912-1914) and in Krakow (between 1916 and 1920 and in 1922). In 1931 he was in Warsaw as Vice-Rector. In November 1934 he went to Krakow where he remained as confessor and assistant parish priest. Here he was arrested together with other Salesian confreres on 23 May 1941. After a short detention in the prison in Montelupich, he was deported to the concentration camp in Auschwitz. On 27 June 1941, he died of ill-treatment and inhuman labour. He was 61 years of age, 40 years of profession and 32 years of priesthood.



### ***Fr Kazimierz Wojciechowski***

Kazimierz Wojciechowsky was born in Jasło (Galicia) on 16 August 1904. Orphaned by his father when he was only five years old, he was taken into the institute of Prince Lubomirski in Cracow. He began secondary school in 1916 at the Salesian Institute in Oświęcim. In 1920 he began his novitiate in Klecza Dolna. He made his perpetual vows on 2nd May 1928 in Oświęcim. Between 1924 and 1925 he taught music and mathematics in Łąd. On 19th May 1935 he was ordained a priest in Cracow. In 1935-1936 he was in Daszawa and in Cracow, where he taught religion and was appointed director of the oratory and of the Catholic Youth Association. The Servant of God was arrested in Krakow on 23 May 1941 with other Salesian confreres. On 26 June 1941 he was deported to Auschwitz

concentration camp where, after just one day, he was killed. He was 37 years of age, 19 of profession and 6 of priesthood.



### ***Fr Franciszek Miśka***

Franciszek Miśka was born in Swierczyniec (Upper Silesia) on 5 December 1898. He completed his secondary schooling at the Salesian Institute in Oświęcim. He entered the novitiate in Pleszów in 1916. He made his perpetual profession in Oświęcim on 25 July 1923. He completed his theological studies in Turin-Crocetta. He was ordained a priest on 10 July 1927 in Turin. He then returned to Poland. In 1929 he was appointed counsellor and catechist at the orphanage in Przemyśl. In 1931 and for the next five years he was in Jaciążek as the Rector. In 1936 he was appointed parish priest of the parish of Łąd. In 1941 he became Rector of the house of the Sons of Mary and parish priest of Łąd. On 6 January 1941, the Salesian institute in Łąd was transformed by the Gestapo into a prison for priests of the diocese of Włocławek and Gniezno-Poznań. Fr Franciszek was entrusted by the German authorities with the task of maintaining order and providing for the prisoners. For unspecified reasons he was transferred several times to Inowrocław and brutally tortured there. On 30 October 1941, the Servant of God was transported to Dachau concentration camp (Germany). Here, subjected to forced labour and inhuman living conditions, he died on 30 May 1942, the day of the Most Holy Trinity, in the camp's barracks hospital. He was 43 years old, almost 25 years of religious profession and almost 15 years of priesthood.



The reputation for holiness and martyrdom of the Servants of

God Fr Jan Świerc and 8 Companions, although hindered during the communist period, spread as soon as they died and is still alive today. They were considered to be exemplary priests, dedicated to pastoral work and works of charity, warm and friendly, always available, interested in giving glory only to God, for whose sake they were faithful even to the shedding of their blood.

On 28 March 2023, the Historical Consultors of the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints cast affirmative votes on the *Positio super martyrio* of the Servants of God John Świerc and VIII Companions, Professed Priests of the Society of St Francis de Sales, who were killed in *odium fidei* in the Nazi death camps in the years 1941-1942. We pray that they will be raised to the honours of the altars as soon as possible.

*Mariafrancesca Oggianu*

*Member of the General Postulation*

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## **Fr Giulio Barberis and his “Cronichetta”: day by day at Valdocco with Don Bosco**

On 21 February 1875 some Salesians decided to set up an “historical commission” to “collect memories of Don Bosco’s life”, committing themselves to “write down and together read what we write in order to ensure the greatest possible accuracy” (so we read in the minutes written by Fr Michael Rua). Among them was a young 28-year-old priest who had recently been appointed by Don Bosco to organise and direct the Salesian Congregation’s novitiate, in accordance with the Constitutions officially approved the previous year. His name



was Fr Giulio Barberis, best known for being the first novice master of Don Bosco's Salesians, a role he held for twenty-five years. He was later Provincial and then Spiritual Director of the Congregation from 1910 until his death in 1927.

He was more involved than the others in the "historical commission", preserving memories and testimonies of Don Bosco's activities and life at the Valdocco Oratory from May 1875 to June 1879, when he left Turin to move to the new novitiate site in San Benigno Canavese. He left us copious documentation that is still preserved in the Central Salesian Archives, among which the fifteen handwritten notebooks he entitled *Cronichetta* stand out for their significance. Many scholars and biographers of St John Bosco have drawn from them (starting with Fr Lemoyne for his *Biographical Memoirs*), but until now they have remained unpublished. A critical edition was published last year, making this important and direct testimony on Don Bosco and the beginnings of the Congregation he founded available to everyone.

Fr Giulio Barberis, a graduate of the University of Turin, was an attentive and precise man in his work, and reading the pages of his *Cronichetta* one can see how passionately and carefully he tried to complete this work as well. Unfortunately, with regret and sorrow, he repeatedly points out that either for health reasons or because of his numerous other commitments, he had to suspend the drafting of the notebooks or limit himself to summarising or merely hinting at certain facts. At one point he finds himself having to write: "What a painful suspension. Forgive me, my dear *Cronichetta*: if I suspend you so many times and with such long suspensions, it is not that I do not love you above all other work, but it is out of necessity, that is, to complete my duties first, at least in the main" (Notebook XI, p. 36). Therefore, we are not surprised if the form of his entries is not always neat, with some ill-constructed sentences or some spelling inaccuracies; this in no way detracts from what he has passed on to us.

The notebooks are a mine of information with the advantage of immediacy compared to other later narratives, which are more literary, but necessarily reworked and reinterpreted. We find evidence of important events, such as the first missionary expedition of 1875, the preparation, departure and effects of which are recounted in detail.



The most important feasts are described (e.g. Mary Help of Christians or the birth of St John the Baptist, Don Bosco's name day) and how they were celebrated. We can learn about the ordinary and extraordinary activities at Valdocco (the school, the theatre, music, visits from various personalities...): how they were prepared and managed, what worked well and what needed to be improved, how the Salesians under Don Bosco's guidance organised themselves and worked together, without hiding some critical aspects. There are also small aspects of everyday life: health, food, the economy and many other details. From these chronicles, however, the spirit that animated the whole work also emerges: the passion that sustained the often overwhelming commitment, the affection for Don Bosco by both Salesians and boys, the style and educational choices, the care for the growth of vocations and the formation of young Salesians. At a certain point the author notes: "Oh, that we might consume our whole life to the last breath in working in the Congregation for the greater glory of God, but in such a way that not a single breath in our life might have any other purpose" (Notebook VII, pg. 9).

The *Cronichetta* also presents a precise portrait of Don Bosco in his mature years. On 15 August 1878 Fr Barberis wrote: "Don Bosco's birthday. Born as he was in 1815, he turned 63. A celebration was held. He made use of this occasion to distribute prizes to the artisans. Poems were printed as usual and many were read out" (Notebook XIII, p. 82). Many records

dwell on the personality characteristics of the father and teacher of boys, including certain aspects that have been lost in later biographical narratives, such as his interest in the archaeological and scientific discoveries of his time. But above all, the total dedication to his work appears, in those years in particular the commitment to consolidate the Salesian Congregation and to expand its range of activity more and more with the foundation of new houses in Italy and abroad.

It is, however, difficult to summarise the very rich content of these notebooks. An attempt has been made in the introduction to the volume to identify some core ideas that range from the history of the Salesian Congregation and the life of Don Bosco (there are several passages in which Barberis mentions “former matters at the oratory”) to the formation model at Valdocco and management and organisational aspects. The introduction also deals with other issues related to the document: the use made of it, with special reference to the *Biographical Memoirs*, the historical value to be given to the information, the purpose for which it was written, and the language and style used. Regarding this last point, we note how the author, according to what he learned from Don Bosco himself, has enriched his chronicle with dialogues, amusing episodes, “good nights” and dreams of Don Bosco, thus making the reading also interesting and pleasant.



The volume also bears more general witness to the historical time in which it was written, in particular the troubled period following Italian unification. In March 1876 there was a change of government for the first time led by the party of the historical Left. In the eighth notebook of the *Cronichetta* on 6 August 1876 we find a record of the reception held at the Salesian boarding school in Lanzo on the occasion of the inauguration of the new railway, at which various ministers took part. Don Bosco’s interaction with politicians and his interest in the affairs of Italy and other states is well

documented and the historical notes at the end of each notebook provide essential information. Even more mundane news items find a place in the various entries, such as the laying of submarine cables for the electric telegraph or some health and medical beliefs of the time.

This publication is a critical edition, therefore mainly aimed at scholars of Salesian history, but also those who wish to delve deeper into certain aspects of the person of the holy founder of the Salesians and his work will find great benefit from reading it. Once one overcomes the obstacle of reading 19th century Italian, it is often enjoyable.

*Fr. Massimo SCHWARZEL, sdb*

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## **A protection centre for street children: in Lagos, Nigeria**

*In Lagos, Nigeria, in an overpopulated and growing city where more than 40 per cent of the population are young people under 18, the Salesians have opened a home for street children.*

[Lagos](#) is one of the 36 states of federal [Nigeria](#). It is practically a city-state, capital of the country until 1991, when the new capital, Abuja, was officially recognised in the centre of the country. With its 16 million inhabitants, it is the second most populous urban area in Africa after Cairo, and with its metropolitan area of 21 million inhabitants, it is one of the most populous in the world. Moreover, it is continuously growing, so much so that it has become the first

city in Africa and seventh in the world in terms of the speed of population growth.

With a very warm climate, lying just 6° north of the Equator, it is located on the mainland, opening onto Lake Lagoon and the Atlantic Ocean. Thanks to its location, it has always been a commercial city, so much so that, even though the capital has been relocated, it remains the commercial and economic centre of the state and one of the most important ports in West Africa.

With 230 million inhabitants, Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa and the sixth most populous country in the world. Nigeria has the third largest youth population in the world, after India and China, with over 90 million inhabitants under the age of 18.

The youth situation in this city is comparable to Turin in Don Bosco's time. Many poor rural and urban youth flock to the city of Lagos in search of work and a better life, but they are subject to exploitation, neglect, poverty and deprivation. They are at risk of being left on the street, of being abused, of being trafficked, of coming into conflict with the law or abusing drugs.

The Salesians have come to the aid of these children and young adults, with a [Don Bosco House](#), a protection centre for street children, approved by the Ministry of Youth and Social Development of Lagos State as a rehabilitation home for boys at risk. It is a Home that is dedicated to improving the lives of street children, vulnerable boys, by providing them with an alternative family environment, shelter, education, emotional support, protection and life skills enhancement. The starting point is the belief that every child has positive potential and that young people represent the future of the country. If the environment is good, if they receive a good education and see good examples, they too can grow to become a hope for others.



Don Bosco House includes residential and non-residential guests.

Residential children are those who live in the home, attend school within the home and participate in all the activities that will lead them to become better people and reintegrate into their families and communities. Some of the programmes run in the home, in the area of skills acquisition and empowerment, are tailoring, barbering, shoe making, while in the area of talent development there are music, theatre, dance and choreography. The children are also engaged in various therapeutic, sports and recreational activities to foster their social and physical development.

In their work with these children the Salesians have realised the potential of music, especially in the rehabilitation of the youngest children. By helping them to get to know and use musical instruments, relief is offered from the burden of their experience, helping them to overcome various traumas, and also strengthening a good family relationship between them. The same happens with dance. The children are very attracted to choreography, they want to try and are not discouraged when they realise they have made a mistake, but try again with perseverance until they succeed, learning from their mistakes. Dance encourages the children to experiment and find different paths to forget their problems.



But the Don Bosco House does not close its doors to those who do not want to stay. Non-residential guests are those who live on the streets and often come to seek temporary shelter. The house serves as a stop-off point for them to rest, play, take

a shower, change clothes, receive medication and food. On these occasions, they are also offered follow-up activities: counselling and psychological rehabilitation, family tracing and reintegration, continuation of education, acquisition of skills, complex medical and health care and job placement.

This is a valuable help, because most of these young people are aged between 14 and 24. Many of them are engaged in some kind of work, which allows them to earn something to cover their daily expenses for food, clothing and other necessities. A good number of them work in the unorganised sector, helping at weddings, on construction sites, carrying loads in bus car parks, selling bags of water and drinks on the street, doing the most menial jobs. And it is good to see this, because it means that they want to earn an honest living, but do not always find someone to help them.

As you can guess, the girls' situation is no better and this presents a challenge for the Salesians: to think of them in some way. This is also why the Salesians ask for support to improve the skills of their staff and management in general, and are open to receiving assistance to improve the quality of work. Alone they can do little, but together with others they can do a lot.



*Fr Raphael AIROBOMAN, sdb*

*Director of the Don Bosco Home Child Protection Centre, Lagos, Nigeria*

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# The miracle

This is the true story of an eight-year-old girl who knew that love can work wonders. Her little brother was destined to die of a brain tumour. His parents were poor, but had done everything to save him, spending all their savings.

One evening, the father said to the tearful mother: "We can't do this any more, dear. I think it's over. Only a miracle could save him."

The little girl in the corner of the room, with bated breath, had heard this.

She ran to her room, broke open the piggy bank and, without making a sound, headed for the nearest pharmacy. She waited patiently for her turn. She walked up to the counter, stood on tiptoes and, in front of the astonished pharmacist, placed all the coins on the counter.

"What's that for? What do you want, little one?"

"It is for my little brother, Mr. Pharmacist. He is very ill and I have come to buy a miracle."

"What are you saying?" muttered the pharmacist.

"His name is Andrew, and he has a thing growing inside his head, and daddy told mummy that it's over, there's nothing more to be done, and that it would take a miracle to save him. You see, I love my little brother so much, that's why I took all my money and came to buy a miracle."

The pharmacist nodded a sad smile.

"My little one, we don't sell miracles here."

"But if this money is not enough, I can get busy to find more. How much does a miracle cost?"

There was a tall, elegant man in the pharmacy, looking very serious, who seemed interested in the strange conversation.

The pharmacist spread his arms, mortified. The girl, with tears in her eyes, began to retrieve her change. The man approached her.

"Why are you crying, little one? What is the matter with you?"



"Mr Pharmacist won't sell me a miracle or even tell me how much it costs... It's for my little brother Andrew who is very sick. Mum says it would take an operation, but dad says it costs too much and we can't pay and that it would take a miracle to save him. That's why I brought everything I have."

"How much do you have?"

"One dollar and eleven cents... But, you know..." she added with a edge in her voice, "I can still find something..."

The man smiled "Look, I don't think that's necessary. One dollar and eleven cents is exactly the price of a miracle for your little brother!" With one hand he collected the small sum and with the other he gently took the little girl's hand.

"Take me to your house, little one. I want to see your little brother and also your daddy and mummy and see with them if we can find the little miracle you need."

The tall, elegant man and the little girl came out holding hands.

That man was Professor Carlton Armstrong, one of the world's greatest neurosurgeons. He operated on little Andrew, who was able to return home a few weeks later fully recovered.

"This operation," mum murmured, "is a real miracle. I wonder how much it cost..."

The little sister smiled without saying anything. She knew how much the miracle had cost: one dollar and eleven cents.... plus, of course, the love and faith of a little girl.

*"If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain: 'Move from here to there' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you" (Matthew 17:20).*

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# The charge of 101. Salesian House Monterosa

“How exciting... a year ago Fr Angel was with us!”

This is how we began our Community celebration on Sunday 8 May 2022. Just one year ago, our Rector Major was with us in Turin, at *Michele Rua* to celebrate 100 years of the Work. And with him was also the Mayor of the City!

Yes... 100 years!

It was the summer of 1922 when a large group of young people, the Fathers Union and the Committee of Patronesses, led by Fr Lunati, inaugurated the *Michele Rua Oratory*, with its halls, church, courtyard, nursery school run by the FMA and sewing school. The building was made possible thanks to the help of many volunteers and also the support of many benefactors, first among many, Pope Benedict XV with his generous donation of 10,000 lira. Since then, the Work has never stopped and expanded immediately afterwards with the Theatre and in 1949 with the Industrial Training School, so as to prepare young people for work.

In 1958 the Community became a Parish, a just recognition of the religious and social work that the Salesians have been carrying out in Borgo Monterosa for forty years; in the following years the Vocational School became a Middle School.



Monterosa Salesian Home, 1960s. Outside the playroom

Thanks to various contributions, and to the willingness and sacrifice of young people and volunteers, in the 1970s the Nursery School arrived, and in 1991 the Gymnasium and the new football pitches. In 2008, with the valuable presence of the FMA, the Primary School was added and the group of the Friends of the Crib and the Mamma Margaret Workshop expanded. So many

avenues opened up and ensured that the children and young people of the neighbourhood found a safe and welcoming place, even during the most difficult times starting with the war, fascism... until the lockdown due to pandemic in 2020. And even during the lockdown, our Salesians and FMA made their presence felt with online meetings, rooftop singing and games organised on digital platforms.

Re-reading the history of our Oratory sends a shiver down our spine... a shed, a courtyard then a larger shed made available by a benefactor in a working-class area, where children would gather in the streets looking for someone to look after them and love them. It was there that the Salesians decided to remain to be there in that situation so close to that of Don Bosco. And then again: Mamma Margaret's Recreation Centre, the number of children increasing and the roof that is no longer enough, the availability of so many fathers and mothers who offer their skills and abilities.



Monterosa Salesian Home. Bandina football team, 1952

It all started in 1922 and so in 2022 we celebrated our first 100 years. It has been a valuable year in so many ways. Looking back at history and seeing how many similarities there are between the past and our daily lives has given us a wonderful boost of enthusiasm. Today, as then, the children are looking for those who can love them, who with their daily presence can testify to them how important they are, how valuable they are. And so at *Michele Rua* we have the Infant, Primary and Secondary Schools; we have the Theatre and the Multifunctional Building; we have the Day Care Centre in collaboration with the Social Services of the City of Turin; we have the Catechism and the Formative Groups. So much for young people and teenagers, but also so much with and for families: Family Group, Baby Rua, Young Marrieds, Evergreen Group, Mamma Margherita Workshop and Friends of Michele Rua.

It all works because those who pass through it experience it as a Home, as their Community. And this is why, on the occasion of the Centenary, the Educative and Pastoral Community has decided to embark on a synodal journey, interpreting their area and analysing its needs to try together to give answers and offer proposals to the many young people who today cross the threshold of our courtyards.

A journey, that of the Centenary, which, with feet firmly planted in the present and the history of the past clear in mind, has challenged us regarding the future. We identified the key words of our being in this neighbourhood and decided to let ourselves be guided by: family, welcome, work, formation, evangelisation and youth. Around these cornerstones, we laid the foundations to restart and get everyone back on track for the good of the young people who pass through the Oratory's door. In the "new" *Michele Rua* there is now a Maker Lab for tailoring, carpentry, robotics and videomaking, where children and young people can have a workshop experience, so they can learn by doing. In the workshops set up on the first floor, experienced volunteers offer their time to help the children express themselves, trying to work together on a piece of wood, with the woodburner or hacksaw, or on a piece of fabric with a needle and thread. But that's not all: there are also outdoor classrooms and an educational vegetable garden offering green beans and tomatoes to the kids who take turns tending their seedlings.

In a multi-ethnic and diverse neighbourhood like ours, the priority has always been the poorest families, and so, with our parish, in addition to the usual charity services to pay gas bills or offer a shopping bag, two important new projects were born: *Amico Click*, to offer useful tools to those who find it difficult to enter the digital world such as creating an email or booking a doctor online, and *Amico Speak*, so that all new arrivals can know and use the Italian language well.

And, with the momentum of the Centenary, we have not stopped at reinventing today; we are on the move to the near future. We are rethinking how to restructure the premises of the former Bocciofila, which has been disused for some time, to be an increasingly active presence in the area, responding to today's needs. We would like to take up the 1949 idea of the "Industrial Start-up" and study a modern Work Hub for young people who are unable to follow structured and continuous paths; we would like to be there for all the children who are unable to "fit in" at school, particularly because of the effects left on them by the lockdown periods, and thus create a professional after-school centre offering study methods, accompaniment for families, and individualised services. And, as Don Bosco wanted, we are determined to relaunch all the activities related to our theatre: music, dance, acting. We will start by staging a new Musical that will enthuse the children and bring out their talents.

Today in our courtyards there are more than 100 children playing every day, we have more than 500 children enrolled in sports activities and 200 in oratorian training activities. We have the Catechism children's groups and at least 50 children a week who come for after-school activities. We have more than 520 children enrolled in our schools and 20 who attend our Day Care Centre every day. When we get together to eat for the Community Feast, we prepare more than 500 dishes of polenta and stew... and then many enrolled in the Children's Summer programme, summer camps at the seaside and in the mountains. All this is made possible thanks to the Salesians and Daughters of Mary Help of Christians who are tirelessly there, each serving with their own distinct contribution and availability. Thanks to countless youth leaders, volunteers who inhabit our courtyards as if they were their own homes and are never absent to perform a huge variety of services. Thanks to the employees who believe in their vocation and do not cross the threshold just to do a job.



## Monterosa Salesian Home. Activities with the boys, 2023

Thanks to the local institutions who advise, suggest and network. Thanks to the many benefactors who do not fail to support the many expenses. Thanks to the families who continue to believe in the educational alliance that can be created between adults for the good of the children. Thanks to those who have left us but who continue to watch over us and guard our activities.

Above all, thanks to Mary Help of Christians, St Dominic Savio, Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello who guide us, bless us and fill us with grace.

On the occasion of the centenary, we asked those who had passed through here to tell us a piece of their lives at Michele Rua, and 100 beautiful stories came in, full of emotion and passion. Well, in all of them there is the memory of someone, priest, nun, animator, catechist... who offered a piece of their life for others in our Work. This is why *Michele Rua* is like this, a living presence in the *Barriera di Milano* neighbourhood.

Returning to the first sentence of our story, on Sunday we celebrated the Community's feast on the 101st anniversary of the foundation of the Work, and as our Provincial said, we have a lot to celebrate again... and like the Dalmatian in Walt Disney's story, charged up and enthusiastic, we set off for the CHARGE of 101!

*A volunteer.*

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# Don Bosco in Albania. A father for so many young people

*The Salesian charism has put down roots in Albania, a country where the Salesian work is alive and fruitful: from the beginnings in the 1990s to looking towards the future, here are the experiences recounted by Fr Giuseppe Liano, a Guatemalan missionary at the service of Albanian youth, in the community at Scutari.*

How did the Salesian presence in Albania come about? Fr Oreste Valle tells us that while looking at the dramatic Italian situation in the ports of Bari and Brindisi in 1991, it was Pope St John Paul II himself who asked the then Rector Major, Fr Egidio Viganò, for the Salesians' immediate willingness to go to Albania. The arrival of boats overflowing with people in search of a better future broke his heart and immediately made him realise that one could not limit oneself to welcoming them at the port: there was also an urgent need to take the opposite route and go out to meet these poor and abandoned young people left behind at home.

The first Salesian expedition from Italy arrived at the end of 1991. Officially, the Salesian presence began on 25 September 1992, in [Shkodër](#), in northern Albania, destined for a promising future, starting with a full and joyful present. The context was an historically important city of great culture and faith, in the midst of appalling poverty, an unimaginable number of young people, with the memory of so much bloodshed, the blood of Catholic martyrs and those of other religions.

The work developed around the needs of the boys and their families: from the oratory, the heart and genesis of the Salesian presence, to the vocational school, then the boarding school, the church and the parish. A development according to the oratory criterion: courtyard, school, home and parish, as

Don Bosco wanted. After Shkodra, horizons opened up in the capital Tirana, then in Kosovo, in Prishtina and Gjilan, and, for almost three years, also in Lushnje, in southern Albania.

The [Salesian house in Shkodra](#) is located in the centre of the city: there are a significant number of boys enrolled in the boarding school and the oratory continues to be a crowded courtyard every afternoon. From the little ones who come for their football training or the folk-dance school, to the “big ones” who enjoy playing volleyball, basketball or simply meeting to talk and spend time together in the oratory.

Every day, at 6pm, all activities stop for a good night and prayer, as is Salesian tradition. The catechetical groups meet each weekend (Friday) as well as the formation groups (Saturday).

This is the ordinary routine, but then we would have to add vocational meetings, apostolate experiences, preparation for the various sports and feast days depending on the liturgical season. All this is animated by a fairly large believing community and a substantial number of young people and young leaders.

One could say that the beauty and originality of the Albanian Salesian works is that, on the whole, hundreds of children and families of different creeds are welcomed, offering a service of education and communion in an interreligious context. The name and tradition of “Don Bosko” (with a k) are recognised as a model of trust, work and generous good for society. Each community carries out its mission in a totally different context in terms of faith, pastoral proposal and dialogue with the city, but efforts are made to share, as far as possible, between Salesians and Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

For the youngsters, everything seems to be just one playground in different places. This harmony and trust are the trump card enabling the Salesians to offer games, courses, prayers and opportunities for growth without being judged as “propagandists of the faith” or “only interested in their own



good”.



Those who enter a Salesian environment feel welcomed and able to welcome others, without distinction. And for Catholics, being part of the group of leaders and the playground means living their vocation in the service of young people according to the Salesian style, with the beauty of seeing them pray, go to confession and attend mass regularly.

What is currently challenging the Salesians is finding the right answers to the needs of this generation.

The phenomenon of migration is heart-breaking, poverty indicators are rising and the chances of a worthy future in Shkodra are dramatically reduced. One has to be very lucky or else leave the city to study and find a job. The Salesians dream of a day centre and a youth centre, with a worthy and profitable vocational school and a language, arts and sports school which would give their dreams a shape, a present and a future. Unfortunately, without financial support, these dreams remain ink on blank sheets of paper. And, in the meantime, young people and families continue to leave here.

But the Salesians do not stop dreaming, living the present as a truly precious gift from God. Fr Giuseppe Liano, a Salesian missionary from Guatemala, tells us: “Personally, I feel like the luckiest Salesian on this earth: sharing the mission with Salesians from all over the world (Vietnam, Congo, Italy, Zambia, India, Slovenia, Slovakia, Guatemala, Albania and Kosovo), with such faithful young people and Salesians in such a beautiful city, dedicating myself to animating the oratory... this kind of thing doesn’t happen every day! All this, while still aware that getting into the context, getting to know the situation and understanding the language were slow and costly processes. But, after a while, one realises how much it was all worth it. Such a challenging and beautiful mission is a stimulus to creative fidelity and holiness!”

For Albania today, a complex future lies ahead. There is no shortage of problems. Lately, economic support and projects arriving in Albania have been directed to more needy recipients, especially in Ukraine and Turkey; this suggests that it is also time to begin not only to receive but also to generate support, although it is not yet possible to fully cover the costs. The young people, who are faithful and strong, are there by God's grace. Today the challenge is to find the point of momentum, the way to turn the context together into a certainty, an "oasis" for future generations and a source of vocations, holiness and beauty.

*Marco Fulgaro*

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## **Fifty years of service. Father Rolando Fernandez**

*Fr Rolando Fernandez, a Salesian missionary from the Philippines, currently in the community of Dili – Comoro belonging to the Timor-Leste (TLS) Vice-Province, has completed 50 years of service in priestly life, 40 of them in Timor-Leste.*

The faithful in Baucau celebrated 50 years of priestly life of Fr Rolando Fernandez, sdb, a missionary from Pangasinan, Philippines, on the feast day of St Dominic Savio. Joining in the concelebration of the Mass of Thanksgiving were the TLS Superior, Fr Anacleto Pires, priests from the Diocese of Baucau and Salesian priests. Many people took part, including some religious sisters and Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, members of the Salesian Family, novices and pre-novices, government representatives, students and young

people, gathered in Baucau Cathedral and animated by a joyful spirit of thanksgiving, celebrating God's love through the person of Fr Rolando Fernandez in his forty years of life and service on behalf of the Timorese people.

**Amu Orlando**, as he is called by the people, spent ten years of his missionary life in Papua New Guinea, before joining other missionaries working in Timor-Leste in the mid-1980s. This celebration took place in Baucau, because Fr Rolando worked there as parish priest (1992-1994) and director and founder of the well-known Escola Secundária Santo António (ESSA) Teulale-Baucau. Along with this, Fr Rolando completed many other works in Baucau. To name but a few, translations of the Word of God into the national language, Tetum, and other printed works. He made a great effort to offer the faithful prayers and worship texts for liturgical celebrations. The last of his legacies, but no less important, which will remain in the hearts of Timorese youth throughout the country, is the organisation of the Cruz Jovens event for the youth of Timor-Leste, initiated by Pope St John Paul II in Rome on 22 April 1984 (the first World Youth Day).



In his homily, Fr Rolando went to the heart of the meaning of assistance. Firstly, he spoke of the unworthiness of a man to become a priest. The priesthood is not a right, but a gift from God. It is God who calls, in his great love, and gives this grace to become a priest. It is God's trust to choose and raise up men to serve his people. This is also reflected in the second Eucharistic Prayer, in which the priest says: "...giving thanks that you have held us worthy to be in your presence and minister to you." For this great gift, Fr Rolando thanked God for calling him and giving him the opportunity to serve.

Then, looking back to the past, to his life journey, Fr

Rolando saw how the finger of God had pointed out to him, shown him and prepared the way for this gift of ordained priesthood through the experiences he began in his devoted family of parents and brothers, and through the Salesian missionaries he met. We can add that the saying 'the fruit does not fall far from the tree' is once again confirmed.

One of the memorable events that changed his life was that his father was impressed after visiting a Don Bosco technical school. There, he saw the boys making shoes, sewing, carpentry, mechanical and electrical work. His father bought a pair of shoes for him and, on that occasion, a Salesian priest gave him a booklet with pictures of Mary Help of Christians, Don Bosco and Dominic Savio. Once home, his father told him: 'Next year, you will go to the Don Bosco school'. Indeed, he went there. There he saw the life of the Salesians, learnt from them, wished to be like them and, in the end, became one of them, a Salesian brother and then a Salesian priest forever. Finally, Fr Rolando felt a great desire to become a sign and bearer of God's love, especially for young people. For him, the love of his confreres and superiors who trusted him, who entrusted some responsibilities beyond his abilities to his care, the love of his former students, the boys and the people, enriched his life with meaning. And these are not empty words: so many events and experiences of love from Salesians and people could be enumerated. He could deeply feel their love even when he was ill.

Then, recalling the words of Don Bosco who said: 'Bread, work and paradise: these are three things I can offer you in the name of the Lord', he commented that bread, for him, was never lacking, but if there was no work, the risk was that we would not even have paradise. Intense work consumes life quickly, but he is not afraid of death because he has faith in the words that Don Bosco left as his testament: 'When it happens that a Salesian succumbs and ceases to live working for souls, then you will say that our Congregation has had a great triumph and the blessings of Heaven will descend abundantly upon it'. And this confidence in Don Bosco's words continues,

giving credence to the Salesian Constitutions which state in article 54: 'death for the Salesian is made bright by the hope of entering into the joy of his Lord'. And – we say – this trust expressed in the Constitutions is right, because Don Bosco himself said: 'If you have loved me in the past, continue to love me in the future **with the exact observance of our Constitutions**'.

After the homily, Fr Rolando renewed his religious vows once again before the Superior, Fr Anacleto Pires, Fr Manuel Ximenes, sdb, parish priest of Baucau, and Fr Agnelo Moreira, sdb, Rector of the Baucau community. He gave a living testimony of God's love for mankind, especially for young people.

After the final blessing, there were a number of speeches by various representatives who expressed their gratitude to Fr Rolando for his presence, his life and his work for the Church in Timor-Leste, particularly in Baucau. Thanks to his example of life, there are many vocations to religious life, many sisters and priests. Fr Rolando Fernandez, just like a drop of honey, has attracted many young people, boys and girls, to embrace the religious or priestly life. As a sign of gratitude on behalf of the confreres in Timor-Leste, Fr Anacleto presented Fr Rolando with a statue of Don Bosco. And in memory of this event, a tree was also planted in Baucau by Fr Anacleto and Fr Rolando.



*Fr Julian Mota, sdb*