

# **International volunteer work in Benediktbeuern**

## **Don Bosco Volunteers: the commitment of young people for a better future**

*For more than 20 years the German Salesian Province of Don Bosco has been involved in the field of youth volunteering. Through the Don Bosco Volunteers programme the Salesians in Germany offer around 90 young people each year an educational and life experience in Salesian houses in the Province and in various countries around the world.*

For many young Germans it is customary, once they have completed their school education, to devote a year of their lives to social work. The profile of the Salesians for many of these young Germans is a source of inspiration when choosing an organisation to accompany them during this experience. In spite of the secularisation of German society and a constant loss of faithful by the Church in recent years, many young people knock on the Salesians' door with the clear intention of helping their neighbour and making a small contribution to a better world. These young people find a form of faith and an example of life in the figure of Don Bosco.

Not all of those who apply for admission to the volunteer programme at the relevant offices of the Province in Benediktbeuern and Bonn have had experience in youth groups connected with the Church and especially with the Salesians during their lives. Some of them are not baptised, but recognise a possibility for personal growth in the Salesian educational offer, based on fundamental values for their own development. That is why so many young people begin a

volunteer experience with the Don Bosco Volunteers programme every year: during training weekends, the young people not only learn useful information about the projects, but also come face to face with the Salesian preventive system and spirituality, thus preparing themselves for the time they will put into the service of other young people.



The volunteers are accompanied during their experience by a team of coordinators who look after not only the organisational aspects, but above all of the support before, during and after the volunteering experience. This is because the volunteer year does not end on the last day of service at the host Salesian home, but continues for life. This year in the service of others represents a foundation of values that has a strong impact on the future development of the volunteers. Don Bosco educated young people in order to make them upright citizens and good Christians: the Don Bosco Volunteers programme is inspired by this fundamental principle of Salesian pedagogy and seeks to create the basis for a better society, in which Christian values once again characterise our lives.

The German Province provides opportunities for young people to meet at all stages of the volunteering experience: orientation meetings, online information offers, training courses, parties and annual experience exchange meetings are basic activities on which the success of the Don Bosco Volunteers programme is built.

A co-ordination team consisting of co-workers from the Aktionszentrum Benediktbeuern youth training centre and the mission office in Bonn, supported by the provincial economist Fr. Stefan Stöhr and the youth ministry delegate, Fr. Johannes Kaufmann, manages and directs all activities, developing the programme in all its components.

The volunteer experience begins with the application to join the programme: young people taking part in the national programme start their service in September and take part in 25 training days during the volunteer year. For volunteers intending to go abroad, the path is somewhat longer: after an orientation meeting in the autumn, selections are made and candidates receive information from former volunteers who have already taken part in the programme in the past. The training phase begins in the first months of the year and includes a total of 12 days of preparation, during which volunteers receive information on Don Bosco's pedagogy, the work of the Salesians in the world, important topics such as intercultural communication and precautions to be taken in case of emergency during the experience abroad. In July, the volunteers receive a blessing and a Don Bosco medal as a symbol of belonging to the Salesian Family.

The departure of the young people is planned for September, and towards the middle of the service, reflection meetings are offered in the various regions where the volunteers work, held by the coordination team of the German Province. The experience ends with a concluding seminar, shortly after returning from the service abroad, in which the foundations are laid for a future commitment to the Salesian Family.

On an annual basis, two meetings are organised in the Province for all those who have taken part in the programme since the start of activities in the 1990s. The Province's coordination team takes care of all organisational aspects, including: searching for Salesian houses interested in collaborating in the field of volunteering; financing activities through ministerial and European funds; support in the event of emergencies; organising the health insurance aspects of the volunteers; communicating with the families of the volunteers.



More than a thousand young people have already taken part in

the Don Bosco Volunteers programme in Germany and abroad over the past 25 years. In a study carried out a few months ago by the German Province, in which around 180 former volunteers took part, a constant commitment to social work on the part of the young people was observed even many years after the volunteering experience. Particularly evident is the respondents' focus on issues such as social injustice, racism, ecology and sustainable development. This study has demonstrated the value of this programme, not only in terms of the immediate help that volunteers can give to their host communities during their year of service, but also in terms of the positive effects that can be registered in the long term, once they have completed their academic studies or embarked on their professional path.

An important aspect of the Don Bosco Volunteers programme is its inclusion in national and European programmes, such as the European Commission's European Solidarity Corps, the national volunteer programmes of the Ministry for Family and Youth or the weltwärts programme of the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation, so that the Salesians' training offerings can be made more visible to institutions.

Constant quality controls carried out by competent associations certify the efficiency and transparency of the training offer of the Don Bosco Volunteers programme on a biannual basis. One aspect of these quality controls often concerns the cooperation between our competent offices and the host structures in Germany and in different countries around the world. This detail distinguishes the Salesian offer from many other private volunteer agencies, which cooperate with various organisations with the most varied profiles. Our volunteers work exclusively in Salesian facilities and are specially prepared for this life experience. It does not matter whether a volunteer is employed in a small village in southern India or in a European metropolis. There is something that unites all these young people and makes them feel at home

during their experience: Don Bosco with his presence in the host communities offers them a point of reference in everyday life and gives them comfort and protection in the most difficult moments.

Of course, it would be too easy to say that a volunteer experience always goes smoothly or without problems: the acclimatisation phase in particular can create various integration problems for the volunteers. But it is precisely in these situations that growth can be observed in young people, who learn to know themselves, their limits and their resources better. The accompaniment provided by the Salesian host communities and the staff of the German Provincial coordination centres is intended to turn even the most difficult phases of this journey into opportunities for reflection and personal growth.

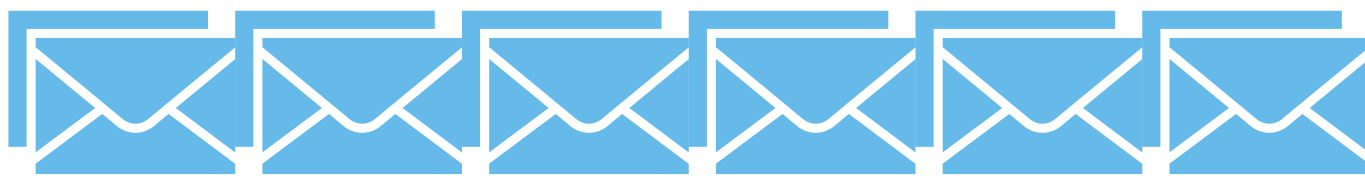
Many challenges await us in the future: the last two years have shown us that the world is changing and the fear that war will wipe out the prospect of a fairer society seems to be growing in the new generations. The Don Bosco Volunteers programme seeks to be a glimmer of light and a source of hope, so that our young people can build a better future for our planet through their commitment.

Francesco BAGIOLINI  
Benediktbeuern, Germany

## Photo gallery International volunteer work in Benediktbeuern

<  
>





---

# Missionary in Amazonia

## To be a missionary in Amazonia is to allow oneself to be evangelised by the forest

*The beauty of the indigenous people of Rio Negro conquers hearts and causes our own heart to change, to expand, to be surprised and to identify with this land, to the point of it being impossible to forget “dear Amazonia”! This is the experience of Leonardo, a young Salesian in the heart of Amazonia.*

### **How did the idea of being a missionary arise in your heart?**

This desire matured within me over many years of listening to the stories of Salesian missionaries, their witness as bearers of the love of God to the world. I have always admired these confreres who experienced divine love in their lives and could not remain silent; rather they felt compelled to announce it to others so that they too could prove how much they were loved by God. So it was that I asked to have an experience in the Salesian missions in Amazonia among the indigenous peoples. In 2021 I began to live and work as a “practical trainee” in the São Gabriel da Cachoeira missionary

community, in the state of Amazonia. It was a real “missionary school”, full of new discoveries and experiences, of unimagined challenges, facing realities totally unknown to me until then.



**What were your first impressions on arriving in an unknown land?**

From the first moment that I looked out the window of the plane and saw the vastness of the forest and the many rivers, my mind “clicked”: I really am in Amazonia! Just as I have always seen on TV, the Amazon region is of exuberant beauty, with beautiful natural landscapes, true masterpieces of God the Creator. Another very beautiful first impression was seeing so many indigenous brothers and sisters, with such striking physical characteristics, such as the colour of their skin, their bright eyes and their black hair. To see the diversity and cultural richness of Amazonia is to remember our history, to remember our origin as Brazil and to understand better who we are as a people.

**And why the choice of the Amazon? What is special about it for you?**

The Church, including our Salesian Congregation, is essentially missionary. However, in the Northern region this is even more so because the territories are immense; access, generally by river, is difficult and costly; the cultural and linguistic diversity is vast and there is an enormous lack of priests, religious and other leaders who can carry out evangelization and the presence of the Church in these lands. Therefore, there is a lot of work and “heavy”, demanding work. It is not only the service of visits, preaching, celebrating the sacraments, as one might think of missionary life, but it means sharing the life and work of the people, carrying heavy burdens, feeling the need, exclusion, and abandonment of the people by the politicians; spending hours on the road or on the river; feeling the stings of insects; eating the food of the simple people “seasoned” with the spices of love, sharing and of welcome; listening to the stories of the elderly, often with words and expressions that we do not understand well; getting muddy feet and clothes, unheated cars; being without internet and, sometimes, even without electricity... All of this is involved in Salesian missionary life in Amazonia!

**Tell us something more about the Salesian work where you have lived? What do the Salesians do for the young people of the region?**

One of the purposes of our Salesian community in Sao Gabriel is the Oratory and Social Work: it is the Salesian playground, our direct work with the young people of “Gabriel” who frequent our Oratory every day and find in our house a place to play, have fun and live in a healthy way with their friends and colleagues. The young people here love sports, especially the national passion that is football. As the city does not offer many options for leisure and sport, the kids are present at our work all the time we are in operation and they complain



a lot when it's time to end the day's activities. An average of 150 to 200 young people pass through our work every day. Besides this, the Salesian Missionary Centre offers courses for teenagers and older youth, such as computer and bakery courses.

**And if a young person, knowing you and liking the charism, expresses the desire to become a Salesian, is there a way to be formed as such?**

Yes, for some years now our community has also been running the Centro de Formação Indígena (CFI), which aims at accompanying and welcoming young indigenous people from all our missionary communities who want to follow vocational accompaniment and be helped in drawing up a Life Project. This accompaniment is what the Indigenous Aspirantate of the Salesian Missionary Province of Amazonia (ISMA) is all about. Besides offering this formation process, CFI offers classes in Portuguese, Salesianity, computer and bakery courses, spiritual and psychological accompaniment and gradual insertion within Salesian life. It is really an experience that is highly valued by them, since they are the first steps on the formation journey and it is done in their environment, with their people, with the affection and closeness of the Salesians and lay leaders.



**You said that there are other missionary communities besides San Gabriel? How is this? How does the missionary work in Rio Negro function?**

Because it has more connections and services, our São Gabriel community is the base seeing to links and logistics with our missions in the interior, especially Maturacá (with the Yanomami people) and Iauaretê (in the “tukano triangle”). In these missionary situations there is no formal commerce, and when there is, the prices are extremely high. Therefore, all purchases of food, hygiene products, materials for repairs and fuel for the boats used in the itinerance (pastoral visits to the riverside communities) and the production of electricity by generator, are done in São Gabriel and then sent by us, via river transport, to these locations. It is a very intense manual work, because we have to buy and then carry a lot of heavy materials to the boats that will take these products to our people who live and work in the other missions. We carry

food bags, Styrofoam boxes with meat and several “carotes” (plastic containers for carrying liquids) of 50 litres of fuel each. Besides this, our house has several rooms, always available and prepared to host the missionary confreres who are passing through São Gabriel, either going to or returning from the other missions. It is a real work of assistance and networking.

**And do you remember any powerful experiences from these “itinerance” on the rivers?**

Yes, of course, in relation to these “itinerance”, one experience that impressed me deeply was the one at **Maturacá**. We had days of profound experience of the encounter with God through the encounter with others, with those who are different from us, with our neighbour, because we made a pastoral visit to the Yanomami people’s communities.



In addition to the headquarters of the Salesian Mission at

Maturacá, we visited six other communities (Nazaré, Cachoeirinha, Aiari, Maiá, Marvim and Inambú). These were intense and challenging days. Firstly, because each community is very distant from one another and access is only possible by means of the tributaries of our beloved Amazon, travelling in a motorised boat (called a voadeira), under strong sun or heavy rain. Secondly, they are traditional Yanomami communities, so culture shock is inevitable, as they have habits, customs and ways of life that are completely different to us non-indigenous people. Thirdly, there are the practical challenges, such as the lack of electricity 24 hours a day, no telephone signal, little choice and variety of food, bathing and washing clothes in the river, living with insects and other animals of the forest... A real anthropological and spiritual "dive". We celebrated the Eucharist in all the communities and several baptisms in some of them, we visited the families and prayed with the children. It was a fantastic experience of encounter, special days, days of gratitude, days of returning to the most essential aspects of our faith and Salesian Youth Spirituality: love for Jesus, fruit of our personal encounter with Him, and the love for our neighbour that is manifested in the desire to be with him and to become his friend.

**This remarkable "itinerance" undoubtedly left you with much to learn in your life, true?**

These pastoral visits are a real "school" and give us life lessons: detachment, because the more "things" we accumulate, the "heavier" the journey becomes; living in the present, because in the middle of Amazonia, without access to the means of information, the only contact is with present reality, whatever is around us, the forest, the river, the sky, the boat; gratuitousness, because we face difficulties and weariness without expecting gestures of human gratitude. Finally, geographical itinerance leads us to an "inner itinerance", conversion, a return to the essentials of life

and faith. To sail the rivers of Amazonia is to sail to interior rivers. To be in the missions is to be constantly provoked to free oneself from preconceived and rigid ideas in order to be freer to love and welcome the other and to announce the joy of the Gospel to them.

A very special lesson that I learn every day in the missions is that to be a good missionary I must be someone deeply marked and touched by the merciful love of God, and only from this experience can I be ready to “take” and “show” everywhere how God loves us and can transform our whole life. I also learn that, being a missionary, I take and show this love, first of all with my own life given to the mission. Without saying a word, by the simple fact of leaving my origins and embracing new cultures, I can reveal that the love of God is worth much more than all the things we consider valuable in our lives. Therefore, the missionary’s life is his first and greatest witness and proclamation!

**You have had this missionary experience, but can it be said that you too have been evangelised? What has given you satisfaction in your heart?**

Finally, being in São Gabriel, the most indigenous municipality in Brazil, “home” to 23 multicultural and multilingual ethnic groups, I realize every day that, in calling us to be missionaries, God calls us to be capable of being enchanted by the beauty and mystery which is each person and each culture of our world. Therefore, following the example of the Master, Jesus, missionary of the Father, we are called to “empty ourselves” of everything in order to “fill ourselves” with the beauties and marvels present in every corner of the earth and to associate them with the preciousness of the Gospel. This was one of the most profound experiences for me.

At the end of all this, I believe that satisfaction comes from the smiles and cries of our boys and girls playing, running, jumping, throwing a ball, telling their jokes; it comes from

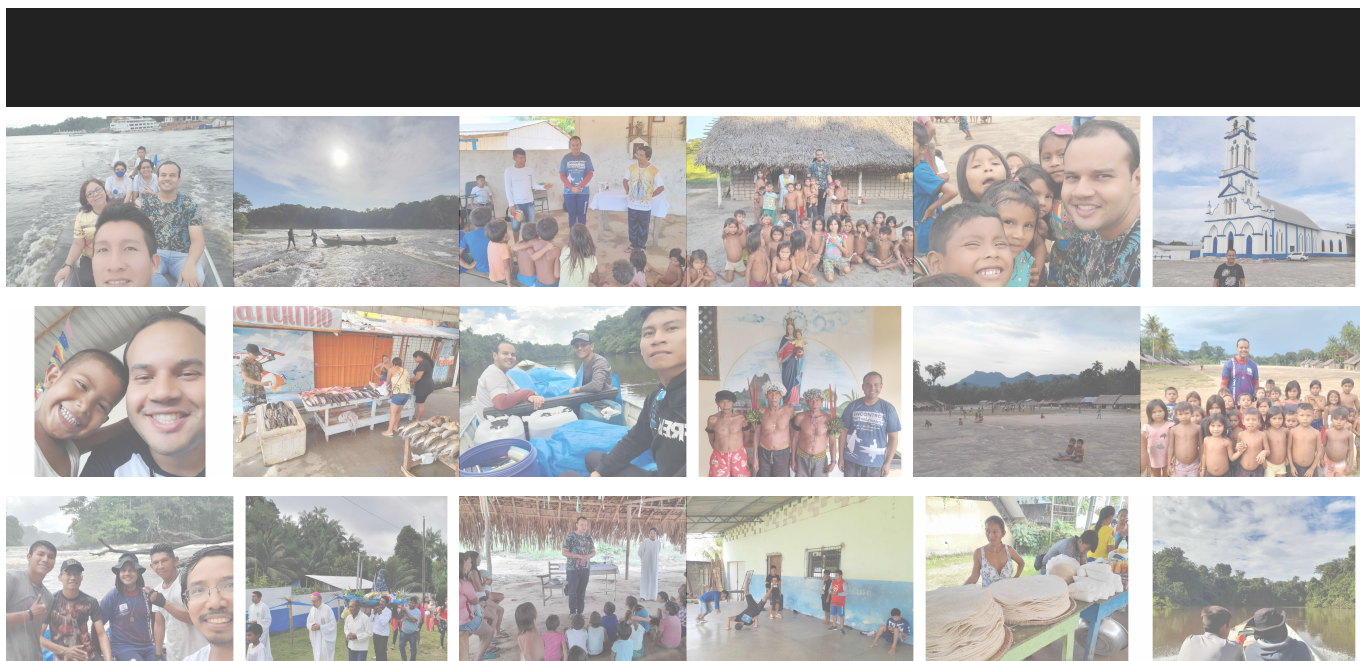


the curious and brilliant glances of the men and women of the forest; joy comes from contemplating the beauty of nature, the generosity of the people and the perseverance of the Christians who remain, at times, for months without the presence of a priest, but who look at and touch with love and devotion the little feet of the small image of Our Lady or the cross on the altar. In the Salesian missions of Rio Negro one learns to live without excesses, to value simplicity and to rejoice in the little things of life. Here all becomes a feast, dance, music, celebration, faith. Here one lives in the same poverty and simplicity as at the beginning of Valdocco, where Don Bosco, Mamma Margaret, Dominic Savio, Fr Rua and so many others lived and were sanctified. Being in Amazonia certainly enriches us as people, Christians and Salesians of Don Bosco!

*Interview of Don Gabriel ROMERO with the young Salesian Leonardo Tadeu DA SILVA OLIVEIRA, from the Province of São João Bosco based in Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brazil.*

## Amazonia Photo Gallery

< >



---

# Missionary Synodality

## Missionary Synodality: A Salesian Perspective

### Synodality in the New Testament

In recent years, the noun “synodality” has become more commonly used. Unfortunately, some have their own ideological or flawed understanding of the concept. So, it is no surprise that many people, even religious and priests, openly ask: “what is this thing? What does it mean?” Synodality is actually a new word for an old reality. Jesus, the pilgrim who proclaimed the Good News of the Kingdom of God (*Lk 4,14-15*) shared with everyone the truth and love of communion with God and our sisters and brothers. The image of the disciples of Emmaus in *Luke 24,18-35* is another example of synodality: they began by *remembering* the events they have experienced; then they *recognised* the presence of God in those events; and finally, they *acted* by returning to Jerusalem to proclaim Christ’s resurrection. This means that, we disciples of Jesus, ought to walk together in history as the People of God of the new covenant. In fact, in the *Acts of the Apostles* the People of God moved forward together, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, during the Council of Jerusalem (*Acts 15; Gal 2,1-10*).

### Synodality in the early Church

In the early Church, St. Ignatius of Antioch (50-117) reminded the Christian community in Ephesus that all its members are ‘companions on the journey’, by virtue of their baptism and their friendship with Christ. While St. Cyprian of Carthage (200 – 258) insisted that nothing should be done in the local

church without the bishop. Similarly, for St. John Chrysostom (347-407) 'Church' is a term for 'walking together' through the reciprocal and ordered relationship of the members leading them to have a common mind.

In the early Church, the two-part Greek word: *syn* (meaning "with") and *ódós* (meaning "path") was used to describe the journey together of the People of God on the same path to respond to disciplinary, liturgical and doctrinal issues. Thus, synods have been held periodically in local Churches and dioceses since the middle of the second century, that is, from about the year 150. Similarly, since 325 in Nicaea, the gathering of all bishops of the Church, called 'Council' in Latin, took decisions as expressions of communion with all the Churches.

## **Synodality in Vatican II**

The Second Vatican Council did not specifically address the theme on synodality nor use the term or concept in its documents. Instead, it used the term 'collegiality' for the method of building the conciliar processes. However, synodality lies at the heart of the work of renewal the Council was encouraging. While collegiality concerns decision-making process of bishops at the level of the universal Church, synodality is the fruit of active efforts to live the Vatican Council II's perspectives at the local level. This understanding was embodied in its vision of the nature of the Church as '*communion*' which has received the '*mission*' of proclaiming and establishing among all peoples God's kingdom (*Lumen gentium*, 5). It envisions the Church walking together and sharing "[the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties](#)" of all those we walk with (*Gaudium et spes*, 1).

## **Pope Francis and Synodality**

Since 2013 Pope Francis has been teaching us about synodality in all that he does and says. Synodality is not a simple



discussion nor like the deliberations in parliaments in search for the consensus which end in the vote of the majority. It is not debating, arguing or listening in order to respond. It is not a process of democratisation or putting doctrine up for a vote. It is not a plan, or a programme to be implemented. It is not even about what bishops or other stakeholders want, nor about command and control. Instead, synodality is about who we are and who we aspire to be as a Christian community, as the body of Christ. It is the style of life that qualifies the life and mission of the entire Church. Synodality is attentive listening in order to understand on a deeper, personal level. It is being a Church of participation and co-responsibility, beginning with the Pope, bishops and involving the whole people of God, so that we may all discover God's will as we face a particular set of challenges.

The presence of the Holy Spirit, through the sacrament of Baptism they received, enables the totality of God's people to have an *instinct of faith* (*sensus fidei*) which helps them to discern what is truly of God as well as feel, sense and perceive in harmony with the Church. Synodality involves the exercise of the *sensus fidei* of the whole People of God, the ministry of leadership of the college of Bishops with the clergy, and the ministry of unity of the Bishop of Rome.

## **Synodality and Discernment**

Above all, synodality is marked by a constant discernment of the presence of the Holy Spirit. This is a dynamic, unfolding reality, because we cannot predict where the Holy Spirit may lead us. Synodality is not a path marked out in advance. It is, instead, an encounter that shapes and transforms. It is a process that challenges us to recognize the prophetic function of God's people and requires us to be open to the unexpected of God. Through mutual listening and dialogue, God comes to touch us, to shake us, to change us interiorly. In the final analysis, synodality is the expression of the collective involvement and sense of co-responsibility for the Church of

the totality of God's people.

This implies an attitude of attentive listening with humility, respect, openness, patience to our experiences and readiness to listen even to discordant ideas, to people who have left the practice of the faith, to people of other faith traditions or even no religious belief so as to discern the promptings of the Holy Spirit, who is the main protagonist, and consequently promote God's action in people and society by acting with wisdom and creativity.

### **The Church is missionary**

The Church exists to spread the good news of Jesus. Thus, its missionary activity is, above all, proclaiming the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God (Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, 14, 22). Since all members of the Church, by virtue of the baptism received, are agents of evangelisation, consequently a synodal Church is an indispensable precondition for a new missionary energy that will involve the entire People of God. Evangelisation without synodality lacks concern for the structures of the Church. Inversely, synodality without evangelisation means we are just another social, business or philanthropic club.

### **Missionary synodality**

Missionary synodality is a systemic approach to pastoral reality. Sent to proclaim the Gospel, every baptised, as missionary disciple, has to learn to listen attentively and respectfully, as fellow travellers, to the local people, to followers of other religions, to the cries of the poor and marginalised, to those who have no voice in the public space, in order to be closer to Jesus and his Gospel and become a Church that goes forth, not closed in on itself.

If our public witness is not always evangelising in a broad sense, we are just another NGO, in a world of increasingly

growing inequality and isolation. Today there is a growing realisation that everything we do as Catholics is a touchpoint of evangelisation. We evangelise through the way we welcome people; how we treat our friends and family; how we spend our money as individuals, communities and groups; how we care for the poor and reach out to the marginalised; how we use the social media; how we attentively listen to the longings of the young and how we disagree and dialogue with one another.

## **The synodal process**

In order to attentively listen to the instinct of faith of God's people (*sensus fidelium*), which the Church teaches as an authentic guarantor of the faith it expresses, Pope Francis instituted the 'synodal process.' By journeying together, discussing and reflecting together as God's people, the Church will grow in its self-understanding, learn how to live communion, foster participation, and open itself to the mission of evangelisation.

Indeed, the synodal process is meant to inspire hope, stimulate trust, bind up wounds so that we may weave new and deeper relationships, learn from one another, and enlighten minds to dream with enthusiasm about the Church and our common mission. It is a *kairos* or 'ripe moment' in the life of the Church to undergo conversion in preparation for evangelisation and it is a moment of evangelisation.

## **Synodality and the Salesian charism**

From the pedagogical and spiritual treasures of the Salesian charism we can draw out expressions of missionary synodality.

Our Patron, St. Francis de Sales, made real friendship as the necessary context where journeying together through spiritual accompaniment takes place. He believed that there could be no real spiritual accompaniment without real friendship. Such friendship always involves mutual communication and reciprocal enrichment, which allows the relationship to become truly

spiritual.

In the Oratory at Valdocco, Don Bosco prepared his boys for life and made them aware of God's love for them, helped them love their Catholic faith and practice it in their ordinary daily life. He took care to maintain one-to-one relationship so as to provide them, according to the needs of each one, personal and group accompaniment. Thus, he wrote in his letter from Rome of 1884: "familiarity leads to love, and love leads to confidence. It is that that opens up the heart and the young reveal everything without fear." By maintaining a beautiful balance between a healthy, mature environment and the individual responsibility, the Oratory became a home, a parish, a school and a playground.

Don Bosco formed around him a community in which young people themselves were key players. He fostered participation and the sharing of responsibility by ecclesiastics, Salesians, lay people. They helped him teach catechism and other classes, assist in church, lead the young in prayer, prepare them for their first communion and confirmation, assist in the playground where they played with the boys, and help the more needy to find employment with some honest employer. In return, Don Bosco took diligent care of their spiritual life, through personal encounters, conferences, spiritual direction and the administration of the sacraments. Such an environment gave rise to a new culture where there was deep love for God and our Lady, which in turn, created a new style of relationship between young people and educators, between laity and priests, between artisans and students.

Today the *Educative-Pastoral Community* (EPC), through the *Salesian Educative Pastoral Plan* (SEPP), is the centre of communion and sharing in the spirit and mission of Don Bosco. In the EPC we foster a new way of thinking, judging and acting, a new way of confronting problems and a new style of relationships – with young people, Salesians and lay people, in various ways as

leaders and collaborators.

An essential element of Don Bosco's charism is the missionary spirit which he passed on to his Salesians and to the whole Salesian family. This is summed up in *Da mihi animas* and is expressed through the 'oratorian heart', fervour, drive and passion for evangelisation, particularly of young people. It is the capacity for intercultural and inter religious dialogue and the willingness to be sent where there is a need, particularly to the peripheries.

### **A time for conversion**

Personal and communal conversion will always be needed because we humbly recognise that there are still so many hindrances within us to our efforts to live the missionary synodality: an urgent sense to teach than to listen; a sense of privilege and entitlement; a failure to be transparent and accountable; a slowness to dialogue and lack of animating presence among the young; a propensity to control and to claim the sole right to make decisions; a lack of trust in empowering the laity as mission partners; and a lack of recognition of the presence of the Holy Spirit in cultures and peoples even before our arrival.

Indeed, Salesian missionary synodality is both a gift and a task!

---

## **From Croatia to Ethiopia: Don Bosco's missionary dream**

# continues

## From Croatia to Ethiopia: don Bosco's missionary dream continues

*Testimony of Josip Ivan SOLD0 sdb, a Croatian Don Bosco missionary sent to Ethiopia among the members of the 151st missionary expedition. The missionary call arises within the Salesian vocation as an invitation to go out and go wherever the Lord calls us.*

My name is Josip SOLD0, I am a Croatian Salesian born in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Let me begin by saying that my family has always played an important role in my life: I have three brothers and two sisters, one of whom is my twin sister. I am very proud of my sixteen grandnephews and nieces; my mother Veronica is still alive while my father died in 2006.

If I look back in the story of my vocation, I can say that from a very young age I felt the desire to become a priest. I was already an altar boy at the age of five and I kept up this service until middle school. As a teenager, however, I drifted away from the Church, keeping only the tradition of going to Mass on Sundays and going to confession, but without any real interest or involvement.



Around the age of 24-25 my conversion began. At that time I worked in a fast-food company and felt the need to reconnect with God, reading the Bible in my breaks from work. The Word of God slowly filtered into my heart and I felt confused. I was a 'normal' young man who loved going to discos, going out with friends and having fun with them, getting girls to notice me, hoping one day to find my soul mate. Meeting a Salesian priest changed my life and I made the decision to deepen my

understanding of Don Bosco's charism with the desire to one day become a Salesian priest. For two years I was in the pre-novitiate community; I needed to really get to know Don Bosco because the Salesians had no community where I lived. Suffice it to say that in my village they asked me if the Salesians were part of the Catholic Church, thinking they were a sect instead. The idea of helping poor young people, educating them for a better life and bringing them closer to Christ immediately fascinated me.

In 2016 I moved to Italy, to Rome where I stayed for three years, first in the novitiate in Genzano, where I took my first vows as a religious on 8 September 2017, and then in the Community of San Tarcisio to study philosophy at the Pontifical Salesian University. Inside me I felt a strong desire to go further, to go far, but I was not yet mature enough to make a serious and difficult decision such as missionary life. When I returned to Croatia for my internship, I realised that my doubts, uncertainties, fears, not feeling up to it, or inexperience could not stop me from being willing to become a missionary. God works through us even when we are not aware and we cannot rely solely on our own, limited, human strength, He uses our weaknesses, our little nuances to show His greatness. Many times it had happened to me that I had prepared well for meetings with the young people and then they often remembered nothing of the meeting, but they would tell me how significant for them were the things said in informal moments, which I often did not even realise. I understood that God does not need superheroes but "useless servants" who have in their hearts the desire to serve Him, and so I wrote my application to the Rector Major to be a Salesian missionary, *ad gentes*. In the very year that the Covid pandemic started, I received the answer from the Generalate: missionary with destination Ethiopia! The first step was to learn patience amidst the limitations due to the health situation and the slowness of the bureaucracy to obtain the necessary documents.

In the meantime, I did my practical training in the communities in Split and Zagreb, two different experiences which gave me the opportunity to get to know many saintly confreres and young people who showed me the face and voice of God.

Finally, at the beginning of September last year, I arrived in Ethiopia! At the "Bosco Children" in Addis Ababa I was able to be among the boys: many of them come from the street. The Salesians give them a second chance by welcoming them into the centre. There are young refugees, boys who have had to flee their cities or their homes, while others were born and have always lived on the street. We Salesians offer them the chance to have a new life, through education, housing and all that is necessary for a life worthy of a human being. The boys who enter the Bosco Children programme live there for two to three years until they are ready to be reintegrated into their family or society. Another service I performed this year was building the website ([boscochildren.com](http://boscochildren.com)), with the help and support of some good confreres from Croatia and the Croatian youth movement called Nova Eva. Having had experience as a cook in the past, it was suggested that I bake bread with the young people: every day we baked bread for the whole centre and community, with the dream of one day opening a real bakery with jobs and training courses. For the rest, our centre is a 'Valdocco in Addis Ababa': a farm with rabbits, chickens and cows, school for auto mechanics, carpentry, metalworkers, electricians, cooking, tailoring... everything to educate our boys and prepare them for life.



The culture shock for me was quite strong: the different food, a language that I could not learn straight away, the customs of a new culture... I experienced many emotions, I felt nervous and often wanted to isolate myself.

I have to thank the Congregation's Missions Sector for the



missionary training course that has just ended because it was an opportunity to name these shocks, to see that other missionaries also experience the same challenges and that the process of inculturation is not easy. In spite of the difficulties, I feel in my heart a strong desire to go forward and urge myself to overcome myself. With time I know that I will understand that in missionary life the Lord does not ask for much – “He asks for everything” to give you everything.

My formation towards the priesthood continues by beginning my studies in theology, before returning to the mission. Surely there will be new challenges, but there will also be the joy of being where the Lord wants me, the fullness of knowing that what I am doing is God’s will. Now I feel that there is nothing that can fill your heart as the Lord does when you are there where He wants you, when you know that your life finds fullness of meaning in His Divine plan, and the hope that He will never leave your hands until heaven, where I hope to be one day together with many brothers and sisters.



*Interviewer: Marco FULGARO*