 Reading time: 5 min.

Salesian Croatia represents a part of the Salesian Congregation that deserves special attention. In a country with nearly 4 million inhabitants, numerous vocations are emerging, not only among the Salesians but also among the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. Recently, the community welcomed a new Salesian provincial: Father Milan Ivančević. We had the pleasure of interviewing him and wish to share his testimony.

Can you introduce yourself?
Milan Ivančević, Salesian, born on 25 October 1962 in Šlimac (Rama – Prozor, BiH). Of three brothers and three sisters, I have 29 nieces and nephews. I completed my primary and secondary education in my hometown. After studying mathematics and physics in Mostar and spending two years teaching at a primary school, I joined the Salesian community in the autumn of 1989. I took my perpetual vows on 8 September 1997 and was ordained a priest on 27 June 1998.

As a Salesian priest, I have served in the following capacities:
1998 – 1999: Parish assistant at the Parish of Our Lady Help of Christians in Knežija;
1999 – 2002: Religion teacher in Žepče;
2002 – 2003: Adviser for the Salesian Vocational Education Community in Podsused;
2003 – 2005: Specialist studies in Rome at the UPS (licence in spirituality);
2005 – 2006: Adviser for the Salesian Vocational Education Community in Podsused;
2006 – 2015: Director in the same community and member of the Inspection Council;
2015 – 2021: Director of the Salesian community in Žepče and director of the KŠC Don Bosco;
2021 – 2024: Parish priest and community director in Split;
2024 – present: Inspector.

Who was the first person to tell you the story of Jesus?
My mother taught me my first steps in faith, both through her words and her example. Later, as I grew up, the rest of my family also nurtured our faith, as regular prayer was a constant at home: morning and evening prayers, before and after meals.
We lived in a village 7 km from the church, yet we regularly attended Sunday Mass. Everything was imbued with faith, but also with great suffering. My area suffered

greatly during the Second World War. One day, when I was only 11, my mother lost two brothers who were killed by Chetniks (Serbs) in the autumn of 1942 simply because they were Croats. That wound marked the family for life, along with poverty.

How did you come to know about Don Bosco / the Salesians?
I heard about the Salesians rather late. During my studies in mathematics, I expressed my wish to become a priest to my aunt, now deceased, who was a nun in Germany. She provided me with four addresses in Germany that one could approach regarding a vocation to the priesthood. Among these was the Salesian congregation in Germany. I began corresponding with them, and the letters were translated by the Croatian Salesian Don Franjo Crnjaković, who was then working in Germany. When the time was right to join a community, the issue arose that I did not know the German language. Then Don Franjo sent me the address of the Salesians in Zagreb, and that is how I became a Croatian Salesian.

You studied mathematics at school. Why did you choose the Salesian path?
I loved mathematics and working with children at school. I enjoyed helping young people solve mathematical problems. Since my childhood, the call to the priesthood had been quietly growing within me. The first instance I remember was an experience with an elderly relative who was among the few relatives receiving a pension. When I was in Year Three of primary school, one day he saw me happy because of my excellent grades and said, “Promise me that you will study to become a priest, and from now on I shall give you 5 stotinki of each of my pensions” (now worth about 10 euros). Naturally, I promised, because as a child that was of great value to me. Many years later, when I was already working in a school and close to deciding to join the community, I attended his funeral, and at his open grave I thanked him and promised that I would become a priest. Among the children to whom I taught mathematics were also those abandoned by their parents. Observing their situation helped me decide to embark on the path of serving young people as a Salesian.

The greatest joy and the greatest challenge
The experiences in the confessional make me especially happy. When I witness the transformation of a human soul and recognise that I am the means through which it happens, it is incomparable to anything on earth – it is a celestial event. This is particularly true when it comes to young people, although in these situations every

soul is young because it is beautiful. What hurts me most is the despair of children and young people when their parents separate. I am always deeply moved by their suffering. I am also pained by the thoughtlessness with which people make the decision to have an abortion. I get goosebumps thinking of the blindness in which people do not realise the enormity of the error they are committing. These issues penetrate deeply into humanity and call it into question.

What are the most urgent local needs, especially for young people? What could be done more and better?

The most urgent need of our population is to restore hope in people so that they are not afraid of life, and to strengthen them in the faith that God guides and sustains this world. Life is so much more beautiful and rich when it is imbued with faith, because it is in faith that it finds a clear meaning and constant reasons for joy. Modern culture steals this value from young people and replaces it with fleeting values, which quickly and easily fade away, leaving a void in the soul. We are fortunate that a large number of young people are able to nurture and live their faith, sometimes even against the prevailing current. But sadly, many are still far from faith and seek meaning in something smaller than themselves.

Perhaps we could go out even more and start seeking the homeless. However, it is necessary to go out prepared; if we rely solely on our own strength we might achieve a little, but if we proceed with the strength of God, then He does a great deal with our small endeavours. I believe that in our hearts, which are consecrated to God, we need to recover that original love and bear witness with renewed vigour that God is truly alive and that He invites us to share in His life. And this cannot be hidden – the souls see it.

How do you see the future?

The future, like the present, is in God’s hands. The Bible teaches us that the world is in good hands. That is why we must not be afraid. “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Romans 8:31). It is true that changes are happening at an incredible speed, and the world is becoming ever smaller because everything is easily and quickly accessible. Cultures and traditions mingle, and no one can predict what the consequences will be. But if we have trust in the Lord, the source of life, He will bring everything to good. It is up to us to listen, discern, and find our place and our role in what He asks of us. And if we are on that path, then we are ready for the wonderful surprises that the Lord is preparing for us.

What place does Our Lady Help of Christians hold in your life?

Mary, the Mother of Jesus, holds an important place in my life. My own mother pointed out the presence of the Madonna throughout her life and whispered prayers, reciting the Rosary until her last breath. I too gladly make pilgrimages to the sanctuaries of the Madonna and testify to how her gaze infuses hope in people. Don Bosco left us the devotion to Our Lady Help of Christians and promised that we would witness miracles if we have childlike trust in the Immaculate Help of Christians. The mystery of Christmas and the Eucharist cannot be fully understood without delving deeply, and the simplest way to do so is to pray the Rosary.

What would you say to young people at this moment?
My message to young people is not to be afraid to be believers, even if society labels it as old-fashioned. Indeed, no one is as invested in our tomorrow as God, who, through His commandments, gives us strength for the future. He prepares us for the future with His commandments. If each day we strive to align our lives with the Decalogue, then we can already say of ourselves: blessed are those who follow in our footsteps, for they will have people ahead of them. Therefore, young people, be courageous, do not fear life—it is God’s most beautiful gift.

Milan Ivančević, SDB
Provincial, Croatia