 Reading time: 7 min.

Could you briefly introduce yourself?
I was born in Bahía Blanca, Argentina, on 19 March 1961, which is like the “gateway to Patagonia”, the land of Don Bosco’s missionary dreams. My parents didn’t name me José, but Jorge Mario, without knowing that one day we would have an Argentinian Pope with the same name. I made my first profession in 1980, my perpetual profession in 1986, and I was ordained a priest in 1990, precisely on the centenary of Don Bosco College, where I had attended high school. In 1995, I left for the missions, for my new “promised land”, in West Africa (Ghana, Nigeria, Niger, Liberia, and Sierra Leone), where I would spend 30 years of my life serving in various capacities. I served as a missionary in Ghana, Sierra Leone, and Nigeria. I was responsible for the AFW and ANN Provinces until, in the last General Chapter 29, I was elected Councillor for Missions.

How did you discover your Salesian vocation and what attracted you to Don Bosco’s charism?
It was a gradual process. God manifests Himself through your talents, your interests, events, and people. Every vocation is a tapestry of love. You just have to read everything with the eyes of faith and then you discover a beautiful tapestry that reveals how much God has loved and guided you in life. I got to know Don Bosco thanks to the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians who prepared me for my First Communion when I was just eight years old. At nine, I joined the Don Bosco Scouts, where I learned one of life’s most beautiful truths, “he who does not live to serve, does not serve to live.” At 15, I had my first missionary experience in the Southern Line of Río Negro, in Sierra Colorada, among the Mapuche people. It was my first immersion in reality. One thing was to see poverty in documentaries or magazines; another, very different, was to smell it, touch it, hear it. There I felt the call to missionary life, to leave everything to give everything for the poorest, without calculations or limits. At that time, I was reading Saint Paul and various lives of the saints. They all seemed brilliant to me, but very great and inimitable. Reading Don Bosco revealed him to be close, likeable, accessible. “I want to be like him,” I told myself. At 17, with the dream of being a Salesian and a missionary, I left for the novitiate, even against my parents’ will. At first, they struggled a lot to accept it, especially when I left definitively for the missions. I think at that moment, they thought I was a bit crazy. But with time they discovered that it was a different kind of “madness”, that there was no point in opposing it, that God Himself was behind everything, inspiring, calling, and accompanying.

What people inspired you in your vocational choice?
An authentic plethora of witnesses marked my path: my parents, who let me “fly” from the nest so young; the first Salesian I met, Fr. Renato Razza, chaplain of the Scouts, a true incarnation of the Letter from Rome of 1884, always “assisting” the boys in the playground and organising “bike rides”; Brother Coadjutor Juan Spinardi, always smiling, available, and prayerful. Great pioneer missionaries of the early days in yesterday’s Patagonia: Cagliero, Costamagna, Fagnano, Milanesio (I grew up reading their biographies!). And the more recent missionaries I met during my initial formation: Fathers Francisco Calendino, Lucio Sabatti, Hermes Grasso, and Antonio Mateos. They were the living Gospel. They spoke little; they witnessed much. They kept nothing for themselves; they gave everything. Their example of life was like a magnet, an invitation to follow them.

Do you remember any particular educator or formator?
Yes, Bishop Jaime Francisco de Nevares, Salesian bishop of Neuquén, who ordained me a priest. He educated with his life and his word. A true prophet who announced and denounced. One of the few who confronted the military dictatorship and its abuses; he defended human rights and saved lives. He loved God and the poor with passion. A Salesian and missionary bishop who travelled the entire province of Neuquén on horseback to visit farmers, Mapuche people, and families. What a transparent gaze. He conveyed peace and courage. What a missionary model!

What were the greatest difficulties in your vocation and in your missionary life?
Difficulties are part of life and of every vocation. At first there was my parents’ opposition. It is difficult to put your hand to the plough and not look back; to love mom and dad and the whole family less than God and His Will. It meant leaving affections and certainties to launch myself into God’s adventure; signing a blank page for God so that He could fill it as He pleased. Also, my fears, doubts, and rebellions. With the help of a good spiritual director, they turned into opportunities to grow and mature in the call.
In the mission, the biggest challenge was the cultural leaps that can sometimes be “shocking”. To be a missionary is to become one with your new people. You have to give up your worldview, personal tastes, and ways of thinking and even feeling. But love is always stronger. The Holy Spirit makes you reborn humbler, poorer, freer. And you launch yourself into the sea and learn to swim by swimming!
Perhaps the greatest difficulty is thinking of going to transform, educate, and evangelise others… when, in the end, after many blows, you realise that it is the

young people, the children, the people who transform, educate, and evangelise you.

Which aspect of the Salesian charism do you feel you have embodied the most?
Perhaps this answer should be given by the young people and communities I have accompanied and who have accompanied me. But if I have to say something, I would say, the mission for the poorest and most vulnerable young people. Their pain has always grieved me; the suffering that is the fruit of evil and injustice. I have always tried to embrace their pain and bring it to Jesus in the Eucharist to ask Him to transform it into a smile and hope. Not everything has been roses. There have been thorns, many. I have cried, literally cried in some cases. And, on the other hand, I have seen true miracles, broken hearts healed, lives rebuilt. We absorb pain and give back love, service, and dedication. And many lives are transformed because we have something that other NGOs don't have: Grace! For God nothing is impossible.

Why did you choose to be a missionary?
I wouldn't know how to say it! In reality, I believe we don't choose. God chooses and calls us. It is an inner, deep, "metaphysical" call, a force that attracts you. And He Himself guides you, calling through His Word, people, and situations of injustice that the world suffers. Feeling deeply loved by God is at the root of every missionary call, and that love pushes you to go out, to leave, to undertake a different exodus in your life. "Woe to me if I do not evangelise!" said Saint Paul. How can one not announce Him who loves you and the Beloved! Especially to those who have not yet experienced Him in their lives!

Could you share a significant experience with young people?
There are so many stories and anecdotes. We could write a book. I'll tell you one. One night, on the streets of Freetown, I told a group of street children — during a good night — to look at themselves in a mirror every morning and repeat three truths: "God created me. If He created me, He loves me. And if He loves me, He takes care of me."
An eight-year-old child then approached me and thanked me. It was the first time someone had told him that God loved him. He believed he was on the street because God had cursed him. That night, I came to understand what it means to be a Salesian. The mission is not activities. I am a mission, as Pope Francis said. I am a Salesian and I am a mission, to be signs and bearers of God's love for the poorest young people. Only in this way do we transform suffering into hope.

Have you worked with other groups of the Salesian Family on mission?
Yes, and it has been an immense richness. Lay people, FMA, Salesian Cooperators, SYM animators, volunteers… Thanks to them, Don Bosco's charism has expanded and been incarnated in Africa and throughout the world. If today we are present in 137 countries, it is thanks to this joint work of Salesians, lay people, young people, and the Salesian Family. We — especially the Salesians — must convince ourselves of this. There is no turning back. Together we can do more and better in everything concerning the Salesian mission. Working in isolation today is a long-term death sentence.

How do you keep your spirituality alive?
Through prayer, silence, contemplation, daily intimacy with Jesus, reading, service, meditation, and the rosary. Do not live a disintegrated life. On the contrary, seek and find God in everything: in the chapel, in the playground, at work, on the street, in reading, in study, in recreation, in personal and group meetings, in travel. When you live like this, everything lights up; even the cross and suffering become a place of encounter with God. In short, what keeps you going, persevering, and faithful is the strength of faith, prayer, and community, the family spirit.

How to help other Salesians discover their missionary vocation?
The missionary vocation is not the result of a simple desire for adventure. It is a gift from God, a call to go out of oneself to proclaim the joy of the Gospel. It is discovered in prayer, in listening to the Word, in discernment accompanied by the confessor and spiritual director, and in reading the signs of the times, in service, in a sacrificed, simple, and poor life. I have always said; God does not play hide-and-seek. He is direct. If He sets His eyes on you, He manifests Himself. "Whoever loves me, I will manifest myself to him" (Jn 14:21). It is all a matter of love with a capital L, a sincere and true love. You just have to have your eyes wide open and your heart restless so as not to let it pass! "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me" (Rev 3:20).

What message would you give to Salesian missionaries today?
We are celebrating 150 years since the first missionary sending. It is time to give thanks, rethink, and relaunch. Let us fix our gaze on Don Bosco and imitate him in everything, especially in his faith, his patience, and his apostolic ardour. Nothing and no one should steal our joy of being missionaries. There is nothing to fear. The mission continues because it is the Holy Spirit who continues to drive His Church. In difficult times, Mary Help of Christians and the Eucharist be our safe harbour. And

let us always remember, passionate for Jesus Christ, we bring the joy of the Gospel to young people.