 Reading time: 4 min.

He made his First Profession in Damascus on September 8, 2002, and his Perpetual Profession in Aleppo on August 2, 2008. He was ordained a priest in his hometown, Qamishli, on September 11, 2010.
After initial formation, he served the Provincial in several ministries, taking on various responsibilities. From 2010 to 2014 in Aleppo, Syria, he served as a pastoral collaborator; from 2015 to 2017 in Damascus, he served as Director. From 2017 to 2018 in Alexandria, Egypt, he again held the role of Director, and from 2018 to July 2024 in Al-Fidar and El Houssoum, Lebanon, he continued with the responsibility of Director. At the provincial level, he served as the pastoral delegate for Youth Pastoral for about 12 years, finishing this service in June 2024 and then starting the new service on July 6, 2024, as provincial.
The Middle East Province includes Palestine – Israel, Syria, Egypt, and Lebanon.

Can you introduce yourself?
I was born in Syria, in a city called al-Qamishli (northeast Syria), on July 2, 1978, to an Armenian family. Like all Armenians of the diaspora, I survived the Ottoman genocide of 1915, when my grandparents fled and made it to Qamishli. My father’s name is Aram and my mother’s name is Araxi; we are a family of two brothers and six sisters.

Who first told you the story of Jesus?
My family has always had a deep Christian faith that my parents passed on to me since I was a child, even with the help of my grandmother, who spoke to me about Jesus. The Armenian Church also helped me because as a child I served as an altar boy and assisted at Mass. Then I started attending the oratory of Don Bosco in my city, starting from the fifth grade. Since I really enjoyed playing soccer, I continued to attend Don Bosco for years, and gradually my belonging to the oratory grew more and more, involving me not only in sports activities, but also in animation and service.

What is the story of your vocation?
My vocation was born from a desire that God placed in my heart. When I served at Mass, I would tell myself: when I grow up, I will also be on the altar like this priest. After getting to know the Salesians, this desire matured more and more, and the example of the Salesians, who were with us in the courtyard, in church, and in

various moments of our lives, made me think seriously about my life and its meaning. So I began to reflect more deeply and to ask myself about the purpose of my existence and the meaning of my life. Therefore, I started to wonder how I could discern my vocation, to ask what God wanted from me. With these thoughts, with prayer and service, I walked in search of the Lord's will for me. In Qamishli there was an Italian missionary who was always with us in the courtyard. He organised soccer tournaments, encouraged us, accompanied us to church to experience the Holy Mass and Eucharistic adoration, and showed us films about the lives of saints to then encourage us to do works of charity and service in the oratory and outside. His testimony made me reflect that I too could live and do like him. So with his help and that of other Salesians, I began my discernment. I loved the life of that Salesian because he was close to God, to people, and to young people like Don Bosco, with a joyful and beautiful life, simple and profound. It was clear that his was not a job rather a divine vocation!

How did your family react?
My family is simple, and at first, they did not want me to leave home. But then they understood that it was a call from the Lord, and so I was allowed to begin the journey. From that moment on, my family has always encouraged my vocation with affection and prayer.

What have the biggest challenges been?
The biggest challenge was leaving the world to follow Christ in the consecrated life. This was not easy because my life was bound to many friends and soccer. I was a soccer player, and I played on a major league team in my city. So, leaving all this was difficult.

What is your most beautiful experience?
However, I must say that once I started the journey, I experienced what Jesus says in the Gospel, that whoever follows Him will have in return many brothers, sisters, friends, confreres, young people, and laypeople with whom to share life and mission. This is truly a beautiful gift.

What are the young people like in your area?
The young people of our province are heroes. They are wonderful. As I always tell everyone, they are the true protagonists of the history of our lands because they have always lived in very difficult and war-torn situations. It is because they have learned to live in these situations as Christians and as witnesses, with great faith

and hope. For me, they were and still are a beautiful example.

What more could be done and improved?
The future of the young people of our lands today is very ambiguous and not easy. However, they can do a lot. Thus I pray to God that He grants us peace so that they can build a future in these lands and look to tomorrow with hope and without fear because He is with us and does not abandon us.

What place does Mary Help of Christians occupy in your life?
In our houses in the Middle East, we Salesians, together with the young people, are used to frequently invoking Mary Help of Christians because we know that it was she who helped Don Bosco, especially in the most difficult moments. And we, especially in these moments of war, do not cease to ask for her maternal intercession, she our refuge, she the Madonna of difficult times, as Don Bosco used to say.

What would you say to young people at this moment?
I tell young people to not be afraid of life and difficulties, rather to face everything with love and hope; not alone, but with God and with brothers and sisters, because together we can change ourselves and the world. This is how our saints and our founding father Don Bosco lived and acted. Therefore, I invite young people to open their hearts to God's call, and not be indifferent when they hear His voice… do not harden your hearts!
And I conclude by saying to myself and to all young people the same words of Pope Francis in *Christus Vivit*: "Christ is alive and He wants you to be alive!"

Fr. Simon ZAKERIAN
Middle East Provincial