 Reading time: 8 min.

Malta, a land blessed by the Apostle Paul, is an island located in the heart of the Mediterranean Sea between Europe and North Africa. Over the centuries, it has been influenced by numerous cultures, making it more enchanting. This small state, one of the most densely populated in the world, has hosted the Salesians of Don Bosco since 1903, passionately engaged in the education of young people. We interviewed Fr. Eric, recently appointed to lead the Maltese Salesian community.

Can you introduce yourself?
My name is Fr. Eric Cachia, and I was born on August 4, 1976, in Malta. I am the eldest of three children. I have two younger sisters and two lovely nieces. I attended kindergarten at the state school in my hometown, Ħaż-Żebbuġ, for six years. During the last year, it was necessary to take an exam to access the desired school. I dreamed of entering the minor seminary, but to make my mother happy, I also took the exam for the state high school and another for Savio College, the Salesian school, of which I knew almost nothing at the time, and which I initially did not want to attend. I took that exam reluctantly, but God's plans were for me to be admitted into the Salesian school.

After seven years of study, I obtained my high school diploma and began the Novitiate in Lanuvio, near Rome, making my first religious vows in the hands of the newly elected Rector Major, Fr. Juan E. Vecchi, at the Sacred Heart in Rome. I was the youngest in the group: I was only 19 years old. Back in Malta, I obtained a Bachelor's degree in Philosophy and Sociology and subsequently spent two years as the head of the Oratory in Sliema.

For my theological studies, I moved to Rome, attending the Pontifical Salesian University (UPS) and living at the Gerini community. I was ordained a deacon in 2004 and continued my training in Dublin, Ireland, obtaining a Master's in *Holistic Development in Family Pastoral Ministry*. Having retuned to Malta, I was ordained a priest on July 21, 2005, along with nine other religious and diocesan members.

My first obedience was to be the Head of the Oratory in Sliema and Treasurer of the community. After a few months, I was appointed Delegate for Youth Pastoral in the Council of the Malta Delegation. I held this position for a year before being appointed Treasurer of the Delegation, a role I held for 10 years and then for

another 6 years when, in 2018, Malta became a Vice-Province.

In the meantime, I also held other positions: Principal of Savio College, Supervisor in the post-novitiate training in Malta for six years, and for four years, Assistant Coordinator of the Association of Catholic Schools in Malta. To respond to pastoral needs, I obtained a Master's in Systemic and Family Psychotherapy and was elected Secretary of the Committee of the National Association of Psychotherapy in Malta. In 2017, I became the Director of St. Patrick's, a structure that includes a school, a boarding school, and a public church, as well as being Principal of the school. Finally, in December 2023, I was appointed Provincial, a position I took on starting in July 2024.

What did you dream of as a child?
When I was 7, I became an altar boy, and even today I cannot explain the experience I had during my first Mass as a ministrant. I felt a presence of love in my heart that invited me to become a priest. Even at home, I played "being a priest," and at school, despite the tension between Church and State at the time, I often debated religious topics.

The desire to become a priest included the wish to give a voice to those who did not have one. I liked writing stories, speaking in public, and organising events. At just 14, for example, I was already organising walks for the altar boys.

What is the story of your vocation?
My vocation was born from the meeting with various priests whom I considered role models. However, it was in the Salesian school that I found new energy. There I discovered hidden talents and lived experiences that made me feel part of a large family. In that joyful and stimulating context, the Lord spoke to my heart.

During my last school year, I understood that my path would be Salesian. After a year of discernment and discussion with my family and a priest, I found peace in deciding: "I give myself for the boys of the future. I will be Salesian to carry on what I have received."

A curious anecdote was told to me by my paternal grandmother when I was close to the diaconate. My father was one of 18 children in a large and modest family. An English Salesian, Fr. Patrick McLoughlin, known for his reputation of holiness, would often stop by the nuns after Mass to bring a slice of cake to my grandmother. In the

evening, he would return with leftover meals to help feed the struggling family. One day, my grandmother asked him: “How can I repay such kindness and providence?” He replied: “You just pray: who knows, maybe one of your children will become a Salesian.” Among 51 cousins, I was the first – and one of two – to choose the religious life… and Salesian.

How did your family react?
My family has always been very supportive. My parents never imposed their ideas but always tried to support my decisions. My father was a mason, and my mother was a housewife. Simplicity and family unity were among the strongest values that characterised us. They made sacrifices as an expression of a love lived in a concrete way that I would understand only as an adult. It was not easy to leave the country and start my journey at just 18, but today my parents are proud, and in some way, they are also part of the Salesian Family. For over 30 years, they have prepared meals for the boys during summer camps. Who knows how many times my father, despite being illiterate, spoke with the wisdom of the heart to some young person or parent. And how many times they have sent brochures at the provincial level to support our Salesian works!

The most beautiful joy and the greatest struggle
There are many joys that are kept in the heart, but one of the greatest is when I meet an ex-student who tells me: “In you, I found the father I never had.” Living one’s vocation fully also means offering what could have been equally beautiful, like building a family. This sometimes involves having to suffer in silence for this choice offered. The greatest struggle, on the other hand, is seeing children suffer due to wars, violence, and abuse… seeing them deprived of the ability to dream of a world full of hope and possibilities. It is equally difficult to remain credible and optimistic in a context of fierce secularism that often drains energy and tries to extinguish enthusiasm.

Local and youth needs
Malta lives in a very particular reality. Culturally, it remains deeply Catholic, but in everyday practice, it is not so much. In recent years, politically oriented choices aimed primarily at boosting the economy have generated a deep crisis within families. Many young people grow up marked by the lack of reference figures and models to accompany them with love. There are no stable points of orientation, and at the same time, many young people are searching for new meaning in their lives. Faith, increasingly relegated to the private sphere, can, however, awaken interest

when it manages to speak a language that challenges and invites to aim high. In these cases, young people are happy to come together to live experiences that require guidance. About 20% of the population is no longer Maltese. The economy, which has attracted people from all over the world, is transforming the face of the island. Many non-Maltese young people feel alone, while others begin or resume a journey of faith. These are new frontiers and emerging forms of poverty, marked by psycho-affective challenges and mental health issues. These situations highlight the urgency of addressing isolation, precariousness, and relational deficiencies that characterise this complex reality.

The great challenges of evangelisation

Everything can be summed up in one word: credibility. Young people today, more than ever, do not need simple transmitters of content, rather people with authentic hearts and ears capable of listening to the heartbeat of hearts searching for meaning in their lives. They need educators who know how to create processes, companions who are not afraid to show their fragility and limits, but who are authentic guides. These are guides who propose what they themselves have lived: the encounter with Jesus as a goal and calling for every person. A guide leads to rediscovering oneself as part of a Church on the move towards the peripheries, ready to embrace and heal wounds, even before indicating what must be done. The real challenge, at least for Europe, is to find young people who have the courage to bet their lives on Jesus. As emerged during the Synod, some structures, contexts, and languages of the Church are no longer incisive. This is compounded by a Church that, in some cases, appears tired and distracted, too focused on self-preservation. This situation also reflects that of families, which must be placed back at the centre of priorities in every nation. They are the future of the State and the Church. That is why Salesian environments, with their humanism that values the beauty present in every person, must present themselves not only as immediate responses, but also as models for other groups and realities. Perhaps only today do we understand that the joy and hope of Don Bosco go far beyond simple emotions. They are the foundations upon which to build the relaunch of a renewed humanity redeemed by Christ.

How do you see the future?

I look to the future with hope. The present we live in, in my opinion, is marked by numerous crises on various fronts: I would say it could not be worse than this. Therefore, it is a time for renewal. We rely on Christ in this time of purification and transformation. Yes, there are challenges that will surely shape the future.

What place does Mary Help of Christians occupy in your life?
As a child, we prayed the Rosary as a family every day. However, for me, it was perhaps just a practice of popular piety. Over time, especially during my years as a Salesian, I realised how close this heavenly mother is to me. I remember numerous moments when, caught up in practical difficulties and concerns related to pastoral work, I was about to give up. But she always intervened at the right moment. Every day I realise how truly “it was she who did everything.” I have a deep affection for the blessing of Mary Help of Christians. Every morning I entrust to her all the young people and lay collaborators, but especially those who find themselves in the peripheries of society. A year ago, on the occasion of the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, I shared on social media a phrase that Mary said to Juan Diego: “Do not be afraid. Am I not here, I who am your Mother? Are you not under my shadow and protection? Am I not the source of your joy? Are you not in the fold of my cloak, in the crossing of my arms? Do you need anything else? Do not let anything else worry or disturb you.” Two hours later, I received a call from the Rector Major and the request to accept or not the appointment as Provincial.

What would you say to young people?
Do not give up! I would recall the words of Pope Francis addressed to young people in April 2024: ” Rise to stand in front of life, not to sit on the couch. There are several “couches” that take hold of us and do not let us get up again.” If only young people understood that they are the hope of today and tomorrow, that they are like delicate and fragile seeds, but at the same time rich with infinite possibilities! I would urge them to challenge Christ, but also to allow Christ to challenge them. Only then do we understand that with Him we build an intimate relationship with a living God, not with an image shaped by fears or anxieties. I would challenge those young people who have already experienced Don Bosco. It is extraordinary to throw oneself into the Heart of Christ, giving one’s life for the young who will come. “Whom shall I send?” Christ asked His disciples. If only many others had the same determination: “Send me!”

Fr. Eric CACHIA, sdb
Superior of Malta