

□ Reading time: 5 min.

The message of Rector Major Fr Ángel FERNÁNDEZ ARTIME

The first missionary expedition was blessed by the tears of Don Bosco who said:

“We are starting a great work. Who knows, but this departure may be like a seed from which a great plant will arise?”

The prophecy came true.



First Salesian missionary expedition – Turin, Valdocco 11 Nov. 1875

The first missionary expedition was blessed by the tears of Don Bosco who said: “We are starting a great work. Who knows, but this departure may be like a seed from which a great plant will arise?” The prophecy came true.

The first time was unforgettable. It was the feast of St Martin in 1875. The world did not know it, but in that corner of Turin called Valdocco, an extraordinary enterprise was beginning: ten young Salesians were leaving for Argentina. They were the first Salesian missionaries.

The *Biographical Memoirs* recount the moment in epic terms: “As 4 o’clock was striking and the first notes of the carillon were echoing, a sudden furious noise was heard in the House with slamming of doors and windows. A wind had risen so violent that it threatened to sweep away the Oratory. It may have been pure coincidence, but it is a fact that a similar violent wind broke loose in the very hour when the cornerstone of the Church of Mary Help of Christians was laid. It happened once again during the consecration of the same church.”.

The Basilica was crowded. Don Bosco climbed into the pulpit. “At sight of him a profound silence fell over the vast sea of people, all trembling with emotion as they drank in his every word. Every time he referred directly to the missionaries, his voice became choked, almost dying away on his lips. He manfully restrained his

tears, but his audience wept.”

“But my voice fails me, tears stifle my words. I only say that even though in this moment my soul is saddened at the thought of your departure, my heart is greatly consoled in seeing our Congregation strengthened; in realizing how we, in our insignificance, are yet able at this moment to contribute our little pebble to the mighty edifice of the Church. Yes, go forth bravely, but remember that there is but one Church that is spread over Europe, America and the whole world and welcomes men of all nations seek refuge at her maternal bosom. As Salesians, no matter in what remote part of the world you may be, never forget that here in Italy you have a Father who loves you in the Lord, and a Congregation that thinks of you in every circumstance, provides for your needs and will always welcome you as brothers. Go then. You will have to face all kinds of trials, hardships and dangers. Do not be afraid; God is with you. You will go, but you will not go alone because everyone will accompany you. Farewell! ... Perhaps some of us will not meet again on this earth.” (BM XI,362). Embracing them, Don Bosco gave each one a little sheet of paper with twenty special reminders, almost a fatherly testament to children he might never see again. He had written them in pencil in his notebook during a recent train journey.

The tree grows



On 25 September we relived that moment of grace for the 153rd time. Today they are called Oscar, Sébastien, Jean-Marie, Tony, Carlos... They are 25, young, prepared but they carry in their eyes and hearts the awareness and courage of the first ones. They are the vanguards of what I have asked of the entire Salesian Family for this six year period: courage, prophecy and fidelity.

Don Bosco had made a small prophecy: ‘We are entering upon a mighty undertaking, not because we have any pretensions or because we believe that we can convert the whole world in a few days; yet who knows? This departure, this humble beginning may be the seed that will grow into a mighty tree. It may be like a tiny grain of millet or of mustard seed that will grow little by little and accomplish great things. It may awaken in many hearts the desire to consecrate themselves to God in the Missions, to join forces with us and reinforce our ranks. The extraordinary number of those who asked to be chosen makes me hope that it will be so.’ (BM XI,

360).

'To be a missionary. What a word!' a Salesian testifies after forty years of missionary life. "An elderly person said to me: 'Don't talk to me about Christ; sit here beside me, I want to smell you and if this is His smell then you can baptise me'".

Don Bosco's fifth reminder to missionaries was: "Take special care of the sick, of the young, of the old and of the poor."

We live in a time that must be faced with a renewed mentality, one that "knows how to overcome frontiers". In a world where borders are in danger of becoming increasingly closed, the prophecy of our life also consists in this: to show that for us there are no borders. The only reality we have is God, the Gospel and the mission.

My dream is to be able to say today and in the years to come that 'Salesians of Don Bosco' means, for the people who hear our name, that we are consecrated, somewhat "crazy" - "crazy" because we love the young, especially the poorest, the most abandoned and defenceless, with a true Salesian heart. This seems to me the most beautiful definition that can be given today of the sons of Don Bosco. I am convinced that our Father would want exactly this.

They still leave to give their lives to God. Not only in words. The Congregation has also paid the tribute of blood. The priestly motto that martyr Rudolf Lunkenbein chose for his ordination was "I have come to serve and to give my life". On his last visit to Germany in 1974, his mother begged him to be careful, because they had informed her of the risks her son was running. He replied: "Mother, why do you worry? There is nothing more beautiful than to die for the cause of God. That would be my dream."

I have the firm conviction that our Family must journey over the next six years towards greater universality and without borders. Nations have borders. Our generosity, which supports the mission, cannot and must not know limits. The prophecy we must witness as a Congregation does not include borders.

One missionary recounted how he had celebrated Mass for the indigenous people of the mountains near Cochabamba, Bolivia. He was a young priest and hardly knew the Quechua language, and at the end, as he was walking home, he felt he had been a fiasco and had failed to communicate at all. But an old peasant, dressed

poorly, showed up and thanked the young missionary for coming.

Then he made an incredible move: “Before I could open my mouth, the old farmer reached into the pockets of his cloak and pulled out two handfuls of colourful rose petals. He stood up on tiptoe and gestured to me to help him by lowering my head. So he dropped the petals on my head, and I remained speechless. He rummaged in his pockets again and managed to extract two more handfuls of petals. He kept repeating the gesture, and the supply of red, pink and yellow rose petals seemed endless. I just stood there and let him do it, looking at my *huaraches* (leather sandals), bathed in my own tears and covered with rose petals. Eventually he took his leave and I was left alone. Alone with the fresh fragrance of roses.” I can tell you from experience that millions of families around the world are filled with gratitude towards the Salesians who have become the “gospel” in their midst.