

□ Reading time: 6 min.

We interviewed Father Rafael Bejarano Rivera, a Colombian Salesian, elected General Councilor for Youth Ministry in March 2025. Father Rafael shares his vocational journey, which began with his encounter with the Salesians at the school in Cali, where he discovered a joyful lifestyle close to young people. With significant experience in social works, particularly at Ciudad Don Bosco in Medellín, where he welcomed boys from armed groups, Father Rafael highlights the current challenges faced by young people: violence, addictions, lack of opportunities, and the need for recognition. His central message invites young people not to stop dreaming, to take care of themselves and others, especially the most vulnerable and invisible, following Don Bosco's teaching that every young person carries within them a unique treasure to share.

Could you introduce yourself?

My name is Rafael Bejarano Rivera and I am a Salesian of Don Bosco. I was born on 1 December 1977, in Buga, Colombia, and I am the second of three children of Carlos Humberto and Dioselina. I met the Salesians as a boy, attending the San Juan Bosco school in Cali. I completed my pre-novitiate in Rionegro in 1995, my novitiate in La Ceja in 1996, and on 24 January 1997, I made my first religious profession. I made my perpetual profession in Medellín in 2003 and was ordained a priest in Cali on 2 December 2006.

I studied philosophy and theology at the Pontifical Bolivarian University of Medellín and the Pontifical Javeriana University of Bogotá; I then obtained a master's degree in Social Enterprise Management. I have held coordination and management positions in various social and youth works in Colombia, particularly at Ciudad Don Bosco in Medellín. From 2020 to 2025, I collaborated with the Youth Ministry Sector at the General House in Rome, where I mainly dealt with the coordination of projects and services for young people in situations of vulnerability and marginalisation. In March 2025, during the 29th General Chapter, I was elected General Councillor for Youth Ministry.

What is the story of your vocation? How did you get to know Don Bosco / the Salesians?

I got to know Don Bosco through the Salesian school and daily contact with the Salesians. In that environment, I experienced a different style of Christian life: joyful, close to young people, and animated by a strong educational passion. It was precisely this way of living the Gospel that ignited in me the vocational question

and the desire to consecrate my life to young people as a Salesian.

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

Numerous Salesian educators and confreres who accompanied me from a young age were fundamental in my journey. In them, I found authentic witnesses of faith and love for young people.

In addition, other elements marked my growth: the family environment, the positive atmosphere of the school, and the influence of my uncle, a Claretian religious, who played a very important role in my life.

The encounter with the Salesians and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in my city was also decisive. Through the local oratory, I experienced the joy of accompanying young people in their needs, while the SYM was the space where my vocation took shape, allowing me to accompany different groups and to live Salesian youth spirituality as a life choice.

What were the main challenges and greatest joys in your formation journey and in your first years as a Salesian?

One of the biggest challenges was learning to live in balance between community life, study, and pastoral commitment. It was not always easy to maintain the pace, but this journey taught me a lot. Another great challenge was working in complex socio-political contexts, transforming that commitment into a vocational and evangelising action. I am convinced that socio-political commitment is an integral part of the Salesian mission.

The greatest joy, however, was discovering that the Lord truly called me to live for young people and seeing that my presence could become a sign of hope for them. A unique emotion was seeing how young people, especially in social works, managed to reintegrate into their families and society. Like Don Bosco, I experienced the beauty of building alliances at a political and institutional level for the common good.

The greatest joy and the greatest struggle of your ministry

The greatest joy is seeing young people who, after experiences of pain and exclusion, regain confidence, resume studying and working, reintegrate into society, and smile again. The greatest struggle is facing the deep wounds that many carry within and accepting that we do not always have all the resources or immediate answers available.

In what aspects of your day do you feel the Salesian charism most alive?

I feel the Salesian charism alive when I am with young people, when I listen to their stories, when I share moments of fraternity with my confreres, and when I accompany educational and pastoral paths. The oratory, the school, and social works remain for me the privileged places where I recognise Don Bosco's presence today.

What challenges do you see today in accompanying young people, and what Salesian tools still seem effective to you?

Today's challenges are many: violence, addictions, mental health difficulties, lack of opportunities, low self-confidence, and lack of hope for the future. The Salesian tools that remain current and fruitful are the Preventive System, personal accompaniment, the oratory as a welcoming home, and the educating community. Even today, closeness, reason, and loving-kindness can speak to the hearts of young people.

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

A very significant experience for me was the one lived at Ciudad Don Bosco in Medellín, where we welcomed young people from armed groups. Observing their transformation, step by step, from fear to hope, from isolation to friendship, was one of the most precious gifts of my ministry.

What prayer practices or devotions do you find most meaningful to you?

The centre of my day is the Eucharist, along with community prayer. I also find great strength in devotion to Mary Help of Christians and in personal meditation on the Word of God, which guides me in daily decisions. Confession holds a special place: both personally and in accompanying young people, it is an experience of grace for me. Seeing their faces light up with joy after encountering Christ gives me deep peace and serenity.

What are the most urgent needs of young people?

Today, young people primarily need concrete opportunities for study and work, but also to feel protected from violence and abuse. They need to be listened to and accompanied, especially in their deepest questions. Above all, they need to be recognised and seen. Too many vulnerable young people, living on the margins, remain invisible. The urgent challenge is to restore their dignity and make them feel that they have a place in society and in the Church. It is fundamental to help them take care of themselves, to recognise their value and uniqueness, so that they, in turn, can take care of others.

How do you see the future? Do you have any projects that are particularly close to your heart?

The future challenges us with courage and creativity. As General Councillor, I feel the responsibility to strengthen the network of Salesian works, promote a youth ministry capable of responding to today's challenges and accompany young people to be protagonists in the Church and in society. The project closest to my heart is to give a voice and visibility to the most vulnerable young people, those who are often not heard. I want to help them recognise their dignity, to form themselves, and to rebuild self-confidence. I also believe that we Salesians must take care of ourselves. Only those who know how to lovingly accept and guard their own fragility can deeply give themselves to others.

What is the most important message you would leave for a young person who is questioning the meaning of life or faith?

I would tell them, do not be afraid of your questions. Life gains meaning when we learn to give ourselves, but this gift becomes authentic only if we first learn to look within ourselves and take care of ourselves. Faith does not eliminate fragilities, but illuminates them and transforms them into a strength at the service of others. The world needs young people capable of noticing the excluded, of giving a voice back to those who have none, of restoring hope to those who have lost it. If you learn to accept and love yourself, you will be free to accept others with authenticity and generosity.

What message would you like to convey to young people today?

I invite you never to stop dreaming and never to let anyone steal your hope. Form yourselves with commitment, cultivate authentic friendships, be protagonists of your own lives, and have the courage to transform the world with good. Above all, learn to have eyes and a heart for those who are invisible, for those who are discarded or forgotten. Take care of yourselves — your dreams, your wounds, your talents — because only then can you take care of others with generosity. Don Bosco taught us that every young person carries within them a unique treasure. Discover it, share it, and put it at the service of others, so that the world becomes a place where everyone can feel loved and recognised.