 Reading time: 3 min.

We interviewed the new Superior Fr Gabriel NGENDAKURIYO, of the African Great Lakes Visitatory (AGL), which includes Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi.The Visitatory's name recalls its proximity to Lake Victoria, the largest in Africa and the second largest in the world.

Can you introduce yourself?
My name is Gabriel NGENDAKURIYO, a Salesian of Don Bosco and a priest. I was born on 3 July 1954 in Burundi, where I attended school until the end of secondary school. Soon after, I entered the Salesian Congregation: I did my novitiate in Butare, Rwanda (1978-1979), and then studied Philosophy at the interdiocesan seminary in Nyakibanda (Rwanda).
In 1981, I moved to Lubumbashi (then Zaire) for practical training. I completed my Theology in Kolwezi, in the same country, and was ordained a priest in Lubumbashi on 11 August 1987. A month later I was already in Rukago, Burundi, as parish vicar. In 1991 I was sent to Rome and then to Jerusalem for studies to prepare me for the role of formator at our *St Francis de Sales Theology Institute* in Lubumbashi. I stayed there from 1994 to 2006, until the Rector Major (Fr Pascual Chávez) appointed me Provincial Superior of a new Circumscription called *Great Lakes Africa* (AGL), with activities in three countries: Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda.
At the end of my six-year term (2006-2012) and after a sabbatical year in the Holy Land, I was appointed Director in Buterere (Burundi). Subsequently, for two years, I directed the Don Rua Community at UPS (Rome). Six years later (August 2021), I returned to Buterere as Rector of the Shrine dedicated to Mary Help of Christians. From there I left for Kigali for a new term as Provincial Superior. I am now in Rome for a formation session for the 'new' provincials.

Who first told you the story of Jesus?
I come from a deeply Christian and practising family. I got to know Jesus in a 'vital and concrete' way before being theoretical: we prayed the rosary every day, went to Mass on Sundays (two hours of walking), I was an altar boy, and I followed my older sister to catechumenate before starting primary school. So it was my parents who first told me about Jesus.

What is the story of your vocation?
At the end of primary school, I asked to enter the small diocesan seminary because

I wanted to become a priest. It was not possible for me; so I was directed to a short-cycle school, run by the *Brothers of Our Lady of Mercy*, to train primary school teachers. Here I found people who edified me greatly. Then, at 17, I arrived at a Salesian school and felt the ‘fire’ of Don Bosco in my heart.

What is your fondest memory?
The moment of my priestly ordination is one of my most precious memories. Another is linked to my first arrival in the Holy Land and, later, in Lourdes.

What are the most urgent local needs and what are the needs of young people?
In my AGL Province, the most urgent priority is formation in *authentic* human and Christian values . Today there are so many ‘teachers’ of all kinds and it has become complicated to distinguish the weeds from the good wheat. Let us therefore work for deep evangelisation, based on the principles of Don Bosco’s own ‘preventive system’.

Are the Christians in the region persecuted?
Absolutely not. At the moment Christians enjoy sufficient freedom to live and proclaim their faith, obviously with respect for public order.

Do you have relations with people of other religions in your region?
Relations are not always idyllic between Catholic Christians and some new forms of Protestant obedience, but disagreements never result in violence.

How do you see the future?
I look at the future with optimism and realism. Human history is dynamic, made up of ups and downs. Today we are certainly going through a delicate period, which requires that we read the ‘signs of the times’ well and take the right direction.

What place does Mary Help of Christians occupy in your life?
Ever since I was a child I have always had a very important relationship with Mary (I only came to know the title ‘Help of Christians’ later). Once I discovered that she listens to me and takes care of me, I speak to her with respect but also with spontaneity and familiarity. I do everything to make her known and loved. I feel like her ‘son’, ‘confidante’ and ‘disciple’.

What would you say to young people at this time?

I would tell them that life is beautiful and worthy of being lived to the full. And that this ‘life in fullness’, though wonderful, also requires effort (in the ascetic sense), capable of ennobling the human person. Come on, young people!

Fr Gabriel NGENDAKURIYO,
Superior of the Great Lakes Visitation of Africa