

□ Reading time: 5 min.

From Uruguay to Ethiopia, via Ireland: the journey of Fr. Ignacio José LAVENTURE OTEGUI is that of a Salesian who feels, above all, “sent”. Born in Montevideo in 1972 and raised in a Salesian environment since the age of six, he left as a missionary in January 2001, a few months after his priestly ordination. For twenty-five years he has served the circumscription of Ethiopia-Eritrea, almost always in the field of formation: socius to the master and then master of novices in Debre Zeit, in charge of the youth centre and theology lecturer in Adigrat, then vicar, delegate for formation and secretary. On 25 August 2025, he took over the leadership of the Mary Kidane Mehret Vice-Province (AET). In this interview, he talks about the question that changed his life, the love for Mary Help of Christians he learnt from his mother, and the challenges facing young people in a country scarred by war.

Could you introduce yourself?

I am Fr. Ignacio José Laventure Otegui. I was born on 27 December 1972 in Montevideo, Uruguay. I made my first profession on 31 January 1992 at the Talleres Don Bosco, and in the same parish and Salesian house, I was ordained a priest on 30 September 2000. A few months later, in January 2001, I left as a missionary, first to Ireland, to study English, and in August of the same year, I landed in my missionary promised land, Ethiopia-Eritrea. In these twenty-five years of missionary life, I have worked mainly in the field of formation. From 2001 to 2004, I was in the novitiate house in Debre Zeit, as socius to the master and in charge of the oratory-youth centre; I then obtained a licentiate in Dogmatic Theology at the UPS (2005-2007); from 2007 to 2010, I was in the post-novitiate in Adigrat, as in charge of the youth centre and theology lecturer at the Major Seminary of the diocese; from 2010 to 2019, I returned to Debre Zeit as master of novices. From 2019 to 2025, I was provincial vicar, delegate for formation and provincial secretary. On 25 August 2025, I began my service as superior of the Mary Kidane Mehret Vice-Province (AET).

When did you first hear the call and what brought you to the Salesians?

I can say I was almost born in a Salesian house. I have no childhood memories that are not linked to the Salesians. I entered the St. Francis di Sales (Maturana) Salesian school at the age of six, did all my primary and secondary schooling there, and then moved on to the Juan XXIII Salesian pre-university institute. My mother was a Salesian Cooperator and, together with my father, was part of the parents' committee: they were very involved in the life of the school. I was a member of the Dominic Savio and Zephyrinus Namuncurà clubs and later of the Salesian Missionary Youth. Yet I had never thought of becoming a Salesian, until the rector of Maturana, who was speaking with all the students, asked me the question: "Have you ever thought about becoming a Salesian?" I still remember my answer: "You're crazy, not at all". But that day he planted a seed in my heart, a seed that began to sprout and which blossomed a year later, when I entered the Salesian Aspirantate in Villa Colón on 20 June 1989.

Is there a particular event or person that significantly influenced your decision to become a Salesian?

Yes. The person is the Salesian I just mentioned, Fr. Felix Irureta. He asked me that question and then never brought the subject up again, until almost a year later, when I was the one who sought him out. His respect and his silence were very important to me. As for events, I would say my first missionary experience with the missionary group in Melo, at the age of fourteen. That experience somehow took me out of my comfort zone and, as a result, I became an animator in the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians' oratory, at Mary Help of Christians school.

What were the main challenges and greatest joys during your formation and early years as a Salesian?

The greatest joys were the family spirit that I breathed and assimilated in the various formation houses and among the confreres, and then the work and animation in the oratory. I started as an animator at fourteen and continued throughout my formation, and even afterwards: being among the children and young people was and is a great joy. One of the biggest challenges, on the other

hand, was overcoming my shyness and the fear of facing new situations: I was a very reserved and quiet person.

What challenges do you see today in accompanying young people and which Salesian tools do you still consider effective?

I think one of the challenges is the speed of change, especially among young people. As Salesians, we can have the feeling of not being able to keep up, of not being able to enter their world. Next year we will celebrate 150 years of the Preventive System, this great intuition of Don Bosco. Here we have a tool that is always effective, provided we know how to apply it to today's reality. The Preventive System implies our physical presence among the young, what in our tradition we call assistance. This too is a fundamental tool.

How do you stay spiritually and humanly steadfast in difficult times?

My master of novices, before we left for our different places of apostolate, always used to repeat to us: "Remember, you are sent". This has helped me a lot in difficult times: knowing that I am not the one in charge, but that I have been sent by the Lord. It is His mission, and He promised to be with us until the end. I like what St. Paul says: "I know whom I have believed" (2 Tim 1:12). Looking to Jesus, seeking Him even when I don't understand the reason for this or that, has been important in my Salesian life. As a novitiate group, we had chosen the motto: "Our life belongs to you; we have placed it in your hands".

How would you describe Salesian spirituality in a few words?

It is not easy in a few words, but I would say it is a simple, joyful, and profound way of entering into a relationship of friendship with God.

What are the most urgent local needs and the needs of the young?

Young people have so many needs in today's world, but perhaps one of the most important is to have true role models in life and adults ready to accompany them, to walk with them. Locally, young people suffer from the political and economic instability of the country. After the war, many lost hope in the present and the future and became victims of addiction, human trafficking, and violence. It is urgent to walk with them and try to rebuild trust and hope. As Salesians, we must have the courage, as Don Bosco did in his time, to offer new answers to new situations and challenges.

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

One of my childhood memories is a statue of Our Lady that came to our house for a few days every month, before moving on to another family. Back then, my mother used to say to me and my younger brother: "Está la virgencita, vayan a saludarla" ("The little Virgin is here, go and say hello to her"). From my mother, I learnt to love Mary as Help of Christians, and this has accompanied me through the ups and downs of life. I have experienced in my life and in my vocation what Don Bosco used to say: that every Salesian vocation is brought into the Congregation by Mary.

Do you have a message for the Salesian Family?

This too was a great intuition of Don Bosco, although he did not call it the Salesian Family. He had understood the potential of involving many different types of people in his work of educating and evangelising the young. I believe that this gift of God which is the Salesian Family is a sign of the times, a call from God to work increasingly in synodality, to use an expression of Pope Francis, for the "salvation of the young".