

□ Reading time: 8 min.

*The Salesian Congregation, founded in 1859 by Saint John Bosco, has had at its head a superior general called, since the time of Don Bosco, Rector Major. The figure of the Rector Major is central to the leadership of the congregation, serving as a spiritual guide and center of unity not only for the Salesians but also for the entire Salesian Family. Each Rector Major has contributed uniquely to the Salesian mission, addressing the challenges of their time and promoting the education and spiritual life of young people. Let's briefly summarize the Major Rectors and the challenges they have faced.*

### **Saint John Bosco (1859-1888)**

Saint John Bosco, founder of the Salesian Congregation, embodied distinctive qualities that shaped the identity and mission of the order. His deep faith and trust in Divine Providence made him a charismatic leader, capable of inspiring and guiding with vision and determination. His tireless dedication to the education of young people, especially the most needy, manifested itself through the innovative Preventive System, based on reason, religion, and loving-kindness. Don Bosco promoted a family atmosphere in Salesian houses, fostering sincere and fraternal relationships. His organizational skills and entrepreneurial spirit led to the creation of numerous educational works. His missionary openness pushed the Congregation beyond Italian borders, spreading the Salesian charism throughout the world. His humility and simplicity made him close to everyone, earning the trust and affection of collaborators and young people.

Saint John Bosco faced many difficulties. He had to overcome the misunderstanding and hostility of civil and ecclesiastical authorities, who often distrusted his educational method and rapid growth. He faced serious economic difficulties in supporting the Salesian works, often relying only on Providence. Managing difficult young people and training reliable collaborators was an arduous task. Furthermore, his health, worn down by intense work and constant worries, was a constant limitation. Despite everything, he faced every trial with unwavering faith, paternal love for young people, and tireless determination, carrying out the mission with hope.

### **1. Blessed Michele Rua (1888-1910)**

The ministry of Rector Major of Blessed Michele Rua is characterized by fidelity to the charism of Don Bosco, institutional consolidation, and missionary expansion. He

was appointed by Don Bosco as his successor by order of Pope Leo XIII, in the audience of 24.10.1884. After the Pope's confirmation on 24.09.1885, Don Bosco made his choice public before the Superior Chapter.

Some characteristics of his rectorship:

- he acted as a "living rule" of the preventive system, maintaining the educational spirit of Don Bosco through formation, catechesis, and spiritual direction; he was a continuator of the founder;
- he directed the exponentially growing Congregation, managing hundreds of houses and thousands of religious, with pastoral visits around the world despite health problems;
- he faced slander and crises (such as the scandal of 1907) defending the Salesian image;
- he promoted the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and the Cooperators, strengthening the tripartite structure desired by Don Bosco;
- under his leadership, the Salesians grew from 773 to 4,000 members, and the houses from 64 to 341, extending into 30 nations.

## **2. Don Paolo Albera (1910-1921)**

The ministry of Rector Major of Don Paolo Albera is distinguished by fidelity to the charism of Don Bosco and global missionary expansion. Elected in General Chapter 11.

Some characteristics of his rectorship:

- he maintained the preventive system intact, promoting the spiritual formation of young Salesians and the dissemination of the Salesian Bulletin as an instrument of evangelization;
- he faced the challenges of the First World War, with Salesians mobilized (over 2,000 called to arms, 80 of them died in the war) and houses transformed into hospitals or barracks, maintaining cohesion in the Congregation; this conflict caused the suspension of the planned General Chapter and interrupted many educational and pastoral activities;
- he faced the consequences of this war which generated an increase in poverty and the number of orphans, requiring an extraordinary commitment to welcome and support these young people in Salesian houses;
- he opened new frontiers in Africa, Asia, and America, sending 501 missionaries in nine *ad gentes* expeditions and founding works in Congo, China, and India.

## **3. Blessed Filippo Rinaldi (1922-1931)**

The ministry of Rector Major of Blessed Filippo Rinaldi is characterized by fidelity to

the charism of Don Bosco, missionary expansion, and spiritual innovation. Elected in General Chapter 12.

Some characteristics of his rectorship:

- he maintained the preventive system intact, promoting the interior formation of the Salesians;
- he sent over 1,800 Salesians around the world, founded missionary institutes and magazines, opening new frontiers in Africa, Asia, and America;
- he established the association of Past Pupils and the first Salesian secular institute (Volunteers of Don Bosco), adapting the spirit of Don Bosco to the needs of the early twentieth century;
- he revived the interior life of the Congregation, exhorting to “unlimited confidence” in Mary Help of Christians, a central legacy of the Salesian charism;
- he emphasized the importance of spiritual formation and assistance to emigrants, promoting welfare works and associations among workers;
- during his rectorship, members grew from 4,788 to 8,836 and houses from 404 to 644, highlighting his organizational skills and missionary zeal.

#### **4. Don Pietro Ricaldone (1932-1951)**

The ministry of Rector Major of Don Pietro Ricaldone is characterized by institutional consolidation, commitment during the Second World War, and collaboration with civil authorities. Elected in General Chapter 14.

Some characteristics of his rectorship:

- he strengthened Salesian houses and training centers, founded the Salesian Pontifical University (1940), and oversaw the canonization of Don Bosco (1934) and Mother Mazzarello (1951);
- he faced the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) which represented one of the main difficulties, with persecutions that severely affected Salesian works in the country;
- subsequently, he faced the Second World War (1939-1945) which caused further suffering: many Salesians were deported or deprived of their freedom, and communications between the General House in Turin and the communities scattered around the world were interrupted; furthermore, the advent of totalitarian regimes in Eastern Europe led to the suppression of several Salesian works;
- during the war, he opened Salesian structures to displaced persons, Jews, and partisans, mediating for the release of prisoners and protecting those in danger;
- he promoted Salesian spirituality through editorial works (e.g., *Corona patrum salesiana*) and initiatives in favor of marginalized young people.

#### **5. Don Renato Zigiotti (1952-1965)**

The ministry of Rector Major of Don Renato Ziggiotti (1952-1965) is characterized by global expansion, fidelity to the charism, and conciliar commitment. Elected in General Chapter 17.

Some characteristics of his rectorship:

- he was the first Rector Major not to have personally known Don Bosco and to renounce the office before his death, demonstrating great humility;
- during his mandate, the Salesians grew from 16,900 to over 22,000 members, with 73 provinces and almost 1,400 houses worldwide;
- he promoted the construction of the Basilica of Saint John Bosco in Rome and the sanctuary on Colle dei Becchi (Colle Don Bosco), in addition to the transfer of the Salesian Pontifical Athenaeum to the capital;
- he was the first Rector Major to actively participate in the first three sessions of the Second Vatican Council, anticipating the renewal of the Congregation and the involvement of the laity;
- he accomplished an unprecedented feat: he visited almost all the Salesian houses and Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, dialoguing with thousands of confreres, despite logistical difficulties.

## **6. Don Luigi Ricceri (1965-1977)**

The ministry of Rector Major of Don Luigi Ricceri is characterized by conciliar renewal, organizational centralization, and fidelity to the Salesian charism. Elected in General Chapter 19.

Some characteristics of his rectorship:

- post-conciliar adaptation: he guided the Congregation in the implementation of the indications of the Second Vatican Council, promoting the Special General Chapter (1966) for the renewal of the Constitutions and the permanent formation of the Salesians;
- he transferred the General Directorate from Valdocco to Rome, separating it from the "Mother House" to better integrate it into the ecclesial context;
- the revision of the Constitutions and Regulations was a complex task, aimed at ensuring adaptation to the new ecclesial directives without losing the original identity;
- he strengthened the role of the Cooperators and Past Pupils, reinforcing collaboration between the different branches of the Salesian Family.

## **7. Don Egidio Viganò (1977-1995)**

The ministry of Rector Major of Don Egidio Viganò is characterized by fidelity to the Salesian charism, conciliar commitment, and global missionary expansion. Elected

in General Chapter 21.

Some characteristics of his rectorship:

- his participation as an expert in the Second Vatican Council significantly influenced his work, promoting the updating of the Salesian Constitutions in line with the conciliar directives and guiding the Congregation in the implementation of the indications of the Second Vatican Council;
- he actively collaborated with Pope Saint John Paul II, becoming his personal confessor, and participated in 6 synods of bishops (1980-1994), strengthening the link between the Congregation and the universal Church;
- deeply linked to Latin American culture (where he spent 32 years), he expanded the Salesian presence in the Third World, with a focus on social justice and intercultural dialogue;
- he was the first rector major elected for three consecutive terms (with papal dispensation);
- he strengthened the role of the Cooperators and Past Pupils, promoting collaboration between the different branches of the Salesian Family;
- he strengthened devotion to Mary Help of Christians, recognizing the Association of Devotees of Mary Help of Christians as an integral part of the Salesian Family;
- his dedication to scientific research and interdisciplinary dialogue led him to be considered the “second founder” of the Salesian Pontifical University;
- under his leadership, the Congregation launched the “Africa Project,” expanding the Salesian presence in the African continent, which bore much fruit.

### **8. Don Juan Edmundo Vecchi (1996-2002)**

The ministry of Rector Major of Don Juan Edmundo Vecchi is distinguished by fidelity to the Salesian charism, commitment to formation, and openness to the challenges of the post-Council. Elected in General Chapter 24.

Some characteristics of his rectorship:

- he is the first non-Italian Rector Major: son of Italian immigrants in Argentina, he represented a generational and geographical change in the leadership of the Congregation, opening up to a more global perspective;
- he promoted the permanent formation of the Salesians, emphasizing the importance of spirituality and professional preparation to respond to the needs of young people;
- he promoted a renewed attention to the education of young people, emphasizing the importance of integral formation and personal accompaniment;
- through the Circular Letters, he exhorted to live holiness in everyday life, linking it to youth service and the testimony of Don Bosco;

- during his illness, he continued to witness faith and dedication, offering profound reflections on the experience of suffering and old age in Salesian life.

### **9. Don Pascual Chávez Villanueva (2002-2014)**

The ministry of Rector Major of Don Pascual Chávez Villanueva is distinguished by fidelity to the Salesian charism, commitment to formation, and commitment to the challenges of globalization and ecclesial transformations. Elected in General Chapter 25.

Some characteristics of his rectorship:

- he promoted renewed attention to the Salesian community as an evangelizing subject, with priority given to spiritual formation and the inculturation of the charism in regional contexts;
- he relaunched the commitment to the most vulnerable young people, inheriting the approach of Don Bosco, with particular attention to frontier oratories and social peripheries;
- he oversaw the permanent formation of the Salesians, developing theological and pedagogical studies linked to the spirituality of Don Bosco, preparing for the bicentenary of his birth;
- he led the Congregation with an organizational and dialogical approach, involving the different regions and promoting collaboration between Salesian study centers;
- he promoted greater collaboration with the laity, encouraging co-responsibility in the Salesian mission and addressing internal resistance to change.

### **10. Don Ángel Fernández Artime (2014-2024)**

The ministry of Don Ángel Fernández Artime is distinguished by fidelity to the Salesian charism and to the papacy. Elected in General Chapter 27.

Some characteristics of his rectorship:

- he led the Congregation with an inclusive approach, visiting 120 countries and promoting the adaptation of the Salesian charism to different cultural realities, while maintaining a strong link with the roots of Don Bosco;
- he strengthened the commitment to the most vulnerable young people in the peripheries, inheriting the approach of Don Bosco;
- he faced the challenges of globalization and ecclesial transformations, promoting collaboration between study centers and renewing the instruments of governance of the Congregation;
- he promoted greater collaboration with the laity, encouraging co-responsibility in the educational and pastoral mission;
- he had to face the COVID-19 pandemic which required adaptations in educational

and assistance works to continue serving young people and communities in difficulty;

- he had to face the management of human and material resources in a period of vocational crisis and demographic changes;
- he moved the General House from the Pisana to the work founded by Don Bosco, Sacro Cuore of Rome;
- his commitment culminated in his appointment as Cardinal (2023) and Pro-Prefect of the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life (2025), marking a recognition of his influence in the universal Church.

The Major Rectors of the Salesian Congregation have played a fundamental role in the growth and development of the congregation. Each of them has brought their own unique contribution, addressing the challenges of their time and keeping the charism of Saint John Bosco alive. Their legacy continues to inspire future generations of Salesians and young people around the world, ensuring that Don Bosco's educational mission remains relevant and vital in the contemporary context.

We also present below a statistic of these rectorships.

<i>Rector Major</i>	<i>Born on</i>	<i>Beginning of Rector Major mandate</i>	<i>Elected at ... years</i>	<i>End of Rector Major mandate</i>	<i>Rector Major for...</i>	<i>Lived for... years</i>
BOSCO Giovanni	16.08.1815	18.12.1859	44	31.01.1888 (†)	28 years and 1 month	<b>72</b>
RUA Michele	09.06.1837	31.01.1888	50	06.04.1910 (†)	22 years and 2 months	<b>72</b>
ALBERA Paolo	06.06.1845	16.08.1910	65	29.10.1921 (†)	11 years and 2 months	<b>76</b>

RINALDI Filippo	28.05.1856	24.04.1922	65	05.12.1931 (†)	9 years and 7 months	<b>75</b>
RICALDONE Pietro	27.07.1870	17.05.1932	61	25.11.1951 (†)	19 years and 6 months	<b>81</b>
ZIGGIOTTI Renato	09.10.1892	01.08.1952	59	27.04.1965 († 19.04.1983)	12 years and 8 months	<b>90</b>
RICCERI Luigi	08.05.1901	27.04.1965	63	15.12.1977 († 14.06.1989)	12 years and 7 months	<b>88</b>
VIGANO Egidio	29.06.1920	15.12.1977	57	23.06.1995 (†)	17 years and 6 months	<b>74</b>
VECCHI Juan Edmundo	23.06.1931	20.03.1996	64	23.01.2002 (†)	5 years and 10 months	<b>70</b>
VILLANUEVA Pasqual Chavez	20.12.1947	03.04.2002	54	25.03.2014	11 years and 11 months	76
ARTIME Angel Fernandez	21.08.1960	25.03.2014	53	31.07.2024	10 years and 4 months	64