 Reading time: 5 min.

We interviewed the new inspector of Shillong, India, Fr John ZOSIAMA. A special region in North-East India, bordering Bhutan, Bangladesh and Myanmar (Burma).

Can you introduce yourself?
I was born on 20th August 1974 in Chhingchhip, Mizoram, Northeast India. I had my early education in my village till High School. After that I did my Pre-University course in Aizawl, the capital of Mizoram state.

Who first told you the story of Jesus?
I grew up in a traditional Catholic family. We used to have regular family prayer like rosary in the evening. My mother was very devoted to our Blessed Mother, she never missed her daily rosary and she used to tell us about Jesus and the Gospel values.

What is the story of your vocation and why Salesian?
I was a regular altar server in my parish and frequented Catechism class every Sunday. I had desire to become a priest when I was small. But when I became adolescent I had no more intention of becoming a priest. Instead I concentrated on my studies to get good Government job and have happy family with children. However, before I joined University for further studies, I began to think seriously about my life and my vocation. I felt in my heart that God wants me to become a priest to serve him and to work for the Catholic Church since other Christian denominations are quite strong in my place. I felt that I could contribute something for our church especially the young people who are led astray. As I was planning to join a seminary, our Catechist told me about the Salesians and advised me to join them. I also heard about the Salesians and had seen their institutions in Shillong. Immediately, I contacted my aunty who is a nun, Missionary Sister of Mary Help of Christians (MSMHC) and she told the Vice Provincial in Guwahati. As soon as he asked me to come I went directly to Guwahati by myself which is two days journey by road from my village. That is how I joined the Salesian Aspirantate.

How did your family react?
When I told my mother about my intention to become a priest, she was very happy. She told me not to worry about them, the Lord will take care of everything. Instead my father was not so happy as he wanted me to study and support the family. But

at the end he also accepted and during the family prayer before I left home he prayed and shared that seeking first the kingdom of God is the most important thing in life by quoting Mt 6:33, “Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, all these things shall be added unto you”.

The most beautiful joy and the greatest toil

I had a beautiful pastoral experience during my practical training and diaconate ministry. I really enjoyed being with the boys, teaching them, playing and working with them and being a friend to them. The two years I spent in the Aspirantate where we have around 150 boys, it was full of beautiful memories. Then, I had the joy of visiting many villages during my diaconate ministry. It was a joy to meet simple people in the villages, staying with them and sharing the message of the good news with them gave me sense of joy and fulfilment as Salesian.
The most challenging time was during my Philosophate. I had some misunderstanding with my superiors. I began to question about my vocation too. But I turned to God and I believed strongly that if He wants me He will make way for me. So, He did and I was able to go through those challenging times.

What do local youth look like and what are the most pressing local and youth needs?

The young people are lively and talented in various fields, and most of them are still actively involved in the church and social activities. But they are greatly influenced by the social media today. They are gradually led astray by what they see in the media like materialism, secularization and political ideas, and we need to guide and accompany them as Salesians. Many are school drop-outs and unemployed, they need guidance and we need to give them hope for their future, to skill them and train them to be responsible citizens and good Christians.

Are Christians in the area being persecuted?

There are no persecuted Christians as such. Majority are Christians in some of the states where we are working. We get good support and collaboration with other religions too. But the Central government is trying to restrict our works of education and evangelization by imposing new rules and regulations which often make our pastoral works more and more difficult.

What are the great challenges of evangelization and mission today?

First of all, the Central government has introduced new financial rules and educational policy, which are going to be more and more difficult for us to operate

and work for the people. But we continue our works of evangelization and the Church continues to grow stronger in Northeast India. I think, strengthening their faith through Catechetical instruction and helping them to live fully as believers with the Gospel values, to be agents of peace and social change are the needs of the hour in our region.

What could be done more and better?
As Salesians we could do something more for the young people especially who are in the periphery like school drop-outs, drug abusers and unemployed youth. We need to have a serious study and make strategic plans together with our lay collaborators and members of the Salesian family. We need to learn to work together as a team and network with others to be more effective and reach out to those most in need.

The relationship with those of other religion in your area?
So far our relationship with other religions is very good in our region. Many of the teachers in our schools and institutions are of other religions. They are dedicated and collaborate well with us in good spirit.

Do you have any projects that are particularly close to your heart?
I think, as Salesians we should study more the situation of the young people today and listen to their problems and aspirations, and then initiate a new ministry for the young people in this region especially those who are really poor and neglected. We may need to make a radical and difficult choice, but this is the type of work Don Bosco wished us to do. Let us pray and hope that we the confreres will also be able to change our mentality according to the change of time.

What place does Mary Help of Christians occupy in your life?
I have received so many graces through the intercession of our Blessed Mother in my life, especially as the Help of Christians. I can say that what I am today is because of our Bl. Mother who listened to my prayer and interceded for me always. I am grateful to her and to my mother who inspired me to pray rosary devoutly with faith.

Do you have a message for the Salesian Family?
As Salesian family we have a great charism through our father and founder Don Bosco, we need to cherish and be grateful to God for the gift of this charism. We should strive more to work together as a family for the young people especially the

poor and abandoned wherever we are. We belong to a big family present in 137 countries and we can be visible signs and bearers of God’s love for the young people.

Fr. John Zosiama,
Provincial of Shillong, India (INS)