

□ Reading time: 7 min.

*The General Counsellor for Formation, Fr Silvio Roggia, shares with depth and simplicity the journey that led him to Salesian life, weaving together family roots, meaningful encounters, and unexpected calls. From the hills of Langhe to Valdocco, from his missionary experience in Africa to his international service within the Congregation, Fr Silvio recounts a vocational story marked by gratitude, trust in Providence, and a growing love for Don Bosco. His words offer an authentic glimpse into Salesian formation today and the beauty of a life given to young people.*

### **Could you introduce yourself?**

I am Silvio Roggia, born in a small village in the Langhe – Novello – in the south-west of Piedmont. A land of hills and vineyards, with Barolo as a neighbouring village: there, Marquise Juliette Colbert and her husband Tancredi had their castle. A geographical link that connects me to this figure, so important in the history and mission of our father Don Bosco.

He knew me long before I knew anything about him, because I had the grace to be born into a family where many Salesians preceded me. I am the last of nine confreres. Four uncles: Emilio, a coadjutor; Fiorenzo, Davide, and Felice, priests; Felice, a missionary for many years in Ecuador, where he passed away in 2000. Two first cousins of my father, including Guglielmo, a missionary in Myanmar and then in the Philippines, where he now rests. And finally, two first cousins of mine, children of a brother and a sister of my father. 9 SDBs in the family.

Despite this large Salesian family, the choice to go and study with the Salesians for secondary school was, at its inception, rather casual. The five years spent at Valdocco – two years of gymnasium and three years of high school at Valsalice, while always living in the community at Valdocco – naturally opened the way to the novitiate.

The journey then continued beautifully and serenely in the Salesian formation shared with my companions from the then Subalpine Province, which became the Special Circumscription of Piedmont in 1993.

### **How did you perceive God's call and how did it manifest in your life? Why Salesian?**

The Salesian vocation, as I said, was born in the family and developed naturally over time, especially during my stay at Valdocco. The Salesian missionary call had a surprising genesis.

It was the day after my return from Rome, where we had participated in the 1989

summer course in preparation for perpetual profession, after the second year of theology at Crocetta. Fr. Luigi Basset, my Provincial, called me, proposing that I start a provincial missionary animation service for young people. It would be my apostolate on weekends, while I continued my studies.

That gift - that call - put me in direct and constant contact with the missionary realities of the "Project Africa," which was experiencing a period of great momentum in those years. However, I had not planned to leave.

A novitiate companion of mine, Luca Maschio, had already left for Kenya during his practical training. We had remained in contact - as much as possible then, with a few letters - and had met again in the summer of our priestly ordinations in 1991, a beautiful and rich time, lived with the other companions who became priests in those months.

In 1994, he did me a great favour. He welcomed two young people from the summer group of "departing" missionaries - one of the initiatives born within the missionary animation in Piedmont - who were destined for Nigeria. Thanks to him, we directed them towards Kenya, as in the last weeks before departure, internal problems in Nigeria had emerged that made the journey impossible.

Unfortunately, in September of that year, Luca died in a road accident near Embu, Kenya. It was a strong blow for me, but also an equally strong appeal to go and take his place.

I made myself available. When my studies for the licentiate in theology at Crocetta and the degree in pedagogy at the Catholic University of Milan were completed, Fr. Luigi Testa sent me to Nigeria - entrusted to the ICP Circumscription - where I landed on 10 October 1997.

### **Is there a particular episode or person who had a significant influence on your decision to become a Salesian?**

More than a single episode, I would say it was an intertwining of presences and discreet gestures that guided my path. My uncle Fiorenzo, a Salesian, never pushed me directly, but with his life and his way of being, he left a deep impression on my soul. A hidden sowing that would bear fruit years later.

Then there was my cousin, Fr. Beppe Roggia, who accompanied me for five years of proposed community at Valdocco and as a companion in the novitiate year in Pinerolo. His trust and his gentle yet firm, discreet yet empowering style of accompaniment were decisive.

And finally, for the eighteen years I lived in Africa, I cannot fail to remember another Salesian - Italo Spagnolo - who welcomed me to Ondo, where he was simultaneously director, bursar, and headmaster, and who, with his incurable

optimism and his ability to always see the good, set the course for all my years to come.

Along with them, many other faces and encounters contributed to the maturing of my response. But these three, at different times, played a fundamental role.

### **What were the most significant moments of your formation journey?**

Every season of my life has had its own \*munus\* – gift/commitment – of formation for which I am immensely grateful. There is no line that interrupts the flow between “formation” and “life”; everything has been formation and continues to be so.

My high school years at Valdocco were fundamental in making me fall in love with Don Bosco and making him the direction of my future. Among the phases of initial formation, all precious, the four years at Crocetta were essential for establishing the vision of life that has always accompanied me and continued to develop from there, like the roots of a great tree.

Africa, for eighteen years, was a continuous school, like a second new life that still circulates in my veins and colours everything I am and do. Within that, there was an unforeseen period of trial – marked by illness with surgeries and chemotherapy – which left a deep mark, along with perfect healing. It was, in its own way, one of the most important seasons of my existence.

The six years spent as a member of the dicastery team were a worldwide experience, with the breadth of the universal Church and the Salesian presence, especially in Africa and Asia.

Finally, in the last three years in the Zeffirino community in Rome, with confreres from 27 countries and 28 provinces, I was part of one of the most intense active and vibrant intercultural experiences in the Congregation.

I owe everything to all these friends, brothers, and sisters whom Providence has allowed me to meet in these 62 years of life.

### **Which aspect of the Salesian charism do you believe you have most embodied?**

I believe that having spent so many years with young people in formation and particularly thirteen as master of novices gave me the opportunity to grasp how “to strive to make yourself loved” is first and foremost what our father continues to do; he continues to make himself loved. The sincere and deep love for Don Bosco that so many young people, from such diverse cultural backgrounds, continue to have is contagious, and one cannot help but grow in affection and fondness for Don Bosco and for his pedagogical-spiritual legacy. This is the gift I have received and that I try to transmit.

**How would you describe, in your own words, Don Bosco's "preventive system"?**

I prefer to use the words that the Rector Major, Fr. Fabio Attard, placed at the conclusion of his six-year programme 2025-2031, drawing from a letter of Fr. Edmundo Vecchi from 2000. It seems to me a very apt photograph of the Preventive System. This is how I believe it and how I would like to live it with my confreres. "When we think of the origin of our Congregation and Family, from where the Salesian expansion began, we find above all a community, not only visible, but even singular, atypical, almost like a lamp in the night: Valdocco, home of an original community and a known, extensive, open pastoral space... In this community, a new culture was developed, not in an academic sense, but in the direction of new internal relationships between young people and educators, between lay people and priests, between artisans and students, a relationship that flowed back into the context of the neighbourhood and the city... All of this had as its root and motivation faith and pastoral charity, which sought to create a family spirit within, and oriented towards a heartfelt affection for the Lord and Our Lady." (Fr. Juan VECCHI, *\*Ecco il tempo favorevole\**, ACG 373, 2000).

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

Meditation on the daily Word, as offered to us by the liturgy in the Mass readings. It is the renewable energy that continues to nourish life, always new, always at hand, always effective.

**How do you cultivate your formation - books, courses, retreats - to stay "continuously updated" with the times and with God?**

"Save, by saving, saved," a common motto in the first Oratory, already in the time of Domenico Savio. I believe it is part of the Salesian dynamism: what we prepare and offer to others also becomes a source of energy and renewal for ourselves.

**Is there a prayer, a "Salesian goodnight," or a habit you never miss? Why?**

I try to start the morning with a space of silence and personal prayer before the beginning of communal prayer. It is easy to save and preserve that time, before the rhythm of daily commitments fills the agenda.

**What is the most important thing you have learned from your life experience as a Salesian?**

Trust. Trust in Providence. Trust in the people you live with. It is better to risk overdoing it and being betrayed on the side of trust towards those who live under the same roof as us than, out of fear and suspicion, to shut ourselves away in

securities that create barriers and isolate us.

**What are the main challenges that Salesian formation must face today?**

Africa continent: 92% of Salesians are under 50 years old. Europe: 27% are under 50 years old. We are becoming increasingly diversified, and formation must meet Salesians in their distinct realities and speak a language close to their life experience.

**What advice would you give to a young person who feels called to religious life?**

That it is worth trusting the future even more than our past. If this invitation comes from the Lord and we gradually re-tune ourselves to what He suggests to our heart, tomorrow will potentially be much richer than what we have experienced so far, even if it will always be a future made of both roses and thorns.