 Reading time: 5 min.

The Salesian mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea had its beginnings in 1975, when the first three Salesians –from Ireland Fr Patrick Morrin, from USA Bro. Joseph Reza and from Italy Bro. Cesare Bullo – arrived in Mekele (Tigray-Ethiopia). Under the guidance of the Middle East (MOR) Province, they responded to the Congregation's call to explore new frontiers. Later, in 1982, other missionaries from the Lombardo-Emiliana Province (ILE) arrived in Dilla as part of *Project Africa.* The Salesian presence in Eritrea began in Dekemhare in 1995. In 1998, the communities of the two provinces united to form the Mariam Kidane Meheret Vice-Province (AET).

In October 2025 we will celebrate fifty (50) years of presence (Golden Jubilee). It is the time to thank the Lord and praise him, and to remember and thank those who have made the blessing of Salesian Charism reality for the young people of Ethiopia and Eritrea. Special thanks goes to all the missionaries and all the benefactors, may God bless you abundantly.

When God wants to bless His people, he makes use of other people. When he wanted to bless all his people he called Abraham: "*and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice*" (Genesis 22:18), when He wanted to free his people from slavery he called Moses (Exodus 3), and when he wanted to remind his people of his love he called prophets. And in our time God has spoken through his Son: "*but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds*" (Hebrews 1:2). His love is revealed to us through the incarnation of the Second Person of the most Holy Trinity – the Word of God became flesh (cf. John 1:14) comes to show us how much God loves us: "*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life*" (John 3:16).

And when he wanted to bless Ethiopian and Eritrean young people through the Charism of the Salesians he inspired the late bishop of the Adigrat Eparchy Bishop Abune Hailemariam Kahsay who asked the Salesians to come to his Eparchy and offer holistic education to young people. If we say yes to the Lord to collaborate with him in blessing his people, we need to be consistent, persevering and take commitment to try to understand his plan and his time, as well as to make our contribution. Since the answer of the Salesians was late in coming he asked three of

his priests who were studying in Italy to become Salesians, and in this way to start the Salesian presence in Ethiopia. One of those three – Abba Sebhatleab Worku – after becoming a Salesian, was teaching philosophy in Lebanon, while following his initial formation – and was appointed as bishop of the Adigrat Eparchy succeeding Abune Hailemariam Kahsay. As the Word of God says "*Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit*" (John 12:24). The fruit did not come when Abune Hailemariam was alive but the seed with which he collaborated to sow gave fruit after his death. Then Abba Sebhatleab Worku made his final profession before being consecrated bishop, and he was able to welcome the first Salesians on 17 October 1975 in Mekele. From then on it spread to different parts of Ethiopia (Adigrat, Adwa, Shire, Dilla, Soddo, Adamitullu, Zway, Debrezeit, Addis Abeba, Gambella) and in Eritrea (Dekemhare, Asmara and Barentu).

There are sixteen presences (13 communities in Ethiopia, two communities and one presence in Eritrea). In Ethiopia we are running Six (6) Technical Institutes, Eight (8) Primary Schools, Five (5) Secondary Schools, thirteen (13) Oratory/Youth Centers,one (1) home for Children at Risk, Five (5) Parishes, three (3) Aspirantates, formation houses for the novices and postnovices.

Geographically Ethiopia is located in East Africa (Horn of Africa) bordering with Kenya, Somalia, Djibouti, Eritrea, Sudan and South Sudan. It is one of the ancient countries (sometimes called Aksumite Kingdom). In history it developed but through lack of continuity and conflict, much of the past has been destroyed and it is trying to start anew, instead of building on what was already begun, causing the country to remain as one of under-developed countries.

In just the last fifty years of Salesian presence, we have seen three bloody wars: 1974-1991 – seventeen (17) years of civil war to overthrow the dictator and to build a democratic government; 1998-2000 two years of bloody war with the excuse of a "border" conflict with Eritrea. In 2020, a conflict broke out between the Federal Government and its allies and the Tigray Region; although it apparently ended in 2022 with the Pretoria Agreement, the war continued between the Federal Government and the Amhara Region and is still ongoing. Moreover, conflicts that began years ago in the Oromia region – one of Ethiopia's largest regions – continue to persist.

War consumes immense human and material resources, destroys infrastructure and

human relations, and hampers investment and tourism. We witness these effects in our own countries and in many parts of the world.

As Salesians, we believe that the only way out from conflicts and war, from poverty and lack of peace is through education and we have continued within the war and conflict giving education for the poor young people to build their future and their peaceful co-existence. Practising the Salesian preventive system: being with the young, being interested in their life and with a readiness to listen to them and to dialogue with them, trying to give them the values of *Religion, being reasonable with them, and starting everything by loving them* makes it possible for us to educate them.

Throughout our fifty year journey we have faced political (lack of stability and wars), social, economic challenges. Nowadays the main challenge is political instability and the issue of resources (human and financial). Following the directions of the General Chapters, we have sought to work together with lay people, and even though we have made progress, there is still a long way to go. The work with the Salesian Family is also another challenge that needs to be addressed. We are so grateful for the provinces who have contributed to the foundation and growth of the Salesian presence in Ethiopia and Eritrea.

We are still in an emergency situation following the war and lack of stability, because there are many Internally Displaced People in the camps – in schools (many government schools are not providing education for students) in Tigray. Our schools are accommodating students from among Internally Displaced People (IDPs), and these students and their families are still in need of daily food. We intervene when we can – thanks to the help that comes from the Don Bosco network and from other benefactors, and the students are fully dependent on us for all school materials.

For religious life we face a lack of prepared formation guides. Even though there are still vocations, our capacity to take care of them is difficult, considering the times we are living in. We need more prepared personnel.

There are one hundred and four (104) Salesians in Ethiopia and Eritrea including those who are in initial formation. The majority are local vocations already holding responsibility which shows that the foundation is established. The Vice-Province (AET) has three main priorities – *Salesian Charismatic Religious Identity, Youth*

Ministry involving the lay people, and Self-sustainability.

And we hope that slowly we will learn from our own history and make an effort to live together in harmony so that the mission moves smoothly towards the young people who are in need, and make a good contribution to the education and growth of the young – *Good Believers and Upright Citizens*.

Together with our benefactor and all collaborators, we are committed to continuing to journey with the young people to work for a better society and the Church!

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Superior of the AET Vice-Province