

□ Reading time: 4 min.

Thirty years old, Malagasy, now a theology student at Crocetta in Turin and a missionary in the Middle East Province, which includes Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, and Egypt. Germain Maevatoky has already crossed continents, languages, and cultures as he prepares for the mission to which he has been assigned. This year, in Genzano, he met thirty other missionary confreres serving in Europe and the Middle East, brought together by the Missions Sector. His story includes scouting and the oratory in Madagascar, Don Bosco's missionary dreams, the cross he received in the midst of the pandemic, and the challenge of Arabic. And the certainty that the Salesian charism unites people across every border.

From scouting to Don Bosco

I first met the Salesians through the assistant priest at my parish in Madagascar. At the time, I was a scout. I enjoyed helping out at church and spending time with my friends. It was there that I discovered the joy of serving the Church and the desire to follow Jesus more closely. I went to the Salesians, who introduced me to the oratory and suggested that I read the life of Don Bosco, translated into Malagasy. I was captivated by it, and as I got to know the Salesians better, I decided to join the Congregation after completing my secondary education.

A vocation born of reading

My missionary vocation grew out of things I read that left a deep impression on me. While studying the history of the Catholic Church in my country, I discovered how many missionary congregations had come to serve the people and proclaim the Good News. I then focused on Don Bosco's missionary dreams, particularly the passages where he speaks of the countries the Salesians would reach and the missionaries who would leave their homeland. Finally, each year I read the Rector Major's missionary appeal, published on 18 December, the anniversary of the Congregation's foundation, and I felt as though it was addressed to me personally. With all this in my heart, at the end of three years of philosophy studies and after a

period of discernment with my mentor, I wrote to the Rector Major to offer my services.

The missionary cross in the time of Covid

In 2021, at the height of the pandemic, I attended the course for new missionaries before receiving the missionary cross. There were only a few of us, and because of the restrictions we stayed in Italy for just over two weeks. That formation prepared me spiritually, psychologically, and culturally. It was also an opportunity to meet the confreres from the Missions Sector and the other Salesians in the same missionary group. Visiting significant Church sites in Rome and Salesian places – Colle Don Bosco, Valdocco, and Mornese – helped me experience and understand the Salesian charism more deeply.

New eyes on faith

My arrival in the Middle East marked the beginning of the adventure of missionary life, an adventure that is only just getting started. In Egypt, encountering others opened my eyes to my own faith. I was deeply struck by the Orthodox Christians. During pilgrimages and visits to churches, there was an intense atmosphere of prayer that truly helped me to pray. I saw people of great faith touching or kissing images of the saints and relics: to me, this was a clear sign of devotion and a strong sense of belonging. And then there was meeting Muslims, who read the Qur'an even on the underground, especially during Ramadan, and pray in the street or in shopping centers.

The challenge of languages

In this new context, the hardest challenge for me was the language, or rather, the languages. In our province, you need to know Italian, Arabic, and English. Thank God, the province gave me the time I needed to learn them, particularly Arabic. Another challenge was having a different mentor each time I moved to a new community, that happened every year during my first four years as a missionary.

A special province

The Middle East Province is distinctive because political relations between the Countries are far from straightforward, making it difficult to bring all the confreres together. Thanks to technology, though, we meet online from time to time for a provincial gathering. Young people are a strong presence in our youth centers, oratories, parishes, and schools, and the Salesians' work is also appreciated by governments. We support refugees in Lebanon, Syria, and Egypt, and in some communities, we also work alongside Muslims.

I was warmly welcomed by the superiors – the provincial and his vicar – and by all the confreres. I was able to see for myself that faith in Jesus and Don Bosco's charism unite people, despite differences in culture and background.

The Genzano gathering

I am deeply grateful to the Missions Sector, which made it possible for us to meet in Genzano this year, a valuable initiative for the good of the Congregation. It was a gathering for missionaries who had arrived in Europe and the Middle East within the past five years. It was a time for fellowship, formation, sharing, and encouragement. I was impressed by the collaboration among the members of the Sector and by their willingness to listen to us, advise us, and engage in dialogue with us.

Looking ahead

To meet the challenges ahead, I would say we should continue our work in the Salesian spirit, with creativity and flexibility, collaborating with lay people and local authorities, and bearing witness to our faith in Jesus. Thank you for your prayers, which are a true source of spiritual support for us missionaries. And together, let us ask the Lord to send workers into His harvest!

Marco Fulgaro