

The Dream of the Elephant (1863)

Unable to give the strenna to his pupils on the last day of the year, having returned from Borgo Cornalense on the 4th, Sunday, Don Bosco had promised to give it to them on the evening of the feast of Epiphany. It was 6 January 1863 and all the young people, artisans and students, gathered in the same parlour, anxiously awaited the strenna. After prayers, he mounted the platform and addressed them:

Tonight I should give you the *strenna*. Every year around Christmas, I regularly beg God to suggest a *strenna* that may benefit you all. In view of your increased number, I doubled my prayers this year.

The last day of the year [Wednesday] came and went, and so did Thursday and Friday, but nothing came to me. On Friday night [January 2] I went to bed exhausted, but could not fall asleep. The next morning I got up, worn out and almost half dead, but I did not feel upset over it. Rather, I was elated, knowing from past experience that a very bad night is usually a forewarning that Our Lord is about to reveal something to me. That day I went on with my work at Bargo Cornalese; the next day by [early] evening I arrived back here. After hearing confessions, I went to bed. Tired from my work at Bargo and from not sleeping the night before, I soon dozed off. Now began the dream which will give you your *strenna*.

My dear boys, I dreamed that it was a feast day afternoon and that you were all busy playing, while I was in my room with Professor [Thomas] Vallauri discussing literature and religion. Suddenly there was a knock at my door. I rose quickly and opened it. My mother – dead now for six years – was standing there. Breathlessly she gasped, “Come and see! Come and see!”

"What happened?" I asked.

"Come! Come!" she replied.

I dashed to the balcony. Down in the playground, surrounded by a crowd of boys, stood an enormous elephant.

"How did this happen?" I exclaimed. "Let's go down!" Tonight I should give you the *strenna*.

Professor Vallauri and I looked at each other in surprise and alarm and then raced downstairs.

As was only natural, many of you had run up to the elephant. It seemed meek and tame. Playfully it lumbered about, nuzzling the boys with its trunk and cleverly obeying their orders, as though it had been born and raised at the Oratory. Very many of you kept following it about and petting it, but not all. In fact, most of you were scared and fled from it to safety. Finally, you hid in the church. I, too, tried to get in through the side door which opens into the playground, but as I passed Our Lady's statue beside the drinking fountain and touched the hem of Her mantle for protection, She raised Her right arm.

Vallauri did likewise on the other side of the statue, and the Virgin raised Her left arm. I was amazed, not knowing what to think of such an extraordinary thing.

When the bell rang for church services, you all trooped in. I followed and saw the elephant standing at the rear by the main entrance.

After Vespers and the sermon, I went to the altar, assisted by Father Alasonatti and Father Savio, to give Benediction. At that solemn moment when you all deeply bowed to adore the Blessed Sacrament, the elephant-still standing at the end of the middle aisle-knelt down too, but with its back to the altar.

Once services were over, I tried to dash out to the playground and see what would happen, but I was detained by someone. A while later, I went out the side door which opens into the porticoes and saw you at your usual games. The elephant too had come out of the church and had idled over to the second playground where the new wing is under construction. Mark this

well, because this is precisely the place where the grisly scene I am going to describe occurred.

At that moment, at the far end of the playground I saw a banner followed processionally by boys. It bore in huge letters the inscription *Sancta Maria, succurre miseris!* [Holy Mary, help Your forlorn children!] To everybody's surprise, that monstrous beast, once so tame, suddenly ran amuck. Trumpeting furiously, it lunged forward, seized the nearest boys with its trunk, hurled them into the air or flung them to the ground, and then trampled them underfoot. Though horribly mauled, the victims were still alive. Everybody ran for dear life. Screams and shouts and pleas for help rose from the wounded.

Worse – would you believe it? – some boys spared by the elephant, rather than aid their wounded companions, joined the monstrous brute to find new victims.

As all this was happening (I was standing by the second arch of the portico, near the drinking fountain) the little statue that you see there (and he pointed to the statue of the Blessed Virgin) became alive and grew to life-size. Then, as Our Lady raised Her arms, Her mantle spread open to display magnificently embroidered inscriptions. Unbelievably it stretched far and wide to shelter all those who gathered beneath it. The best boys were the first to run to it for safety. Seeing that many were in no hurry to run to Her, Our Lady called aloud, *Venite ad Me omnes!* [Come all to Me!] Her call was heeded, and as the crowd of boys under the mantle increased, so did the mantle spread wider. However, a few youngsters kept running about and were wounded before they could reach safety. Flushed and breathless, the Blessed Virgin continued to plead, but fewer and fewer were the boys who ran to Her. The elephant, meanwhile, continued its slaughter, aided by several lads who dashed about, wielding one sword or two and preventing their companions from running to Mary. The elephant never even touched these helpers.

Meanwhile, prompted by the Blessed Virgin, some boys left the safety of Her mantle in quick sorties to rescue some victims.

No sooner did the wounded get beneath Our Lady's mantle than they were instantly cured. Again and again several of those brave boys, armed with cudgels, went out and, risking their lives, shielded the victims from the elephant and its accomplices until nearly all were rescued.

The playground was now deserted, except for a few youngsters lying about almost dead. At one end by the portico, a crowd of boys stood safe under the Virgin's mantle. At the other stood the elephant with some ten or twelve lads who had helped it wreak such havoc and who still insolently brandished swords.

Suddenly rearing up on its hind legs, the elephant changed into a horrible, long-homed specter and cast a black net over its wretched accomplices. Then, as the beast roared, a thick cloud of smoke enveloped them, and the earth suddenly gaped beneath them and swallowed them up.

I looked for my mother and Professor Vallauri to speak to them but could not spot them anywhere. Then I turned to look at the inscriptions on Mary's mantle and noticed that several were actual quotations or adaptations of Scriptural texts. I read a few of them:

Qui elucidant Me vitam aeternam habebunt. They that explain Me, shall have life everlasting. [Sir. 24, 31]

Qui Me invenerit, inveniet vitam. He who finds Me, finds life. [Prov. 8, 35]

Si quis est parvulus, veniat ad Me. Whoever is a little one, let him come to Me. [Prov. 9, 4]

Refugium peccatorum. Refuge of sinners.

Salus credentium. Salvation of believers.

Plena omnis pietatis, mansuetudinis et misericordiae. Full of piety, meekness and mercy.

Beati qui custodiunt vias Meas. Blessed are they that keep My ways. [Ps. 8, 32]

All was quiet now. After a brief silence, the Virgin, seemingly exhausted by so much pleading, soothingly comforted and heartened the boys and, quoting the inscription I had inscribed at the base of the niche, *Qui elucidant Me, vitam aeternam habebunt*, She went on: "ou heeded My call and were

spared the slaughter wrought by the devil on your companions. Do you want to know what caused their ruin? *Sunt colloquia prava*: Foul talk and foul deeds. You also saw your companions wielding swords. They are those who seek your eternal damnation by enticing you from Me, just as they did with many schoolmates of yours."

"But *quos [Deus] diutius exspectat durius damnat*: Those for whom God keeps waiting, He punishes more severely. The infernal demon enmeshed and dragged them to eternal perdition. Now, go in peace, but remember My words: 'Flee from companions who befriended Satan, avoid foul conversation, have boundless trust in Me. My mantle will always be your safe refuge.'"

Our Lady then vanished; only our beloved statuette remained. My deceased mother reappeared. Again the banner with the inscription *Sancta Maria, succurre miseris* was unfurled. Marching processionally behind, the boys sang *Lodate Maria, o lingue fedeli*. [Praise Mary, ye faithful tongues.] Shortly afterward, the singing waned and the whole scene faded away. I awoke in a sweat. Such was my dream.

My sons, now it's up to you to draw your own *strenna*. Examine your conscience. You'll know if you were safe under Mary's mantle, or if the elephant flung you into the air, or if you were wielding a sword. I can only repeat what the Virgin said: *Venite ad Me omnes*. Turn to Her; call on Her in any danger. I can assure you that your prayers will be heard. Those who were so badly mauled by the elephant are to learn to avoid foul talk and bad companions; those who strive to entice their companions from Mary must either change their ways or leave this house immediately. If anyone wants to know the role he played, let him come to my room and I'll tell him. But I repeat: Satan's accomplices must either mend their ways or go! Good night!

Don Bosco had spoken with such fervor and emotion that for a whole week afterward the boys kept discussing that dream and would not leave him in peace. Every morning they crowded his confessional; every afternoon they pestered him to find out

what part they had played in that mysterious dream.

That this was no dream but a vision, Don Bosco had himself indirectly admitted when he had said: "I regularly beg God to suggest... A very bad night is usually a forewarning that Our Lord is about to reveal something to me." Furthermore, he forbade anyone to make light of what he had narrated.

But there is more. On this occasion he made a list of the wounded and of those who wielded one or two swords. He gave it to Celestine Durando, instructing him to watch them. The cleric handed this list over to us, and it is still in our possession. The wounded were thirteen-probably those who had not been rescued and sheltered beneath Our Lady's mantle. Seventeen lads wielded one sword; only three had two. Scattered marginal notes next to a boy's name indicate an amendment of life. Also, we must bear in mind that the dream, as we shall see, referred also to the future.

That it mirrored the true state of things was admitted by the boys themselves. "I had no idea that Don Bosco knew me so well," one of them stated. "He revealed my spiritual condition and my temptations so exactly that I could find nothing to add."

Two other boys were told that they were wielding swords.

"It's quite true," each admitted. "I knew it all along." They mended their ways.

One afternoon, while talking of this dream and remarking that some boys had already left the Oratory and others would soon follow lest they harm their companions, he came to mention his own "wizardry," as he called it. In this connection he told the following incident:

Some time ago, a boy wrote home and falsely accused priests and superiors of this house of grave wrongdoings. Fearing that Don Bosco might see his letter, he held on to it till he could secretly mail it. That same day, right after dinner, I sent for him. In my room I told him of his misdeed and asked why he had told such lies. Brazenly he denied everything. I let him

talk and then, word for word, I repeated the contents of the letter to him. Embarrassed and frightened, he knelt at my feet in tears. "Was my letter intercepted?" he asked.

"No," I replied. "Your family has probably received it by now, and it's up to you to put matters right."

The boys around him asked how he had found that out. "Oh, it's my wizardry," he answered with a laugh. This wizardry and his dream, which revealed not only the boys' present spiritual condition but their future as well, must have been one and the same thing. Many years later, a boy who had been quite close to Father Rua wrote him a long letter, giving his full name and Turin address. We report it here:

Dear Father Rua:

Turin, February 25, 1891

... Among other things I recall a vision of Don Bosco in 1863, when I was at the Oratory. He saw the future of all the boarders. He himself told us about it after night prayers. It was the dream about the elephant. (After describing the dream, he went on:) At the end, Don Bosco told us, "If you want to know what part you played, come to my room and I will tell you."

I too went. "You," he told me, "were one of those trailing after the elephant both before and after church services. Naturally you became a victim. The elephant flung you high into the air with its trunk. When you tumbled down, you were so badly hurt that you could not make it to safety, though you tried hard. A companion of yours, a priest, unrecognized by you, grabbed your arm and dragged you under the Madonna's mantle."

This was not a dream, as Don Bosco called it, but a genuine revelation of my future which Our Lord made to His servant during my second year at the Oratory, when I was a model of conduct and piety.

Yet Don Bosco saw me in that condition.

When the summer vacation of 1863 came around, I went home because of health and I did not return to the Oratory. I was then thirteen.

The following year, my father apprenticed me to a shoemaker, and two years later (1866) I went to France to complete my training. There I associated with anticlericals, gradually stopped going to church and the sacraments, began to read irreligious books, and even grew to loathe and hate the Catholic faith. Two years later I returned to Italy but kept reading impious books, drawing further and further away from the true Church.

Yet all this time I constantly prayed to God in the name of Jesus to enlighten me and lead me to the true faith. This struggle lasted thirteen years. I strove continually to raise myself up, but I was wounded.

I had fallen prey to the elephant and was powerless.

Toward the end of 1878, during a mission which drew great crowds, I went to hear those good preachers. I was delighted by the incontestable truths they expounded. The very last sermon was on the Blessed Sacrament, about which I still had grave doubts. (In fact I no longer believed in the real or even spiritual presence of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament.) The preacher presented the truth so clearly and so convincingly that, touched by God's grace, I decided to go to confession and place myself under the Blessed Virgin's mantle. Since then I have never ceased to thank God and Our Blessed Mother for this grace.

Please note that, as Don Bosco had seen in his dream, I later found out that the missionary had been a schoolmate of mine at the Oratory.

Dominic N ...

P.S. Should you see fit to publish this letter, I also authorize you to edit it, short of substantial changes, because what I wrote is genuinely true. I kiss your hand

respectfully, dear Father Rua, and by this act I intend to pay homage to our beloved Don Bosco.

Certainly, this dream must also have enlightened Don Bosco in appraising priestly and religious vocations and the applicants' inclinations to good so well displayed by those brave boys who had confronted the elephant and his accomplices, had wrested their wounded companions from their clutches, and had carried them to safety under the Madonna's mantle. He therefore continued to accept applicants to the Salesian Society and to admit to triennial vows those who had satisfactorily completed their probationary period. The mere fact that he accepted them will

be their imperishable honor. Some did not take vows or left after their expiration, but nearly all, as diocesan priests or as public school teachers, persevered in their mission of saving and educating the young. Their names are recorded in the minutes of three chapter meetings of the Salesian Society.

(BMVII, 212-219)

A smile at dawn

A touching testimony by Raoul Follereau. He was in a leper colony on a Pacific island. A nightmare of horror. Nothing but walking corpses, despair, rage, sores and horrific mutilation. Yet in the midst of such devastation, one sick old man retained surprisingly bright and smiling eyes. He was suffering in body, like his unhappy companions, but showed attachment to life, not despair, and gentleness in his treatment of others.

Intrigued by that true miracle of life, in the hell of the leper colony, Follereau wanted to seek an explanation: what on earth could have given such strength of life to that old man

so stricken by evil?

He followed him, discreetly. He discovered that, invariably, at the crack of dawn, the old man would drag himself to the fence surrounding the leper colony, and reach a specific place.

He would sit and wait.

It was not the rising of the sun that he waited for. Nor the spectacle of the Pacific dawn.

He would wait until, on the other side of the fence, a woman would appear, also elderly, her face covered in fine wrinkles, her eyes full of gentleness.

The woman did not speak. She only sent out a silent and discreet message: a smile. But the man lit up at that smile and responded with another smile.

The silent conversation lasted a few moments, then the old man would get up and toddle back to the barracks. Every morning. A kind of daily communion. The leper, nourished and fortified by that smile, could endure a new day and hold out until the new appointment with the smile of that feminine face.

When Follereau asked him, the leper said, "she is my wife!"

And after a moment of silence: "Before I came here, she looked after me in secret, with everything she could find. A sorcerer had given her an ointment. Every day she smeared my face with it, except for a small part, enough to affix her lips to it for a kiss... But it was all in vain. So they picked me up, brought me here. But she followed me. And when I see her again every day, only from her do I know that I am still alive, only for her do I still enjoy living."

Surely someone smiled at you this morning, even if you did not realise it. Certainly someone is waiting for your smile today. If you enter a church and open your soul to silence, you will realise that God, first of all, welcomes you with a smile.

Wonders of the Mother of God invoked under the title of Mary Help of Christians (9/13)

[\(continuation from previous article\)](#)

Chapter XVII. Continuation and completion of the building.

It seems that the Holy Virgin did in fact fulfil the prayer made publicly in the blessing of the cornerstone. The work continued with the utmost speed, and during the course of 1865 the building was brought up to the roof, covered, and the vault completed, with the exception of the section included in the periphery of the dome. 1866 saw the completion of the large cupola, the smaller cupola, and everything was covered with tin-plated copper.

1867 saw the completion of the statue representing Mary Mother of Mercy in the act of blessing her devotees. At the foot of the statue is this inscription: *Angela and Benedetto Chirio, a couple, in homage to Mary Help of Christians FF.* These words recall the names of the well-deserving donors of this statue, which is made of wrought copper. It is about four metres high, surmounted by twelve golden stars that crown the head of the glorious Queen of Heaven. When the statue was placed in its place, it was simply bronzed, which revealed the work of art very well, but at some distance it became barely visible, so it was decided gild it. A pious person, already well-deserving of many titles, took charge of the expense for that.

Now it shines brightly, and to those who look at it from afar when it is beaten by the rays of the sun, it seems to speak and wants to say:

I am as beautiful as the moon, as chosen as the

sun: *Pulcra ut luna, electa ut sol*. I am here to accept the supplications of my children, to enrich with graces and blessings those who love me. *Ego in altissimis habito ut ditem diligentes me, et thesauros eorum repleam*.

When the work of decorating and ornamenting the statue was finished, it was blessed with one of the most devout solemnities.

Archbishop Riccardi, our most venerable archbishop, assisted by three canons of the Metropolitan and many priests, was pleased to come himself to perform that sacred function. After a short address aimed at demonstrating the ancient use of images among the Jewish people and in the early Church, the blessing was shared with the Venerable.

In the year 1867, the work was almost completed. The remainder of the interior of the church was done in the first five months of the current year 1868.

There are therefore five altars, all of marble worked with different designs and friezes. For preciousness of marble, the one in the side chapel on the right stands out, containing antique green, Spanish red, oriental alabaster and malachite. The balustrades are also of marble; the floors and chancels are mosaic. The interior walls of the church were simply coloured without paint for fear that the recent construction of the walls would counterfeit the colour type.

From the first base to the greatest height is 70 metres; the plinths, bindings, cornices are of granite. In the interior of the church and the cupola there are iron railings to keep safe those who might have to do some work there. On the outside of the dome there are three with a staircase, and while not very comfortable, are certainly safe for those wishing to climb up to the statue's pedestal. There are two bell towers surmounted by two statues, each two and a half metres high. One of these statues represents the Angel Gabriel in the act of offering a crown to the Blessed Virgin; the other St Michael holding a flag in his hand, on which is written in large letters: LEPANTO. This is to commemorate the great victory won by the Christians against the Turks at

Lepanto through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Above one of the bell towers is a concert of five bells in E-flat, which some worthy devotees have promoted with their offerings. Above the bells are several images are engraved with similar inscriptions. One of these bells is dedicated to the Supreme Hierarch of the Church Pius IX, another to Archbishop Riccardi our Archbishop.

Chapter XVIII. Ancona. Painting of St Joseph – Pulpit.

In the left transept is the altar dedicated to St Joseph. The painting of the saint is the work of the artist Tomaso Lorenzone. The composition is symbolic. The Saviour is presented as a child in the act of handing a basket of flowers to the Blessed Virgin as if saying: *flores mei, flores honoris et honestatis*. His August Mother says to offer it to St Joseph her husband, so that by his hand they may be given to the faithful who are waiting for them with raised hands. The flowers represent the graces that Jesus offers to Mary, while she appoints St Joseph as its absolute dispenser, as Holy Church greets him: *constituit eum dominum domus suae*.

The height of the painting is 4 metres and it is 2 metres wide.

The pulpit is very majestic; the design is also by Cav. Antonio Spezia; the sculpture and all the other works are the work of the boys from the Oratory of St Francis de Sales. The material is carved walnut and the boards are well connected. Its position is such that the preacher can be seen from any corner of the church.

But the most glorious monument of this church is the altarpiece, the large painting above the high altar in the choir. It is also the work of Lorenzone. Its height is over seven metres by four. It presents itself to the eye as an appearance of Mary Help of Christians in the following manner:

The Virgin stands in a sea of light and majesty, seated on a throne of clouds. She is covered by a mantle that is supported by a host of angels, who, making a crown, pay

homage to her as their Queen. With her right hand she holds the sceptre that is a symbol of her power, almost alluding to the words she spoke in the holy Gospel: *Fecit mihi magna qui potens est*. He, God, who is mighty, has done great things for me. With her left hand she holds the Child whose arms are open, thus offering graces and mercy to those who have recourse to his August Mother. On her head she has the diadem or crown with which she is proclaimed Queen of heaven and earth. From above descends a ray of heavenly light, which from the eye of God comes to rest on Mary's head. In it are written the words: *virtus altissimi obumbrabit tibi*: the virtue of the Most High God will overshadow you, that is, will cover you and strengthen you.

From the opposite side other rays descend from the dove, Holy Spirit, which also come to rest on Mary's head with the words in the middle: *Ave, gratia plena: God save you O Mary, you are full of grace*.. This was the greeting given to Mary by the Archangel Gabriel when he announced to her in the name of God that she was to become the Mother of the Saviour.

Further down are the Holy Apostles and Evangelists St Luke and St Mark in somewhat larger-than-life figures. They are enraptured, as if exclaiming: *Regina Apostolorum, ora pro nobis*. They gaze astonished at the Blessed Virgin who appears to them majestically above the clouds. Finally, at the bottom of the painting is the city of Turin with other devotees thanking the Blessed Virgin for the favours received and beseeching her to continue to show herself mother of mercy in the grave dangers of the present life.

In general, the work is well expressed, well-proportioned, natural; but the value that will never be lost is the religious idea that gives rise to a devout impression in the heart of anyone who admires it.

[\(continued\)](#)

St Francis de Sales forms his collaborators

Francis de Sales did not wish to become a bishop. "I was not born to command," he allegedly told a confrere, who encouraged him, saying "But everyone wants you!" He accepted when he recognised God's will in the opinion of the Duke, of Bishop de Granier, the clergy and the people. He was consecrated bishop of Geneva on 8 December 1602 in the small church in his parish in Thorens. In a letter to Jane de Chantal, he wrote that, on that day, "God had taken me from myself to take me for himself, and thus, give me to the people, meaning that he had transformed me from what I was for me into what I should be for them."

To fulfil the pastoral mission entrusted to him and aimed at serving "this miserable and afflicted diocese of Geneva", he needed collaborators. Of course, according to the circumstances he liked to call all the faithful "my brothers and my collaborators", but this was directed all the more to the members of the clergy, his "confreres". The reform of the people called for by the Council of Trent could indeed begin with them and through them.

The pedagogy of example

First and foremost, the bishop had to set an example: the pastor had to become the model for the flock entrusted to him, and first and foremost for the clergy. To this end, Francis de Sales imposed upon himself an Episcopal Rule. Drafted in the third person, it stipulated not only the strictly religious duties of the pastoral office, but also the practice of a number of social virtues, such as simplicity of life, habitual care of the poor, good manners and decency. From the very beginning, we read an article against

ecclesiastical vanity:

Firstly, as regards external behaviour Francis de Sales, Bishop of Geneva, will not wear silk robes, nor robes that are more precious than those hitherto worn; however, they will be clean, well tailored so as to be worn with propriety around the body.

In his episcopal household he would content himself with two clerics and a few servants, often very young. They too would be formed in simplicity, courtesy and a sense of welcome. The table would be frugal, but neat and clean. His house must be open to all, because "the house of a bishop must be like a public fountain, where the poor and the rich have the same right to approach to draw water."

In addition, the bishop must continue to be formed and to study: "He will make sure that he learns something every day that is in any case useful and appropriate for his profession." As a rule, he would devote two hours to study, between seven and nine in the morning, and after dinner he was able to read for an hour. He recognised that he enjoyed studying, but it was indispensable to him: he considered himself a "perpetual student of theology".

Knowing people and situations

A bishop of this stature could not content himself with being merely a good administrator. To lead the flock, the shepherd must know the flock, and to know the exact situation of the diocese and the clergy in particular, Francis de Sales undertook an impressive series of pastoral visits. In 1605, he visited 76 parishes in the French part of the diocese and returned "after beating the countryside for six weeks without interruption". The following year, a large pastoral tour lasting several months took him to 185 parishes, surrounded by "frightful mountains, covered with a sheet of ice ten to twelve inches thick". In 1607, he was in 70 parishes and, in 1608, he put an end to the official visits of his diocese by

moving to 20 parishes around Annecy, but he continued to make many more visits in 1610 to Annecy and the surrounding parishes. In the course of six years, he would have visited 311 parishes with their branches.

Thanks to these visits and personal contacts, he acquired a precise knowledge of the real situation and the concrete needs of the population. He observed the ignorance and lack of priestly spirit of certain priests, not to mention the scandals of some monasteries where the Rule was no longer observed. Worship reduced to a function and tainted by the pursuit of profit, recalled all too often the bad examples taken from the Bible: "We resemble Nabal and Absalom, who rejoiced only in the shearing of the flock."

Widening his view of the Church, he went so far as to denounce the vanity of certain prelates, true "courtiers of the Church" whom he compared to crocodiles and chameleons: "The crocodile is an animal that is sometimes terrestrial and sometimes aquatic, it gives birth on earth and hunts in the water; this is how the courtiers of the Church behave. Trees drop their leaves after the solstice: the elm, the lime, the poplar, the olive, the willow; the same happens among churchmen."

To the complaints about the behaviour of the clergy he added reproaches for their weakness in the face of injustices committed by the temporal power. Recalling some brave bishops of the past, he exclaimed: 'Oh! how I would like to see some Ambrose commanding Theodosius, some Chrysostom scolding Eudoxia, some Hilary correcting Constantius! If one is to believe a confidence of his mother Angelica Arnauld, Bishop de Sales also groaned about the "unrest in the Curia of Rome", true "tearful topics", well convinced however that "to speak of them to the world in the situation in which it finds itself, is a cause of useless scandal."

Selection and formation of candidates

The renewal of the Church entailed an effort to discern and form future priests, very numerous at the time.

During the first pastoral visit in 1605, the bishop received 175 young candidates; the following year he had 176; in less than two years he had met 570 candidates for the priestly ministry or novices in monasteries.

The evil stemmed primarily from the absence of vocation in a good number of them. Often the attraction of temporal benefit or the desire of families to place their second-born sons was pre-eminent. In each case, discernment was required to assess whether the vocation came "from heaven or from earth".

The Bishop of Geneva took the decrees of the Council of Trent very seriously, which had provided for the creation of seminaries. Formation had to begin at an early age. As early as 1603, an attempt was made to set up an embryonic minor seminary in Thonon. Adolescents were few in number, probably due to lack of means and space. In 1618, Francis de Sales proposed to appeal directly to the authority of the Holy See to obtain legal and financial support for his project. He wanted to erect a seminary, he wrote, in which the candidates could "learn to observe ceremonies, to catechise and exhort, to sing and exercise the other clerical virtues" All his efforts, however, were in vain due to a lack of material resources.

How to ensure the formation of future priests in such conditions? Some attended colleges or universities abroad, while the majority were formed in canonries, under the guidance of a wise and educated priest or in monasteries. Francis de Sales wanted every major centre of the diocese to have a "theologian", i.e. a member of the cathedral chapter in charge of teaching sacred Scripture and theology.

Ordination, however, was preceded by an examination and before being assigned a parish (with the attached benefice), the candidate had to pass an exam. The bishop attended and personally questioned the candidate to ensure that he possessed the required knowledge and moral qualities.

Ongoing formation

Formation was not to stop at the moment of ordination or assignment to a parish. To ensure the ongoing formation of his priests, the main means at the bishop's disposal was the annual convocation of the diocesan synod. The first day of this assembly was solemnised by a pontifical mass and a procession through the city of Annecy. On the second day, the bishop gave the floor to one of his canons, had the statutes of previous synods reread and collected the comments of the parish priests present. After this, work would begin in commissions to discuss questions concerning church discipline and the spiritual and material service of the parishes.

Since the synod constitutions contained many disciplinary and ritual norms, care for ongoing, intellectual and spiritual formation was visible in them. They referred to the canons of the ancient Councils, but especially to the decrees of the "Most Holy Council of Trent". On the other hand, they recommended reading works that dealt with pastoral care or spirituality, such as those of Gerson (probably the *Instruction of the Parish Priests to Instruct the Simple People*) and those of the Spanish Dominican Luis de Granada, author of an *Introduction to the Symbol*.

Knowledge, he wrote in his *Exhortation to Clerics*, "is the eighth sacrament of the hierarchy of the Church." The ills of the Church were mainly due to the ignorance and laziness of the clergy. Fortunately, the Jesuits arrived! Models of educated and zealous priests, these "great men", who "devour books with their incessant studies" have "re-established and consolidated our doctrine and all the holy mysteries of our faith; so that even today, thanks to their praiseworthy work, they fill the world with learned men who destroy heresy everywhere." In the conclusion, the bishop summed up his whole thinking: "Since divine Providence, without regard to my incapacity, has established me as your bishop, I exhort you to study endlessly, so that, being learned and exemplary, you may be blameless, and ready to answer all those who question you on matters of faith."

Forming preachers

Francis de Sales preached so often and so well that he was considered one of the best preachers of his time and a model for preachers. He preached not only in his diocese, but also agreed to preach in Paris, Chambéry, Dijon, Grenoble and Lyon. He also preached in Franche-Comté, in Sion in the Valais and in several towns in Piedmont, in particular Carmagnola, Mondovì, Pinerolo, Chieri and Turin.

To know his thoughts on preaching, one must refer to the letter he addressed in 1604 to Andrea Frémyot, brother of the baroness of Chantal, young archbishop of Bourges (he was only thirty-one), who had asked him for advice on how to preach. To preach well, he said, two things are needed: knowledge and virtue. To achieve a good result, the preacher must try to instruct his hearers and touch their hearts.

To instruct them, one must always go to the source: Holy Scripture. The works of the Fathers should not be neglected; indeed, "what is the doctrine of the Fathers of the Church, if not an explanation of the Gospel and an exposition of Holy Scripture?" It is equally good to make use of the lives of the saints who make us hear the music of the Gospel. As for the great book of nature, God's creation, the work of his Word, it constitutes an extraordinary source of inspiration if one knows how to observe and meditate on it. "It is a book," he writes, "that contains the Word of God." As a man of his time, brought up in the school of the classical humanists, Francis de Sales did not exclude the pagan authors of antiquity and even a hint of their mythology from his sermons, but he used them "as one uses mushrooms, that is, only to whet one's appetite."

Moreover, what greatly aids the understanding of preaching and makes it enjoyable is the use of images, comparisons and examples, taken from the Bible, ancient authors or personal observation. Indeed, similes possess "an incredible effectiveness when it comes to enlightening the intelligence and moving the will."

But the real secret of effective preaching is the

charity and zeal of the preacher who knows how to find the right words in the depths of his heart. One must speak “with warmth and devotion, with simplicity, with candour and with confidence, be deeply convinced of what one is teaching and inculcating in others.” Words must come from the heart rather than the mouth, because “the heart speaks to the heart, while the mouth speaks only to the ears.”

Forming confessors

Another task undertaken by Francis de Sales from the dawn of his episcopate was to draw up a series of *Advice for Confessors*. They contain not only a doctrine on the grace of this sacrament, but also pedagogical norms directed to those who have a responsibility to guide people.

First of all, those who are called to work for the formation of consciences and the spiritual progress of others must begin with themselves, lest they deserve the reproach: “Physician, heal thyself”; and the apostle’s admonition: “You who judge others, condemn yourself.” The confessor is a judge: it is up to him to decide whether or not to absolve the sinner, taking into account the inner dispositions of the penitent and the rules in force. He is also a doctor, because “sins are spiritual illnesses and wounds”, so it is up to him to prescribe the appropriate remedies. Francis de Sales, however, emphasises that the confessor is above all a father:

Remember that the poor penitents call you father when they begin their confession and that indeed you must have a fatherly heart towards them. Receive them with immense love, patiently enduring their coarseness, ignorance, weakness, slowness of comprehension and other imperfections, never desisting to help and succour them as long as there is some hope in them that they may correct themselves.

A good confessor must be attentive to the state of each person’s life and proceed in a diversified manner, taking into account each person’s profession, “married or not, cleric

or not, religious or secular, lawyer or procurator, artisan or farmer." The type of reception, however, had to be the same for everyone. According to Chantal's mother, he received everyone "with equal love and gentleness": "ords and ladies, bourgeoisie, soldiers, maids, peasants, beggars, the sick, stinking convicts and abjects."

Regarding inner dispositions, each penitent presents himself in his own way, and Francis de Sales can appeal to his own experience when he draws up a kind of typology of penitents. There are those who approach "tormented by fear and shame", those who are "shameless and without any fear", those who are "timid and nurture some suspicion of obtaining the forgiveness of their sins", and those who, finally, are "perplexed because they do not know how to tell their sins or because they do not know how to make their own examination of conscience."

A good way to encourage the timid penitent and to instil confidence in him is to acknowledge yourself that "you are no angel", and that "you do not find it strange that people commit sins." With the shy person it is necessary to behave with seriousness and gravity, reminding him that "at the hour of death of nothing else will he give a full account but of the confessions he has made." But above all, the Bishop of Geneva insisted on this recommendation: "Be charitable and discreet towards all penitents and especially towards women." One finds this Salesian tone in the following fragment of advice: "Beware of using words that are too harsh towards penitents; for sometimes we are so austere in our corrections that we show ourselves to be more blameworthy than those we reproach are guilty." Furthermore, try "not to impose confused but specific penances on penitents, and to be more inclined to gentleness than severity."

Form together

Finally, it is worth considering a concern of the Bishop of Geneva regarding the community aspect of formation, because he was convinced of the usefulness of encounter,

mutual animation and example. We do not form well if not together; hence the desire to bring priests together and also, as far as possible, to divide them into groups. The synodal assemblies that, in Annecy, saw parish priests gathered once a year around their bishop were a good thing, even irreplaceable, but not sufficient.

To this end, the bishop of Geneva expanded the role of the "overseers", a kind of animator of pastoral sectors with the "faculty and mission to support, warn, exhort the other priests and watch over their conduct." They were in charge not only of visiting the parish priests and churches under their jurisdiction, but also of bringing their confreres together twice a year to discuss pastoral issues. The bishop was very keen on these meetings, "emphasising the importance of the assemblies, and ordering his overseers to send him the registers of those present and the reasons for those absent." According to one witness, he had them deliver "sermons on the virtues required of a priest and the duties of pastors concerning the good of the souls entrusted to them." There was also "a spiritual conference on the difficulties that might arise concerning the meaning of the Synodal Constitutions or the means necessary to obtain better results in view of the salvation of souls."

The desire to gather fervent priests suggested a project to him modelled on the Oblates of Saint Ambrose, founded by Saint Charles Borromeo to help him in the renewal of the clergy. Could not something similar be attempted in Savoy to encourage not only reform but also devotion among the ranks of the clergy? In fact, according to his friend Bishop Camus, Francis de Sales would have cultivated the project of creating a congregation of secular priests "free and without vows". He renounced it when the congregation of the Oratory was founded in Paris, a society of "reformed priests" that he tried to bring to Savoy.

While his efforts were not always crowned with success they testify, in any case, to his constant concern to form his co-workers as part of an overall project for the

renewal of church life.

Where was Don Bosco born?

On the first anniversary of Don Bosco's death his Past Pupils wanted to continue to celebrate the Feast of Recognition, as they had done every year on 24 June, organising it for the new Rector Major, Fr Rua.

On 23 June 1889, after placing a memorial stone in the Crypt at Valsalice where Don Bosco was buried, they celebrated Fr Rua at Valdocco on the 24th.

Professor Alessandro Fabre, a past pupil from 1858-66, took the floor and said among other things:

"You will not be disappointed to know, dear Fr Rua, that we have decided to add as an appendix the inauguration on 15 August next of another plaque, the commission for which has already been given and the design is reproduced here. *We will place it on the house where our dear Don Bosco was born and lived for many years*, so that the place where the heart of that great man who was later to fill Europe and the world with his name, his virtues and his admirable institutions might remain a signpost for contemporaries and posterity will remain a place where it first beat for God and for mankind."

As can be seen, the Past Pupils' intention was to place a plaque on the *Casetta* at the Becchi, which everyone believed was Don Bosco's birthplace, because he had always indicated it as *his home*. But then, finding the *Casetta* in ruins, they were encouraged to redo the inscription and place the plaque on Joseph's house nearby, with the following wording dictated by Prof. Fabre himself:

On 11 August, a few days before Don Bosco's birthday, the Past Pupils went to the Becchi to unveil the

plaque. Felice Reviglio, Parish Priest at St Augustine's, and one of Don Bosco's very first pupils, gave the speech on the occasion. Talking about the Casetta he said: "The very house near here where he was born, which is almost completely ruined..." is "a true monument of Don Bosco's evangelical poverty."

The "completely ruined" Casetta had already been mentioned in the Salesian Bulletin in March 1887 (BS 1887, March, p. 31), and Fr Reviglio and the inscription on the plaque ("a house now demolished") were evidently speaking of this situation. The inscription covered the unfortunate fact that the Casetta, not yet Salesian property, now seemed inexorably lost.

But Fr Rua did not give up and in 1901 offered to restore it at the Salesians' expense in the hope of later obtaining it from the heirs of Antonio and Giuseppe Bosco, as happened in 1919 and 1926 respectively.

When the work was completed a plaque was placed on the Casetta with the following inscription: IN THIS HUMBLE COTTAGE, NOW PIOUSLY RESTORED, FATHER JOHN BOSCO WAS BORN ON 16 AUGUST 1815

Then also the inscription on Joseph's house was corrected as follows: "*Born here in a house now restored... etc.*", and the plaque was replaced.

Then, when the centenary of Don Bosco's birth was celebrated in 1915, the Bulletin published the photo of the Casetta, specifying: "It is the one where the Venerable John Bosco was born on 16 August 1815. It was saved from the ruin to which time had condemned it, with a general repair in the year 1901."

In the 1970s, archival research carried out by Commendatore Secondo Caselle convinced the Salesians that Don Bosco had indeed lived from 1817 to 1831 at the Casetta purchased by his father, his home, as he had always said, but he had been born at the Biglione farmstead, where his father was a share farmer and lived with his family until his death on 11 May 1817, at the top of the hill where the Church to St.

John Bosco now stands.

The plaque on Joseph's house had been changed, while the one on the Casetta was replaced by the current marble inscription: THIS IS MY HOUSE DON BOSCO

The Past Pupils' opinion in 1889, with the words "Born near here in a house now demolished" now took on another meaning; it did not mean the Caasetta at the Becchi.

The place names at Becchi

Did the Bosco family live at Cascina Biglione when John was born?

Some have said that this is in doubt, because they almost certainly lived in another house owned by Biglione at "Meinito". Proof of this would be Francesco Bosco's Will, drawn up by notary C. G. Montalenti on 8 May 1817, where we read: "... in the house of Signor Biglione inhabited by the testator in the region of the Monastero borgata [hamlet] at Meinito...". (S. CASELLE, *Cascinali e Contadini del Monferrato: i Bosco di Chieri nel secolo XVIII*, Rome, LAS, 1975, p. 94).

What can be said about this opinion?

Today, "Meinito" (or "Mainito") is merely the site of a farmstead located south of Colle Don Bosco, beyond the provincial road that goes from Castelnuovo towards Capriglio, but at one time it indicated a more extensive territory, contiguous to one called *Sbaraneo* (or *Sbaruau*). And *Sbaraneo* was none other than the valley to the east of the Colle.

"Monastery", then, did not only correspond to the current wooded area close to Mainito, but covered a vast area, from Mainito to Barosca, so much so that the Casetta at the Becchi was recorded in 1817 as "region of Cavallo, Monastero" (S. CASELLE, op. cit., p. 96).

At a time when there were not yet any maps with numbered plots, farmsteads and estates were identified on the basis of place names or toponyms, derived from surnames of ancient families or geographical and historical features.

They served as landmarks, but did not correspond to today's meaning of "region" or "hamlet" except very

roughly, and were used with much freedom of choice by notaries.

The oldest map of the Castelnovese, preserved in the municipal archives and kindly made available to us, dates back to 1742 and is called the "Napoleonic Map", probably because of its greater use during the French occupation. An extract of this map, edited in 1978 with photographic elaboration of the original text by Mr Polato and Mr Occhiena, who compared the archive documents with the lots numbered on the Napoleonic Map, gives an indication of all the land owned by the Biglione family since 1773 and worked by the Bosco family from 1793 to 1817. From this "Extract" it appears that the Biglione family did not own any land or houses at Mainito. And on the other hand, no other document can be found so far that proves the contrary.

So what meaning can the words "in Mr Biglione's house... in the Monastero region of the hamlet of Meinito" have?

First of all, it is good to know that only nine days later, the same notary who drew up Francesco Bosco's will, wrote in the inventory of his inheritance: "... in the house of Signor Giacinto Biglione inhabited by the unnamed pupils [Francesco's sons] in the region of Meinito...". (S. CASELLE, op. cit., p. 96), thus promoting Mainito from "borgata" to "regione" in just a few days. And then it is curious to note that even the Cascina Biglione proper, in different documents appears as *Sbaconatto*, in *Sbaraneo* or *Monastero*, in *Castellero*, and so on and so forth.

So where are we at? Taking everything into account, it is not difficult to realise that it is always the same area, *the Monastero*, which at its centre had Sbaconatto and Castellerò, to the east the Sbaraneo, and to the south the Mainito. Notary Montalenti chose "Meinito" as others chose "Sbaraneo" or "2Sbaconatto" or "Castellero". But the site and the house were always the same!

We know, moreover, that Mr and Mrs Damevino, owners of Cascina Biglione from 1845 to 1929, also owned other farmsteads, at Scajota and Barosca; but, as local elders

assure us, they never owned houses at Mainito. Yet they had bought the properties that the Biglione family had sold to Mr Giuseppe Chiardi in 1818.

All that remains is to conclude that the document drawn up by notary Montalenti on 8 May 1817, even if it contains no errors, refers to the Cascina Biglione proper, where Don Bosco was born on 16 August 1815, his father died on 11 May 1817 and the grandiose Temple to St John Bosco was built in our days.

The existence, finally, of a fictitious Biglione house inhabited by the Bosco family at Mainito and then demolished whenever or by whoever before 1889, as some have speculated, has (at least so far) no real evidence in its favour. When the Past Pupils the words "Born here at..." in Becchi (see our January article) they certainly could not have been referring to Mainito, which is over a kilometre from Joseph's house!

Cascine, massari and mezzadri

Francesco Bosco, farmer at the Cascina Biglione, wishing to set up his own business, bought land and the Becchi house, but death took him suddenly on 11 May 1817 before he had been able to pay all his debts. In November, his widow, Margaret Occhiena, moved with her children and mother-in-law into the *Casetta*, which had been renovated for the purpose. Before then, the *Casetta*, already contracted by her husband since 1815 but not yet paid for, consisted only of "a croft and adjacent stable, covered with tiles, in poor condition" (S. CASELLE, *Cascinali e contadini* [...], p. 96-97), and therefore uninhabitable for a family of five, with animals and tools. By February 1817 the notarial deed of sale had been drawn up, but the debt was still outstanding. Margaret had to resolve the situation as guardian of Anthony, Joseph and John Bosco, by then small owners at the Becchi.

It was not the first time that the Bosco family moved from the status of *massari* to becoming smallholders and vice versa. The late Comm. Secondo Caselle has given us ample

documentation of this.

Don Bosco's great-great-grandfather, Giovanni Pietro, formerly a *massaro* (sharecropper) at the Croce di Pane farmstead, between Chieri and Andezeno, owned by the Barnabite Fathers, in 1724 became a sharecropper at the Cascina di San Silvestro near Chieri, belonging to the Prevostura di San Giorgio. And the fact that he lived in the Cascina di San Silvestro with his family is recorded in the *Registri del Sale* of 1724. His nephew, Filippo Antonio, fatherless and taken in by Giovanni Pietro's eldest son, Giovanni Francesco Bosco, was adopted by a great-uncle, from whom he inherited a house, garden and 2 hectares of land in Castelnuovo. But, due to the critical economic situation he found himself in, he had to sell the house and most of his land and move with his family to the hamlet of Morialdo, as a sharecropper of Cascina Biglione, where he died in 1802.

Paolo, his first-born son, thus became the head of the family and the farmer, as recorded in the 1804 census. But a few years later, he left the farmstead to his half-brother Francesco and went to settle in Castelnuovo after taking his share of the inheritance and buying and selling. It was then that Francesco Bosco, son of Filippo Antonio and Margherita Zucca, became a *massaro* of Cascina Biglione.

What was meant in those days by *cascina*, *massaro* and *mezzadro*?

The word *cascina* (in Piedmontese: *cassin-a*) indicates in itself a farmhouse or the whole of a farm; but in the places we are talking about, the emphasis was on the house, i.e. the farm building used partly as a dwelling and partly as a rustic house for livestock, etc. The *massaro* (in Piedmontese: *massé*) in itself is the tenant of the farmstead and the farms, while the *mezzadro* (in Piedmontese: *masoé*) is only the cultivator of a master's land with whom he shares the crops. But in practice in those places the *massaro* was also a sharecropper and vice versa, so that the word *massé* was not much used, while *masoé* generally indicated the *massaro* as well.

Mr and Mrs Damevino, owners of Cascina *Bion* or Biglione al Castellero from 1845 to 1929, also owned other farmsteads, at *Scajota* and *Barosca*, and, as Mr Angelo Agagliate assured us, they had five *massari* or sharecroppers, one at Cascina Biglione, two at Scajota and two at Barosca. Naturally, the various *massari* lived in their own farmstead.

Now, if a farmer was a farmer, e.g., at Cascina Scajota, owned by the Damevino family, he was not called “living in the Damevino house”, but simply “alla Scajota”. If Francesco Bosco had lived in the supposed Biglione house at Mainito, he would not, therefore, have been said to have lived “in Mr Biglione’s house” even if this house had belonged to the Biglione family. If the notary wrote “In Signor Biglione’s house inhabited by the testator below”, it was a sign that Francesco lived with his family at Cascina Biglione proper.

And this is further confirmation of the previous articles that refute the hypothesis of Don Bosco’s birth at Mainito “in a house now demolished”.

In conclusion, one cannot give exclusive importance to the literal meaning of certain expressions, but must examine their true meaning in the local usage of the time. In studies of this kind, the work of the local researcher is complementary to that of the academic historian, and particularly important, because the former, aided by detailed knowledge of the area, can provide the latter with the material needed for general conclusions, and avoid erroneous interpretations.

Announcement from the Rector

Major at the end of his term of office

To my Salesian Brothers SDB

To my brothers and sisters in the Salesian Family

My dear brothers and sisters: Please accept my fraternal and affectionate greetings on this day when we remember our Father Don Bosco's birth. I am sending you these words a few minutes after solemnly celebrating the liturgical feast of Don Bosco's birth at the Becchi, Colle Don Bosco, where he was born on 16 August 1815. This child was a wonderful instrument of the Spirit of God to give life to the great movement that is the Don Bosco Family.

This morning, in the presence of the Vicar of the Rector Major and many of my Salesian brothers and sisters, the Salesian Family, lay friends of Don Bosco, civil and public service authorities and 375 young people from all over the world who took part in the Youth Synod, I signed my resignation from the service as Rector Major, as established by the Constitutions and Regulations of the Salesians of Don Bosco, given that I have been called by the Holy Father, Pope Francis, to another service.

I would like to communicate to the whole Salesian world, in these words, what has taken place. I would like to express my outlook of faith and hope in the Lord who has guided us, and I wish to express my gratitude for so much good received over these ten and a half years as Rector Major of the Congregation and, in the name of Don Bosco, as Father of the entire Salesian Family.

1. First of all, dear brothers and sisters, in addressing you I would like to express my deep gratitude to God for these years in which he has blessed our Congregation and the

Salesian Family. Over a decade we have certainly experienced very different events and situations, especially in a Congregation that is present in 136 nations; I think I can say that we have approached everything from a perspective of faith, with great hope and determination, always for the good of the mission and in fidelity to the charism we have received.

2. I am grateful to the Lord for the fact that over these years I have not lacked, nor have we lacked, the serenity and strength that comes from him. For how true is what the risen Lord says to St Paul: "My grace is sufficient for you" (2 Cor 12:9). This is how I have experienced, and this is how we as the General Council have experienced our service of animation and government. In particular, I would like to thank the two General Councils that have accompanied me over these ten and a half years for their loyalty to our common project, for their dedication and their service.

3. At the end of this period at the head of the Salesian Congregation, I express particular thanks to the Vicar of the Rector Major, Fr Stefano Martoglio, who takes up his service at the head of the Congregation with total dedication and generosity. In the coming months there will be much work and great responsibility, but his personality, his fraternal approach, his ability and optimism, with the help of the General Council and guided by the Lord, will facilitate the journey that remains until the 29th General Chapter.

4. I express my deep gratitude to all my Salesian confreres around the world. I have always felt welcomed, loved and fraternally accepted, and I have found collaboration and generosity. It is true that the Salesians of Don Bosco love and care for the Rector Major as they would for Don Bosco himself, as he asked of us in his spiritual testament. Thank you for your generosity.

5. I would also like to express my gratitude to the Salesian

Family spread throughout the world: to our sisters the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, to the Salesian Cooperators, to the Association of Mary Help of Christians (ADMA) – all founded by Don Bosco – and so on up to the 32 groups that today make up this great charismatic tree. These were years of growth and blessing. Thank you to all the people who, through faith in the Lord, have made all this possible.

6. And over these ten years of my service of animation and government, during which I have been able to visit 120 of the countries in which the Congregation and the Salesian Family are present, I have received the great gift of meeting young people around the world: little ones, teenagers, young adults, boys and girls of every nation. I was able to “see with my own eyes, feel with my heart”, first-hand, how “the educational miracles that heal and transform lives” continue to happen every day in many Salesian presences and in our family. And I was able to meet thousands and thousands of young people from all continents and cultures. They were one of my profoundest joys.

7. And I have one last thank you to make. Throughout these years, I have always felt encouraged and supported by the unconditional love of my biological family. For nine of these years my parents, now with God, accompanied me lovingly, serenely, and with their prayers, always telling me not to worry about them. They and all the rest of my family have always been there for me, supporting me with their presence and representing a safe haven to reach so that I never forget my humble origins.

8. Let me conclude by referring to what I said on 25 March 2014 when the then Rector Major, Fr Pascual Chavez, asked me, on behalf of the 27th General Chapter which had elected me in the voting, whether I would accept the service of Rector Major.

I remember that in my poor Italian of that time I said, not

without deep emotion, that “trusting in the Grace of the Lord and in faith, with the certainty that I will always be supported by my Salesian confreres, and because I truly love the young people whom I carry in my Salesian heart, I accept what is asked of me.” Today, with these words of thanks, I can tell you that everything I had hoped for has come true with God’s grace.

My final words are addressed to our Father Don Bosco and the Help of Christians. There is no doubt that Don Bosco has watched over and supported his Congregation and his Family over these years. And I have no doubt that in all this time what he himself had assured us has been achieved: “She did everything”. This was the case with Don Bosco. This has been the case in the recent years to which I refer, and this will undoubtedly continue to be the case. To her, our Mother and Help of Christians, we entrust ourselves.

From the bottom of my heart, thank you and greetings from this brother of yours who is and always will be a Salesian of Don Bosco. With all my affection,

Ángel Fernández Cardinale Artime

Prot. 24/0427

Colle Don Bosco, 16 August 2024

Let us also add the office termination act.

I, the undersigned, Ángel Fernández Cardinale Artime, Rector Major of the Society of St Francis de Sales,

– whereas in the Consistory of 30 September 2023 the Holy Father Francis created and proclaimed me Cardinal of the Deaconry of Santa Maria Ausiliatrice in Via Tuscolana; whereas on 5 March 2024 he assigned me the titular see of Ursona, with the dignity of archbishop, and whereas on 20 April 2024 I received Episcopal Ordination in the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome;

– considering that the religious elevated to the Episcopate is

subject only to the Roman Pontiff (can.

705);

– taking into account that, in accordance with can. 184 §1 CIC *“An ecclesiastical office is lost by the lapse of a predetermined time”* and that, by decree of 19 April 2024, the Holy Father ordered *“by exception and only for this case”* the continuation of my service as Rector Major after episcopal ordination, until 16 August 2024, hereby

I DECLARE

that, since the time established by the aforementioned decree has expired, **from today's date I have ceased to hold the office of Rector Major of the Society of St Francis de Sales.**

In accordance with art. 143 of the Constitutions, the Vicar, Father Stefano Martoglio, will simultaneously take over the governance of the Society *ad interim*, until the election of the Rector Major that will take place during the 29th General Chapter convened in Turin from 16 February to 12 April 2025.

Ángel Fernández Cardinale Arttime

Prot. 24/0406

Rome, 16 August 2024

Interview with Nelson Javier MORENO RUIZ, Provincial of Chile

Fr Nelson is 57 years old and was born in the city of Concepción on 11 September 1965. He met the Salesians at the

Salesian College in Concepción, where he was a student and was involved in youth groups and pastoral activities.

His parents Fabriciano Moreno and María Mercedes Ruiz currently live in the city of Concepción.

He did all his initial formation in the city of Santiago. He made his perpetual profession on 8 August 1992 in Santiago (La Florida). He was ordained a priest on 6 August 1994 in Santiago. His first years as a priest were spent in the Salesian presence at Colegio San José de Punta Arenas and at the Salesian school in Concepción, where he worked in pastoral ministry. From 2001 to 2006 he was rector in Puerto Natales and from 2006 to 2012 rector in Puerto Montt.

From 2012 to 2017 he was provincial economer and rector of the provincial house. In 2018 he was rector of the Salesian house in Gratitude Nacional in the city centre of Santiago and from 2019 rector in Puerto Montt, where he is currently located.

Fr Moreno Ruiz succeeds Fr Carlo Lira Airola, who completed his six-year term in January 2024.

Can you present yourself?

I am a Salesian happy with life, who in the Salesian religious vocation has found the presence of God in the young people, whom I serve and accompany as a educator and pastor.

I am Father Nelson Moreno Ruiz, Provincial of the Chilean Province. I was called to this service of animation by the Rector Major Cardinal Ángel Fernández Artime, taking up this responsibility in January this year.

I got to know the Salesians at a young age, when I entered the Salesian school in the city of Concepción, which is the first work in our country, where the missionaries sent by Don Bosco arrived from Argentina to Chile in 1887.

In this Salesian school environment, I grew up around the educative and pastoral proposal offered by the school; sports meetings, missionary activities and many social service activities, all of which had an echo in my life as a young man; it was also important to see and meet Salesians in the school yard, and with these experiences my vocation developed

and over time I felt called to follow in Don Bosco's footsteps as a Salesian.

My family consists of my parents, now elderly – my father Fabriciano aged 93 and my mother aged 83 – my four brothers, the three boys who studied at the Salesian school, and my older sister, who often had the task of looking after us. We are a relatively small family, completed by four grandchildren, who are now young professionals.

As a Salesian, I made my first religious profession on 31 January 1987, then I was a religious for 37 years and was ordained a priest on 6 August 1994. In my religious life, I had the opportunity to animate some communities as director of works, as well as serving as provincial economist before becoming provincial.

I consider that one of my characteristics is to be attentive to rendering good service wherever the Lord wants it, so I spent time preparing and studying for the mission. After graduating from high school at the Salesian school in Concepción, I entered the Congregation where I studied Philosophy, then obtained a Licentiate in Theology at the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile, a Degree in Religious Education and a Licentiate in Education in School Management at the Raúl Silva Henríquez Catholic University; later, I obtained a Master's Degree in Educational Management from the University of Concepción in Chile, a Master's Degree in Quality and Excellence in Education from the University of Santiago de Compostela in Spain, and a Doctorate in Educational Sciences from the University of Seville, Spain.

And now, with humility and simplicity, I serve my Province, the confreres and animation of the works.

What did you dream of as a child?

As a child, along with my brothers and friends, I had a very normal and happy childhood. I loved sport, I played football regularly in a local club and this led me to dream of taking up sport in the future. What I liked most was sharing and having friends, and this was what sport offered me.

When I entered school and joined the various pastoral activities, I realised that I also enjoyed teaching the children and young people I had contact with in these pastoral activities. The educational and pedagogical theme made a lot of sense to me and became part of my life project, as I saw it as a dream that was possible to realise.

These concerns mingled with my inclination to study something related to the area of health; this motivation was very present, since some in my family were engaged in professions in this area.

I see that the common thread of these inclinations that I have felt from childhood to adolescence were always oriented towards working with people, being of service to them, serving them, teaching them, accompanying them.

What is the story of your vocation?

My vocational story, without a doubt, begins in my family, I come from a home where the faith was lived, through devotion to St Sebastian and St Rita of Cascia, and it was my parents who inculcated the faith in us, allowing us to receive the sacrament of baptism and confirmation. My vocation began at home, in a very simple way, with a sense of God perceived naturally and without any great religious practices, but with a deep sense of gratitude to God in everyday life.

At the Salesian school in Concepción, I discovered a new world, because it was a huge and prestigious school in the city. When I arrived, I immediately felt welcomed and motivated to participate in the proposals it had for its students, especially the pastoral activities, in which I was gradually involved, as well as sport, which was an important part of my life at that age.

When I was studying at Salesian school, I was very interested in all the pastoral activities, and in my last year of primary school, I had the opportunity to participate as a monitor in the 'Summer Camps – Villa Feliz', where I discovered that I could be useful and give something to the poorest children; from then on, I made a commitment to continue on this path of

service, which gave a lot of meaning to my adolescent concerns.

It was in the youth groups that my vocation to religious life became more clearly defined, I became part of the sacramental ministry, as a Confirmation monk, where I reaffirmed my call to serve.

All this pastoral life gave me the opportunity to meet and share with the Salesians who, with their witness and closeness, presented me with a vocational proposal that caught my attention, as they were beautiful testimonies of a service close to young people. This was already the seed of my religious vocation, which gave me the impetus to decide to enter the Congregation, the beginning of the vocational journey in the call the Lord made to me, where I have been a Salesian priest for 30 years, accompanied by the motto I chose for my priestly ordination: 'Lord, you know everything, you know that I love you' (Jn 21:17),

Why Salesian?

Why Salesian? Because it was in a school of the Congregation where I studied, where I grew up, where my convictions, my certainties and my life project were formed.

With the Salesians, through pastoral activities, I got to know the mission of the Church more deeply, all this environment gave full meaning to my life, confirming that the charism of joy, youth and education, was the path that the Lord presented to me, in which I actively participated, because it responded to my concerns and desires, and made me happy; there was no possibility of another answer, because the Salesians were what covered everything I was looking for and desired, and that I had known since my childhood.

During my formation, I had contacts with other congregations and charisms, which helped me to confirm, even more, that Salesian spirituality was my style, what covered the meaning of what I wanted to do; the life of Don Bosco, work with young people, pastoral work, everything, the fruit of the experience

I had with them, where I was formed, where I served and where my vocation was formed and consolidated.

The Lord gave me the gift of getting to know Don Bosco and Salesian spirituality, it was the proposal he invited me to follow and I accepted it, I consecrated my life here, and today I feel that my vocation as a Salesian makes me all that I am.

How did your family react?

Once I made the decision to take the step of joining the Salesians, I told my family, especially my parents. They were surprised, and it was my mother who first understood, supported and accompanied me, inviting me to take this step.

My father, worried, asked me if I was really sure, if it was what I really wanted, what made me happy and if it was my path; to all these questions I answered yes. He confirmed that if it was what I wanted and was willing to see if it was really my future, and made it clear that I could always count on them and not to forget that I would always have my home, in case it was not my path, and told me that I could count on all his support.

Hearing my parents' support so clearly was very nice, it gave me a lot of joy and serenity, since I was starting out on a path without being sure that it was really the path for a young person.

My siblings were also surprised, because I had a very natural life, tied to sports, with friends, but when they were sure that I really wanted to follow the Lord's call, they supported me.

I always felt very accompanied and supported by my parents and brothers, which gave me a lot of serenity to start the formation process; to this day, I count on them, I know they accompany me with love made prayer.

What are the most urgent local and youth needs?

In Chile today, the population up to 17 years of age is 4,259,115, 24% of the country's total population. And we

Salesians are particularly dedicated to the formal education of this segment of the population. We have 22 schools, where children and young people from 4 to 19 years old study, with a total of 31,000 students being educated in our schools. Today, it is the largest school network in the country offering this service to young people.

In addition, there is a University which serves some 7,000 students, and the Don Bosco Foundation, which is dedicated to taking in and accompanying street children, the most vulnerable segment among them, and serves more than 7,000 children and young people.

The most urgent need that our young people experience and suffer is that they are highly exposed to alcohol and drug consumption, as well as the indiscriminate use of technology. This, together with the loneliness they experience due to the disintegration of their families, often leads them to suffer from 'mental health' situations, depression, anxiety, panic attacks and the like.

This reality prompts us to try to accompany them in their search for meaning, emotional well-being and emotional stability, all basic needs of human beings, especially those who are developing and growing. We also try to provide them with Christian values, so that step by step they commit to living their faith in youth communities and the Chilean Church, as well as providing them with the education they need to integrate into society.

Young people are Don Bosco's favourite portion and we owe it to them to provide them with education and tools so that they can become 'good Christians and honest citizens'.

What are the most significant works in your area?

The Chilean Province has a varied range of works: parishes, youth pastoral centres, reception centres, schools and universities. But the pastoral proposal has focused fundamentally on formal education in schools, which provide education from pre-school age – 4 years of age – to secondary education – 19 years of age.

Chilean education provides training both to prepare young people to enter higher education, universities, and to provide technical vocational education, where students graduate with a technical diploma in a career of their choice.

We can say that vocational technical education is one of the most significant jobs we have, because it is a real promotion of young people, allowing them to enter the world of work with a technical diploma, which, although it is true that it is not everything, makes it easier for them to work with their families, and often finances their continuation in higher education.

I would also like to emphasise the work we do in the Fundación don Bosco, which takes care of children on the street who do not have or do not have a family, working with them to contain, rehabilitate, promote and socially integrate them, creating – as Don Bosco did – evangelised children and young people with values.

Do you communicate through magazines, blogs, Facebook or other media?

Social media today are very important and of great help in reaching many young people and adults. I regularly communicate with the Salesian Family through the Salesian Bulletin, the Agorà blog, the official websites of the Province, the website and Instagram.

What are the most important areas?

Of the mission that I have to carry out today in the Province, I believe that the most important thing is to accompany and animate the lives of my confreres, especially those with whom I work and share responsibility for the Province as councillors, and the confreres who have the responsibility of animating and accompanying the confreres as rectors of communities and works. In short, the priority is to accompany my Salesian confreres.

In the same way, the task of animating the life of the Salesian Family seems relevant to me, an important task,

animating in fidelity to the charism, all those who are part of it; consecrated Salesians, Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, Salesian Cooperators, Volunteers of Don Bosco, Association of Mary Help of Christians and others.

We cannot fail to mention as a relevant task, that of animating the lives of young people, through youth pastoral work, associations and the various groups that can exist under the Salesian charism, giving an important place among these, to the pastoral work for vocations, and to those young people who feel the desire to respond to the Lord's call in our Congregation.

How do you view the future?

Faced with a society thirsting for meaning it seems to me that we Salesians are called to respond to these quests and to give meaning to what we do, to give meaning to life, especially for the young.

We have a fundamental task, which is to educate the young, and those who educate them and work with them must certainly be bearers of dreams and hope.

The world is constantly being built, and it is up to us Salesians to contribute, with our lives, our actions and our mission, to its construction, through the education of today's young people, so that, knowing that they are loved, valuable, capable and bringing out the best in them, they can give meaning to their lives and be builders of hope in their families and in society.

Do you have a message for the Salesian Family?

The message that I can share with the entire Salesian Family, first of all, is that we are custodians and bearers of a gift, a gift that God gives to the Church, which is the Salesian charism, a gift and a task for each of us.

This year, the Cardinal and Rector Major of the Congregation, Ángel Fernández Artime, invites us to dream, in imitation of our father Don Bosco, a dreamer father. Don Bosco dreamed of things that seemed impossible, but his great trust in Mary

Help of Christians and his persevering and tenacious work led him to realise his dreams. We too, worthy sons of this father, are called to dream and to add young people to these dreams, which are nothing more than desiring a better world for them, where they can fit in, building a society that is more amiable and more sensitive to human and Christian values. Together with them, we want to contribute and become good Christians and upright citizens, feeling deeply loved by God.

Interview with Fr Luis Víctor SEQUEIRA GUTIÉRREZ, Provincial of the Angola Province

We asked Fr Luis Víctor SEQUEIRA GUTIÉRREZ, the new Provincial of the Angola Province (ANG), some questions for readers of the OnLine Salesian Bulletin.

His appointment is due to the fact that the previous superior of the Salesians in Angola, Fr Martin Lasarte, was appointed Bishop of the Diocese of Lwena.

With this appointment, the Rector Major has also decided, again after consulting his Council, to elevate the Angola Vice-Province to the rank of Province, starting from the day of the installation of Fr Sequeira Gutiérrez. He will therefore be the first Provincial of the new Province. Son of Cristóbal Sequeira and Victoria Gutiérrez, Victor Luís Sequeira Gutiérrez was born on 22 March 1964, in Asunción, Paraguay. He attended the Salesian aspirantate in Ypacaraí in 1984, the prenovitiate in 1985 and finally the novitiate in La

Plata, Argentina, in 1986. He made his first profession on 31 January 1987. His philosophy studies took him to São Paulo, Brazil, and to the Catholic University of Asunción.

From 1992 to 2020, he worked as a missionary in Angola, holding various posts: Bursar of the Don Bosco formation house in Luanda (1997-98), Rector of the Catholic Mission in Libolo (1998-2005), Rector and parish priest in Dondo (2005-11). From 2011 to 2014 he was Rector of the Luanda Formation Centre, as well as Deputy Director of the Institut Supérieur de Philosophie et Pédagogie Don Bosco in Luanda, now known as ISDB.

He previously served as Superior of the Salesians of Angola for the six-year period 2014-2020.

In November 2020, he was sent to Portugal to be part of the formation team for Theology students in Lisbon, also serving briefly as chaplain at the Medical Rehabilitation Centre in Alcoitão. Finally, in February 2023, he returned to Angola, where he had recently been appointed Rector and Parish Priest of the Lwena community.

Fr Sequeira Gutiérrez is fluent in Spanish, Guarani, French, Italian and Portuguese.

Can you present yourself?

I am Father Victor Luís Sequeira Gutiérrez, Provincial of Angola. I have been in Angola for 32 years and I am Paraguayan.

How did your vocation come about?

At a time of military dictatorship and in a Church where young people found a place for free expression, the encounter with the Word led me to conversion and commitment. I felt called to be at the service of this Church that leads to liberation, especially of young people.

Why Salesian?

Because my roots are Salesian, my mother was familiar with Salesian settings, in contact with the FMA and my father with the oratory and the priests who were real fathers (dads);

furthermore, I was born and grew up in a Salesian parish, we can say that my nature is Salesian.

Do you remember any educators in particular?

Father Edmundo Candia, Father Rojas, Father Aquino.

Why a missionary?

It all started with aspiration, when I came into contact with the missions in the Chaco, then also with the missions in Africa and the Africa project. From that moment on I felt called.

What are the greatest difficulties you have encountered?

The encounter of the Gospel with the local culture, where the life and dignity of people must be valued.

What are the greatest joys you have encountered?

The way people do not lose hope and always give you a smile, the gratitude they have for the missionaries.

How do you find work in this environment?

Above all, useful as an instrument of God, not indispensable, and therefore fulfilled as a consecrated and missionary person.

What are the young people in the area like?

They are cheerful, full of vitality, ready to learn, to be formed and to develop.

Are Christians persecuted in the area?

No, thank God, Angola is predominantly Christian.

What are the great challenges of evangelisation and mission today?

Human formation and the proclamation of the Gospel, in-depth dialogue with the culture.

What could be done more and better?

Give quality education and vocational training, embody the Gospel more in the culture, a catechesis that touches current

reality.

A pergola of roses (1847)

Don Bosco's dreams are gifts from on high to guide, warn, correct, encourage. Some of them were set down in writing and have been preserved. One of these – made at the beginning of the saint's mission – is the dream about the pergola of roses, which he had in 1847. We present it in full.

Don Bosco first related it himself seventeen years later in 1864 when one night, after prayers, as was his custom at times, he gathered the members of his [infant] Congregation in his anteroom for a conference. Among those present were Father Victor Alasonatti, Father Michael Rua, Father John Cagliero, Father Celestine Durando and [the two clerics] Joseph Lazzero and Julius Barberis. After speaking of detachment from the world and from one's own family to follow Our Lord's example, he continued:

I have already told you of several things I saw as in a dream. From them we can infer how much Our Lady loves and helps us. But now that we are all together alone, I am going to tell you not just another dream, but something that Our Lady herself graciously showed me. I am doing this that each of us may be convinced that it is Our Lady Herself who wants our Congregation. This should spur us to work ever harder for God's greater glory. She wants us to place all our trust in Her. I am taking you into my confidence. Please do not mention what I tell you to anyone else in this house or to outsiders, lest you give evil tongues occasion to wag.

One day in 1847, after I had spent much time reflecting on how I might help others, especially the young,

the Queen of Heaven appeared to me. She led me into a beautiful garden. There stood there a rustic but wide and charming portico built as a vestibule. Its pillars were dressed with climbing vines whose tendrils, thick with leaves and flowers, stretched upward together and knitted a graceful awning. The portico opened on a lovely walk that soon became, as far as the eye could see, a breathtakingly beautiful pergola, whose sides were lined with enchanting roses in full bloom. The ground too was covered with roses. The Blessed Virgin said to me: "Take off your shoes!" When I had done so, She added: "Walk under that rose pergola, for this is the path you must take."

I gladly removed my shoes because it would have been a pity to step on such gorgeous roses. I took but a few steps and immediately felt very sharp thorns piercing my feet and making them bleed. I had to stop and turn back.

"I had better wear my shoes," I told my guide.

"Yes, indeed," She replied, "sturdy ones." So I put my shoes on again and returned to the rose pergola, followed by a number of helpers who had just showed up and asked to go along with me. They followed me under the indescribably beautiful pergola, but as I went along I noted that it was becoming narrow and low. Many of its branches were draped like festoons; others instead just dropped straight down. Some branches, here and there, jutted sideways from the rose stalks, while others formed a thicket which partly blocked the path; still others crept along the ground. All the branches, however, were thick with roses. There were roses about me, roses above me, and roses under my feet.

As my feet made me wince with pain, I could not help brushing against the roses at my sides, and even sharper thorns pricked me. But I kept walking. My lacerated legs, though, kept getting entangled in the lower branches. Whenever I pushed aside a bough barring my way, or skirted the sides of the pergola to avoid it, the thorns dug into me and made me bleed all over. The roses overhead also were thick with thorns which pricked my head. Notwithstanding, I went forward,

encouraged by the Blessed Virgin. Now and then, however, some sharper thorns pierced me more than others and caused greater pain.

Meanwhile those who were watching me walk under that bower – and they were a crowd – passed comments, such as, “How lucky Don Bosco is! His path is forever strewn with roses! He hasn’t a worry in the world. No troubles at all!” But they couldn’t see the thorns that were piercing my poor legs. I called on many priests, clerics, and laymen to follow me, and they did so joyfully, enthralled by the beauty of the flowers. When, however, they discovered that they had to walk over sharp thorns and that there was no way to avoid them, they loudly began complaining, “We have been fooled!”

I answered: “If you are out for a nice time, you had better go back. If not, follow me.”

Many turned back. After going on for a while, I turned to look at my followers. You cannot imagine how I felt when I saw that some had disappeared and others had already turned back and were walking away. I went after them and called them back, but it was useless; they would not even listen to me. Then I broke into tears and wept unrestrainedly as I asked myself: “Must I walk this painful path all alone?”

But I was soon comforted. I saw a group of priests, clerics and laymen coming toward me. “Here we are,” they said. “We are all yours and ready to follow you.” So I led them forward. Only a few lost heart and quit; most of them followed me through.

After walking the whole length of the pergola I found myself in another enchanting garden, and my few followers gathered around me. They were exhausted, ragged and bleeding, but a cool breeze healed them all.

Another gust of wind came and, like magic, I found myself surrounded by a vast crowd of boys, young clerics, coadjutor brothers and even priests, who began helping me care for all those boys. Many of these helpers I knew, but many more were strangers.

Meanwhile I had come to a higher spot in the

garden, where a very imposing, majestic building stood. I entered and found myself in a spacious hall so grandiose that I doubt one could find its like in any royal palace. Fresh thornless roses, set all through the hall, filled it with a most delicate fragrance. The Blessed Virgin, who had been my guide all along, now asked me: "Do you grasp the meaning of what you now see and of what you saw before?"

"No," I said. "Please explain it to me."

She replied: "The path strewn with roses and thorns is an image of your mission among boys. You must wear shoes, a symbol of mortification. The thorns on the ground stand for sensible affections, human likes and dislikes which distract the educator from his true goal, weaken and halt him in his mission, and hinder his progress and heavenly harvest.

The roses symbolize the burning charity which must be your distinguishing trait and that of your fellow workers. The other thorns stand for the obstacles, sufferings and disappointments you will experience. But you must not lose heart. Charity and mortification will enable you to overcome all difficulties and lead you to roses without thorns."

As soon as the Mother of God finished speaking, I awoke and found myself in my room.

Don Bosco understood the purport of the dream and concluded by saying that from then on he knew exactly the path he had to follow. Already known to him were the obstacles and snares with which his adversaries would attempt to block his progress. Many would be the thorns on his path, but he was sure, absolutely sure, of God's will in the matter and of the ultimate success of his great undertaking.

The dream also warned him not to be discouraged by the defection of some who seemed called to help him in his work. Those who first deserted him were priests and laymen who in the early days of the festive oratory had volunteered to help him. Those who came later were his own Salesians, and the wind symbolized the forthcoming divine assistance and comfort. On a later occasion Don Bosco revealed that this dream or vision was repeated in 1848 and in 1856, each time under

slightly different circumstances, which we have integrated in our narration to avoid repetitions.

(BM III, 25-28)

Interview with Fr Aurélien MUKANGWA, Superior of the Africa Congo Congo Vice-Province

We put a few questions to Fr Aurélien MUKANGWA, Superior of the Africa Congo Congo (ACC) Vice-Province, for readers of the Salesian Bulletin OnLine.

Fr Aurélien was born on 9 November 1975 in Lubumbashi, Democratic Republic of Congo. He completed his novitiate at Kansebula from 24 August 1999 to 24 August 2000. He then made his perpetual profession in Lubumbashi on 8 July 2006 and was ordained a priest on 12 July 2008.

At local level, he has held the positions of Headmaster in Uvira, Kinshasa, Lukunga and Le Gombe, and of School Principal in Masina. Before the establishing of the current ACC Vice-Province, he was chosen to be the Superior of the DRC-WEST Delegation for four years, and at the time of this appointment, he was again the Provincial Delegate in the new AFC East Delegation, based in Goma.

Fr Mukangwa is the son of Donatien Symba Mukangwa and Judith Munyampala Mwange, and holds a Diploma in Pedagogy. He has taken on this new role of leadership and governance of the ACC Vice-Province – covering part of the Democratic Republic of

Congo and the Republic of Congo – for the six-year period 2023-2029.

Can you present yourself?

My name is Mukangwa Mwanangoy Aurélien, and I was born in Lubumbashi (Haut Katanga) in the Democratic Republic of Congo on 9 November 1975 to my late father Donatien Symba Mukangwa and my mother Judith Munyampara Mwange. I am the second of 11 children, 7 boys and four girls.

I became a Salesian of Don Bosco nearly 24 years ago, on 24 August 2000. And since 24 May 2023, I have been installed as the second provincial superior of the vice-province of Mary Help of Christians Africa Congo-Congo (ACC). Immediately after my initial formation, I worked in Uvira, Kinshasa, Lubumbashi and Goma, and now I'm at the Vice-Province headquarters in Kinshasa.

What is the story of your vocation?

Thank you very much for this beautiful question, which I find very essential, because what's important for me is the encounter with Don Bosco that led to my being called a Salesian.

The vocational influence I've had depends on the place of my birth, my childhood and my youth. I was born and grew up in a district that was pastorally served exclusively by the Salesians of Don Bosco. At the time, all the parishes in the commune of Kenya (Lubumbashi-RDC) were run by the Salesians of Don Bosco. My first contact with the Salesians was at kindergarten (aged 4), where I met Salesians such as Fathers Eugène, Carlos Sardo, Angelo Pozzi and Luigi Landoni. In my parish of Saint Benoit (Kenya), when I was very young, I used to go to the oratory and the playground, where I also met Father Jacques Hantson, SDB, and the young Salesians in formation who came from Kansebula (post-novitiate). In the same parish, I also met Father André Ongenaert, SDB. Around 1987, the family moved to the neighbourhood behind the Cité des Jeunes de Lubumbashi, founded by the Salesians. And there

I had the privilege of getting to know many African Salesians and missionaries.

So, from an early age, I harboured the desire to become like these Salesians who came to do pastoral work in my parish, because they inspired me so much by their way of doing things and being with us, their way of welcoming children and the availability they had to listen to young people, especially their commitment to the service of poor young people and the joy they put around us all.

How did you get to know Don Bosco / the Salesians?

As I said earlier, I got to know Don Bosco through the Salesians of Don Bosco in my parish, in my school, in my education through the Salesians, books and films about Don Bosco.

Do you remember a particular teacher?

Father Jacques Hantson, for the Salesian and missionary spirit with which he guided us in the oratory of the parish of Saint Benoît in Lubumbashi. Father Hantson was a Belgian missionary and today he rests with his heavenly father.

What were the greatest difficulties you encountered?

The greatest difficulties we have encountered so far are the poverty of young people abandoned by the state, their parents and adults; young people who have become victims of war, unemployment, drugs, prostitution, poverty and exploitation in various forms. The other difficulty is the lack of real solutions to the problems of young people and the lack of human, material and financial resources to provide proper assistance to these vulnerable young people in difficulty.

What is your best experience?

My best experience in my Salesian life has been as an assistant in the pre-novitiate house, in oratory activities, and in school and social pastoral work.

Over time I've learnt that from both positive and negative experiences, we need to draw good lessons for life and try to

be positive in order to make Salesian optimism a reality.

Are Christians in the region persecuted?

I have to say here that the geographical area of our vice-province is, by grace, predominantly Christian. So Christians are not persecuted here. However, they are sometimes victims of the socio-political and security situation in the countries that make up our Vice-Province.

What are the major challenges of evangelisation and mission today?

Today the great challenges of evangelisation and mission are those of the digital world, where we find a fairly large number of young people confronted with Artificial Intelligence, with all its pitfalls.

Another specific challenge for our Vice-Province is the expansion of the Salesian mission throughout our geographical area. There are young people on the periphery who need Don Bosco's charism. But for this to happen, we need to invest heavily in the formation of quality Salesians who are truly "passionate about Jesus Christ and dedicated to young people".

What role does Mary Help of Christians play in your life?

As a Catholic Christian and a Salesian of Don Bosco, Mary has an important place in my life. Thanks to Salesian spirituality, I have learnt to deepen the dimension of devotion to Mary Help of Christians. Every morning, at the end of our meditation, we pray the Salesian prayer to Mary Help of Christians, and I find time during the day and in the evening to ask the Virgin Mary for help with my vocation, the Salesian mission, the Salesian family and especially young people. I have great confidence in her. She is my Mother. She is intrinsically linked to my vocation; in fact, I owe it to her.

What would you say to the young people of today?

In view of the challenges facing young people today, there are many things to say. To young people, I say that God has given them a great gift in the person of Don Bosco through the

Salesian charism. Every young person who meets Don Bosco has a duty to build his or her life on Salesian values. I don't need to remind you of the command Don Bosco left us: "Teach young people the ugliness of sin and the beauty of virtue." Anyone who has not yet met Don Bosco should contact a Salesian organisation. Dear young people, you are the protagonists of your future, a better and radiant future! So don't waste time. Get involved. Take advantage of the Salesian charism. It's there for you.