 Reading time: 16 min.

We had an exclusive interview with the Rector Major of the Salesians, Fr. Fabio Attard, looking back over the key stages of his vocation and his human and spiritual journey. His vocation began in the oratory and was consolidated through a rich formative journey that took him from Ireland to Tunisia, Malta, and Rome. From 2008 to 2020, he was General Councillor for Youth Ministry, a role he carried out with a multicultural vision acquired through experiences in different contexts. His central message is ***holiness*** *as the foundation of Salesian educational action: 'I would like to see a holier Congregation,' he says, emphasising that professional efficiency must be rooted in consecrated identity.*

What is your vocation story?
I was born in Gozo, Malta, on 23 March 1959, the fifth of seven children. At the time of my birth, my father was a pharmacist in a hospital, while my mother had started a small fabric and dressmaking shop, which over time grew into a small chain of five shops. She was a very hard-working woman, but the business always remained a family affair.
I attended local primary and secondary schools. A very beautiful and special part of my childhood was that my father was a lay catechist at the oratory, which until 1965 had been run by the Salesians. As a young man, he had attended that oratory and had remained there as the only lay catechist. When I started attending at the age of six, the Salesians had just left. A young priest (who is still alive) took over and continued the activities of the oratory in the same Salesian spirit, having himself lived there as a seminarian.

We continued with catechism, daily Benediction of the Eucharistic, football, theatre, choir, trips, parties… everything you normally experience in an oratory. There were many children and young people, and I grew up in that environment. In practice, my life took place between my family and the oratory. I was also an altar boy in my parish. So, after finishing high school, I turned towards the priesthood, because I had had this desire in my heart since I was a child.

Today I realise how much I was influenced by that young priest, whom I looked up to with admiration. He was always there with us in the courtyard, in the activities of the oratory. However, at that time the Salesians were no longer there. So, I entered the seminary, where at that time there were two years of preparatory studies as an

intern. During the third year – which corresponded to the first year of philosophy – I met a family friend about 35 years old, an adult vocation, who had entered as a Salesian aspirant (he is still alive today and is a coadjutor). When he took this step, a fire was lit inside me. And with the help of my spiritual director, I began a vocational discernment. It was an important but also demanding journey. I was 19 years old, but that spiritual guide helped me to seek God's will, and not simply my own. So, in my last year – the fourth year of philosophy – instead of following him to the seminary, I lived as a Salesian aspirant, completing the required two years of philosophy.

My family environment was strongly marked by faith. We attended Mass every day, recited the Rosary at home, and were very close-knit. Even today, although our parents are in Heaven, we maintain that same unity among brothers and sisters.

Another family experience marked me deeply, although I only realised it over time. My brother, the second in the family, died at the age of 25 from kidney failure. Today, with advances in medicine, he would still be alive thanks to dialysis and transplants, but back then there weren't many options. I was by his side during the last three years of his life. We shared the same room and I often helped him at night. He was a peaceful, cheerful young man who lived his fragility with extraordinary joy.
I was 16 when he died. Fifty years have passed, but when I think back to that time and that daily experience of closeness made up of small gestures, I realise how much it has marked my life.

I was born into a family where there was faith, a sense of work and shared responsibility. My parents are two extraordinary examples for me. They lived their cross with great faith and serenity, without ever burdening anyone, and at the same time, they knew how to convey the joy of family life. I can say that I had a very happy childhood. We were neither rich nor poor, but always modest and discreet. They taught us to work, to manage resources well, not to waste, to live with dignity, elegance, and above all, with attention to the poor and the sick.

How did your family react when you made the decision to follow your vocation as a religious?
The time had come when, together with my spiritual director, we had made it clear that my path was that of the Salesians. I also had to tell my parents. I remember it was a quiet evening; we were eating together, just the three of us. At one point I

said, “I want to tell you something. I have made my discernment and I have decided to join the Salesians.”
My father was delighted. He replied immediately, “May the Lord bless you.” My mother, on the other hand, began to cry, as all mothers do. She asked me, “So you’re leaving?” But my father intervened gently and firmly, “Whether he leaves or not, this is his path.”
They blessed me and encouraged me. Those moments will remain etched in my memory forever.

I particularly remember what happened towards the end of my parents’ lives. My father died in 1997, and six months later my mother was diagnosed with terminal cancer.
At that time, my superiors had asked me to go and teach at the Pontifical Salesian University (UPS), but I didn’t know what to do. My mother was not well and was nearing the end of her life. Talking to my brothers, they said to me, “Do what your superiors ask you to do.”
I was at home and talked to her about it. “Mom, my superiors are asking me to go to Rome.”
With the clarity of a true mother, she replied, “Listen, my son, if it were up to me, I would ask you to stay here, because I have no one else and I don’t want to be a burden on your brothers. But…” – and here she said something that I carry in my heart – “You are not mine; you belong to God. Do what your superiors tell you.”
That sentence, spoken a year before her death, is a treasure for me, a precious legacy. My mother was an intelligent, wise, and perceptive woman. She knew that her illness would lead to her death, but at that moment she was able to be free inside. Free to say words that confirmed once again the gift she herself had given to God: offering a son to the consecrated life.

My family’s reaction, from the beginning to the end, was always marked by deep respect and great support. And even today, my brothers and sisters continue to carry on this spirit.

What has been your formative journey from novitiate to today?
It has been a very rich and varied journey. I began my pre-novitiate in Malta, then I did my novitiate in Dublin, Ireland. It was a truly beautiful experience.
After the novitiate, my companions moved to Maynooth to study philosophy at the university, but I had already completed my studies. For this reason, my superiors asked me to remain at the novitiate for another year, where I taught Italian and

Latin. After that, I returned to Malta for two years of internship, which were very beautiful and enriching.

I was then sent to Rome to study theology at the Pontifical Salesian University, where I spent three extraordinary years. Those years gave me great open-mindedness. We lived in the student residence with forty brothers from twenty different countries: Asia, Europe, Latin America… even the teaching staff was international. It was the mid-1980s, about twenty years after the Second Vatican Council, and there was still a lot of enthusiasm in the air. There were lively theological debates, liberation theology, and interest in method and practice. Those studies taught me to read faith not only as intellectual content, but as a choice of life.

After those three years, I continued with two more years of specialisation in moral theology at the Alfonsian Academy with the Redemptorist fathers. There, too, I met significant figures, such as the famous Bernhard Häring, with whom I formed a personal friendship and went to talk to him regularly every month. It was a total of five years – between my bachelor's and licentiate degrees – that deeply formed me from a theological point of view.

Afterwards, I volunteered for the missions, and my superiors sent me to Tunisia, together with another Salesian, to re-establish the Salesian presence in the Country. We took over a school run by a female congregation which, having no more vocations, was about to close. It was a school with 700 students, so we had to learn French and also Arabic. To prepare ourselves, we spent a few months in Lyon, France, and then devoted ourselves to studying Arabic.

I stayed there for three years. It was another great experience because we found ourselves living the Salesian faith and charism in a context where we could not speak explicitly about Jesus. However, it was possible to build educational programmes based on human values: respect, availability, truth. Our witness was silent but eloquent. In that environment, I learned to know and love the Muslim world. Everyone – students, teachers, and families – were Muslims, and they welcomed us with great warmth. They made us feel part of their family. I returned to Tunisia several times and always found the same respect and appreciation, regardless of our religious affiliation.

After that experience, I returned to Malta and worked for five years in the social

field. In particular, I worked in a Salesian house that welcomes young people in need of more attentive educational support, including residential care.

After these eight years of pastoral work (between Tunisia and Malta), I was offered the opportunity to complete my doctorate. I chose to return to Ireland because the subject was related to conscience according to the thinking of Cardinal John Henry Newman, now a saint. After completing my doctorate, the Rector Major at the time, Fr. Juan Edmundo Vecchi – of blessed memory – asked me to join the Pontifical Salesian University as a professor of moral theology.

Looking back on my entire journey, from aspirant to doctorate, I can say that it has been a combination of experiences not only in terms of content but also in terms of very different cultural contexts. I thank the Lord and the Congregation for offering me the opportunity to experience such a varied and rich formation.

So, you know Maltese because it is your mother tongue, English because it is the second language in Malta, Latin because you taught it, Italian because you studied in Italy, French and Arabic because you were in Manouba, Tunisia… How many languages do you know?
Five or six languages, more or less. However, when people ask me about languages, I always say that it is a bit of a historical coincidence.
In Malta, we grow up with two languages: Maltese and English, and we study a third language at school. In my day, Italian was also taught. Then, I had a natural aptitude for languages, so I also chose Latin.
Later, when I went to Tunisia, I had to learn French and Arabic.
In Rome, living with many Spanish-speaking students, my ear got used to it, and when I was elected Councillor for Youth Ministry, I also studied Spanish a little, which is a very beautiful language.

All languages are beautiful. Of course, learning them requires commitment, study, and practice. Some people are more gifted than others; it is part of one’s personal disposition. But it is neither a merit nor a fault. It is simply a gift, a natural predisposition.

From 2008 to 2020, you served two terms as General Councillor for Youth Ministry. How did your experience help you in this mission?
When the Lord entrusts us with a mission, we bring with us all the baggage of experiences we have accumulated over time.

Having lived in different cultural contexts, I did not run the risk of seeing everything through the filter of a single culture. I am European; I come from the Mediterranean, from a Country that was a British colony, but I have had the grace to live in international, multicultural communities.

My years of study at UPS also helped me a lot. We had professors who did not just impart knowledge, but taught us to synthesise and develop a method. For example, when studying Church history, we understood how essential it was to understand patristics. When studying biblical theology, we learned to connect it with sacramental theology, morality, and the history of spirituality. In short, they taught us to think organically.
This ability to synthesise, this architecture of thought, then becomes part of your personal formation. When you study theology, you learn to identify key points and connect them. The same applies to pastoral, pedagogical or philosophical proposals. When you meet people of great depth, you absorb not only what they say, but also how they say it, and this shapes your style.

Another important element is that, at the time of my election, I had already had experiences in missionary environments, where the Catholic religion was practically absent, and I had worked with marginalised and vulnerable people. I had also gained some experience in the university world and, at the same time, I had devoted myself a lot to spiritual accompaniment.

Furthermore, between 2005 and 2008 – just after my experience at the UPS – the Archdiocese of Malta asked me to found a Pastoral Formation Institute, following a diocesan synod that had recognised the need for it. The archbishop entrusted me with the task of starting it from scratch. The first thing I did was to build a team of priests, religious, and lay people – men and women. We created a new formation method, which is still used today. The institute continues to function very well, and in some ways that experience was a valuable preparation for the work I did later in youth ministry.

From the beginning, I have always believed in teamwork and collaboration with lay people. My first experience as a director was precisely in this style: a stable educative team, today we would call it a CEP (Educative-Pastoral Community), with regular, not occasional, meetings. We met every week with educators and professionals. And this approach, which over time has become a method, has remained a reference point for me.

Added to this is my academic experience: six years as a lecturer at the Salesian Pontifical University, where students came from over a hundred countries, and then as an examiner and director of doctoral theses at the Alfonsian Academy.
I believe that all this has prepared me to live this responsibility with clarity and vision.

So, when the Congregation asked me to take on this role during the General Chapter of 2008, I already had a broad, multicultural vision. This helped me because bringing together diversity was not difficult for me; it was part of normality. Of course, it wasn't simply a matter of making a 'fruit salad' of experiences; it was necessary to find the common threads, to give coherence and unity.

What I was able to experience as General Councillor was not a personal achievement. I believe that any Salesian, if he had had the same opportunities and support from the Congregation, could have had similar experiences and made his own generous contribution.

Is there a prayer, a Salesian goodnight ritual, a habit that you never fail to do?
Devotion to Mary. At home we grew up with the daily Rosary, recited as a family. It was not an obligation; it was something natural. We did it before meals, because we always ate together. Back then it was possible. Today perhaps it is less so, but back then that was how we lived, the family together, shared prayer, the common table.

At first perhaps, I did not realise how deep that Marian devotion was. But as the years passed, when you begin to distinguish what is essential from what is secondary, I realised how much that maternal presence had accompanied my life. Devotion to Mary is expressed in different ways: the daily Rosary, when possible; a moment of pause before an image or statue of Our Lady; a simple prayer, but one made from the heart. These are gestures that accompany the journey of faith.

Of course, there are some fixed points: daily Eucharist and daily meditation. These are pillars that are not discussed; they are lived. Not only because we are consecrated, but because we are believers. And faith is lived only by nourishing it. When we nourish it, it grows in us. And only if it grows in us can we help it to grow in others. For us, as educators, it is clear: if our faith does not translate into concrete life, everything else becomes a facade.

These practices – prayer, meditation, devotion – are not reserved for saints. They are an expression of honesty. If I have made a choice of faith, I also have a responsibility to cultivate it. Otherwise, everything is reduced to something external, apparent. And this, over time, does not hold up.

If you could go back, would you make the same choices?
Absolutely yes. There have been very difficult moments in my life, as there are for everyone. I don't want to come across as the 'victim of the moment'. I believe that every person, in order to grow, must go through phases of darkness, moments of desolation, loneliness, of feeling betrayed or unjustly accused. And I have experienced these moments. But I have had the grace of having a spiritual director at my side.
When you go through certain hardships accompanied by someone else, you can sense that everything God allows has a meaning, a purpose. And when you come out of that 'tunnel', you discover that you are a different, a more mature person. It is as if, through that trial, we are transformed.
If I had been alone, I would have risked making wrong decisions, without vision, blinded by the fatigue of the moment. When you are angry, when you feel alone, it is not the time to decide. It is the time to walk, to ask for help, to be accompanied.

Going through certain passages with someone's help is like being dough put in the oven; the fire cooks it, makes it mature. So, when asked if I would change anything, my answer is no. Because even the most difficult moments, even those I didn't understand, have helped me become the person I am today.

Do I feel like a perfect person? No. But I feel that I am on a journey, every day, trying to live in the mercy and goodness of God.

And today, as I give this interview, I can say with sincerity that I feel happy. Perhaps I have not yet fully understood what it means to be Rector Major – it takes time – but I know that it is a mission, not a walk in the park. It brings with it its difficulties. However, I feel loved and esteemed by my collaborators and by the whole Congregation.

And everything I am today, I am thanks to what I have experienced, even in the most difficult moments. I would not change them. They have made me who I am.

Do you have any projects that are particularly close to your heart?

Yes. If I close my eyes and imagine something I really want, I would like to see a holier Congregation. Holier. Holier.

I was deeply inspired by Fr. Pascual Chávez's first letter in 2002, entitled "Be saints". That letter touched me deeply and left a mark on me.

There are many projects, all of them valid, well structured, with broad and deep visions. But what value do they have if they are carried out by people who are not holy? We can do excellent work, we can even be appreciated – and this, in itself, is not a bad thing – but we do not work to achieve success. Our starting point is an identity; we are consecrated persons.

What we offer only makes sense if it comes from there. Of course, we want our projects to be successful, but even more than that, we want them to bring grace, to touch people deeply. It is not enough to be efficient. We must be effective in the deepest sense, effective in our witness, in our identity, in our faith.
Efficiency can exist without any religious reference. We can be excellent professionals, but that is not enough.
Our consecration is not a detail. It is the foundation. If it becomes marginal, if we put it aside to make room for efficiency, then we lose our identity.

And people are watching us. In Salesian schools, people recognise that the results are good – and that is good. But do they also recognise us as men of God? That is the question.

If they see us only as good professionals, then we are only efficient. But our life must be nourished by Him – the Way, the Truth, and the Life – not by what 'I think' or 'I want' or 'what seems right to me'.

So, rather than talking about my personal project, I prefer to talk about a deep desire, to become saints. And to talk about it in concrete terms, not in an idealised way. When Don Bosco spoke to his boys about *study, health, and holiness*, he was not referring to a holiness made up only of prayer in the chapel. He was thinking of a holiness lived in relationship with God and nourished by relationship with God. Christian holiness is the reflection of this living and daily relationship.

What advice would you give to a young person wondering about their vocation?

I would tell them to discover, step by step, what God's plan is for them.
The vocational journey is not a question you ask and then wait for a ready answer from the Church. It is a pilgrimage. When a young person says to me, *"I don't know whether to become a Salesian or not,"* I try to steer them away from that formulation. Because it is not simply a matter of deciding, *"I'm going to become a Salesian."* A vocation is not an option in relation to a 'thing'.

In my own experience, when I told my spiritual director, "I want to become a Salesian, I have to be one", he calmly made me reflect; *"Is this really God's will? Or is it just your desire?"*

And it is right for a young person to seek what he desires; it is healthy. But those who accompany him have the task of educating that search, of transforming it from initial enthusiasm into a journey of inner maturation.
"Do you want to do good? Good. Then know yourself, recognise that you are loved by God."
It is only from that deep relationship with God that the real question can emerge; "What is God's plan for me?"
Because what I want today may not be enough for me tomorrow. If vocation is reduced to what 'I like,' then it will be something fragile. Vocation, on the other hand, is an inner voice that calls us, that asks us to enter into dialogue with God, and to respond.

When a young person reaches this point, when they are accompanied to discover that inner space where God dwells, then they truly begin to walk.
For this reason, those who accompany them must be very attentive, profound, and patient. Never superficial.

The Gospel of Emmaus is a perfect image. Jesus approaches the two disciples and listens to them even though He knows they are talking confusedly. Then, after listening to them, He begins to speak. And in the end, they invite Him; *"Stay with us, for it is nearly evening."*
And they recognise Him in the gesture of breaking bread. Then they say to each other, *"Were not our hearts burning within us while He was talking to us on the way?"*

Today, many young people are searching. Our task as educators is not to be hasty. But to help them, calmly and gradually, to discover the greatness that is already in

their hearts. Because there, in that depth, they encounter Christ. As St Augustine says, *“You were within me, and I was outside. And there I sought you.”*

Do you have a message for the Salesian Family today?
t is the same message I shared during the recent meeting of the Salesian Family Council; ***Faith. Let us root ourselves ever more deeply in the person of Christ.***

It is from this rootedness that an authentic knowledge of Don Bosco is born. When the first Salesians wanted to write a book about the real Don Bosco, they did not call it *“Don Bosco, Apostle of Youth,”* but *“Don Bosco with God’”*– a text written by Fr. Eugenio Ceria in 1929.
This gives us pause for thought. Why did they, who had seen him in action every day, not choose to emphasise Don Bosco’s tireless work, his organisational skills, his talent as an educator? No, they wanted to portray Don Bosco as a man deeply united with God.
Those who knew him well did not stop at appearances but went to the root. Don Bosco was a man immersed in God.

To the Salesian Family I say: we have received a treasure. An immense gift. But every gift entails a responsibility.
In my final discourse, I said: ***“It is not enough to love Don Bosco, you have to know him.”***
And we can only truly know him if we are people of faith.

We must look at him with the eyes of faith. Only in this way can we encounter the believer that Don Bosco was, in whom the Holy Spirit acted with power, with *dýnamis*, with *cháris*, with charism, with grace.
We cannot limit ourselves to repeating certain maxims of his or recounting his miracles. Because we run the risk of dwelling on the anecdotes of Don Bosco, instead of dwelling on the story of Don Bosco, because Don Bosco is greater than Don Bosco.

This means study, reflection, depth. It means avoiding all superficiality.

And then we will be able to say with truth, **“This is my faith, this is my charism: rooted in Christ, in the footsteps of Don Bosco.”**