 Reading time: 4 min.

On 16 June 2024, Cardinal Luis Antonio G. Tagle, Pro-Prefect of the Dicastery for Evangelisation, confirmed Fr Alessandro as National Director of the Pontifical Missionary Works (POM) in Lithuania for another five-year term (2024-2029). Fr Alessandro, a Salesian from Turin, has been working as a missionary in Lithuania since 1998. He is currently the rector of the Salesian community in Vilnius, pastor of the parish entrusted to the Salesians and editor of the Lithuanian Salesian Bulletin. He was appointed national director of the POM in 2019 at the proposal of the Lithuanian Bishops' Conference, and his post can be summarised as the Church of Lithuania's national commissioner of missionary animation, especially with a special eye for missions directly dependent on the Pontifical Organisations.

What are the Pontifical Missionary Societies?
The Pontifical Missionary Societies (POM) are a worldwide network of prayer and solidarity in the service of the Pope to meet the spiritual and material needs of peoples and local Churches in the so-called mission territories. They are an organisation of the universal Catholic Church that promotes and supports missionary activities worldwide. Their main mission is to spread the Gospel and support Christian communities in developing countries. In each country of the world, there is a national POM directorate that, through the various diocesan directors or national appointees of religious congregations or ecclesial movements, coordinates the initiatives of that country for the growth of missionary attention.
Let us look in detail at the history, the theological and ecclesial motivation of these 4 Works and their specificity.

1. Work of the Propagation of the Faith: founded in 1822 in Lyon, France, by Blessed Pauline Jaricot. Its purpose is to provide financial and spiritual support to Catholic missions around the world. It was recognised as 'Pontifical' by Pope Pius XI in 1922.

2. *Opera dell'Infanzia Missionaria* (also known as Holy Childhood): founded in 1843 by Charles de Forbin-Janson, Bishop of Nancy, France. It aims to sensitise children in Christian countries to the missionary cause and to promote solidarity among children worldwide. It was also recognised as 'Pontifical' by Pope Pius XI in 1922.

3. *Opera di San Pietro Apostolo*: founded in 1889 by Jeanne Bigard and her mother Stéphanie in Caen, France. Its aim is to support the training of local clergy in

mission territories. It supports scholarships for clergy and priests from mission countries, both locally and abroad. Declared ‘Pontifical’ in 1922 by Pope Pius XI.

4. Missionary Union of the Clergy: founded in 1916 by Father Paolo Manna, a PIME (Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions) missionary. It promotes missionary awareness among clergy and pastoral workers. It is not just for the clergy, but for the awareness of the entire people of God as possessors of the universal missionary mandate. It became a pontifical work in 1956, under the pontificate of Pope Pius XII.

Theological and ecclesial motivation

POM is rooted in the Church’s mission to evangelise, which originates from Christ’s mandate to his disciples: “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19). Mission is therefore seen as a response to the divine invitation to share the Good News with all nations.

The heart of mission is the proclamation of salvation in Jesus Christ, the proclamation of the Kingdom of God and the witnessing of the Christian faith.

On the other hand, proclamation not supported by solidarity would not be very credible. The POMs express the solidarity of the universal Church with the young Churches, especially in the poorest countries, through spiritual and material aid.

From the ecclesial point of view, the POMs are a concrete expression of missionary cooperation within the universal Church. They provide support to local churches in mission territories, helping them to develop church structures and to train clergy and laity. They also promote missionary awareness among the faithful, stimulating prayer, missionary vocation and financial support for missions. They facilitate international cooperation within the Church, enabling an equitable distribution of resources for mission needs.

The Pontifical Mission Societies are a vital component of the Catholic Church, embodying a commitment to evangelisation and global solidarity. Their history reflects a continuous and growing attention towards missions, while their theological and ecclesial motivation highlights the importance of the missionary mandate in the context of the Christian faith.

We Salesians are also called to be part of this ecclesial missionary journey of spiritual and material closeness and solidarity.

Universal Mission Collection

Since 1926, World Mission Day has been celebrated on the penultimate Sunday of October in all the Catholic communities of the world, as a day of prayer and universal solidarity among sister Churches. It is a time when each one of us is called

to face up to the responsibility that is incumbent on every baptised person and on every Christian community, whether small or large, in response to Jesus' mandate "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mk 16:15). It is placed at the beginning of the pastoral year to remind us that the missionary dimension must inspire every moment of our lives and that "missionary action" Pope Francis reminds us "is the paradigm of every work of the Church" (EG 15).
The Day is associated with an annual collection of offerings with which the Pontifical Missionary Societies, an expression of the Pope's solicitude towards all the Christian communities of the world, come to the aid of the young missionary Churches, especially those in difficult situations and of greatest need, providing for their basic pastoral needs: training of local seminarians, priests, religious, catechists; construction and maintenance of places of worship, seminaries and parish structures; support for local Catholic TV, Radio and Press; provision of means of transport for missionaries (cars, motorbikes, bicycles, boats); support for the education, upbringing and Christian formation of children and young people. For this reason, this collection of offerings differs from other purposes, as well as from other possible forms of cooperation between particular Churches.

Theme of World Mission Day 2024
Every year the Holy Father sends a message to the whole Church on the occasion of World Mission Day. This message pays special attention to the activities of the POMs in the service of the whole Church. This 2024, the theme of World Mission Day is "Go and invite everyone to the banquet", inspired by Mt 22:9. This theme was chosen to emphasise the mission of the Church to bring the invitation to salvation to all humanity, reflecting the parable of the wedding feast in which the king invites everyone at the crossroads to participate in the banquet.
Pope Francis highlights three key aspects:
1. "Go and invite!" Mission as a tireless going out to everyone to invite them to an encounter and communion with God. This calls the Church to always be outgoing, overcoming obstacles and difficulties to bring the Gospel to all.
2. The "Banquet". The eschatological and Eucharistic perspective of the mission. The eschatological banquet symbolises the final salvation in the Kingdom of God, and participation in the Eucharist anticipates this perfect communion with God.
3. "Everyone". The universal mission of Christ's disciples, who must go to the margins of society to invite all, without exclusion, to participate in the new life in Christ.

Fr Alessandro BARELLI, sdb