

Interview with Fr Francisco LEZAMA, Provincial of Uruguay

We asked Fr Francisco LEZAMA, the new Provincial of Uruguay (URU), a few questions for the readers of the Salesian Bulletin OnLine.

Fr Francisco Lezama was born in the city of Montevideo on 11 September 1979. He got to know the Salesians in the Salesian work of Las Piedras, where he took part in youth groups and parish activities.

His parents Luis Carlos Lezama and Graciela Pérez currently live in the city of Las Piedras.

He did all his initial formation in the city of Montevideo. He made his perpetual profession on 31 January 2006 in Montevideo. He was ordained priest on 11 October 2008 in Las Piedras (Uruguay). His first years as a priest were spent in the Salesian presence of the Colegio Juan XXIII in the city of Montevideo. From 2012 to 2015 he studied Sacred Scripture at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome.

From 2018-2020 he was rector and parish priest of the Colegio Pio IX in Villa Colón, a member of the formation team and in charge of vocations ministry. In the year 2021 he takes up the service of Provincial Vicar and Provincial Delegate for Youth Ministry until October 2022 when he was appointed Provincial Economer.

Fr Lezama succeeds Fr Alfonso Bauer as Provincial of URU, who finished his six-year term in January 2024.

Can you introduce yourself?

I am Francisco Lezama, a Salesian priest. I am 44 years old... I am passionate about educating young people, I feel at home among them. I come from a family that has taught me the value of justice and concern for others. Life has given me friends with whom I can share who I am and who help me to grow all the time. I dream of a world in which everyone has a place, and I

work to the best of my ability to make this a reality.

What is the story of your vocation?

Since I was a child I felt called to put my life at the service of others. I looked in many places: I became involved in political and social activism, I thought of dedicating myself professionally to education as a teacher... As a teenager I approached the parish because of my desire to help others. There, participating in the oratory, I discovered that this was the environment in which I could be myself, in which I could develop my deepest self... and in this context, a Salesian suggested that I discern a consecrated vocation. I had never consciously considered it, but at the time I felt a light in my heart that told me it was that way.

Since then, in the Salesian vocation, I have been developing my life, and even with the thorns among the roses I have been discovering that Jesus' calls have been marking my path: my profession as a religious, my university studies in education, my ordination to the priesthood, my specialisation in Sacred Scripture, and above all each mission, each young person with whom God has given me the gift of meeting, allow me to continue to be grateful and to unfold my vocation.

Why a Salesian?

I am passionate about education, I feel called to fulfil my vocation there, and I also believe that it is an instrument to change the world, to change lives. I have also discovered that as a Salesian I can give my whole life, "until my last breath", and that makes me very happy.

How did your family react?

They have always accompanied me and my siblings, so that everyone can find their own way to happiness. In my father's family I have an uncle and an aunt who have also been called to the consecrated life, but above all I have in my family many examples of faithful and generous love, starting with my parents, and lately I see it in the love of my sister and my

brother-in-law for their children, who have given me the vocation of an uncle, and help me to discover new facets of the same love, which comes from God.

Who first told you the story of Jesus?

I remember my grandmother and my godfather who encouraged me a lot to get to know Jesus... then in the catechesis of my parish, I began to follow the path that allowed me to grow in his friendship... Finally, with the Salesians, I discovered that Jesus is close to me, makes himself present in everyday life and encourages me to grow in his friendship.

You studied Sacred Scripture at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome. Are young people today interested in the Bible? How can you bring them closer to it?

I have discovered that young people are very interested in the Bible; even in a university youth centre in Montevideo, a group of young people asked me for Greek classes so that they could study the text in depth! The reality is that the biblical text shows us the Word of God always in dialogue with cultures, with the challenges of the times, and young people are very sensitive to these realities.

What have been the greatest challenges you have faced?

There is no doubt that the injustices and inequalities that our societies experience are very great challenges, because for us they are not figures or statistics, but they have a name and a face, in which the suffering face of Christ is reflected.

What have been your greatest satisfactions?

For me, it is an immense joy to see God at work: in the hearts of young people, in the communities that listen to his voice, in the people who bet on love even in the face of difficulties.

On the other hand, it is a great joy to share the charism with the Salesian brothers and with so many lay people who make it possible today to develop the Salesian work in Uruguay. We

have taken very significant steps towards synodality, sharing life and mission, in a style that enriches us and allows us to work from the depths of our identity.

What are the most significant works in your area?

There are many works that have great significance in Uruguay. Some have a high impact on society, such as the Tacurú Movement on the outskirts of Montevideo, which is undoubtedly the most relevant social project in Uruguayan society as a whole. There are other works with great significance in their area, such as the Paiva Institute in the department of Durazno, which allows adolescents from rural areas to access secondary education (which would not be possible for them otherwise) and to open up new horizons in their lives. Or Obra Don Bosco, in the city of Salto, which in addition to various projects that accompany them from birth to 17 years of age, has a specific project for adolescents in conflict with the law, accompanying them in various aspects of their lives.

Do you have any project that particularly interests you?

The last project we started is a home for children that the state has taken under its guardianship, because their rights were being violated, and entrusted them to us, the Salesians. Significantly, we have called it “Casa Valdocco”, and there the children are accompanied while at the same time we look for a way for them to rejoin a family reality that can help them in their development.

What place does Mary Help of Christians occupy in your life?

In Uruguay we have many churches and works dedicated to Mary Help of Christians. In fact, it is in our province that the tradition of the monthly commemoration, every 24th, was born. But there are two places that are significant to me: one is the National Shrine, in Villa Colón, the mother house of the Salesians in Uruguay, from where missionaries later went out to all America. The other place, in the north of the country, is Corralito, in Salto. There, devotion to Mary Help of Christians arrived before the Salesians did, thanks to former

students who spread their devotion. I believe that this is a sign of the vitality of our Family, and also of how she is always present, using means and ways that always surprise and amaze us.