

Interview with the Regional for East and Southern Africa, Fr. Innocent Bizimana

Can you introduce yourself?

My name is Innocent Bizimana. I was born in Musha Rwamagana, in the eastern province of Rwanda, on 25 March 1969. I made my first religious profession on 24 August 1994 in Kansebula, Lubumbashi. After my practical training at Bakanja – a reception centre for street children in Lubumbashi – I attended a semester of theology in Lubumbashi. Then, together with five confreres, I was sent to Lusaka, Zambia. After eight months, with one of them, I left for Madagascar, where I resumed my theology studies at the Fianarantsoa seminary, from 1999 to 2002.

I was ordained a priest on 9 August 2003 in the cathedral of Antsirabe, Madagascar. Subsequently, I continued my studies at the UPS, in Rome, and in 2005, I returned to Fianarantsoa as assistant to the post-novices. In the same year, due to the Director's health, I also took on responsibility for the oratory. The following year, I was appointed parish priest, continuing to oversee the oratory, and from 2007 to 2009, I only carried out the ministry of Pastor.

From 2009 to 2014, I led the community of the "Centre Notre Dame de Clairvaux" in Ivato, a reception home and vocational training centre for disadvantaged young people. In 2011, I was appointed provincial vicar, in addition to holding other positions: delegate for the Salesian Family, for formation and coordinator of the formation commission for the Africa-Madagascar Region. In 2014, I participated as a delegate in the 27th General Chapter and subsequently I was bursar of the Betafo community.

In 2017, I was again called as provincial vicar and in 2020, I took part in the 28th General Chapter, where I was appointed

provincial of Madagascar-Mauritius (MDG).

How did your vocation come about? When did you first perceive the call and what led you to the Salesians?

My home was near the parish of Musha, then entrusted to the Salesians (later closed after the 1994 war). I grew up attending the oratory and as a child I was part of the altar servers' group. After primary school, I attended secondary school at IFAK (Institut de Formation Apostolique de Kimihururra) in Kigali, a Salesian school.

There I experienced a very beautiful atmosphere; a spirit of prayer, daily Eucharist, monthly confession, "good night" every evening after prayer... My vocation was born precisely in this environment of serenity, joy, and study. I still remember collecting the "good nights" written in a notebook, for six consecutive years. Unfortunately, during the war my family was forced to leave home for almost a year to survive. Upon returning, it was destroyed and nothing remained, not even that notebook.

Being a Salesian, for me, was not a coincidence. From an early age I lived in the oratory and studied in a Salesian school. I intensely celebrated the feasts of Don Bosco and Mary Help of Christians. During the novena to Don Bosco, there was a box where everyone put their intentions. Mine were granted; for me it was a sign of God's presence and the paternal love of Saint John Bosco.

Was there an episode or a person who had a decisive influence on your choice?

Not so much a specific episode, as the simple and fraternal lifestyle of the Salesians among the young people. This closeness struck me greatly. Two figures in particular – a Rwandan Salesian and a missionary – deeply marked me with their spirit of prayer, joy, simplicity, and commitment to work.

I wanted to be like them, happy among young people, smiling in the playground, but at the same time, serious in work and

guided by prayer. The lives of Don Bosco and Dominic Savio, their stories and their example, fascinated me. Being united with God in life and work and leading many young people on this path was the call that prompted me to follow in Don Bosco's footsteps.

Have you experienced moments of crisis or doubt?

During the war and the genocide against the Tutsis in Rwanda, I experienced deep anguish. I wondered if God had forgotten us. I was also imprisoned in Congo for reasons related to the conflict. In those moments, the closeness of my confreres and the prayers of the young people were a great support. For twelve years, I could not see my family again. It was not so much a vocational doubt, as a hard trial along the way.

The most difficult: as a parish priest, living in contact with the painful situations of the poor, the sick, and children in difficulty. The community did a lot, but the problems were many and the solutions were not enough, also aggravated by cultural and institutional factors.

The most rewarding: being with the young people and seeing their joy when they feel loved and get involved in associations. Great happiness is also witnessing the redemption of young people without a future, who thanks to formation and education manage to escape poverty. On a spiritual level, many undertake the catechumenal journey and receive the sacraments; it is an immense gift.

What are the main challenges of youth education today?

The lack of true role models. Social media proposes illusory happiness based on success, pleasure, and money. The absence of God, relativism, and indifference are very real dangers. It becomes difficult to talk about God in today's world.

Would you like to share a significant experience with young people?

I have many, but I'll tell you one. An eight-year-

old child, welcomed into our centre, had been mistreated and bore the marks of torture on his body. He constantly spoke of revenge and said that when he grew up, he would become a policeman to kill his father, and he wasn't joking. It was a deep wound.

After three years in the Salesian centre, during the month of January – when we tell young people about the life of Don Bosco and his boys – this child listened to the story of Dominic Savio and his daily visit to the Blessed Sacrament. He began catechesis and, discreetly, he too began to visit the oratory chapel every day.

It was a true miracle. He no longer spoke of revenge; he was no longer violent; he changed radically. At the time of his Baptism, everyone wondered what had happened. He had become a gentle and serene boy.

How do you remain steadfast in difficulties?

Spiritual life requires commitment. I am sustained by community programmes: Eucharist, meditation, liturgy of the hours, retreats, and spiritual exercises. I attach great importance to frequent confession and spiritual guidance, which I consider a shield. Daily Rosary, adoration, and visits to the Blessed Sacrament nourish my inner vigilance.

What is the most important thing you have learned from your Salesian experience?

Service. Like Don Bosco, we are in the Church to serve, bringing the Salesian charism as a contribution. It is an identity that we always live in communion with others; we are never alone.

What was your reaction when you were chosen as Regional?

A surprise! I had already planned to continue my animation service in the Madagascar-Mauritius Province after the General Chapter. I didn't expect it at all.

Which countries are part of the East and Southern Africa Region?

The Region comprises nine Provinces:

- AFM: South Africa, Eswatini, Lesotho
- AGL: Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda
- ANG: Angola, Namibia
- AFE: Kenya, Sudan
- AET: Ethiopia, Eritrea
- MOZ: Mozambique
- TZA: Tanzania
- MDG: Madagascar, Mauritius
- ZMB: Zambia, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Botswana

Is it possible to give Don Bosco an “African face”?

Don Bosco already has an African face. Inculturation is a process that takes time, because Africa does not have a single culture or language. The Salesian charism finds fertile ground on our continent, as evidenced by the numerous vocations.

However, it is necessary to continue to study and deepen Salesianity, to live it in the local context. It is not about literally copying what Don Bosco experienced, but about embodying it today in our reality.

What advice would you give to a young person searching for their place in the world?

I would tell them to put God first and to be accompanied by a wise person, capable of helping them to discern and choose freely.

What place does Mary Help of Christians hold in your life?

Mary Help of Christians is the guide, support, and protection of my spiritual life. I entrust every day to her and always ask for her intercession.

A message for young people today?

God truly loves you. Draw close to Jesus, walk with Mary His Mother, and fear nothing.