

Interview with the Rector Major, Fr. Fabio Attard

*We had an exclusive interview with the Rector Major of the Salesians, Fr. Fabio Attard, looking back over the key stages of his vocation and his human and spiritual journey. His vocation began in the oratory and was consolidated through a rich formative journey that took him from Ireland to Tunisia, Malta, and Rome. From 2008 to 2020, he was General Councillor for Youth Ministry, a role he carried out with a multicultural vision acquired through experiences in different contexts. His central message is **holiness** as the foundation of Salesian educational action: 'I would like to see a holier Congregation,' he says, emphasising that professional efficiency must be rooted in consecrated identity.*

What is your vocation story?

I was born in Gozo, Malta, on 23 March 1959, the fifth of seven children. At the time of my birth, my father was a pharmacist in a hospital, while my mother had started a small fabric and dressmaking shop, which over time grew into a small chain of five shops. She was a very hard-working woman, but the business always remained a family affair.

I attended local primary and secondary schools. A very beautiful and special part of my childhood was that my father was a lay catechist at the oratory, which until 1965 had been run by the Salesians. As a young man, he had attended that oratory and had remained there as the only lay catechist. When I started attending at the age of six, the Salesians had just left. A young priest (who is still alive) took over and continued the activities of the oratory in the same Salesian spirit, having himself lived there as a seminarian.

We continued with catechism, daily Benediction of the Eucharistic, football, theatre, choir, trips, parties... everything you normally experience in an oratory. There were

many children and young people, and I grew up in that environment. In practice, my life took place between my family and the oratory. I was also an altar boy in my parish. So, after finishing high school, I turned towards the priesthood, because I had had this desire in my heart since I was a child.

Today I realise how much I was influenced by that young priest, whom I looked up to with admiration. He was always there with us in the courtyard, in the activities of the oratory. However, at that time the Salesians were no longer there. So, I entered the seminary, where at that time there were two years of preparatory studies as an intern. During the third year – which corresponded to the first year of philosophy – I met a family friend about 35 years old, an adult vocation, who had entered as a Salesian aspirant (he is still alive today and is a coadjutor). When he took this step, a fire was lit inside me. And with the help of my spiritual director, I began a vocational discernment. It was an important but also demanding journey. I was 19 years old, but that spiritual guide helped me to seek God's will, and not simply my own. So, in my last year – the fourth year of philosophy – instead of following him to the seminary, I lived as a Salesian aspirant, completing the required two years of philosophy.

My family environment was strongly marked by faith. We attended Mass every day, recited the Rosary at home, and were very close-knit. Even today, although our parents are in Heaven, we maintain that same unity among brothers and sisters.

Another family experience marked me deeply, although I only realised it over time. My brother, the second in the family, died at the age of 25 from kidney failure. Today, with advances in medicine, he would still be alive thanks to dialysis and transplants, but back then there weren't many options. I was by his side during the last three years of his life. We shared the same room and I often helped him at night.

He was a peaceful, cheerful young man who lived his fragility with extraordinary joy.

I was 16 when he died. Fifty years have passed, but when I think back to that time and that daily experience of closeness made up of small gestures, I realise how much it has marked my life.

I was born into a family where there was faith, a sense of work and shared responsibility. My parents are two extraordinary examples for me. They lived their cross with great faith and serenity, without ever burdening anyone, and at the same time, they knew how to convey the joy of family life. I can say that I had a very happy childhood. We were neither rich nor poor, but always modest and discreet. They taught us to work, to manage resources well, not to waste, to live with dignity, elegance, and above all, with attention to the poor and the sick.

How did your family react when you made the decision to follow your vocation as a religious?

The time had come when, together with my spiritual director, we had made it clear that my path was that of the Salesians. I also had to tell my parents. I remember it was a quiet evening; we were eating together, just the three of us. At one point I said, "I want to tell you something. I have made my discernment and I have decided to join the Salesians."

My father was delighted. He replied immediately, "May the Lord bless you." My mother, on the other hand, began to cry, as all mothers do. She asked me, "So you're leaving?" But my father intervened gently and firmly, "Whether he leaves or not, this is his path."

They blessed me and encouraged me. Those moments will remain etched in my memory forever.

I particularly remember what happened towards the end of my parents' lives. My father died in 1997, and six months later my mother was diagnosed with terminal cancer.

At that time, my superiors had asked me to go and teach at the

Pontifical Salesian University (UPS), but I didn't know what to do. My mother was not well and was nearing the end of her life. Talking to my brothers, they said to me, "Do what your superiors ask you to do."

I was at home and talked to her about it. "Mom, my superiors are asking me to go to Rome."

With the clarity of a true mother, she replied, "Listen, my son, if it were up to me, I would ask you to stay here, because I have no one else and I don't want to be a burden on your brothers. But..." – and here she said something that I carry in my heart – "You are not mine; you belong to God. Do what your superiors tell you."

That sentence, spoken a year before her death, is a treasure for me, a precious legacy. My mother was an intelligent, wise, and perceptive woman. She knew that her illness would lead to her death, but at that moment she was able to be free inside. Free to say words that confirmed once again the gift she herself had given to God: offering a son to the consecrated life.

My family's reaction, from the beginning to the end, was always marked by deep respect and great support. And even today, my brothers and sisters continue to carry on this spirit.

What has been your formative journey from novitiate to today?

It has been a very rich and varied journey. I began my pre-novitiate in Malta, then I did my novitiate in Dublin, Ireland. It was a truly beautiful experience.

After the novitiate, my companions moved to Maynooth to study philosophy at the university, but I had already completed my studies. For this reason, my superiors asked me to remain at the novitiate for another year, where I taught Italian and Latin. After that, I returned to Malta for two years of internship, which were very beautiful and enriching.

I was then sent to Rome to study theology at the Pontifical Salesian University, where I spent three extraordinary years.

Those years gave me great open-mindedness. We lived in the student residence with forty brothers from twenty different countries: Asia, Europe, Latin America... even the teaching staff was international. It was the mid-1980s, about twenty years after the Second Vatican Council, and there was still a lot of enthusiasm in the air. There were lively theological debates, liberation theology, and interest in method and practice. Those studies taught me to read faith not only as intellectual content, but as a choice of life.

After those three years, I continued with two more years of specialisation in moral theology at the Alfonsian Academy with the Redemptorist fathers. There, too, I met significant figures, such as the famous Bernhard Häring, with whom I formed a personal friendship and went to talk to him regularly every month. It was a total of five years – between my bachelor's and licentiate degrees – that deeply formed me from a theological point of view.

Afterwards, I volunteered for the missions, and my superiors sent me to Tunisia, together with another Salesian, to re-establish the Salesian presence in the Country. We took over a school run by a female congregation which, having no more vocations, was about to close. It was a school with 700 students, so we had to learn French and also Arabic. To prepare ourselves, we spent a few months in Lyon, France, and then devoted ourselves to studying Arabic.

I stayed there for three years. It was another great experience because we found ourselves living the Salesian faith and charism in a context where we could not speak explicitly about Jesus. However, it was possible to build educational programmes based on human values: respect, availability, truth. Our witness was silent but eloquent. In that environment, I learned to know and love the Muslim world. Everyone – students, teachers, and families – were Muslims, and they welcomed us with great warmth. They made us feel part of their family. I returned to Tunisia several times and

always found the same respect and appreciation, regardless of our religious affiliation.

After that experience, I returned to Malta and worked for five years in the social field. In particular, I worked in a Salesian house that welcomes young people in need of more attentive educational support, including residential care.

After these eight years of pastoral work (between Tunisia and Malta), I was offered the opportunity to complete my doctorate. I chose to return to Ireland because the subject was related to conscience according to the thinking of Cardinal John Henry Newman, now a saint. After completing my doctorate, the Rector Major at the time, Fr. Juan Edmundo Vecchi – of blessed memory – asked me to join the Pontifical Salesian University as a professor of moral theology.

Looking back on my entire journey, from aspirant to doctorate, I can say that it has been a combination of experiences not only in terms of content but also in terms of very different cultural contexts. I thank the Lord and the Congregation for offering me the opportunity to experience such a varied and rich formation.

So, you know Maltese because it is your mother tongue, English because it is the second language in Malta, Latin because you taught it, Italian because you studied in Italy, French and Arabic because you were in Manouba, Tunisia... How many languages do you know?

Five or six languages, more or less. However, when people ask me about languages, I always say that it is a bit of a historical coincidence.

In Malta, we grow up with two languages: Maltese and English, and we study a third language at school. In my day, Italian was also taught. Then, I had a natural aptitude for languages, so I also chose Latin.

Later, when I went to Tunisia, I had to learn French and Arabic.

In Rome, living with many Spanish-speaking students, my ear got used to it, and when I was elected Councillor for Youth Ministry, I also studied Spanish a little, which is a very beautiful language.

All languages are beautiful. Of course, learning them requires commitment, study, and practice. Some people are more gifted than others; it is part of one's personal disposition. But it is neither a merit nor a fault. It is simply a gift, a natural predisposition.

From 2008 to 2020, you served two terms as General Councillor for Youth Ministry. How did your experience help you in this mission?

When the Lord entrusts us with a mission, we bring with us all the baggage of experiences we have accumulated over time.

Having lived in different cultural contexts, I did not run the risk of seeing everything through the filter of a single culture. I am European; I come from the Mediterranean, from a Country that was a British colony, but I have had the grace to live in international, multicultural communities.

My years of study at UPS also helped me a lot. We had professors who did not just impart knowledge, but taught us to synthesise and develop a method. For example, when studying Church history, we understood how essential it was to understand patristics. When studying biblical theology, we learned to connect it with sacramental theology, morality, and the history of spirituality. In short, they taught us to think organically.

This ability to synthesise, this architecture of thought, then becomes part of your personal formation. When you study theology, you learn to identify key points and connect them. The same applies to pastoral, pedagogical or philosophical proposals. When you meet people of great depth, you absorb not only what they say, but also how they say it, and this shapes your style.

Another important element is that, at the time of my election, I had already had experiences in missionary environments, where the Catholic religion was practically absent, and I had worked with marginalised and vulnerable people. I had also gained some experience in the university world and, at the same time, I had devoted myself a lot to spiritual accompaniment.

Furthermore, between 2005 and 2008 – just after my experience at the UPS – the Archdiocese of Malta asked me to found a Pastoral Formation Institute, following a diocesan synod that had recognised the need for it. The archbishop entrusted me with the task of starting it from scratch. The first thing I did was to build a team of priests, religious, and lay people – men and women. We created a new formation method, which is still used today. The institute continues to function very well, and in some ways that experience was a valuable preparation for the work I did later in youth ministry.

From the beginning, I have always believed in teamwork and collaboration with lay people. My first experience as a director was precisely in this style: a stable educative team, today we would call it a CEP (Educative-Pastoral Community), with regular, not occasional, meetings. We met every week with educators and professionals. And this approach, which over time has become a method, has remained a reference point for me.

Added to this is my academic experience: six years as a lecturer at the Salesian Pontifical University, where students came from over a hundred countries, and then as an examiner and director of doctoral theses at the Alfonsian Academy. I believe that all this has prepared me to live this responsibility with clarity and vision.

So, when the Congregation asked me to take on this role during the General Chapter of 2008, I already had a broad, multicultural vision. This helped me because bringing together

diversity was not difficult for me; it was part of normality. Of course, it wasn't simply a matter of making a 'fruit salad' of experiences; it was necessary to find the common threads, to give coherence and unity.

What I was able to experience as General Councillor was not a personal achievement. I believe that any Salesian, if he had had the same opportunities and support from the Congregation, could have had similar experiences and made his own generous contribution.

Is there a prayer, a Salesian goodnight ritual, a habit that you never fail to do?

Devotion to Mary. At home we grew up with the daily Rosary, recited as a family. It was not an obligation; it was something natural. We did it before meals, because we always ate together. Back then it was possible. Today perhaps it is less so, but back then that was how we lived, the family together, shared prayer, the common table.

At first perhaps, I did not realise how deep that Marian devotion was. But as the years passed, when you begin to distinguish what is essential from what is secondary, I realised how much that maternal presence had accompanied my life.

Devotion to Mary is expressed in different ways: the daily Rosary, when possible; a moment of pause before an image or statue of Our Lady; a simple prayer, but one made from the heart. These are gestures that accompany the journey of faith.

Of course, there are some fixed points: daily Eucharist and daily meditation. These are pillars that are not discussed; they are lived. Not only because we are consecrated, but because we are believers. And faith is lived only by nourishing it. When we nourish it, it grows in us. And only if it grows in us can we help it to grow in others. For us, as educators, it is clear: if our faith does not translate into concrete life, everything else becomes a facade.

These practices – prayer, meditation, devotion – are not reserved for saints. They are an expression of honesty. If I have made a choice of faith, I also have a responsibility to cultivate it. Otherwise, everything is reduced to something external, apparent. And this, over time, does not hold up.

If you could go back, would you make the same choices?

Absolutely yes. There have been very difficult moments in my life, as there are for everyone. I don't want to come across as the 'victim of the moment'. I believe that every person, in order to grow, must go through phases of darkness, moments of desolation, loneliness, of feeling betrayed or unjustly accused. And I have experienced these moments. But I have had the grace of having a spiritual director at my side.

When you go through certain hardships accompanied by someone else, you can sense that everything God allows has a meaning, a purpose. And when you come out of that 'tunnel', you discover that you are a different, a more mature person. It is as if, through that trial, we are transformed.

If I had been alone, I would have risked making wrong decisions, without vision, blinded by the fatigue of the moment. When you are angry, when you feel alone, it is not the time to decide. It is the time to walk, to ask for help, to be accompanied.

Going through certain passages with someone's help is like being dough put in the oven; the fire cooks it, makes it mature. So, when asked if I would change anything, my answer is no. Because even the most difficult moments, even those I didn't understand, have helped me become the person I am today.

Do I feel like a perfect person? No. But I feel that I am on a journey, every day, trying to live in the mercy and goodness of God.

And today, as I give this interview, I can say with sincerity that I feel happy. Perhaps I have not yet fully understood

what it means to be Rector Major – it takes time – but I know that it is a mission, not a walk in the park. It brings with it its difficulties. However, I feel loved and esteemed by my collaborators and by the whole Congregation.

And everything I am today, I am thanks to what I have experienced, even in the most difficult moments. I would not change them. They have made me who I am.

Do you have any projects that are particularly close to your heart?

Yes. If I close my eyes and imagine something I really want, I would like to see a holier Congregation. Holier. Holier.

I was deeply inspired by Fr. Pascual Chávez's first letter in 2002, entitled "Be saints". That letter touched me deeply and left a mark on me.

There are many projects, all of them valid, well structured, with broad and deep visions. But what value do they have if they are carried out by people who are not holy? We can do excellent work, we can even be appreciated – and this, in itself, is not a bad thing – but we do not work to achieve success. Our starting point is an identity; we are consecrated persons.

What we offer only makes sense if it comes from there. Of course, we want our projects to be successful, but even more than that, we want them to bring grace, to touch people deeply. It is not enough to be efficient. We must be effective in the deepest sense, effective in our witness, in our identity, in our faith.

Efficiency can exist without any religious reference. We can be excellent professionals, but that is not enough.

Our consecration is not a detail. It is the foundation. If it becomes marginal, if we put it aside to make room for efficiency, then we lose our identity.

And people are watching us. In Salesian schools, people

recognise that the results are good – and that is good. But do they also recognise us as men of God? That is the question.

If they see us only as good professionals, then we are only efficient. But our life must be nourished by Him – the Way, the Truth, and the Life – not by what ‘I think’ or ‘I want’ or ‘what seems right to me’.

So, rather than talking about my personal project, I prefer to talk about a deep desire, to become saints. And to talk about it in concrete terms, not in an idealised way. When Don Bosco spoke to his boys about *study, health, and holiness*, he was not referring to a holiness made up only of prayer in the chapel. He was thinking of a holiness lived in relationship with God and nourished by relationship with God. Christian holiness is the reflection of this living and daily relationship.

What advice would you give to a young person wondering about their vocation?

I would tell them to discover, step by step, what God’s plan is for them.

The vocational journey is not a question you ask and then wait for a ready answer from the Church. It is a pilgrimage. When a young person says to me, *“I don’t know whether to become a Salesian or not,”* I try to steer them away from that formulation. Because it is not simply a matter of deciding, *“I’m going to become a Salesian.”* A vocation is not an option in relation to a ‘thing’.

In my own experience, when I told my spiritual director, *“I want to become a Salesian, I have to be one”*, he calmly made me reflect; *“Is this really God’s will? Or is it just your desire?”*

And it is right for a young person to seek what he desires; it is healthy. But those who accompany him have the task of educating that search, of transforming it from initial

enthusiasm into a journey of inner maturation.

"Do you want to do good? Good. Then know yourself, recognise that you are loved by God."

It is only from that deep relationship with God that the real question can emerge; "What is God's plan for me?"

Because what I want today may not be enough for me tomorrow. If vocation is reduced to what 'I like,' then it will be something fragile. Vocation, on the other hand, is an inner voice that calls us, that asks us to enter into dialogue with God, and to respond.

When a young person reaches this point, when they are accompanied to discover that inner space where God dwells, then they truly begin to walk.

For this reason, those who accompany them must be very attentive, profound, and patient. Never superficial.

The Gospel of Emmaus is a perfect image. Jesus approaches the two disciples and listens to them even though He knows they are talking confusedly. Then, after listening to them, He begins to speak. And in the end, they invite Him; *"Stay with us, for it is nearly evening."*

And they recognise Him in the gesture of breaking bread. Then they say to each other, *"Were not our hearts burning within us while He was talking to us on the way?"*

Today, many young people are searching. Our task as educators is not to be hasty. But to help them, calmly and gradually, to discover the greatness that is already in their hearts. Because there, in that depth, they encounter Christ. As St Augustine says, *"You were within me, and I was outside. And there I sought you."*

Do you have a message for the Salesian Family today?

It is the same message I shared during the recent meeting of the Salesian Family Council; ***Faith. Let us root ourselves ever more deeply in the person of Christ.***

It is from this rootedness that an authentic knowledge of Don Bosco is born. When the first Salesians wanted to write a book about the real Don Bosco, they did not call it "*Don Bosco, Apostle of Youth*," but "*Don Bosco with God*"— a text written by Fr. Eugenio Ceria in 1929.

This gives us pause for thought. Why did they, who had seen him in action every day, not choose to emphasise Don Bosco's tireless work, his organisational skills, his talent as an educator? No, they wanted to portray Don Bosco as a man deeply united with God.

Those who knew him well did not stop at appearances but went to the root. Don Bosco was a man immersed in God.

To the Salesian Family I say: we have received a treasure. An immense gift. But every gift entails a responsibility.

In my final discourse, I said: ***"It is not enough to love Don Bosco, you have to know him."***

And we can only truly know him if we are people of faith.

We must look at him with the eyes of faith. Only in this way can we encounter the believer that Don Bosco was, in whom the Holy Spirit acted with power, with *dýnamis*, with *cháris*, with charism, with grace.

We cannot limit ourselves to repeating certain maxims of his or recounting his miracles. Because we run the risk of dwelling on the anecdotes of Don Bosco, instead of dwelling on the story of Don Bosco, because Don Bosco is greater than Don Bosco.

This means study, reflection, depth. It means avoiding all superficiality.

And then we will be able to say with truth, ***"This is my faith, this is my charism: rooted in Christ, in the footsteps of Don Bosco."***

Interview with the new inspector don Peter Končan

Short biography

He completed his novitiate in the community of Pinerolo, Italy, professed his first vows on September 8, 1993, in Ljubljana Rakovnik, and his perpetual vows six years later. He received his theological training at the Salesian Pontifical University in Rome from 1997 to 2000, and was ordained a priest in Ljubljana on June 29, 2001.

As a priest, most of his educational and pastoral work was carried out within the Salesian work of Želimlje. From 2000 to 2003, he served as an educator and then, until 2020, as Director of the boarding school. During those years, he also taught religion at the high school and was responsible for the Salesian formation of the laity.

From 2010 to 2016, he was the Director of the Želimlje community and from 2021 to 2024, the Director of the Salesian Community of Ljubljana Rakovnik. From 2018 to 2024, he served as Vicar of the Inspector and his Delegate for Formation. In 2021, he also took on the coordination of this sector at the European level as the coordinator of RECN.

On December 6, 2023, he was appointed the 15th Inspector of the Province of Saints Cyril and Methodius of Ljubljana.

Can you introduce yourself?

I was born on May 30, 1974, in Ljubljana, Slovenia, into a farming family in a small village called Šentjošt. I am the youngest of 4 children, who all have families today, so I have 11 nieces and nephews and we are all very close. My native country and my family were strongly marked by the Communist terror during and after the Second World War. Some relatives were killed, houses destroyed... In the very difficult

situation, my parents had to start building the farmhouse from scratch. They had to use all their hard work and resourcefulness to provide for us children. My parents involved us children in daily work and in this way, I also learned that to achieve something important you have to work hard.

Who first told you the story of Jesus?

My parents always openly expressed their Christian identity, even though being a Christian was not appropriate in those times, and they had quite a few problems because of this. Every evening, after the work was done, we gathered as a family to pray the rosary, the litanies, and other prayers. I liked being an altar boy and for this, I often walked to the church, which was 2 kilometres from my house, to attend Mass. The example of my parents, Christian life in the family and in the parish are therefore the fundamental reasons for feeling God's call from an early age.

How did you meet Don Bosco?

My parents often went on pilgrimage to Ljubljana Rakovnik where the Salesians were, and so I also met Don Bosco, who fascinated me immediately. I started attending retreats organised by the Salesians and after elementary school at 14, it was very natural for me to go to the minor seminary led by the Salesians in Želimlje. My parents were very happy with my decision and always supported me on my journey. I am truly very grateful to them for all the love, for the peaceful family in which I grew up, and for so many important values that they passed on to me. Don Bosco also fascinated them, and so, in the process of my formation, they also made the promise as Salesian cooperators.

The experience of initial formation

I was in high school at the time when Communism collapsed and Slovenia became independent, and then the Salesians could resume our typical work. For this reason, I was taken by the enthusiasm of so many opportunities for youth work that were

opening up. In the years spent in international formation houses in Italy, my horizons were also broadened because I had the opportunity to meet many Salesians from all over the world and live many new experiences. During this period, I worked a lot on my human and spiritual growth, and I also learned to love Don Bosco and his way of being and working with young people very much. I became more and more convinced that this is a path thought of by God for me and that the Salesian charism is a great gift for the young people of our time.

What is your best experience?

The 20 years spent in the boarding school in Želimplje and then in Rakovnik, living with almost 300 young people every day, were truly very beautiful and greatly marked my life. I had the privilege of following their human, intellectual, and spiritual growth and of touching their joys, hopes, and wounds from close up. The young people taught me how important it is to “waste” time being with them. In this period, I also learned and experienced how precious the lay collaborators are, without whom we cannot carry out our mission.

What are the local youth like and what are the most relevant challenges?

In the Salesian works and around our programmes there are still many generous young people, with open hearts and willing to do good for their peers. I am very proud of their enthusiasm and also happy that many in Don Bosco find the model and strength for their human and spiritual growth.

On the other hand, it is also true that they are strongly marked by the virtual world and all the other challenges of our time. Fortunately, traditional values have not completely disappeared, but it is also true that they are no longer strong enough to guide young people. For this reason, we Salesians try to help young people with concrete proposals of support and by walking with them. At the last provincial chapter, we identified some poverties (challenges) of our context: the weak family, lukewarm spiritual tendency,

relativism and the search for identity, passivity, apathy, and the lack of concrete preparation of young people for life.

Where do you find the strength to continue?

First of all, in the confreres. Fortunately, I have very good and generous confreres around me who are of great support to me. The provincial alone cannot do much. I am convinced that the only right way to progress is that we all (Salesians, young people, and lay people) contribute our gifts and strengths for the common good. And secondly, we all and our mission are only a small part in a great design of God. It is He who is the true protagonist and this awareness gives me great inner serenity.

What place does Mary Help of Christians occupy in your life?

Already in my family, I learned that Mary is a great support for daily life. I very willingly and with great confidence go on pilgrimage to the various Marian shrines, where Mary fills me with peace and inner strength for all the challenges of my life. I can testify to many of the graces that have been granted to me or my loved ones through Mary.

Fr. Peter KONČAN,
Slovenia Provincial

Interview with the new provincial fr. Domingos LEONG

Don Domingos Leong is the Superior of the "Mary Help of Christians" Province (CIN) for the six-year term 2024-2030. He succeeds Don Joseph Ng Chi Yuen, who has served the China Province as Superior since 2018. We interviewed him.

Can you introduce yourself?

My name is Domingos Leong, born into a Catholic family living in Macau, then Portuguese colony in China. I have two sisters, and I am the only boy in the family. Both of my parents were teachers in schools run by the Salesians and the FMA. All my education was carried out in Salesian schools, both in Macau and Hong Kong. I joined the Salesian after my graduation from high school and received my formation in Hong Kong. I was sent to study philosophy in the U.S. (Newton, New Jersey) where opened up my global view of the Congregation. After my ordination, I went to Rome to pursue my further study on Liturgy in San Anselmo, Rome.

What did you dream of as a child?

Since my parents were teachers, and some of my relatives were in the field of education, I was dreaming of becoming a teacher in the future.

Do you remember any educators in particular?

During my years in junior high school, I used to attend the Oratory on Sundays. I remember when I was only 12 years old, out of my surprise, I was asked to take charge of a group of youngsters, organized games for them, and teaching them catechisms. I believed that's the seed of Salesian vocation has been planted into my heart.

What is your best experience?

After my ordination, we have chances to organize 'volunteers group' serving in Mainland China during summer holidays. Young people coming from our schools, both in Hong Kong and Macau, went to serve in rural areas. Together with local young people, all shared the beautiful experiences, not only by serving, but also by witnessing our faith in a total different environment. I believed that is the best way to promote religious vocation.

What are the most urgent local needs and those of young people?

The local young people, may not be lacking of any materials, but, they would feel lonely and need accompaniment, both from their peers and adults. Young people are victims of dysfunctional families, they are not being listened to.

What would you say to young people at this moment?

Be courageous! We, the Salesians, are always available and willing to give our help whenever you need, especially in this year of Hope. Together with the members of Salesian Family, we are your BIG support and don't hesitate to ask.

fr. Domingos LEONG

Interview to the new Superior of Malta, Fr. Eric CACHIA

Malta, a land blessed by the Apostle Paul, is an island located in the heart of the Mediterranean Sea between Europe and North Africa. Over the centuries, it has been influenced by numerous cultures, making it more enchanting. This small state, one of the most densely populated in the world, has hosted the Salesians of Don Bosco since 1903, passionately engaged in the education of young people. We interviewed Fr. Eric, recently appointed to lead the Maltese Salesian community.

Can you introduce yourself?

My name is Fr. Eric Cachia, and I was born on August 4, 1976, in Malta. I am the eldest of three children. I have two younger sisters and two lovely nieces. I attended kindergarten at the state school in my hometown, Haż-Żebbuġ, for six years.

During the last year, it was necessary to take an exam to access the desired school. I dreamed of entering the minor seminary, but to make my mother happy, I also took the exam for the state high school and another for Savio College, the Salesian school, of which I knew almost nothing at the time, and which I initially did not want to attend. I took that exam reluctantly, but God's plans were for me to be admitted into the Salesian school.

After seven years of study, I obtained my high school diploma and began the Novitiate in Lanuvio, near Rome, making my first religious vows in the hands of the newly elected Rector Major, Fr. Juan E. Vecchi, at the Sacred Heart in Rome. I was the youngest in the group: I was only 19 years old. Back in Malta, I obtained a Bachelor's degree in Philosophy and Sociology and subsequently spent two years as the head of the Oratory in Sliema.

For my theological studies, I moved to Rome, attending the Pontifical Salesian University (UPS) and living at the Gerini community. I was ordained a deacon in 2004 and continued my training in Dublin, Ireland, obtaining a Master's in *Holistic Development in Family Pastoral Ministry*. Having returned to Malta, I was ordained a priest on July 21, 2005, along with nine other religious and diocesan members.

My first obedience was to be the Head of the Oratory in Sliema and Treasurer of the community. After a few months, I was appointed Delegate for Youth Pastoral in the Council of the Malta Delegation. I held this position for a year before being appointed Treasurer of the Delegation, a role I held for 10 years and then for another 6 years when, in 2018, Malta became a Vice-Province.

In the meantime, I also held other positions: Principal of Savio College, Supervisor in the post-novitiate training in Malta for six years, and for four years, Assistant Coordinator of the Association of Catholic Schools in Malta. To respond to

pastoral needs, I obtained a Master's in Systemic and Family Psychotherapy and was elected Secretary of the Committee of the National Association of Psychotherapy in Malta. In 2017, I became the Director of St. Patrick's, a structure that includes a school, a boarding school, and a public church, as well as being Principal of the school. Finally, in December 2023, I was appointed Provincial, a position I took on starting in July 2024.

What did you dream of as a child?

When I was 7, I became an altar boy, and even today I cannot explain the experience I had during my first Mass as a ministrant. I felt a presence of love in my heart that invited me to become a priest. Even at home, I played "being a priest," and at school, despite the tension between Church and State at the time, I often debated religious topics.

The desire to become a priest included the wish to give a voice to those who did not have one. I liked writing stories, speaking in public, and organising events. At just 14, for example, I was already organising walks for the altar boys.

What is the story of your vocation?

My vocation was born from the meeting with various priests whom I considered role models. However, it was in the Salesian school that I found new energy. There I discovered hidden talents and lived experiences that made me feel part of a large family. In that joyful and stimulating context, the Lord spoke to my heart.

During my last school year, I understood that my path would be Salesian. After a year of discernment and discussion with my family and a priest, I found peace in deciding: "I give myself for the boys of the future. I will be Salesian to carry on what I have received."

A curious anecdote was told to me by my paternal grandmother when I was close to the diaconate. My father was one of 18

children in a large and modest family. An English Salesian, Fr. Patrick McLoughlin, known for his reputation of holiness, would often stop by the nuns after Mass to bring a slice of cake to my grandmother. In the evening, he would return with leftover meals to help feed the struggling family. One day, my grandmother asked him: "How can I repay such kindness and providence?" He replied: "You just pray: who knows, maybe one of your children will become a Salesian." Among 51 cousins, I was the first – and one of two – to choose the religious life... and Salesian.

How did your family react?

My family has always been very supportive. My parents never imposed their ideas but always tried to support my decisions. My father was a mason, and my mother was a housewife. Simplicity and family unity were among the strongest values that characterised us. They made sacrifices as an expression of a love lived in a concrete way that I would understand only as an adult. It was not easy to leave the country and start my journey at just 18, but today my parents are proud, and in some way, they are also part of the Salesian Family. For over 30 years, they have prepared meals for the boys during summer camps. Who knows how many times my father, despite being illiterate, spoke with the wisdom of the heart to some young person or parent. And how many times they have sent brochures at the provincial level to support our Salesian works!

The most beautiful joy and the greatest struggle

There are many joys that are kept in the heart, but one of the greatest is when I meet an ex-student who tells me: "In you, I found the father I never had." Living one's vocation fully also means offering what could have been equally beautiful, like building a family. This sometimes involves having to suffer in silence for this choice offered. The greatest struggle, on the other hand, is seeing children suffer due to wars, violence, and abuse... seeing them deprived of the ability to dream of a world full of hope and possibilities. It is

equally difficult to remain credible and optimistic in a context of fierce secularism that often drains energy and tries to extinguish enthusiasm.

Local and youth needs

Malta lives in a very particular reality. Culturally, it remains deeply Catholic, but in everyday practice, it is not so much. In recent years, politically oriented choices aimed primarily at boosting the economy have generated a deep crisis within families. Many young people grow up marked by the lack of reference figures and models to accompany them with love. There are no stable points of orientation, and at the same time, many young people are searching for new meaning in their lives. Faith, increasingly relegated to the private sphere, can, however, awaken interest when it manages to speak a language that challenges and invites to aim high. In these cases, young people are happy to come together to live experiences that require guidance. About 20% of the population is no longer Maltese. The economy, which has attracted people from all over the world, is transforming the face of the island. Many non-Maltese young people feel alone, while others begin or resume a journey of faith. These are new frontiers and emerging forms of poverty, marked by psycho-affective challenges and mental health issues. These situations highlight the urgency of addressing isolation, precariousness, and relational deficiencies that characterise this complex reality.

The great challenges of evangelisation

Everything can be summed up in one word: credibility. Young people today, more than ever, do not need simple transmitters of content, rather people with authentic hearts and ears capable of listening to the heartbeat of hearts searching for meaning in their lives. They need educators who know how to create processes, companions who are not afraid to show their fragility and limits, but who are authentic guides. These are guides who propose what they themselves have lived: the

encounter with Jesus as a goal and calling for every person. A guide leads to rediscovering oneself as part of a Church on the move towards the peripheries, ready to embrace and heal wounds, even before indicating what must be done. The real challenge, at least for Europe, is to find young people who have the courage to bet their lives on Jesus. As emerged during the Synod, some structures, contexts, and languages of the Church are no longer incisive. This is compounded by a Church that, in some cases, appears tired and distracted, too focused on self-preservation. This situation also reflects that of families, which must be placed back at the centre of priorities in every nation. They are the future of the State and the Church. That is why Salesian environments, with their humanism that values the beauty present in every person, must present themselves not only as immediate responses, but also as models for other groups and realities. Perhaps only today do we understand that the joy and hope of Don Bosco go far beyond simple emotions. They are the foundations upon which to build the relaunch of a renewed humanity redeemed by Christ.

How do you see the future?

I look to the future with hope. The present we live in, in my opinion, is marked by numerous crises on various fronts: I would say it could not be worse than this. Therefore, it is a time for renewal. We rely on Christ in this time of purification and transformation. Yes, there are challenges that will surely shape the future.

What place does Mary Help of Christians occupy in your life?

As a child, we prayed the Rosary as a family every day. However, for me, it was perhaps just a practice of popular piety. Over time, especially during my years as a Salesian, I realised how close this heavenly mother is to me. I remember numerous moments when, caught up in practical difficulties and concerns related to pastoral work, I was about to give up. But she always intervened at the right moment. Every day I realise how truly "it was she who did everything." I have a deep

affection for the blessing of Mary Help of Christians. Every morning I entrust to her all the young people and lay collaborators, but especially those who find themselves in the peripheries of society. A year ago, on the occasion of the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, I shared on social media a phrase that Mary said to Juan Diego: "Do not be afraid. Am I not here, I who am your Mother? Are you not under my shadow and protection? Am I not the source of your joy? Are you not in the fold of my cloak, in the crossing of my arms? Do you need anything else? Do not let anything else worry or disturb you." Two hours later, I received a call from the Rector Major and the request to accept or not the appointment as Provincial.

What would you say to young people?

Do not give up! I would recall the words of Pope Francis addressed to young people in April 2024: " Rise to stand in front of life, not to sit on the couch. There are several "couches" that take hold of us and do not let us get up again." If only young people understood that they are the hope of today and tomorrow, that they are like delicate and fragile seeds, but at the same time rich with infinite possibilities! I would urge them to challenge Christ, but also to allow Christ to challenge them. Only then do we understand that with Him we build an intimate relationship with a living God, not with an image shaped by fears or anxieties. I would challenge those young people who have already experienced Don Bosco. It is extraordinary to throw oneself into the Heart of Christ, giving one's life for the young who will come. "Whom shall I send?" Christ asked His disciples. If only many others had the same determination: "Send me!"

Fr. Eric CACHIA, sdb
Superior of Malta

Interview with the new superior Don Vincentius Prastowo

Don Vincentius Prastowo is the new Salesian provincial for Indonesia, a country that, with its 279 million inhabitants and over 700 languages, ranks fourth in the world by population. Indonesia is the largest archipelagic state on the planet, made up of 17,508 islands, and is home to the largest Muslim community in the world. The Salesian presence in this nation dates back to 1985, although the first experience in present-day East Timor began as early as 1927. We interviewed him.

Can you introduce yourself?

My name is Vincentius Prastowo. I was born on November 28, 1980, in Magelang, Central Java. I am the second generation in my family to embrace the Catholic faith. My parents were the first in our extended family to receive the sacrament of baptism—a decision that profoundly changed the course of our lives. From them, I came to know Jesus Christ and the Catholic values that have been instilled in me since childhood. I attended a Catholic primary school run by the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception (SPM), where my faith grew through religious education, liturgical activities, and close interactions with religious sisters.

What is the story of your vocation?

My interest in religious life began during my teenage years, inspired by the Jesuit priests who served in my parish. Their genuine dedication to service, intellectual depth, and profound spirituality left a lasting impression on me. This

inspiration led me to continue my education at Stella Maris Minor Seminary in Bogor, run by the Franciscans, from 1994 to 1998.

At the seminary, I not only learned basic theology and philosophy but also deepened my understanding of prayer life, discipline, and community living. These years were foundational in shaping my path and clarifying my desire to pursue a life of service to God and others.

How did you meet the Salesians?

Every year, Stella Maris Seminary hosted visits from various religious congregations, introducing seminarians to different spiritualities and missions. During one of these visits, I met Fr. Jose Llopiz Carbonell and Fr. Andress Calejja, two Salesian priests who frequently came to the seminary. They brought annual calendars featuring the image of Mary, Help of Christians, which immediately captured my attention.

Through conversations with them, I became intrigued by the Salesian mission and decided to explore their community further. My curiosity led me to regular visits to the Salesian community in Jakarta every year-end. I was deeply impressed by their approach to education and their commitment to accompanying young people. They didn't just preach about faith; they practiced it by mentoring youth from humble backgrounds.

The warmth and love I experienced in the Salesian community eventually solidified my decision to choose this path.

What difficulties did you encounter?

Choosing the Salesian path was not without challenges. My initial formation took place in Timor Leste, a region embroiled in political conflict at the time due to its struggle for independence from Indonesia. The situation created significant tension, both for me and my family. My parents were deeply concerned for my safety and even suggested I consider a "safer" congregation.

However, my resolve was firm. I believed that this calling was

the life God had planned for me. Amid the ongoing conflict, I faced numerous trials, including the threat of violence, cultural adaptation, and longing for my family. Yet, in every hardship, I found strength through prayer and God's protection.

This experience taught me to rise above fear and strengthened my conviction. One of my greatest joys was the freedom and courage to determine my life's calling, despite the obstacles along the way.

As a Salesian, I've come to realize the immense challenges faced by communities in Indonesia's archipelagic regions. Our nation, comprised of thousands of islands, grapples with disparities in access to education and economic opportunities. In remote areas, young people's most pressing needs are quality education and access to decent jobs.

I firmly believe that collaboration between central and local governments is essential to alleviating poverty in these regions. Prioritizing the development of educational infrastructure, offering scholarships for underprivileged children, and creating equitable job opportunities are vital steps.

As part of the Salesian community, I feel called to contribute to these efforts, especially through vocational education programs aimed at empowering youth with skills that prepare them for the workforce and foster self-reliance.

How is your Salesian work in the context of the country?

Indonesia is known as the country with the largest Muslim population in the world. However, I am grateful that its people are generally moderate and open to diversity. In this context, Salesians work in predominantly Muslim areas with a spirit of brotherhood and collaboration. Our mission seeks to build bridges through education and service, respecting individual beliefs while upholding universal values such as love, justice, and peace.

This awareness of diversity is a treasure that we must

continue to celebrate. In daily life, we learn to respect one another and work together with various communities. I believe Indonesia's cultural, religious, and traditional diversity is a blessing that must be preserved and cherished.

How do you see the future of young people and Salesian education?

Indonesia is projected to experience a demographic boom starting in 2030. This means a significant increase in the working-age population, presenting both opportunities and challenges. While this growth offers the potential for economic advancement, it also poses risks of widespread unemployment if not managed well.

As an education-focused community, the Salesians play a crucial role in preparing young people to face the future. We focus on vocational training that aligns with industry needs while fostering strong character and discipline. One of our main projects is uplifting the dignity of young people in remote islands by equipping them with skills for the digital and technological era.

To thrive in the 5.0 era, Indonesia's youth need adaptability, creativity, and collaboration skills. The training programs we offer aim to meet these needs, empowering young people not only to compete in the job market but also to become agents of change in their communities.

What place does Mary Help of Christians occupy in your life?

Mary has always held a special place in my journey. Since childhood, I have known and loved her through the Rosary prayers often held in our neighbourhood. Her image as Mary, Help of Christians, has continuously strengthened and guided me through life's challenges.

In Salesian tradition, devotion to Mary is highly emphasized. We believe she is ever-present, accompanying and protecting us in every step of our journey. My personal experiences affirm that through prayer and entrusting ourselves to Mary, seemingly insurmountable difficulties can be overcome.

What would you say to young people at this moment?

To young people, my message is this: never lose hope. Do not let difficulties, challenges, or obstacles crush your dreams. Believe that there is always a way forward, especially when we lean on God and seek the intercession of Mary.

Life is a gift full of opportunities. Do not fear stepping out of your comfort zone, facing challenges, and pursuing your true calling. In every journey, God provides the strength, and Mary will always be present as a loving and faithful mother.

May Indonesian youth rise, grow, and become agents of change, bringing hope to the nation and the world. Let us walk together in faith, love, and service.

Fr. Vincentius Prastowo

Provincial of Indonesia

Interview with the new Provincial Fr. Simon Zakerian

He made his First Profession in Damascus on September 8, 2002, and his Perpetual Profession in Aleppo on August 2, 2008. He was ordained a priest in his hometown, Qamishli, on September 11, 2010.

After initial formation, he served the Provincial in several ministries, taking on various responsibilities. From 2010 to 2014 in Aleppo, Syria, he served as a pastoral collaborator; from 2015 to 2017 in Damascus, he served as Director. From 2017 to 2018 in Alexandria, Egypt, he again held the role of Director, and from 2018 to July 2024 in Al-Fidar and El Houssoum, Lebanon, he continued with the responsibility of Director. At the provincial level, he served as the pastoral delegate for Youth Pastoral for about 12 years, finishing this

service in June 2024 and then starting the new service on July 6, 2024, as provincial.

The Middle East Province includes Palestine – Israel, Syria, Egypt, and Lebanon.

Can you introduce yourself?

I was born in Syria, in a city called al-Qamishli (northeast Syria), on July 2, 1978, to an Armenian family. Like all Armenians of the diaspora, I survived the Ottoman genocide of 1915, when my grandparents fled and made it to Qamishli. My father's name is Aram and my mother's name is Araxi; we are a family of two brothers and six sisters.

Who first told you the story of Jesus?

My family has always had a deep Christian faith that my parents passed on to me since I was a child, even with the help of my grandmother, who spoke to me about Jesus. The Armenian Church also helped me because as a child I served as an altar boy and assisted at Mass. Then I started attending the oratory of Don Bosco in my city, starting from the fifth grade. Since I really enjoyed playing soccer, I continued to attend Don Bosco for years, and gradually my belonging to the oratory grew more and more, involving me not only in sports activities, but also in animation and service.

What is the story of your vocation?

My vocation was born from a desire that God placed in my heart. When I served at Mass, I would tell myself: when I grow up, I will also be on the altar like this priest. After getting to know the Salesians, this desire matured more and more, and the example of the Salesians, who were with us in the courtyard, in church, and in various moments of our lives, made me think seriously about my life and its meaning. So I began to reflect more deeply and to ask myself about the purpose of my existence and the meaning of my life. Therefore, I started to wonder how I could discern my vocation, to ask what God wanted from me. With these thoughts, with prayer and

service, I walked in search of the Lord's will for me. In Qamishli there was an Italian missionary who was always with us in the courtyard. He organised soccer tournaments, encouraged us, accompanied us to church to experience the Holy Mass and Eucharistic adoration, and showed us films about the lives of saints to then encourage us to do works of charity and service in the oratory and outside. His testimony made me reflect that I too could live and do like him. So with his help and that of other Salesians, I began my discernment. I loved the life of that Salesian because he was close to God, to people, and to young people like Don Bosco, with a joyful and beautiful life, simple and profound. It was clear that his was not a job rather a divine vocation!

How did your family react?

My family is simple, and at first, they did not want me to leave home. But then they understood that it was a call from the Lord, and so I was allowed to begin the journey. From that moment on, my family has always encouraged my vocation with affection and prayer.

What have the biggest challenges been?

The biggest challenge was leaving the world to follow Christ in the consecrated life. This was not easy because my life was bound to many friends and soccer. I was a soccer player, and I played on a major league team in my city. So, leaving all this was difficult.

What is your most beautiful experience?

However, I must say that once I started the journey, I experienced what Jesus says in the Gospel, that whoever follows Him will have in return many brothers, sisters, friends, confreres, young people, and laypeople with whom to share life and mission. This is truly a beautiful gift.

What are the young people like in your area?

The young people of our province are heroes. They are wonderful. As I always tell everyone, they are the true

protagonists of the history of our lands because they have always lived in very difficult and war-torn situations. It is because they have learned to live in these situations as Christians and as witnesses, with great faith and hope. For me, they were and still are a beautiful example.

What more could be done and improved?

The future of the young people of our lands today is very ambiguous and not easy. However, they can do a lot. Thus I pray to God that He grants us peace so that they can build a future in these lands and look to tomorrow with hope and without fear because He is with us and does not abandon us.

What place does Mary Help of Christians occupy in your life?

In our houses in the Middle East, we Salesians, together with the young people, are used to frequently invoking Mary Help of Christians because we know that it was she who helped Don Bosco, especially in the most difficult moments. And we, especially in these moments of war, do not cease to ask for her maternal intercession, she our refuge, she the Madonna of difficult times, as Don Bosco used to say.

What would you say to young people at this moment?

I tell young people to not be afraid of life and difficulties, rather to face everything with love and hope; not alone, but with God and with brothers and sisters, because together we can change ourselves and the world. This is how our saints and our founding father Don Bosco lived and acted. Therefore, I invite young people to open their hearts to God's call, and not be indifferent when they hear His voice... do not harden your hearts!

And I conclude by saying to myself and to all young people the same words of Pope Francis in *Christus Vivit*: "Christ is alive and He wants you to be alive!"

Fr. Simon ZAKERIAN

Middle East Provincial

Interview with the New Provincial, fr. Milan Ivančević

Salesian Croatia represents a part of the Salesian Congregation that deserves special attention. In a country with nearly 4 million inhabitants, numerous vocations are emerging, not only among the Salesians but also among the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. Recently, the community welcomed a new Salesian provincial: Father Milan Ivančević. We had the pleasure of interviewing him and wish to share his testimony.

Can you introduce yourself?

Milan Ivančević, Salesian, born on 25 October 1962 in Šlimac (Rama – Prozor, BiH). Of three brothers and three sisters, I have 29 nieces and nephews. I completed my primary and secondary education in my hometown. After studying mathematics and physics in Mostar and spending two years teaching at a primary school, I joined the Salesian community in the autumn of 1989. I took my perpetual vows on 8 September 1997 and was ordained a priest on 27 June 1998.

As a Salesian priest, I have served in the following capacities:

1998 – 1999: Parish assistant at the Parish of Our Lady Help of Christians in Knežija;

1999 – 2002: Religion teacher in Žepče;

2002 – 2003: Adviser for the Salesian Vocational Education Community in Podsused;

2003 – 2005: Specialist studies in Rome at the UPS (licence in spirituality);

2005 – 2006: Adviser for the Salesian Vocational Education Community in Podsused;
2006 – 2015: Director in the same community and member of the Inspection Council;
2015 – 2021: Director of the Salesian community in Žepče and director of the KŠC Don Bosco;
2021 – 2024: Parish priest and community director in Split;
2024 – present: Inspector.

Who was the first person to tell you the story of Jesus?

My mother taught me my first steps in faith, both through her words and her example. Later, as I grew up, the rest of my family also nurtured our faith, as regular prayer was a constant at home: morning and evening prayers, before and after meals.

We lived in a village 7 km from the church, yet we regularly attended Sunday Mass. Everything was imbued with faith, but also with great suffering. My area suffered greatly during the Second World War. One day, when I was only 11, my mother lost two brothers who were killed by Chetniks (Serbs) in the autumn of 1942 simply because they were Croats. That wound marked the family for life, along with poverty.

How did you come to know about Don Bosco / the Salesians?

I heard about the Salesians rather late. During my studies in mathematics, I expressed my wish to become a priest to my aunt, now deceased, who was a nun in Germany. She provided me with four addresses in Germany that one could approach regarding a vocation to the priesthood. Among these was the Salesian congregation in Germany. I began corresponding with them, and the letters were translated by the Croatian Salesian Don Franjo Crnjaković, who was then working in Germany. When the time was right to join a community, the issue arose that I did not know the German language. Then Don Franjo sent me the address of the Salesians in Zagreb, and that is how I became a Croatian Salesian.

You studied mathematics at school. Why did you choose the

Salesian path?

I loved mathematics and working with children at school. I enjoyed helping young people solve mathematical problems. Since my childhood, the call to the priesthood had been quietly growing within me. The first instance I remember was an experience with an elderly relative who was among the few relatives receiving a pension. When I was in Year Three of primary school, one day he saw me happy because of my excellent grades and said, "Promise me that you will study to become a priest, and from now on I shall give you 5 stotinki of each of my pensions" (now worth about 10 euros). Naturally, I promised, because as a child that was of great value to me. Many years later, when I was already working in a school and close to deciding to join the community, I attended his funeral, and at his open grave I thanked him and promised that I would become a priest. Among the children to whom I taught mathematics were also those abandoned by their parents. Observing their situation helped me decide to embark on the path of serving young people as a Salesian.

The greatest joy and the greatest challenge

The experiences in the confessional make me especially happy. When I witness the transformation of a human soul and recognise that I am the means through which it happens, it is incomparable to anything on earth – it is a celestial event. This is particularly true when it comes to young people, although in these situations every soul is young because it is beautiful. What hurts me most is the despair of children and young people when their parents separate. I am always deeply moved by their suffering. I am also pained by the thoughtlessness with which people make the decision to have an abortion. I get goosebumps thinking of the blindness in which people do not realise the enormity of the error they are committing. These issues penetrate deeply into humanity and call it into question.

What are the most urgent local needs, especially for young

people? What could be done more and better?

The most urgent need of our population is to restore hope in people so that they are not afraid of life, and to strengthen them in the faith that God guides and sustains this world. Life is so much more beautiful and rich when it is imbued with faith, because it is in faith that it finds a clear meaning and constant reasons for joy. Modern culture steals this value from young people and replaces it with fleeting values, which quickly and easily fade away, leaving a void in the soul. We are fortunate that a large number of young people are able to nurture and live their faith, sometimes even against the prevailing current. But sadly, many are still far from faith and seek meaning in something smaller than themselves.

Perhaps we could go out even more and start seeking the homeless. However, it is necessary to go out prepared; if we rely solely on our own strength we might achieve a little, but if we proceed with the strength of God, then He does a great deal with our small endeavours. I believe that in our hearts, which are consecrated to God, we need to recover that original love and bear witness with renewed vigour that God is truly alive and that He invites us to share in His life. And this cannot be hidden – the souls see it.

How do you see the future?

The future, like the present, is in God's hands. The Bible teaches us that the world is in good hands. That is why we must not be afraid. "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31). It is true that changes are happening at an incredible speed, and the world is becoming ever smaller because everything is easily and quickly accessible. Cultures and traditions mingle, and no one can predict what the consequences will be. But if we have trust in the Lord, the source of life, He will bring everything to good. It is up to us to listen, discern, and find our place and our role in what He asks of us. And if we are on that path, then we are ready for the wonderful surprises that the Lord is preparing for us.

What place does Our Lady Help of Christians hold in your life?

Mary, the Mother of Jesus, holds an important place in my life. My own mother pointed out the presence of the Madonna throughout her life and whispered prayers, reciting the Rosary until her last breath. I too gladly make pilgrimages to the sanctuaries of the Madonna and testify to how her gaze infuses hope in people. Don Bosco left us the devotion to Our Lady Help of Christians and promised that we would witness miracles if we have childlike trust in the Immaculate Help of Christians. The mystery of Christmas and the Eucharist cannot be fully understood without delving deeply, and the simplest way to do so is to pray the Rosary.

What would you say to young people at this moment?

My message to young people is not to be afraid to be believers, even if society labels it as old-fashioned. Indeed, no one is as invested in our tomorrow as God, who, through His commandments, gives us strength for the future. He prepares us for the future with His commandments. If each day we strive to align our lives with the Decalogue, then we can already say of ourselves: blessed are those who follow in our footsteps, for they will have people ahead of them. Therefore, young people, be courageous, do not fear life—it is God's most beautiful gift.

Milan Ivančević, SDB
Provincial, Croatia

**Interview with the new
Superior Fr Gabriel**

NGENDAKURIYO

We interviewed the new Superior Fr Gabriel NGENDAKURIYO, of the African Great Lakes Visitatory (AGL), which includes Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi. The Visitatory's name recalls its proximity to Lake Victoria, the largest in Africa and the second largest in the world.

Can you introduce yourself?

My name is Gabriel NGENDAKURIYO, a Salesian of Don Bosco and a priest. I was born on 3 July 1954 in Burundi, where I attended school until the end of secondary school. Soon after, I entered the Salesian Congregation: I did my novitiate in Butare, Rwanda (1978-1979), and then studied Philosophy at the interdiocesan seminary in Nyakibanda (Rwanda).

In 1981, I moved to Lubumbashi (then Zaire) for practical training. I completed my Theology in Kolwezi, in the same country, and was ordained a priest in Lubumbashi on 11 August 1987. A month later I was already in Rukago, Burundi, as parish vicar.

In 1991 I was sent to Rome and then to Jerusalem for studies to prepare me for the role of formator at our *St Francis de Sales Theology Institute* in Lubumbashi. I stayed there from 1994 to 2006, until the Rector Major (Fr Pascual Chávez) appointed me Provincial Superior of a new Circumscription called *Great Lakes Africa* (AGL), with activities in three countries: Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda.

At the end of my six-year term (2006-2012) and after a sabbatical year in the Holy Land, I was appointed Director in Buterere (Burundi). Subsequently, for two years, I directed the Don Rua Community at UPS (Rome). Six years later (August 2021), I returned to Buterere as Rector of the Shrine dedicated to Mary Help of Christians. From there I left for Kigali for a new term as Provincial Superior. I am now in Rome for a formation session for the 'new' provincials.

Who first told you the story of Jesus?

I come from a deeply Christian and practising family. I got to know Jesus in a 'vital and concrete' way before being theoretical: we prayed the rosary every day, went to Mass on Sundays (two hours of walking), I was an altar boy, and I followed my older sister to catechumenate before starting primary school. So it was my parents who first told me about Jesus.

What is the story of your vocation?

At the end of primary school, I asked to enter the small diocesan seminary because I wanted to become a priest. It was not possible for me; so I was directed to a short-cycle school, run by the *Brothers of Our Lady of Mercy*, to train primary school teachers. Here I found people who edified me greatly. Then, at 17, I arrived at a Salesian school and felt the 'fire' of Don Bosco in my heart.

What is your fondest memory?

The moment of my priestly ordination is one of my most precious memories. Another is linked to my first arrival in the Holy Land and, later, in Lourdes.

What are the most urgent local needs and what are the needs of young people?

In my AGL Province, the most urgent priority is formation in *authentic* human and Christian values . Today there are so many 'teachers' of all kinds and it has become complicated to distinguish the weeds from the good wheat. Let us therefore work for deep evangelisation, based on the principles of Don Bosco's own 'preventive system'.

Are the Christians in the region persecuted?

Absolutely not. At the moment Christians enjoy sufficient freedom to live and proclaim their faith, obviously with respect for public order.

Do you have relations with people of other religions in your region?

Relations are not always idyllic between Catholic Christians and some new forms of Protestant obedience, but disagreements never result in violence.

How do you see the future?

I look at the future with optimism and realism. Human history is dynamic, made up of ups and downs. Today we are certainly going through a delicate period, which requires that we read the 'signs of the times' well and take the right direction.

What place does Mary Help of Christians occupy in your life?

Ever since I was a child I have always had a very important relationship with Mary (I only came to know the title 'Help of Christians' later). Once I discovered that she listens to me and takes care of me, I speak to her with respect but also with spontaneity and familiarity. I do everything to make her known and loved. I feel like her 'son', 'confidante' and 'disciple'.

What would you say to young people at this time?

I would tell them that life is beautiful and worthy of being lived to the full. And that this 'life in fullness', though wonderful, also requires effort (in the ascetic sense), capable of ennobling the human person. Come on, young people!

Fr Gabriel NGENDAKURIYO,

Superior of the Great Lakes Visitation of Africa

**Interview with Fr. John
Zosiama, Provincial of**

Shillong, India (INS)

We interviewed the new inspector of Shillong, India, Fr John ZOSIAMA. A special region in North-East India, bordering Bhutan, Bangladesh and Myanmar (Burma).

Can you introduce yourself?

I was born on 20th August 1974 in Chhingchhip, Mizoram, Northeast India. I had my early education in my village till High School. After that I did my Pre-University course in Aizawl, the capital of Mizoram state.

Who first told you the story of Jesus?

I grew up in a traditional Catholic family. We used to have regular family prayer like rosary in the evening. My mother was very devoted to our Blessed Mother, she never missed her daily rosary and she used to tell us about Jesus and the Gospel values.

What is the story of your vocation and why Salesian?

I was a regular altar server in my parish and frequented Catechism class every Sunday. I had desire to become a priest when I was small. But when I became adolescent I had no more intention of becoming a priest. Instead I concentrated on my studies to get good Government job and have happy family with children. However, before I joined University for further studies, I began to think seriously about my life and my vocation. I felt in my heart that God wants me to become a priest to serve him and to work for the Catholic Church since other Christian denominations are quite strong in my place. I felt that I could contribute something for our church especially the young people who are led astray. As I was planning to join a seminary, our Catechist told me about the Salesians and advised me to join them. I also heard about the Salesians and had seen their institutions in Shillong. Immediately, I contacted my aunty who is a nun, Missionary Sister of Mary Help of Christians (MSMHC) and she told the

Vice Provincial in Guwahati. As soon as he asked me to come I went directly to Guwahati by myself which is two days journey by road from my village. That is how I joined the Salesian Aspirantate.

How did your family react?

When I told my mother about my intention to become a priest, she was very happy. She told me not to worry about them, the Lord will take care of everything. Instead my father was not so happy as he wanted me to study and support the family. But at the end he also accepted and during the family prayer before I left home he prayed and shared that seeking first the kingdom of God is the most important thing in life by quoting Mt 6:33, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, all these things shall be added unto you".

The most beautiful joy and the greatest toil

I had a beautiful pastoral experience during my practical training and diaconate ministry. I really enjoyed being with the boys, teaching them, playing and working with them and being a friend to them. The two years I spent in the Aspirantate where we have around 150 boys, it was full of beautiful memories. Then, I had the joy of visiting many villages during my diaconate ministry. It was a joy to meet simple people in the villages, staying with them and sharing the message of the good news with them gave me sense of joy and fulfilment as Salesian.

The most challenging time was during my Philosophate. I had some misunderstanding with my superiors. I began to question about my vocation too. But I turned to God and I believed strongly that if He wants me He will make way for me. So, He did and I was able to go through those challenging times.

What do local youth look like and what are the most pressing local and youth needs?

The young people are lively and talented in various fields, and most of them are still actively involved in the church and social activities. But they are greatly influenced by the

social media today. They are gradually led astray by what they see in the media like materialism, secularization and political ideas, and we need to guide and accompany them as Salesians. Many are school drop-outs and unemployed, they need guidance and we need to give them hope for their future, to skill them and train them to be responsible citizens and good Christians.

Are Christians in the area being persecuted?

There are no persecuted Christians as such. Majority are Christians in some of the states where we are working. We get good support and collaboration with other religions too. But the Central government is trying to restrict our works of education and evangelization by imposing new rules and regulations which often make our pastoral works more and more difficult.

What are the great challenges of evangelization and mission today?

First of all, the Central government has introduced new financial rules and educational policy, which are going to be more and more difficult for us to operate and work for the people. But we continue our works of evangelization and the Church continues to grow stronger in Northeast India. I think, strengthening their faith through Catechetical instruction and helping them to live fully as believers with the Gospel values, to be agents of peace and social change are the needs of the hour in our region.

What could be done more and better?

As Salesians we could do something more for the young people especially who are in the periphery like school drop-outs, drug abusers and unemployed youth. We need to have a serious study and make strategic plans together with our lay collaborators and members of the Salesian family. We need to learn to work together as a team and network with others to be more effective and reach out to those most in need.

The relationship with those of other religion in your area?

So far our relationship with other religions is very good in our region. Many of the teachers in our schools and institutions are of other religions. They are dedicated and collaborate well with us in good spirit.

Do you have any projects that are particularly close to your heart?

I think, as Salesians we should study more the situation of the young people today and listen to their problems and aspirations, and then initiate a new ministry for the young people in this region especially those who are really poor and neglected. We may need to make a radical and difficult choice, but this is the type of work Don Bosco wished us to do. Let us pray and hope that we the confreres will also be able to change our mentality according to the change of time.

What place does Mary Help of Christians occupy in your life?

I have received so many graces through the intercession of our Blessed Mother in my life, especially as the Help of Christians. I can say that what I am today is because of our Bl. Mother who listened to my prayer and interceded for me always. I am grateful to her and to my mother who inspired me to pray rosary devoutly with faith.

Do you have a message for the Salesian Family?

As Salesian family we have a great charism through our father and founder Don Bosco, we need to cherish and be grateful to God for the gift of this charism. We should strive more to work together as a family for the young people especially the poor and abandoned wherever we are. We belong to a big family present in 137 countries and we can be visible signs and bearers of God's love for the young people.

Fr. John Zosiama,
Provincial of Shillong, India (INS)

Interview with the new inspector of Japan, Fr Francis HAMASAKI

We interviewed the new inspector of Japan, Don Francesco HAMASAKI. It is always nice to hear news from the geographically distant places from the Salesian origin, from Valdocco.

Can you introduce yourself?

I was born in Nagasaki Prefecture, a region of Japan known for the many martyrs that have been there. I was told that my ancestors were also Christians, so-called “hidden” due to persecution. However, during my childhood, I moved to Nara Prefecture (near Osaka and Kyoto, famous for its ancient temples and shrines) and grew up there. My family consists of seven people: my parents, my four siblings, and me. We are all Catholics, and in particular, my parents are very devout.

What is the story of your vocation?

At that time, the priests serving in Nara Prefecture all came from Australia and were Marist missionaries. The parish priest of my community was Father Tony Glynn, a man who worked hard to become a bridge of peace between Japan and Australia. He was even the protagonist of a film titled *The Railway of Love*. It was thanks to his influence that I began to desire to become a priest. However, at that moment, I did not yet know the Salesians of Don Bosco, nor Don Bosco himself.

Later, through various circumstances, such as meeting some sisters, I entered the Salesian aspirantate during my first year of high school. A curious event happened just before my entry: I received a magazine every month without knowing who

sent it to me. After entering the Salesians, I realized that it was the Japanese Salesian Bulletin (Katorikku Seikatsu; Catholic Life). Even today, I do not know who sent it to me, but I believe it was Don Bosco himself guiding me towards his congregation.

Today I feel very happy. This is because I intensely perceive the greatness and mercy of God, and I find joy in being a Salesian priest. This allows me to live the charism of Don Bosco, that is, to dedicate my life to the young.

Before being ordained a priest, I worked for two and a half years in the editorial office of Katorikku Seikatsu at the Don Bosco Sha publishing house. After ordination, I spent 12 years working with young people in the aspirantate. Subsequently, I worked for 9 years in a school and then for 3 years in a small parish and a kindergarten. Now, I hold the role of inspector.

Wherever I have been, I have found joy in being with young people and have lived many extraordinary experiences and encounters. Among all, the one that transformed my way of living, thinking, and feeling as a Salesian was the experience of pastoral work in a juvenile prison. Here I understood the importance of Don Bosco's teaching: "It is not enough to love; the young must feel loved." I deeply understood God's love and his infinite mercy.

Even though, due to my current role, I am often far from direct pastoral work with young people, I continue to dedicate myself to ministry in juvenile prisons so as not to forget the heart of Don Bosco.

What are the young people like in your area?

Speaking of today's Japanese youth, like in other countries, they also face various challenges. I believe there are two main issues that require attention:

1. Young immigrants and children of immigrant families: In recent decades, the number of young people from the Philippines and Latin America has increased. Recently, many young people from Southeast Asia, particularly from Vietnam, are coming to Japan. It is estimated that there are about

600,000 Vietnamese youth in the country. Our inspectorate has already committed to ministry for these young people, but with the continued aging of the Japanese population, it is likely that the number of foreign youth will further increase. This will require greater pastoral and spiritual attention for them.

2. Youth poverty: The Japanese economy is becoming weaker, and economic inequalities are growing. More and more young people are living in poverty. For example, there are many “children’s cafeterias” in Japan, which offer free meals to needy families. Additionally, the number of young people involved in “illegal jobs,” that is, petty crimes that promise easy earnings but turn them into victims of criminal systems, is increasing.

In response to these challenges, I believe it is time for our inspectorate to make courageous decisions and take action, as Don Ángel Fernández Artime, the previous Rector Major and current Cardinal, invited us to do. We must pay special attention to the young people who do not receive the necessary attention from public institutions, collaborating with the Salesian Family and our collaborators.

Finally, I want to emphasize the importance of the Madonna. Without trust and devotion to Mary Help of Christians, how could we convey the heart of Don Bosco to the young? As the years go by, I feel an increasing need for her guidance and help. Like Don Bosco, I often say: “And now, Mary, let’s begin.”

I ask you to pray for the young people of Japan and for us Salesians in Japan, so that we can continue to convey the heart of Don Bosco to all of them.

Don Hamasaki Atsushi Francesco,
inspector of Japan