 Reading time: 5 min.

Don Vincentius Prastowo is the new Salesian provincial for Indonesia, a country that, with its 279 million inhabitants and over 700 languages, ranks fourth in the world by population. Indonesia is the largest archipelagic state on the planet, made up of 17,508 islands, and is home to the largest Muslim community in the world. The Salesian presence in this nation dates back to 1985, although the first experience in present-day East Timor began as early as 1927. We interviewed him.

Can you introduce yourself?
My name is Vincentius Prastowo. I was born on November 28, 1980, in Magelang, Central Java. I am the second generation in my family to embrace the Catholic faith. My parents were the first in our extended family to receive the sacrament of baptism—a decision that profoundly changed the course of our lives. From them, I came to know Jesus Christ and the Catholic values that have been instilled in me since childhood. I attended a Catholic primary school run by the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception (SPM), where my faith grew through religious education, liturgical activities, and close interactions with religious sisters.

What is the story of your vocation?
My interest in religious life began during my teenage years, inspired by the Jesuit priests who served in my parish. Their genuine dedication to service, intellectual depth, and profound spirituality left a lasting impression on me. This inspiration led me to continue my education at Stella Maris Minor Seminary in Bogor, run by the Franciscans, from 1994 to 1998.
At the seminary, I not only learned basic theology and philosophy but also deepened my understanding of prayer life, discipline, and community living. These years were foundational in shaping my path and clarifying my desire to pursue a life of service to God and others.

How did you meet the Salesians?
Every year, Stella Maris Seminary hosted visits from various religious congregations, introducing seminarians to different spiritualities and missions. During one of these visits, I met Fr. Jose Llopiz Carbonell and Fr. Andress Calejja, two Salesian priests who frequently came to the seminary. They brought annual calendars featuring the image of Mary, Help of Christians, which immediately captured my attention.

Through conversations with them, I became intrigued by the Salesian mission and decided to explore their community further. My curiosity led me to regular visits to the Salesian community in Jakarta every year-end. I was deeply impressed by their approach to education and their commitment to accompanying young people. They didn't just preach about faith; they practiced it by mentoring youth from humble backgrounds.
The warmth and love I experienced in the Salesian community eventually solidified my decision to choose this path.

What difficulties did you encounter?
Choosing the Salesian path was not without challenges. My initial formation took place in Timor Leste, a region embroiled in political conflict at the time due to its struggle for independence from Indonesia. The situation created significant tension, both for me and my family. My parents were deeply concerned for my safety and even suggested I consider a "safer" congregation.
However, my resolve was firm. I believed that this calling was the life God had planned for me. Amid the ongoing conflict, I faced numerous trials, including the threat of violence, cultural adaptation, and longing for my family. Yet, in every hardship, I found strength through prayer and God's protection.
This experience taught me to rise above fear and strengthened my conviction. One of my greatest joys was the freedom and courage to determine my life's calling, despite the obstacles along the way.

As a Salesian, I've come to realize the immense challenges faced by communities in Indonesia's archipelagic regions. Our nation, comprised of thousands of islands, grapples with disparities in access to education and economic opportunities. In remote areas, young people's most pressing needs are quality education and access to decent jobs.
I firmly believe that collaboration between central and local governments is essential to alleviating poverty in these regions. Prioritizing the development of educational infrastructure, offering scholarships for underprivileged children, and creating equitable job opportunities are vital steps.
As part of the Salesian community, I feel called to contribute to these efforts, especially through vocational education programs aimed at empowering youth with skills that prepare them for the workforce and foster self-reliance.

How is your Salesian work in the context of the country?
Indonesia is known as the country with the largest Muslim population in the world.

However, I am grateful that its people are generally moderate and open to diversity. In this context, Salesians work in predominantly Muslim areas with a spirit of brotherhood and collaboration. Our mission seeks to build bridges through education and service, respecting individual beliefs while upholding universal values such as love, justice, and peace.
This awareness of diversity is a treasure that we must continue to celebrate. In daily life, we learn to respect one another and work together with various communities. I believe Indonesia's cultural, religious, and traditional diversity is a blessing that must be preserved and cherished.

How do you see the future of young people and Salesian education?
Indonesia is projected to experience a demographic boom starting in 2030. This means a significant increase in the working-age population, presenting both opportunities and challenges. While this growth offers the potential for economic advancement, it also poses risks of widespread unemployment if not managed well. As an education-focused community, the Salesians play a crucial role in preparing young people to face the future. We focus on vocational training that aligns with industry needs while fostering strong character and discipline. One of our main projects is uplifting the dignity of young people in remote islands by equipping them with skills for the digital and technological era.
To thrive in the 5.0 era, Indonesia's youth need adaptability, creativity, and collaboration skills. The training programs we offer aim to meet these needs, empowering young people not only to compete in the job market but also to become agents of change in their communities.

What place does Mary Help of Christians occupy in your life?
Mary has always held a special place in my journey. Since childhood, I have known and loved her through the Rosary prayers often held in our neighbourhood. Her image as Mary, Help of Christians, has continuously strengthened and guided me through life's challenges.
In Salesian tradition, devotion to Mary is highly emphasized. We believe she is ever-present, accompanying and protecting us in every step of our journey. My personal experiences affirm that through prayer and entrusting ourselves to Mary, seemingly insurmountable difficulties can be overcome.

What would you say to young people at this moment?
To young people, my message is this: never lose hope. Do not let difficulties, challenges, or obstacles crush your dreams. Believe that there is always a way

forward, especially when we lean on God and seek the intercession of Mary. Life is a gift full of opportunities. Do not fear stepping out of your comfort zone, facing challenges, and pursuing your true calling. In every journey, God provides the strength, and Mary will always be present as a loving and faithful mother. May Indonesian youth rise, grow, and become agents of change, bringing hope to the nation and the world. Let us walk together in faith, love, and service.

Fr. Vincentius Prastowo
Provincial of Indonesia