

# Becoming a sign of hope in eSwatini – Lesotho – South Africa after 130 years

In the heart of Southern Africa, amidst the natural beauty and social challenges of eSwatini, Lesotho, and South Africa, the Salesians celebrate 130 years of missionary presence. In this time of Jubilee, General Chapter, and historical anniversaries, the Southern Africa Province shares its signs of hope: fidelity to Don Bosco's charism, educational and pastoral commitment among young people, and the strength of an international community that bears witness to fraternity and resilience. Despite the difficulties, the enthusiasm of young people, the richness of local cultures, and the spirituality of Ubuntu continue to point towards paths of future and communion.

Fraternal greetings from the Salesians of the smallest Vice-Province and the oldest presence in the Africa-Madagascar Region (since 1896, the first 5 confreres were sent by Fr. Rua). This year we thank the 130 SDBs who have worked in our 3 countries and who now intercede for us from heaven. "Small is beautiful"!

In the AFM territory live 65 million people who communicate in 12 official languages, amidst many natural wonders and great underground resources. We are among the few sub-Saharan African Countries where Catholics are a small minority compared to other Christian Churches, with only 5 million faithful.

What are the signs of hope that our young people and society are looking for?

Firstly, we are trying to overcome the infamous world records of the growing gap between rich and poor (100,000 millionaires

versus 15 million unemployed young people); the lack of security and increasing violence in daily life; the collapse of the educational system, which has produced a new generation of millions of illiterates, struggling with various addictions (alcohol, drugs...). Furthermore, 30 years after the end of the apartheid regime in 1994, society and the Church are still divided among the various communities in terms of economy, opportunities, and many unhealed wounds. Indeed, the "Rainbow Nation" community is struggling with many "gaps" that can only be "filled" with the values of the Gospel.

What are the signs of hope that the Catholic Church in South Africa is looking for?

Participating in the triennial "Joint Witness" meeting of religious superiors and bishops in 2024, we realised many signs of decline: fewer faithful, lack of priestly and religious vocations, aging, and decreasing number of religious, some dioceses bankrupt, continuous loss/decrease of Catholic institutions (medical care, education, social works or media) due to the sharp decline in committed religious and laity. The Catholic Bishops' Conference (SACBC – which includes Botswana, eSwatini, and South Africa) indicates as a priority, assistance to young people addicted to alcohol and various other substances.

What are the signs of hope that the Salesians of Southern Africa are looking for?

We pray daily for new Salesian vocations, to be able to welcome new missionaries. Indeed, the era of the Anglo-Irish Province (until 1988) has ended, and the Africa Project did not include the southern tip of the continent. After 70 years in eSwatini (Swaziland) and 45 years in Lesotho, we have only 4 local vocations from each Kingdom. Today we have only 5 young confreres and 4 novices in initial formation. However, the smallest Vice-Province in Africa-Madagascar, through its 7 local communities, is responsible for education and pastoral care in 6 large parishes, 18 primary and secondary schools, 3

vocational training centres (TVET), and various social assistance programmes. Our provincial community, with 18 different nationalities among the 35 SDBs living in the 7 communities, is a great gift and a challenge to embrace.

As a minority and fragile Catholic community in Southern Africa

We believe that the only way forward is to build more bridges and communion between religious and dioceses. The weaker we are, the more we strive to work together. As the entire Catholic Church seeks to focus on young people, Don Bosco has been chosen by the Bishops as the Patron of Youth Ministry, and his Novena is celebrated with fervour in most dioceses and parishes at the beginning of the pastoral year.

As Salesians and Salesian Family, we constantly encourage each other: “work in progress” (constant work)

In the last two years, following the Rector Major’s invitation, we have sought to relaunch our Salesian charism, with the wisdom of a common vision and direction (starting from the annual provincial assembly), with a series of small and simple daily steps in the right direction, and with the wisdom of personal and communal conversion.

We are grateful for the encouragement of Fr. Pascual Chávez for our recent Provincial Chapter of 2024: “You know well that it is more difficult, but not impossible, to ‘re-found’ than to found [the charism], because there are habits, attitudes or behaviours that do not correspond to the spirit of our Holy Founder, Don Bosco, and his Project of Life, and have ‘citizenship rights’ [in the Province]. There is truly a need for a true conversion of every confrere to God, holding the Gospel as the supreme rule of life, and of the entire Province to Don Bosco, assuming the Constitutions as a true project of life.”

Fr. Pascual’s advice and commitment were voted on: “To become more passionate about Jesus and dedicated to young people,”

investing in personal conversion (creating a sacred space in our lives, to let Jesus transform it); in communal conversion (investing in systematic monthly ongoing formation according to a theme); and in provincial conversion (promoting the provincial mentality through “One Heart One Soul” – the fruit of our provincial assembly), and with monthly online meetings of the Directors.

On the souvenir image of our Vice-Province of Blessed Michael Rua, next to the faces of all 46 confreres and 4 novices (35 live in our 7 communities, 7 are in formation abroad, and 5 SDBs are awaiting visas, with one at San Callisto-catacombs and one missionary undergoing chemotherapy in Poland). We are also blessed by a growing number of missionary confreres who are sent by the Rector Major or for a specific period from other African Provinces to help us (AFC, ACC, ANN, ATE, MDG, and ZMB). We are very grateful to each of these young confreres. We believe that, with their help, our hope for charismatic relaunch is becoming tangible. Our Vice-Province – the smallest in Africa-Madagascar, almost 40 years after its foundation, still does not have a proper provincial house. Construction began, with the help of the Rector Major, only last year. Here too we say: “work in progress”...

We also want to share our humble signs of hope with all the other 92 Provinces in this precious period of the General Chapter. The AFM has a unique experience of 31 years of local missionary volunteers (involved in the Youth Ministry of the Bosco Youth Centre in Johannesburg since 1994), the “Love Matters” programme for healthy adolescent sexual development since 2001. Our volunteers, in fact, involved for a whole year in the life of our community, are the most precious members of our Mission and of the new groups of the Salesian Family that are slowly growing (VDB, Salesian Cooperators, and Past Pupils of Don Bosco).

Our mother house in Cape Town will celebrate its one hundred and thirtieth (130th) anniversary next year, and thanks to the

one hundred and fiftieth (150th) anniversary of the Salesian Missions, we have created, with the help of the China Province, a special “St. Louis Versiglia Memorial Room,” where our Protomartyr spent a day during his return from Italy to China-Macau in May 1917.

Don Bosco ‘Ubuntu’ – synodal journey

“We are here thanks to you!” – Ubuntu is one of Southern African cultures’ contributions to the global community. The word in the Nguni language means, “I am because you are!” (Other possible translations: “I exist because you exist”). Last year we undertook the “Eco Ubuntu” project (a 3-year environmental awareness project) involving about 15,000 young people from our 7 communities in eSwatini, Lesotho, and South Africa. In addition to the splendid celebration and sharing of the 2024 Youth Synod, our 300 young people [who participated] especially retain Ubuntu in their memories. Their enthusiasm is a source of inspiration. The AFM needs you: We are here thanks to you!

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## **Missionary                      volunteering changes the lives of young people in Mexico**

*Missionary volunteering is an experience that profoundly transforms the lives of young people. In Mexico, the Salesian Province of Guadalajara has for decades developed an organic path of Salesian Missionary Volunteering (SMV) that continues to have a lasting impact on the hearts of many young men and women. Thanks to the reflections of Margarita Aguilar, coordinator of missionary volunteering in Guadalajara, we will*

*share the journey regarding the origins, evolution, formation phases, and motivations that drive young people to get involved in serving communities in Mexico.*

## **Origins**

Volunteering, understood as a commitment to others born from the need to help one's neighbour both socially and spiritually, strengthened over time with the contribution of governments and NGOs to raise awareness on issues of health, education, religion, the environment, and more. In the Salesian Congregation, the voluntary spirit has been present since its origins. Mamma Margherita, alongside Don Bosco, was among the first "volunteers" in the Oratory, committing herself to assisting young people to fulfil God's will and contribute to the salvation of their souls. Already the XXII General Chapter (1984) began to speak explicitly of volunteering, and subsequent chapters insisted on this commitment as an inseparable dimension of the Salesian mission.

In Mexico, the Salesians are divided into two Provinces: Mexico City (MEM) and Guadalajara (MEG). It is precisely in the latter that, starting from the mid-1980s, a youth volunteer project was structured. The Province of Guadalajara, founded 62 years ago, has for almost 40 years offered young people eager to experience the Salesian charism the opportunity to dedicate a period of their lives to serving communities, especially in border areas.

On 24 October 1987, the Provincial sent a group of four young people together with Salesians to the city of Tijuana, in a rapidly expanding Salesian border area. This marked the beginning of Salesian Youth Volunteering (SYV), which gradually developed and became increasingly structured.

The initial objective was proposed to young people around 20 years old, available to dedicate one to two years to build the first oratories in the communities of Tijuana, Ciudad Juárez,

Los Mochis, and other locations in the north. Many remember the early days: shovel and hammer in hand, living together in simple houses with other volunteers, afternoons spent with children, adolescents, and young people from the neighbourhood playing on the land where the oratory would be built. Sometimes the roof was missing, but there was no lack of joy, a sense of family, and encounter with the Eucharist.

Those first communities of Salesians and volunteers brought in their hearts love for God, for Mary Help of Christians, and for Don Bosco, demonstrating a pioneering spirit, missionary ardour, and total care for others.

## **Evolution**

As the Province and Youth Ministry grew, the need for clear formation itineraries for volunteers emerged. The organisation was strengthened through:

*Application questionnaire:* each aspiring volunteer filled out a form and answered a questionnaire that outlined their human, spiritual, and Salesian characteristics, initiating the personal growth process.

*Initial formation course:* theatre workshops, games and group dynamics, catechesis and practical tools for field activities. Before leaving, volunteers met to conclude their formation and receive their assignment to Salesian communities.

*Spiritual accompaniment:* the candidate was invited to be accompanied by a Salesian in their community of origin. For a period, the preparation was carried out together with Salesian Aspirants, strengthening the vocational aspect, although this practice later underwent changes based on the vocational animation of the Province.

*Annual provincial meeting:* every December, near International Volunteer Day (5 December), volunteers meet to evaluate the experience, reflect on each person's journey, and consolidate the accompaniment processes.

*Visits to the communities:* the coordination team regularly visits the communities where volunteers work, to support not only the young people themselves, but also Salesians and lay people of the educational-pastoral community, strengthening support networks.

*Personal life project:* each candidate develops, with the help of the spiritual guide, a life project that helps to integrate the human, Christian, Salesian, vocational, and missionary dimensions. A minimum preparation period of six months is foreseen, with online moments dedicated to the various dimensions.

*Family involvement:* informative meetings with parents on the SYV processes, to help them understand the path and strengthen family support.

*Continuous formation during the experience:* each month a dimension (human, spiritual, apostolic, etc.) is addressed through reading materials, reflection, and in-depth work in progress.

*Post-volunteering:* after the conclusion of the experience, a closing meeting is organised to evaluate the experience, plan the next steps, and accompany the volunteer in reintegration into their community of origin and family, with in-person and online phases.

### **New stages and renewals**

Recently, the experience has taken the name of Salesian Missionary Volunteering (SMV), in line with the Congregation's emphasis on the spiritual and missionary dimension. Some new features introduced:

*Short pre-volunteering:* during school holidays (December-January, Holy Week and Easter, and especially summer) young people can experience community life and service commitment



for short periods, to get a first “taste” of the experience.

*Formation for international experience:* a specific process has been established to prepare volunteers to live the experience outside national borders.

*Greater emphasis on spiritual accompaniment:* no longer just “sending to work”, but placing the encounter with God at the centre, so that the volunteer discovers their vocation and mission.

As Margarita Aguilar, SMV coordinator in Guadalajara, points out, “A volunteer needs to have empty hands to be able to embrace their mission with faith and hope in God.”

### **Motivations of young people**

At the heart of the SMV experience is always the question, “What is your motivation to become a volunteer?” Three main groups can be identified:

*Operative/practical motivation:* those who believe they will carry out concrete activities related to their skills (teaching in a school, serving in a canteen, animating an oratory). They often discover that volunteering is not just manual or didactic work and may be disappointed if they expected a merely instrumental experience.

*Motivation related to the Salesian charism:* former beneficiaries of Salesian work who wish to deepen and live the charism more fully, imagining an intense experience like a long festive meeting of the Salesian Youth Movement, but for a prolonged period.

*Spiritual motivation:* those who intend to share their experience of God and discover Him in others. Sometimes, however, this “fidelity” is conditioned by expectations (e.g. “yes, but only in this community” or “yes, but if I can return for a family event”), and it is necessary to help the volunteer mature their “yes” freely and generously.

### **Three key elements of SMV**

The Salesian Missionary Volunteering experience is based on three fundamental dimensions:

*Spiritual life:* God is the centre. Without prayer, sacraments, and listening to the Spirit, the experience risks being reduced to a simple operational commitment, tiring the volunteer to the point of abandonment.

*Community life:* communion with the Salesians and with other members of the community strengthens the volunteer's presence among children, adolescents, and young people. Without community, there is no support in times of difficulty nor context to grow together.

*Apostolic life:* joyful witness and affectionate presence among young people evangelises more than any formal activity. It is not just about "doing", but about "being" salt and light in everyday life.

To fully live these three dimensions, an integral formation path is needed that accompanies the volunteer from beginning to end, embracing every aspect of the person (human, spiritual, vocational) according to Salesian pedagogy and the missionary mandate.

### **The role of the host community**

The volunteer, to be an authentic instrument of evangelisation, needs a community that supports them, be an example and guide. Likewise, the community welcomes the volunteer to integrate them, supporting them in moments of fragility and helping them to free themselves from ties that hinder total dedication. As Margarita highlights, "God has called us to be salt and light of the Earth and many of our volunteers have found the courage to take a plane leaving behind family, friends, culture, their way of life to choose this lifestyle focused on being missionaries."

The community offers spaces for discussion, common prayer,

practical and emotional accompaniment, so that the volunteer can remain firm in their choice and bear fruit in service.

The history of Salesian missionary volunteering in Guadalajara is an example of how an experience can grow, structure, and renew itself by learning from mistakes and successes. By always placing the young person's deep motivation, the spiritual and community dimension at the centre, a path capable of transforming, not only the realities served, but also the lives of the volunteers themselves, is offered.

Margarita Aguilar tells us, "A volunteer needs to have empty hands to be able to embrace their mission with faith and hope in God."

We thank Margarita for her valuable reflections. Her testimony reminds us that missionary volunteering is not a mere service, but a journey of faith and growth that touches the lives of young people and communities, renewing hope and the desire to give oneself for the love of God and neighbour.

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## **Patagonia: "The greatest enterprise of our Congregation"**

*Upon arriving in Patagonia, the Salesians—led by Don Bosco—aimed to establish an Apostolic Vicariate to secure pastoral autonomy and support from Propaganda Fide. Between 1880 and 1882, repeated appeals to Rome, Argentine President Roca, and the Archbishop of Buenos Aires were thwarted by political unrest and ecclesiastical scepticism. Missionaries such as Rizzo, Fagnano, Costamagna, and Beauvoir travelled along the Río Negro, the Colorado, and as far as Lake Nahuel-*

*Huapi, establishing missions among Indigenous communities and settlers. The turning point came on 16 November 1883: a decree established the Vicariate of Northern Patagonia, entrusted to Bishop Giovanni Cagliero, and the Southern Prefecture, led by Bishop Giuseppe Fagnano. From that moment, the Salesian mission took root "at the end of the world," laying the groundwork for its future flourishing.*

The Salesians had only just arrived in Patagonia when Don Bosco, on 22 March 1880, returned again to the various Roman Congregations and Pope Leo XIII himself with a request for the erection of a Vicariate or Prefecture of Patagonia with its headquarters in Carmen, which would embrace the colonies already established or that were being organised on the banks of the Río Negro, from 36° to 50° South latitude. Carmen could have become "the centre of the Salesian Missions among the Indians".

But the military unrest at the time of General Roca's election as President of the Republic (May-August 1880) and the death of the Salesian Provincial, Fr Francis Bodrato (August 1880), caused the plans to be put on hold. Don Bosco also insisted with the President in November, but to no avail. The Vicariate was neither wanted by the archbishop nor liked by the political authority.

A few months later, in January 1881, Don Bosco encouraged the newly appointed Provincial, Fr Giacomo Costamagna, to get busy with the Vicariate in Patagonia and assured the rector-parish priest Fr Fagnano that with regard to Patagonia – "the greatest undertaking of our Congregation" – a great responsibility would soon fall on him. But the impasse remained.

Meanwhile in Patagonia Fr Emilio Rizzo, who in 1880 had accompanied the Vicar General of Buenos Aires, Monsignor Espinosa, along the Río Negro to Roca (50 km), with other Salesians was preparing for further flying missions along the same river. Fr Fagnano was then able to accompany the army up to the Cordillera in 1881. Don Bosco trembled

impatiently and Fr Costamagna again in November 1881 advised him to negotiate directly with Rome.

As luck would have it, Monsignor Espinosa came to Italy at the end of 1881; Don Bosco took the opportunity to inform the Archbishop of Buenos Aires through him, who in April 1882 seemed favourable to the project of a Vicariate entrusted to the Salesians. More than anything, perhaps, because he did not have the clergy to serve there. But once again nothing came of it. In the summer of 1882 and then again in 1883 Fr Beauvoir accompanied the army as far as Lake Nahuel-Huapi in the Andes (880 km); other Salesians had made similar apostolic excursions in April along the Río Colorado, while Fr Beauvoir returned to Roca and in August Fr Milanesio went as far as Ñorquín in Neuquén (900 km).

Don Bosco was more and more convinced that without their own Vicariate Apostolic the Salesians would not have enjoyed the necessary freedom of action, given the very difficult relations he had had with his Archbishop in Turin and also taking into account that the First Vatican Council itself had not decided anything about the sometimes difficult relationships between Ordinaries and Superiors of Religious Congregations in mission territories. Furthermore, and this was no small thing, only a missionary Vicariate could have financial support from the Congregation of Propaganda Fide.

Therefore Don Bosco resumed his efforts, putting forward to the Holy See a proposal for the administrative subdivision of Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego into three Vicariates or Prefectures: from Río Colorado to Río Chubut, from these to Río Santa Cruz, and from these to the islands of Tierra del Fuego, including Malvinas (Falklands).

Pope Leo XIII agreed a few months later and asked him for possible names for these. Don Bosco then suggested to Cardinal Simeoni the erection of a single Vicariate for northern Patagonia with its headquarters in Carmen, on which a Prefecture Apostolic for southern Patagonia would depend. For the latter he proposed Fr Fagnano; for the Vicariate Fr Cagliero or Fr Costamagna.

## **A dream come true**

On 16 November 1883 a decree from Propaganda Fide erected the Vicariate Apostolic of Northern and Central Patagonia, which included the south of the province of Buenos Aires, the national territories of La Pampa central, Río Negro, Neuquén and Chubut. Four days later he entrusted it to Fr Cagliero as Provicar Apostolic (and later Vicar Apostolic). On 2 December 1883, it was Fagnano's turn to be appointed Prefect Apostolic of Chilean Patagonia, the Chilean territory of Magallanes-Punta Arenas, the Argentine territory of Santa Cruz, the Malvinas (Falkland) Islands and the undefined islands stretching as far as the Strait of Magellan. Ecclesiastically, the Prefecture covered areas belonging to the Chilean diocese of San Carlos de Ancud.

The dream of the famous train journey from Cartagena in Colombia to Punta Arenas in Chile on 10 August 1883 was thus beginning to come true, all the more so since some Salesians from Montevideo in Uruguay had come to found the house of Niteroi in Brazil at the beginning of 1883. The long process of being able to run a mission in full canonical freedom had come to an end. In October 1884 Fr Cagliero would be appointed Vicar Apostolic of Patagonia, where he would enter on 8 July, seven months after his episcopal consecration at Valdocco on 7 December 1884.

## **The sequel**

Although in the midst of difficulties of all kinds that history recalls – including accusations and outright calumnies – the Salesian work from those timid beginnings rapidly unfolded in both Argentine and Chilean Patagonia. It took root mostly in very small centres of Indians and settlers, which today have become towns and cities. Bishop Fagnano settled in Punta Arenas (Chile) in 1887, from where he shortly afterwards started missions in the islands of Tierra del Fuego. Generous and capable missionaries spent their lives on both sides of the Strait of Magellan” or the salvation of the souls” and even bodies (as far as they were able) of the

inhabitants of those lands “down there, at the end of the world”. Many recognised this, among them a person who knows about it, because he himself came “almost from the end of the world”: Pope Francis.

*Historical photograph: The three Bororòs who accompanied the Salesian missionaries to Cuyabà (1904)*

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## Finally in Patagonia!

*Between 1877 and 1880, the Salesian missionary shift towards Patagonia took place. After the offer of the parish of Carhué on May 12, 1877, Don Bosco dreamed of evangelizing the southern lands, but Don Cagliero urged caution in the face of cultural difficulties. The initial attempts were delayed, while General Roca's “desert campaign” (1879) reshaped the balance with the indigenous people. On August 15, 1879, Archbishop Aneiros entrusted the Patagonian mission to the Salesians: “The time has finally come when I can offer you the Mission of Patagonia, for which your heart has long yearned.” On January 15, 1880, the first group led by Don Giuseppe Fagnano set out, marking the beginning of the Salesian epic in southern Argentina.*

What made Don Bosco and Fr Cagliero suspend, at least temporarily, any missionary project in Asia was the news on 12 May 1877: the Archbishop of Buenos Aires had offered the Salesians the mission of Caruhé (south east of Buenos Aires Province), a place of garrison and frontier between numerous tribes of indigenous people from the vast desert of the Pampas and Buenos Aires Province.

Thus the doors of Patagonia were open to the Salesians for the first time: Don Bosco was thrilled, but Fr

Cagliero immediately cooled his enthusiasm: "I repeat, however, that with regard to Patagonia we must not run with electric speed, nor go there by steam, because the Salesians are not yet prepared for this enterprise [...] too much has been published and we have been able to do too little with regard to the Indians. It is easy to conceive, difficult to accomplish, and it is too short a time that we have been here, and we must work with zeal and activity to this end, but not make a fuss, so as not to arouse the admiration of these people here, seeking to aspire, having arrived yesterday, to the conquest of a country that we do not yet know and whose language we do not even know."

With the option of Carmen de Patagónes no longer available, since archbishop had entrusted the parish to a Lazarist (Vincentian) priest, the Salesians were left with the northernmost parish of Carhué and the southernmost parish of Santa Cruz. Fr Cagliero had obtained a passage there by sea in the spring, which would have delayed his planned return to Italy by six months.

The decision of who should "enter Patagonia first" was thus left to Don Bosco, who intended to offer him that honour. But before he even knew it, Fr Cagliero decided to return: "Patagonia is waiting for me, those from Dolores, Carhué, Chaco are asking for us, and I will please them all by running away!" (8 July 1877). He returned to attend the 1st General Chapter of the Salesian Society to be held in Lanzo Torinese in September. Among other things, he was always a member of the Congregation's Superior Chapter, where he held the important position of Catechist General (he was number three in the Congregation, after Don Bosco and Fr Rua).

1877 closed with the third expedition of 26 missionaries led by Fr Giacomo Costamagna and with Don Bosco's new request to the Holy See for a Prefecture at Carhué and a Vicariate at Santa Cruz. Yet, to tell the truth, in the whole year the direct evangelisation of the Salesians outside the city had been limited to the brief experience of Fr Cagliero and cleric Evasio Rabagliati in the Italian colony at Villa



Libertad, near Entre Ríos (April 1877) on the borders of the Diocese of Paraná, as well as some excursions to the Salesian camp in St. Nicolas de los Arroyos.

### **The dream is realised (1880)**

In May 1878 the first attempt to reach Carhué by Fr Costamagna and the cleric Rabagliati failed because of a storm (they were travelling by sea). But in the meantime Don Bosco had already resumed his efforts with the new Prefect of Propaganda Fide, Cardinal Giovanni Simeoni, proposing a Vicariate or Prefecture based in Carmen, as Fr Fagnano himself had suggested, which he saw as a strategic point to reach the natives.

The following year (1879), just as a plan for the Salesians to enter Paraguay was eventuating, the doors of Patagonia were finally opened to them. In April in fact, General Julio A. Roca started the famous "desert campaign" with the aim of subduing the Indians and obtaining internal security, pushing them back beyond the Río Negro and Neuquén rivers. It was the "coup de grace" in their extermination, after the numerous massacres of the previous year.

The Vicar General of Buenos Aires, Monsignor Espinosa, as chaplain to an army of six thousand men, was accompanied by the Argentinean cleric Luigi Botta and Fr Costamagna. The future bishop immediately realised the ambiguity of their position, immediately wrote to Don Bosco, but saw no other way to open the road to Patagonia to the Salesian missionaries. And indeed, as soon as the government asked the archbishop to establish some missions on the banks of the Río Negro and in Patagonia, the Salesians were immediately thought of.

The Salesians, for their part, had the intention of asking the government for a ten-year concession of a territory administered by them in which to construct, with materials paid for by the government and with labour from the Indians, the buildings necessary for a sort of *reducción* in that territory: the poor would avoid the contamination of the

“corrupt and vicious” Christian settlers and the missionaries would plant the cross of Christ and the Argentine flag there. But Salesian Provincial Fr Francis Bodrato did not feel like deciding on his own, and Fr Lasagna advised against it in May on the grounds that the Avellaneda government was at the end of its term and was not interested in the religious problem. It was therefore better to preserve Salesian independence and freedom of action.

On 15 August 1879 Archbishop Aneiros formally offered Don Bosco the Patagonian mission: “The moment has finally arrived, in which I can offer you the Patagonian Mission, for which your heart has so longed, as the care of souls among the Patagonians, which can serve as a centre for the mission.”

Don Bosco accepted it immediately and willingly, even though it was not yet the longed-for consent to the erection of ecclesiastical circumscriptions autonomous from the Archdiocese of Buenos Aires, a reality constantly opposed by the diocesan Ordinary.

### **The departure**

The group of missionaries left for the longed-for Patagonia on 15 January 1880: it was made up of Fr Giuseppe Fagnano, director of the Mission and parish priest in Carmen de Patagónes (the Lazarist Father had retired), two priests, one of whom was in charge of the parish of Viedma on the other bank of the Río Negro, a lay Salesian (Brother) and four Sisters. In December, Fr Dominic Milanesio arrived to help out, and a few months later Fr Joseph Beauvoir arrived with another novice Brother. The Salesian missionary epic in Patagonia was beginning.

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# If Patagonia must wait... let's go to Asia

*The expansion of Salesian missionaries in Argentina during the second half of the 19th century is retraced, in a country open to foreign capital and characterized by intense Italian immigration. Legislative reforms and a shortage of schools favored the educational projects of Don Bosco and Don Cagliero, but the reality proved more complex than imagined in Europe. An unstable political context and a nationalism hostile to the Church were intertwined with anti-clerical and Protestant religious tensions. There was also the dramatic condition of the indigenous people, pushed south by military force. The rich correspondence between the two religious figures shows how they had to adapt their objectives and strategies in the face of new social and religious challenges, while keeping alive the desire to extend the mission to Asia as well.*

Given the juridical *missio* received from the pope, the title and spiritual faculties of apostolic missionaries granted by the Congregation of Propaganda Fide, a letter of presentation from Don Bosco to the Archbishop of Buenos Aires, the ten missionaries after a month's journey across the Atlantic Ocean, in mid-December 1875, arrived in Argentina, an immense country populated by just under two million inhabitants (four million in 1895, in 1914 there would be eight million). They barely knew the language, geography and a little history of the place.

Welcomed by the civil authorities, the local clergy and benefactors, the initial months were happy ones. The situation in the country was in fact favourable, both economically, with large investments of foreign capital, and socially with the legal opening (1875) to immigration, especially Italian: 100,000 immigrants, 30,000 of them in Buenos Aires alone. The

educational situation was also favourable due to the new law on freedom of education (1876) and the lack of schools for “poor and abandoned children”, such as those to which the Salesians wanted to dedicate themselves.

Difficulties arose instead on the religious side – given the strong presence of anticlericals, Freemasons, hostile liberals, English (Welsh) Protestants in some areas – and the simple religious spirit of many native and immigrant clergy. Similarly on the political side given the ever looming risks of political, economic and commercial instability, nationalism hostile to the Catholic Church and susceptible to any outside influence, and the unresolved problem of the indigenous peoples of the Pampas and Patagonia. The continuous advance of the southern frontier line in fact forced them further and further south and towards the Cordillera, when not actually eliminating them or, capturing them and selling them as slaves. Fr Cagliero, the expedition leader, immediately realised this. Two months after landing there he wrote, “The Indians are exasperated with the National Government. They go armed with Remingtons, they take men, women, children, horses and sheep as prisoners [...] we must pray to God to send them missionaries to free them from the death of soul and body.”

### **From the utopia of the dream to the reality of the situation**

In 1876-1877 a kind of long-distance dialogue took place between Don Bosco and Fr Cagliero: in less than twenty months no fewer than 62 of their letters crossed the Atlantic. Fr Cagliero, who was on the spot, undertook to keep to the directives given by Don Bosco on the basis of the sketchy information available to him and his inspirations from on high, which were not easy to decipher. Don Bosco in turn came to know from his leader in the field how the reality in Argentina was different from what he had thought in Italy. The operational project studied in Turin could indeed be shared in terms of objectives and the same general strategy, but not in the geographical, chronological and anthropological coordinates initially envisaged. Fr Cagliero was perfectly

aware of this, unlike Don Bosco who instead tirelessly continued to expand the spaces for the Salesian missions.

On 27 April 1876 in fact he announced to Fr Cagliero that he had accepted a Vicariate Apostolic in India – excluding the other two proposed by the Holy See, in Australia and China – to be entrusted to him, therefore leaving the missions in Patagonia to others. Two weeks later, however, Don Bosco presented a request to Rome to erect a Vicariate Apostolic for the Pampas and Patagonia as well, which he considered, erroneously, to be *terra nullius* [belonging to no one] both civilly and ecclesiastically. He reiterated this in the following August by signing the lengthy manuscript *La Patagonia e le terre australiani del continente americano*, written together with Fr Giulio Barberis. The situation was made even more complicated by the Argentine government's acquisition (in agreement with the Chilean government) of the lands inhabited by the natives, which the civil authorities in Buenos Aires had divided into four governorates and which the Archbishop of Buenos Aires rightly considered subject to his ordinary jurisdiction.

But the furious governmental struggles against the natives (September 1876) meant that the Salesian dream "To Patagonia, to Patagonia. God wills it!" remained just a dream for the time being.

### **The "Indianised" Italians**

In the meantime, in October 1876, the archbishop had proposed to the Salesian missionaries that they take over the parish of La Boca in Buenos Aires to serve thousands of Italians "more Indianised than the Indians as far as customs and religion are concerned" (as Fr Cagliero would write). They accepted it. During their first year in Argentina, in fact, they had already stabilised their position in the capital: with the formal purchase of the Mater Misericordiae chapel in the city centre, with the establishment of festive oratories for Italians in three parts of the city, with the hospice of "*artes y officios*" and the church of San Carlos in the west –

which would remain there from May 1877 to March 1878 when they moved to Almagro – and now the parish of La Boca in the south with an oratory that was being set up. They also planned a novitiate and while they waited for the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians they envisaged a hospice and boarding school in Montevideo, Uruguay.

At the end of 1876 Fr Cagliero was ready to return to Italy, seeing also that both the possibility of entering Chubut and the foundation of a colony in Santa Cruz (in the extreme south of the continent) were being excessively prolonged due to a government that was creating obstacles for the missionaries and that would have preferred, where the native were concerned, “to destroy them rather than place them in reductions”.

But with the arrival in January 1877 of the second expedition of 22 missionaries, F Cagliero independently planned to attempt an excursion to Carmen de Patagones, on the Río Negro, in agreement with the archbishop. Don Bosco in turn the same month suggested to the Holy See that three Vicariates Apostolic (Carmen de Patagones, Santa Cruz, Punta Arenas) be erected or at least one in Carmen de Patagones, committing himself in 1878 to accepting the Vicariate of Mangalor in India with Fr Cagliero as Vicar. Not only that, but on 13 February with immense courage he also declared himself available, again in 1878, for the Vicariate Apostolic of Ceylon in preference to one in Australia, both proposed to him by the Pope (or suggested by him to the Pope?). In short Don Bosco was not satisfied with Latin America, to the west, he dreamed of sending his missionaries to Asia, to the east.

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# 150th anniversary of the first missionary expedition. Missionary Day

*The Mission Sector of the Salesian Congregation prepared the usual materials for Salesian Mission Day 2025 "Give Thanks, Rethink, Relaunch", remembering the 1875, the year of the first missionary expedition.*

150 years is a long period of time and the Salesian Family is preparing to celebrate it appropriately. The booklet of Salesian Mission Day 2025 is a rich and useful tool to give thanks, rethink and relaunch the Salesian missions, together with the poster, the prayer and the video (available at the link [Youtube Settore per le Missioni Salesiane](#) ).

The first Salesian Mission Day (SMD) was in 1988 and, despite the changes, it keeps on being an opportunity offered to SDB communities, Educative and Pastoral Communities (EPCs), all young people and members of the Salesian Family to live this aspect of the Salesian charism well and spread missionary awareness. The name, however, may be misleading: it is not a particular day, there is no single date because each Province can choose the period that best suits its own rhythm and calendar to experience this powerful moment of missionary animation to the full. Moreover, the SMD is the culmination of educative and pastoral processes, and is not an activity detached from the rest.

The booklet starts with some words of Fr. Stefano Martoglio SDB, vicar: "During this year we have the gift of celebrating the 150th anniversary of the Salesian Congregation's first missionary expedition, undertaken by Don Bosco in 1875. Celebrating this expedition means renewing the same spirit and asking the Lord for Don Bosco's missionary heart. This

expedition, and all those that followed, are not just items of chronology for us. It is fidelity to the spirit of Don Bosco, in obedience to God's Gift, that has marked and continues to mark the growth in fidelity of the Salesian Congregation under the aegis and Dream of Don Bosco."

Fr. Alfred Maravilla SDB, General Councillor for the Missions, shares a reflection about the Missionary Option of Don Bosco. Even if Don Bosco had never left as missionary *ad gentes, ad exteros, ad vitam*, we can find his missionary spirit since his childhood.

Don Bosco lived in Piedmont during a vibrant missionary reawakening and as early as 1848 he talked to his boys about sending missionaries to distant regions, speaking often about his desire of evangelizing those who do not know Christ in Africa, America and Asia. Don Bosco's missionary option was a confluence of three factors: firstly, it was the realization of his own long-held personal desire 'to go to the missions' expressed in his five 'missionary dreams'. Secondly, Don Bosco felt that the missionary commitment of his newly approved Congregation would prevent the members from falling into the real danger of a soft and easy lifestyle. Above all, his Congregation's missionary commitment is the fullest expression of his charism summed up in his own and the Congregation's motto: *Da mihi animas, caetera tolle*.

Some contributions came from different perspectives: the Strenna 2025 "Anchored in hope, pilgrims with young people", the Jubilee of the Sacred Heart of Jesus with some points from the encyclical "Dilexit nos," written by Pope Francis and, of course, The Holy Year of the Church, the Jubilee. We can read all these inputs as an invitation of the Holy Spirit to become "more missionary" in our daily life, with faith and hope.

We know that, among many events of 2025, one will be very special for the Salesians: the 29th General Chapter of the SDB Congregation. Fr. Alphonse Owoudou SDB will be the regulator of GCXXIX and he made a prophetic reflection of the Salesian



missions in light of the General Chapter. "The theme of the 29th General Chapter Passionate about Jesus Christ, dedicated to young people offers us a privileged lens through which to reflect on our mission, articulated around three key dimensions: vocation and prophetic fidelity (give thanks), community as a prophecy of fraternity (rethink), and the institutional reorganization of the Congregation (relaunch). The Salesian mission is not only a heritage to be preserved but a challenge to be taken up with renewed enthusiasm and a prophetic vision.

With gratitude for the past, discernment for the present, and boldness for the future, let us continue walking together, inspired by the same missionary zeal that drove the first Salesian missionaries beyond borders, motivated by the desire to make God's love visible among young people."

Then, the presentation of the members of the first expedition of 1875, known above all thanks to the famous photo taken by Michele Schemboche, a professional photographer: Giovanni Battista Allavena, Fr. Giovanni Battista Baccino, Fr. Valentino Cassini, Fr. Domenico Tomatis, Stephen Belmonte, Vincenzo Gioia, Bartolomeo Molinari, Bartolomeo Scavini, Fr. Joseph Fagnano and Fr. John Cagliero, the leader of the missionary expedition.

11 November 1875 was a solemn and emotional day. Don Bosco prepared a sermon to accompany his sons who would be the first to cross the ocean to Argentina. "Our Divine Saviour, when he was on this earth, before going to the Heavenly Father, gathered his Apostles and said to them: *Ite in mundum universum... docete omnes gentes... Praedicate evangelium meum omni creaturae*. With these words our Savior was giving His Apostles not a suggestion, but an order to go and bring the light of the Gospel to all parts of the earth."

To understand better the context of the Salesian missionaries, you will find on the booklet an article about the correspondence with Don Bosco and a synthesis of the five

missionary dreams. Among the hundreds of letters from Don Bosco that crossed the Atlantic Ocean from 1874 to 1887, most were addressed to the Salesians, from Fr. Cagliero to Fr. Fagnano, from Fr. Bodrato to Fr. Vespignani, from Fr. Costamagna to Fr. Tomatis and so on to many of the 150 Salesians, priests, brothers, clerics, who left during the 12 missionary expeditions organized from 1875.

As the Constitutions of the Society of St Francis de Sales said in article 138, “the Councillor for the Missions fosters the missionary spirit and commitment throughout the whole Society. He coordinates initiatives and directs activity in the missions so that it may respond in a Salesian way to the urgent needs of the peoples to be evangelized. It is also his duty to see that provision is made for the specific preparation and updating of missionaries”. So, we have the opportunity to know better and remind the eight General Councillor for the Missions up to 2025: Fr. Modesto Bellido Iñigo (1948-1965), Fr. Bernard Tohill (1971-1983); Fr. Luc Van Looy (1984-1990); Fr. Luciano Odorico (1990-2002); Fr. Francis Alencherry (2002-2008); Fr. Václav Klement (2008-2014), Fr. Guillermo Basaños (2014-2020) and Fr. Alfred Maravilla (2020-2025).

Moreover, we would like to present some figures of lesser-known Salesian ‘pioneers’ who have contributed to spreading the Salesian charism in the five continents: Fr. Francisque Dupont, the initiator of the Salesian mission in Vietnam, Fr. Valeriano Barbero, the sower of the Salesian charism in Papua New Guinea, Fr. Jacques Ntamitalizo, the inspirer of Project Africa, Fr. Raffaele Piperni, the forerunner of the Salesians in U.S.A., Fr. Pascual Chavez, as the concept of Project Europe, and Fr. Bronisław Chodanionek, the undercover pioneer in Moldavia.

The growth of the Salesian Family is a sign of the fruitfulness of the Salesian charism and, in particular, many

Salesian Family groups were founded by Salesian missionaries: in the booklet there is a brief presentation of each one of them. Also, it is good to see the missionary holiness of the Salesian Family, with a growing number of people walking in the path of the sanctity. Another tangible fruit of the Salesian missions is the life of four young people who can be considered as young witnesses of Christian hope: Ceferino Namuncurá, Laura Vicuña, Simão Bororo and Akash Bashir.

New Salesian presences, especially in countries where Salesians are not present yet, are indications of the missionary impetus of the Salesian Congregation that invigorates faith, gives new vocational enthusiasm and revitalises the charismatic identity of the Salesians in the Province that takes responsibility for the new presence as well as in the Province that sends and in the Province that receives missionaries. In addition, the missionary impetus of the Congregation frees us from the dangers of a middle-class lifestyle, spiritual superficiality and genericism, forces us to go out of our comfort zones and leads us forward into the future with hope. With this spirit, we can know more about the new Salesian missionary frontiers: Niger, Botswana, Algeria, Greece and Vanuatu.

The richness of Salesian missions overcomes the borders and reaches many fields: the Salesian missionary museums, as custodians of the Salesian cultural heritage, the Salesian Missionary Volunteers, who donate time and life donated to the others, the missionary groups, like the ones spread in Democratic Republic of Congo, AFC Province.

Each SMD proposes a project, linked to the theme of the year, as a concrete opportunity for solidarity and missionary animation. This year we chose the opening of an oratory in Pagos, Greece, one of the new Salesian missionary frontiers. The opening of an oratory in Pagos, on the island of Syros, will be one of the keys to involving young Greek Catholics and migrants in the area and starting Salesian work with them. All

the funds raised will be used to start up pastoral activities, arrange the premises and purchase animation materials. The involvement of Salesians in the diocese's youth ministry will allow us to share our charism to enrich the local Church, a small minority in need of animation.

The booklet ends with some games to have fun and improve the knowledge about Salesian missions, the presentation of the members of the Mission Sector, who help the General Councillor to fulfil his role of promoting the missionary spirit and missionary commitment in the Salesian Congregation, and the final prayer.

Praised be God our Father,  
for the missionary spirit  
that you have infused in Don Bosco's heart  
as an essential element of his charism.

We thank you for 150 years of Salesian missions,  
and for so many Salesian missionaries  
who have given their lives  
bringing the Gospel and the Salesian charism  
to 137 countries worldwide.

Send your Spirit to guide us  
in rethinking a renewed vision of the Salesian missions,  
with tireless missionary creativity.

Enkindle our hearts with the fire of your love  
so that, passionate about Jesus Christ,  
we may relaunch ourselves  
with missionary zeal and enthusiasm  
to proclaim him to all,  
especially to poor and abandoned youth.

All Salesian missionary saints,  
pray for us!

SMD 2025 materials are available at the link [Salesian Mission](#)

[Day 2025](mailto:cagliero11@sdb.org), for more info write to [cagliero11@sdb.org](mailto:cagliero11@sdb.org).

Marco Fulgaro

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## Leaving for the missions... trusting in dreams

*Don Bosco's missionary dreams, without anticipating the course of future events, had the flavour of being predictions for the Salesians.*

The missionary dreams of 1870-1871 and especially those of the 1880s also contributed in no small part to Don Bosco's attention to the missionary problem. While in 1885 he invited Bishop Giovanni Cagliero to be prudent: "do not pay much attention to dreams" unless "they are morally useful", Cagliero himself, who left as head of the first missionary expedition (1875) and future cardinal, considered them to be mere ideals to be pursued. Other Salesians, on the other hand, and above all Fr Giacomo Costamagna, missionary of the third expedition (1877) and future provincial and bishop, understood them to be a series of steps to be taken almost almost compulsorily, so much so that he asked Don Bosco's secretary, Fr Giovanni Battista Lemoyne, to send him the "necessary" updates. In turn, Fr Giuseppe Fagnano, also one of the first missionaries and future Prefect Apostolic, saw them as the expression of a desire of the whole Congregation, therefore the Congregation had to feel responsible for carrying them out by finding the means and personnel. Lastly, Fr Luigi Lasagna, a missionary who left with the second expedition in 1876, and also a future bishop, saw them as a key to knowing the future Salesian in mission. Later, Fr Alberto Maria De Agostini, in

the first half of the 20th century, would personally embark on dangerous and countless excursions to South America in the wake of Don Bosco's dreams.

However they may be understood today, the fact remains that Don Bosco's missionary dreams, although they did not anticipate the course of future events, had the flavour of predictions for the Salesians. Given that they were devoid of symbolic and allegorical meanings and instead were rich in anthropological, geographic, economic and environmental references (one speaks of tunnels, trains, planes...) they were an incentive for the Salesian missionaries to act, all the more so since their actual realisation could have been verified. In other words, missionary dreams guided history and outlined a programme of missionary work for the Salesian society.

### **The call (1875): an immediately revised project**

In the 1870s, a remarkable attempt at evangelisation was underway in Latin America, thanks above all to the religious, despite the strong tensions between the Church and the individual liberal states. Through contacts with the Argentine consul in Savona, Giovanni Battista Gazzolo, Don Bosco in December 1874 offered to provide priests for the *Misericordia Church* (the church of the Italians) in Buenos Aires, as requested by the Vicar General of Buenos Aires Monsignor Mariano Antonio Espinosa, and accepted the invitation of a Commission interested in a boarding school in San Nicolás de los Arroyos, 240 km north west of the Argentine capital. In fact, the Salesian society – which at the time also included the female branch of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians – had as its first objective the care of poor youth (with catechism, schools, boarding schools, hospices, festive oratories), but did not exclude extending its services to all kinds of sacred ministries. So at that end of 1874 Don Bosco was offering nothing more than what was already being done in Italy. Besides, the Salesian Constitutions, finally approved in the previous April, just when negotiations for

Salesian foundations in non-European “mission lands” had been going on for years, contained no mention of possible *missiones ad gentes*.

Things changed in the space of a few months. On 28 January 1875 in an address to the rectors, and the following day to the whole Salesian community, including the boys, Don Bosco announced that the two aforementioned requests in Argentina had been accepted, after requests in other continents had been refused. He also reported that “the Missions in South America” (which no one had actually offered precisely in those terms) had been accepted on the conditions requested, subject only to the pope’s approval. Don Bosco with a master stroke thus presented to Salesians and young people an exciting “missionary project” approved by Pius IX.

A feverish preparation for the missionary expedition immediately began. On 5 February his circular letter invited the Salesians to offer themselves freely for such missions, where, apart from a few civilised areas, they would exercise their ministry among “savage peoples scattered over immense territories.” Even if he had identified Patagonia as the land of his first missionary dream – where cruel savages from unknown areas killed missionaries and instead welcomed Salesian ones – such a plan to evangelise “savages” went far beyond the requests received from America. The archbishop of Buenos Aires, Federico Aneiros, was certainly not aware of this, at least at the time.

Don Bosco proceeded with determination to organise the expedition. On 31 August he communicated to the Prefect of Propaganda Fide, Cardinal Alessandro Franchi, that he had accepted the running of the college of S. Nicolás as “a base for the missions” and therefore asked for the spiritual faculties usually granted in such cases. He received some of them, but did not receive any of the financial grants he had hoped for because Argentina did not depend on the Congregation of Propaganda Fide, since with one archbishop and four bishops it was not considered to be a “mission land”. And Patagonia? What about Tierra del Fuego? And the tens and tens of

thousands of Indians living there, two, three thousand kilometres away “at the end of the world”, without any missionary presence?

At Valdocco, in the church of Mary Help of Christians, during the famous farewell ceremony for missionaries on 11 November, Don Bosco dwelt on the universal mission of salvation given by the Lord to the Apostles and therefore to the Church. He spoke of the shortage of priests in Argentina, of the families of emigrants who had subscribed and of the missionary work among the “great hordes of savages” in the Pampas and in Patagonia, regions “surrounding the civilised part” where “neither the religion of Jesus Christ, nor civilisation, nor commerce has yet penetrated, where European feet have so far left no traces.”

Pastoral work for the Italian emigrants and then *plantatio ecclesiae* in Patagonia: this was the original twofold objective that Don Bosco left to the first expedition. (Strangely enough, however, he made no mention of the two precise places of work agreed upon on the other side of the Atlantic). A few months later, in April 1876, he would insist with Fr Cagliero that “our aim is ultimately to attempt an expedition to Patagonia [...] always taking as our base the establishment of colleges and hospices [...] in the vicinity of the savage tribes.” He would repeat this on 1 August: “In general, always remember that God wants our efforts towards the Pampas and the Patagonian people, and towards the poor and abandoned children.”

In Genoa, on embarking, he gave each of the ten missionaries – including five priests – twenty special *reminders*. We reproduce them:

## **REMINDERS FOR THE MISSIONARIES**

1. Seek souls and not money, honours or dignities.
2. Be charitable and most courteous towards all, but avoid conversation and familiarity with persons of the opposite sex or with persons whose conduct is open to suspicion.



3. Do not go visiting, except for motives of charity and necessity.
4. Do not accept invitations to dinner except for grave reasons. In such cases ensure that a confrere accompanies you.
5. Take special care of the sick, of the young, of the old and the poor, and you will win the blessing of God and the goodwill of men.
6. Show respect to all persons in authority whether civil or religious.
7. On meeting a person in authority, take care to greet him with all due respect.
8. Do the same towards ecclesiastics or persons belonging to religious institutes.
9. Shun idleness and disputes. And observe great moderation in eating, drinking and sleeping.
10. Love, reverence and respect other Religious Orders and always speak well of them. In this way you will be esteemed by all and will promote the good of the Congregation.
11. Take care of your health. Work well, but only do as much as your strength allows.
12. Let the world know that you are poor in clothing, food and abode, and you will be rich in the sight of God and win the hearts of men.
13. Love one another, advise one another, correct one another, and do not be carried away by either envy or rancour, but let the good of one be the good of all; and let the troubles and sufferings of one be regarded as the troubles and sufferings of all, and let each one strive to banish or at least to mitigate the sorrows of others.
14. Observe your Rules, and never forget the monthly Exercise for a Happy Death.
15. Every morning commend to God the occupations of the day , especially confessions, lessons, religious instructions and sermons.
16. Constantly promote devotion to Mary Help of Christians and to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament.
17. Recommend to the boys frequent Confession and Communion.

18. In order to cultivate ecclesiastical vocations, constantly inculcate 1. love of chastity, 2. horror of the opposite vice, 3. avoidance of bad companions, 4. frequent communion, 5. always be charitable, gentle and kind.

19. Hear both sides before making up your mind regarding reports and matters in dispute.

20. In time of fatigue and suffering, do not forget that we have a great reward prepared for us in heaven.

Amen.

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## **The history of the Salesian missions (1/5)**

*The 150th anniversary of the Salesian missions will be held on November 11, 2025. We believe it might be interesting to offer our readers a brief history of what has gone before and early stages of what was to become a kind of Salesian missionary epic in Patagonia. We will do so over five episodes, with the help of unpublished sources that allow us to correct the many inaccuracies that have passed into history.*

Let us clear the field immediately: it is said and written that Don Bosco wanted to leave for the missions both as a seminarian and as a young priest. This is not documented. While, as a 17 year old student (1834) he applied to join the Franciscan Reformed friars at the Convent of the Angels in Chieri who had missions, the request was apparently made mainly for financial reasons. If ten years later (1844), when he left the “Convitto” in Turin, he was tempted to enter the Congregation of the Oblates of the Virgin Mary, who had just been entrusted with missions in Burma (Myanmar), it is however also true that a missionary vocation, for which he had perhaps

also undertaken some study of foreign languages, was only one of the possibilities of apostolate for the young Don Bosco that opened up before him. In both cases Don Bosco immediately followed the advice, first of Fr Comollo to enter the diocesan seminary and, later, of Fr Cafasso to continue to dedicate himself to the young people of Turin. Even in the twenty years between 1850 and 1870, busy as he was in planning the continuity of his "work of the Oratories", in giving a juridical foundation to the Salesian society he was setting up, and in the spiritual and pedagogical formation of the first Salesians and all young people from his Oratory, he was certainly not in a position to follow up on any personal missionary aspirations or those of his "sons". There is not even a hint of him or the Salesians going to Patagonia, although we see this in writing or on the web.

### **Heightening missionary sensitivity**

This does not detract from the fact that the missionary sensitivity in Don Bosco, probably reduced to faint hints and vague aspirations in the years of his priestly formation and early priesthood, sharpened considerably over the years. Reading the Annals of the Propagation of the Faith gave him good information on the missionary world, so much so that he drew episodes from them for some of his books and praised Pope Gregory XVI who encouraged the spread of the Gospel to the far corners of the earth and approved new religious Orders with missionary aims. Don Bosco could have received considerable influence from Canon G. Ortalda, director of the diocesan Council of the Propaganda Fide Association for 30 years (1851-1880) and also promoter of "Apostolic Schools" (a sort of minor seminary for missionary vocations). In December 1857 he had also launched the project of an Exposition in favour of the Catholic Missions entrusted to the six hundred Sardinian Missionaries. Don Bosco was well informed about it.

Missionary interest grew in him in 1862 at the time of the solemn canonisation in Rome of the 26 Japanese

protomartyrs and in 1867 on the occasion of the beatification of more than two hundred Japanese martyrs, also celebrated with solemnity at Valdocco. Also in the papal city during his long stays in 1867, 1869 and 1870 he was able to see other local missionary initiatives, such as the foundation of the Pontifical Seminary of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul for foreign missions.

Piedmont with almost 50% of Italian missionaries (1500 with 39 bishops) was in the vanguard in this field and Franciscan Luigi Celestino Spelta, Apostolic Vicar of Hupei, visited Turin in November 1859. He did not visit the Oratory, instead Fr Daniele Comboni did so in December 1864, publishing his Plan for Regeneration for Africa in Turin with the intriguing project of evangelising Africa through Africans.

Don Bosco had an exchange of ideas with him. In 1869 Comboni tried, unsuccessfully, to associate him with his project and the following year invited him to send some priests and lay people to direct an institute in Cairo and thus prepare him for the missions in Africa, at the centre of which he counted on entrusting the Salesians with an Apostolic Vicariate. At Valdocco, the request, which was not granted, was replaced by a willingness to accept boys to be educated for the missions. There, however, the group of Algerians recommended by Archbishop Charles Martial Lavigerie found difficulties, so they were sent to Nice, France. The request in 1869 by the same archbishop to have Salesian helpers in an orphanage in Algiers in times of emergency was not granted. In the same way, the petition by Brescian missionary Giovanni Bettazzi to send Salesians to run an up-and-coming institute of arts and trades, as well as a small minor seminary in the diocese of Savannah (Georgia, USA) was suspended from 1868. Proposals from others, whether to direct educational works in "mission territories", or direct action *in partibus infidelium*, could also have been attractive, but Don Bosco would never give up either his full freedom of action – which he perhaps saw compromised by the proposals he had received – or above all his special work with the young, for whom he was

at the time very busy developing the newly approved Salesian Society (1869) beyond the borders of Turin and Piedmont. In short, until 1870 Don Bosco, although theoretically sensitive to missionary needs, was cultivating other projects at a national level.

#### **Four years of unfulfilled requests (1870-1874)**

The missionary theme and the important questions related to it were the object of attention during the First Vatican Council (1868-1870). If the document *Super Missionibus Catholicis* was never presented in the general assembly, the presence in Rome of 180 bishops from "mission lands" and the positive information about the Salesian model of religious life, spread among them by some Piedmontese bishops, gave Don Bosco the opportunity to meet many of them and also to be contacted by them, both in Rome and Turin.

Here on 17 November 1869 the Chilean delegation was received, with the Archbishop of Santiago and the Bishop of Concepción. In 1870 it was the turn of Bishop D. Barbero, Apostolic Vicar in Hyderabad (India), already known to Don Bosco, who asked him about Sisters being available for India. In July 1870 Dominican Archbishop G. Sadoc Alemany, Archbishop of San Francisco in California (USA), came to Valdocco. He asked, successfully, for the Salesians for a hospice with a vocational school (which was never built). Franciscan Bishop L. Moccagatta, Apostolic Vicar of Shantung (China) and his confrere Bishop Eligio Cosi, later his successor, also visited Valdocco. In 1873 it was the turn of Bisop T. Raimondi from Milan who offered Don Bosco the possibility of going to direct Catholic schools in the Apostolic Prefecture of Hong Kong. The negotiations, which lasted over a year, came to a standstill for various reasons, just as in 1874 did a project for a new seminary by Fr Bertazzi for Savannah (USA) also remain on paper. The same thing happened in those years for missionary foundations in Australia and India, for which Don Bosco started negotiations with individual bishops, which he sometimes gave as a *fait accompli* to the Holy See, while in

reality they were only projects in progress.

In those early 1870s, with a staff consisting of little more than two dozen people (including priests, clerics and brothers), a third of them with temporary vows, scattered across six houses, it would have been difficult for Don Bosco to send some of them to mission lands. All the more so since the foreign missions offered to him up to that time outside Europe presented serious difficulties of language, culture and non-native traditions, and the long-standing attempt to have young English-speaking personnel, even with the help of the Rector of the Irish college in Rome, Msgr Toby Kirby, had failed.

(continued)

Historic photo: The Port of Genoa, November 14, 1877.

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## **Basilicata – Calabria Missionary Project**

*Within the “Project Europe,” Italy South has launched a new missionary project in the regions of Calabria and Basilicata, welcoming the first missionaries “ad gentes”, a sign of missionary generosity and an opportunity for growth in the global outreach of the charism of Don Bosco.*

Europe as a land of mission: in a new Salesian missiological perspective, missions are increasingly losing a geographical connotation, as a movement towards “the lands of mission”. Today, missionaries come from all five continents and are sent to all five continents. This multidirectional missionary movement is already taking place in many dioceses and congregations. With the “Project Europe,” Salesians have

confronted this change in the missionary paradigm, for which a journey of conversion of mind and heart is necessary. The "Project Europe," in the idea of Fr. Pascual Chávez, is an act of apostolic courage and an opportunity for charismatic rebirth in the European continent to be inserted into the broader context of the new evangelisation. The goal is to engage the entire Salesian congregation in strengthening the Salesian charism in Europe, especially through a profound spiritual and pastoral renewal of the confreres and communities, in order to continue Don Bosco's project in favour of young people, especially the poorest.

The Salesian provinces involved are called to rethink their Salesian presence for a more effective evangelisation that responds to today's context. Among them, the province of Italy South has developed a new missionary project that involves the regions of Basilicata and Campania. Starting from an analysis of the territory, it can be observed that southern Italy is characterised by a fairly consistent presence of young people, with a lower birth rate compared to other Italian regions, and that emigration is a phenomenon that is very present, causing many young people to leave to study or work elsewhere. Religious and family traditions, which have always constituted an important identity reference for the community, are less relevant than in the past, and many young people experience faith as distant from their lives, although they do not show themselves as being totally opposed to it. The Salesians experience good participation in youth spiritual experiences but, at the same time, a poor receptivity to systematic paths and definitive life proposals.

Other issues affecting the youth world include emotional and affective illiteracy, relational crises in families, abandoning school, and unemployment. All of this fuels phenomena of widespread poverty and the growth of criminal organisations that find fertile ground to involve and deviate the youth.

In this context, many young people express a strong desire for

social commitment, particularly in political and ecological fields and in the world of volunteerism.

In recent years, the Salesian province has reflected upon what can be done to be relevant in the territory and has made several important choices, including the development of works and projects for the poorest young people, such as family homes and day centres that directly and clearly manifest the choice in favour of at-risk youth. The integral care of young people must aim for a formation that is not only theoretical so that the young person can discover or become aware of his/her own abilities. Furthermore, a more courageous missionary practice is required to realise paths of education in faith that help young people fulfil their Christian vocation.

All this must be realised with the active involvement of all: consecrated, laypeople, young people, families, members of the Salesian family... in a fully synodal style that promotes co-responsibility and participation.

Basilicata and Calabria have been chosen as charismatically significant areas in need of consolidation and new educational-pastoral momentum. These are territories to bet upon by opening new pastoral frontiers and resizing some already present. The Salesian presences are six: Potenza, Bova Marina, Corigliano Rossano, Locri, Soverato, and Vibo Valentia. What kind of Salesians are needed for this missionary project? Salesians willing to work in poor, popular, and densely populated contexts, with economic difficulties and sometimes a lack of cultural stimuli, and particularly attentive to the initial announcement. Salesians should be well-prepared, at the spiritual, Salesian, cultural, and charismatic levels. It is necessary to be well aware of the reason why this project has been developed, that is namely to take care of Basilicata and Calabria, two poor regions with few systematic pastoral proposals in favour of the neediest young people, where the first announcement increasingly



becomes a necessity even in contexts of Catholic tradition. The educational and pastoral work of the Salesians seeks to give hope to many young people who are often forced to leave their homes and move north in search of a better life. The contrast of this reality with pastoral and formative offers with a look to the future, particularly vocational training, attention to youth distress, and collaboration with institutions to find answers becomes increasingly urgent. In addition to the consecrated Salesians, this territory is enriched by the beautiful presence of laypeople and members of the Salesian Family, and the local church, as well as the social reality, that nurtures great respect and consideration for the children of Don Bosco.

Welcoming new *ad gentes* missionaries is a blessing and a challenge that fits within this pastoral project. This year the Italy South province (IME) received four missionaries, who were sent in the 155th Salesian missionary expedition. Among them, two have become members of the new provincial delegation AKM (Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro), while the other two have been assigned to Italy South and will take part in the new missionary project of IME for Basilicata and Campania: Henri Mufele Ngankwini and Guy Roger Mutombo, from the Democratic Republic of Congo (ACC province). To best accompany the arriving missionaries, the IME province is committed to ensuring that they feel at home and are steadily integrated into the new community and social reality. The missionaries are gradually blended into the history and culture of the place that will become their home, and from the very first days, they attend Italian language and culture courses for a duration of at least two years, which will help them achieve full inculturation. At the same time, they are introduced into the formative processes and take the first steps in the educational-pastoral action of the province with young people and children. A fundamental dimension is the attention towards the personal spiritual journey: each missionary is guaranteed adequate moments of personal and communal prayer, spiritual

accompaniment and guidance, confession, preferably in a language they understand, and time for updating and formation. In a later phase, the missionary is guaranteed ongoing formation for an even fuller integration into the provincial dynamics, maintaining some specific attentions. The missionary experience will be periodically evaluated to identify strengths, weaknesses, and any corrective measures, in a fraternal spirit.

As Fr. Alfred Maravilla, General Councillor for the Missions, reminds us, “being missionaries in a secularised Europe poses significant internal and external challenges. Goodwill is not enough.” “Looking back with the eyes of faith, we realise that through the launch of the ‘Project Europe,’ the Spirit was preparing the Salesian Society to face the new reality of Europe, so that we could be more aware of our resources as well as the challenges, and with hope to relaunch the Salesian charism throughout the Continent.”

Let us pray that in the regions of Basilicata and Calabria, may the Salesian presence be inspired by the Spirit for the good of the young people most in need.

*Marco Fulgaro*

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## **“Corso respire” 2024. Salesian missionary renewal course**

*The Mission Sector of the Salesian Congregation, with its headquarters in Rome, organised a Missionary renewal course called Corso Respiro, in English language, for the missionaries who are already in the missions for many years*

*and were desirous of a spiritual renewal and updating. The course which began at Colle Don Bosco on 11 September 2024 was successfully concluded in Rome on 26 October 2024.*

The *Corso Respiro* had 24 participants from 14 countries: Azerbaijan, Botswana, Brazil, Cambodia, Eritrea, India, Japan, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines, Samoa, South Sudan, Tanzania and Turkey. Though we, the participants of the course came from various countries with our diverse cultural backgrounds and belonged to the different branches of the Salesian Family, we quickly established a strong bond among ourselves, and all of us felt at home in each other's company.

One of the uniqueness of the *Corso Respiro* was that it was a missionary course in which several members of the Salesian Family took part for the first time: 16 Salesians of Don Bosco (SDB), 3 Sisters of Charity of Jesus (SCG), 2 Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians (MSMHC), 2 Visitation Sisters of Don Bosco (VSDB) and 1 Salesian Cooperator. Another positive aspect was the lived experience with some of the lesser known and smaller members of the Salesian Family.

The seven weeks of the *Corso Respiro* was a time of spiritual renewal which enabled us to deepen our knowledge of Don Bosco, Salesian history, charism, spirit and spirituality and to know better the different members of the Salesian Family. The Salesian *Lectio Divina*, pilgrimages to the places connected with the life and apostolate of Don Bosco at Becchi, Castelnuovo Don Bosco, Chieri and Valdocco, the days spent at Annecy and at Mornese, pilgrimage in the footsteps of St Paul the Apostle in Rome, participation in the general audience given by Pope Francis at the Vatican, visit to the Basilica of Sacro Cuore built by Don Bosco and the Salesian Generalate, sharing of missionary experiences by all the participants of the course, taking part in the solemn "Missionary Sending" from the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians at Valdocco, time spent daily in personal prayer and reflection, common eucharistic celebration and so on helped us very much to

personalise and deepen our Salesian values and missionary vocation. The days we spent in Rome reflecting on the various aspects of the theology of the missions, sessions on Salesian youth ministry, personal discernment, on-going formation, missionary catechesis, emotional literacy, missionary volunteering, missionary animation of the Congregation, etc., with the help of experts in the respective fields were also very enriching. The pilgrimage to Assisi, the place sanctified by Saint Francis of Assisi, with the theme to “thank”, to “re-think” and to “re-launch”, was an occasion for us to thank God for our missionary vocation and ask Him for the grace to return to our mission lands with greater enthusiasm to do better in the future. Another speciality of the *Corso Respiro* was that it was not academic in nature with credits, theses, examinations and grading, but one which laid emphasis on the Word of God, sharing of experiences, reflection, prayer and contemplation with only a minimum theoretical input.

As participants of the *Corso Respiro*, we had the special privilege of witnessing the 155th “Missionary Sending” from the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians at Valdocco, Turin, on 29 September 2024. A total of 27 Salesians, practically all of them very young, left for different countries as missionaries after having received the missionary cross from Don Stefano Martoglio, the Vicar of the Rector Major. That memorable event reminded us of our own reception of the missionary cross and the departure for the missions many years ago. We were also made aware of the uninterrupted “Missionary Sending” from Valdocco since 1875, and the perennial commitment of the Salesians Congregation to the missionary charism of Don Bosco.

A very enriching aspect of the *Corso Respiro* was the sharing of the vocation stories and the missionary experiences by all the participants. Each one prepared himself or herself for it in advance and shared their vocational story and missionary experiences in creative ways. While some shared their experiences in the form of simple talks, others used photos,

video clips and PowerPoint presentations. There was ample time to interact with each missionary to clarify doubts and gather more information about their missionary vocation, the country and the culture of their missions. This sharing was an excellent spiritual exercise because each one of us had the opportunity to reflect deeply on our own missionary vocation and to discover the hand of God at work in our life. This interior journey was very formative and it enabled us to strengthen our missionary vocation and helped us to resolve to commit ourselves with greater generosity to *Missio Dei* ("Mission of God").

During the *Corso Respiro*, through the sharing of our missionary experiences, we were once again deeply convinced that the life of a missionary is not an easy one. Most of the missionaries work in the "peripheries" of various kinds (geographical, existential, economic, cultural, spiritual and psychological), and a good number of them in very difficult conditions, under challenging circumstances and with many privations. In many contexts there is no religious freedom to preach the Gospel openly. In other places there are governments with fascist ideologies which oppose Christianity and have anti-conversion laws in force. There are countries where one cannot reveal one's priestly or religious identity. Then there are places where neither the Catholic institution nor the religious personnel is permitted to exhibit Christian religious symbols like the cross, the Bible, statues of Christ or saints or religious habit. There are territories where the missionaries cannot come together for meetings or spiritual exercises or lead a community life. There are nations that do not allow any foreign Christian missionary to enter their country and block all financial assistance from abroad to Christian institutions. There are mission lands that do not have enough vocations to priestly and religious life, and as a consequence, the missionary is overburdened with many works and responsibilities. Then there are situations where finding the financial resources needed to meet the ordinary expenses

of running institutions like schools, boarding houses, technical institutions, youth centres, dispensaries and so on is one of the major worries of the missionaries. There are missions that lack the financial resources needed to build up the much needed infrastructure or persons qualified to teach in schools and technical institutions or offer basic health care services to the poor. This list of the problems which the missionaries face is not exhaustive. But the positive thing about the missionaries is that they are people of deep faith and happy in their missionary vocation. They are glad to be with the people and satisfied with what they have, and trusting in God's Providence they go ahead with their missionary work in spite of the numerous challenges and privations. Some of the missionaries are radiant examples of Christian holiness which make their life itself a powerful proclamation of the Gospel. These valiant missionaries deserve our appreciation, encouragement, spiritual and material support to continue with their missionary work.

A special word of appreciation to all the members of the Mission Sector who worked very hard and made many sacrifices to organise the *Corso Respiro* 2024. I hope that the Mission Sector will continue to offer this course every year, and if possible, in different languages, and with the participation of more members of the Salesian Family, especially the smaller and the lesser known ones. The course will definitely provide opportunity for the missionaries to have a spiritual renewal, theological updating, physical and mental rest, which are essential to offer better quality missionary and pastoral service in the missions and to establish stronger bonds among the members of the Salesian Family.

Fr. Jose Kuruvachira, sdb