

□ Reading time: 5 min.

Let's get to know Fr. William Matthews, a Salesian of Burmese origin who grew up in Australia, and who in March 2025 was appointed General Councillor for the East Asia and Oceania Region during the 29th General Chapter in Turin. In this interview, Fr. Matthews retraces his vocational journey, from the Salesian parish of Mandalay to migration to Australia, up to his priestly ordination and service as Provincial of Australia and the Pacific Province. He shares his passion for the education of young people, the importance of the Preventive System, and his particular commitment to refugees and migrants, reflecting on the challenges of contemporary evangelization and the unity of the Salesian Family.

Can you introduce yourself?

G'day! My name is Fr William Matthews, a General Councillor for East Asia and Oceania Region of the Salesians of Don Bosco. Born and grew up in a Salesian parish in Mandalay, Burma, I migrated to Australia with my family in 1994. I made my first profession as a Salesian on 31st January 1997 in Melbourne, Australia and I was ordained a priest in Perth, Western Australia on 9th December 2005. As a Salesian, I spent most of my time in secondary education across Melbourne, Adelaide and Sydney in Australia. In June 2017, I was appointed as the 11th Provincial of Australia & Pacific Province which I served faithfully from 2018 to 2023. During the General Chapter 29 in Turin in March 2025, even though not a member of the Chapter, I was appointed as the General Councillor for East Asia and Oceania Region.

Who first told you the story of Jesus?

I learned to love and follow Jesus as a child within my family. My family was very devout and practising Christian faith with regular celebrations of sacraments was an important part of growing up. Our parents made sure that we are good Christians, following Jesus faithfully.

How did you perceive God's calling and how did it manifest itself in your life? Why were you a Salesian?

As an altar server at my local parish for many years, my interest for priestly life germinated and developed. As a teenager, I was able to lead catechism classes in the absence of priests or nuns, and also lead prayer services at my local parish community. I was involved actively in the youth ministry sector of my parish. Being a leader or organizer is always part of my life. I have chosen Salesian life because of my parish background, my family's connection with the Salesians, and my genuine

interest in the education of the young. I never looked back after I entered the Salesian seminary in Burma. I believe Our Lady brought me to Don Bosco.

What were the decisive moments or people in your journey of discernment?

It was quite a challenge to pass the High School Certificate exam in Burma. Many have tried a number of times, and failed. I compromised with God to enter the seminary upon a successful completion in my first attempt. God listened to my challenge and paved the way for me. With support of my family and fellow parishioners, I entered the Salesian seminary in Anisakan in Burma after high school. Life is full of surprises! Twists and turns in one's vocation is normal because we do not know where the good Lord is taking us. Together with my family, I migrated to Australia in 1994, and continued my Salesian journey in Melbourne. I know my family, especially my mother and many friends, always support me and pray for perseverance in my vocation.

Is there an episode that particularly marked you in your Salesian formation?

The Salesian formation I received as an aspirant in Burma provided me with a solid foundation. Many Salesians I met in Burma inspired me to live my life as a Salesian for the good of the young. A number of older Salesians in Australian province also played as amazing role models in my life. Their holiness, generosity and simplicity were second to none as I learned so much from them to be a better Salesian.

What is the greatest joy of your ministry? And the greatest challenge?

The greatest joy in my life is being with the young, the poor, the refugees and migrants in celebration of sacraments. They are the meaning and purpose of my life and ministry. They give me great satisfaction knowing that we encounter Jesus in each other. Yet, there are challenging times when I am misunderstood by others, and to deal with people who treat others differently due to race, gender, background or culture.

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

Salesians need to be accepted by young people before accompanying them. This is why Don Bosco wants his Salesians to make themselves loved. Salesian presence is the first important step and it will help Salesians to get acquainted by the young. As for the tool, the use of the Preventive System is the best way to accompany the young to see Jesus and to be like Jesus to others.

Could you share a particularly meaningful experience with young people or in your mission?

A meaningful experience with young people in my life and mission has been spending time with refugees, migrants and migrant workers from Burma [Myanmar] in Australia, New Zealand and Thailand. They are always in need of spiritual and moral support, and they appreciate immensely even the smallest time and presence I share with them. Reaching out to them and spending time with them has always been a rewarding experience for me as a son of Don Bosco.

How do you stay spiritually and humanly strong in times of difficulty?

Staying active and healthy both spiritually and physically is very important to overcome challenges in life, especially those beyond my control. Relying on calm and gentleness together with the grace of God through a healthy spiritual and physical life help me overcome my times of difficulty.

Is there a figure (besides Don Bosco) who has particularly inspired you in your spiritual life?

Besides Don Bosco, Mary the mother of Jesus Christ inspired me in my life of service for the good of others. Mary accepted the Word of God, and brought it to a reality without fear and trembling. She was trusting, calm, gentle and joyful in doing the will of God as the first faithful disciple. With Mary as the role model and guide, a Salesian can go a long way in his ministry.

What are the great challenges of evangelization and mission today?

Materialism and individualism are the great challenges of evangelization and mission today. People need to embrace the beauty and simplicity of humanity to live in peace and harmony following the teachings of Jesus Christ who is the way, the truth and the life.

Do you collaborate with the laity, with the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (FMA), with other members of the Salesian Family?

As a Salesian, collaboration with members of the Salesian Family especially the laity is very important. Without them, we will not progress. I encourage, support and work with them in every possible way.

Plans for the future? Dreams? Initiatives?

My plans or dreams are not personal but of Don Bosco to help the young become 'good Christians and upright citizens' in every corner of the world especially in countries and places facing difficulties and challenges.

What advice would you give to a young person who feels called to religious life?
Do not be afraid, just trust in the Lord who will work through you for HIS great glory.
Just come along and give yourself totally to the Lord and He will take you to places
where you are needed.

Do you have a message for the Salesian Family?

My message to the Salesian Family is to stay together, pray together and work
together in the spirit of St John Bosco under the maternal guidance of Our Lady Help
of Christians.