

□ Reading time: 3 min.

*Salesian Missionary Volunteering in France-Belgium is a window open to the world. Through V.I.D.E.S. – International Volunteering for Women's Education and Development – young people are trained and commit themselves to women and children, combining education, solidarity, and human growth. It is a choice that leads to living the mission in the spirit of Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello, with an international and inclusive outlook, capable of embracing cultural and religious diversity.*

This year, V.I.D.E.S. France-Belgium Camp took on a special meaning. It was celebrated in harmony with the triple Jubilee involving the entire Salesian Family. A year that makes us relive the Jubilee of Hope proclaimed by the universal Church; the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first Salesian missionary expedition to Argentina (11 November 1875); and the arrival of the Salesian charism in France, in Nice, also in November 1875. To these anniversaries is added the missionary jubilee of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, which makes the sense of belonging to a large family on a journey even more vivid.

### **Overcoming borders with formation and proximity**

From 7 to 21 July 2025, Calais and Guînes welcomed eighteen young volunteers from Belgium, France, Spain, Mexico, India, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Albania. Together with them, religious and formators led two intense weeks on the theme, “Overcoming borders”, in a context marked by internationality, interculturality, and inter-religiousness.

The programme alternated theoretical and practical formation. The days were enriched by moments of study and reflection on crucial topics: “*On the path of migrants*”, “*Godly Play Don Bosco*”, “*The positioning of V.I.D.E.S. in front of migrants in Europe*”, “*Culture shock*”. Not simple lessons, but experiences that opened perspectives, sensitised young people, and prepared each one to leave for the mission.

Alongside the formation, there was time for concrete encounters with those who live the dramatic experience of exile. Every day the volunteers went to Secours Catholique in Calais, a place of welcome and hope for hundreds of migrants waiting to cross the Channel.

### **An active presence among the exiles of Calais**

In those days, over 460 exiles found in the volunteers, not only a service, but above all a smile, a gesture of friendship, a presence that breaks the isolation. The

activities were simple but decisive: teaching French, games, charging phones, distributing meals, washing clothes, caring for the sick. Small signs of proximity, capable of saying, "You are not alone".

The emotional climate was intense: joy and gratitude for the encounters, but also sadness and helplessness in the face of the wounds of humanity that become visible in Calais. For many volunteers, it was a transformative experience. One of them shared:

"In the midst of these brothers and sisters I saw again the face of Jesus, the one the Gospel speaks of. *'I was a stranger and you welcomed me'* (Mt 25:35). In their gaze, I felt the call to serve with simplicity, even when our hands seemed too small in the face of so much suffering."

### **The missionary sending**

The camp concluded with a moment of great ecclesial significance: the Missionary Sending in the parish of Guînes, presided over by the parish priest Fr. David and animated by the presence of the Salesians of Don Bosco, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, the Salesian Cooperators, and many faithful.

During the celebration, the permanent deacon expressed a thought that touched hearts:

"These young people sent on mission by our parish have become our children. Our community has the mission to listen to them and support them wherever they may be."

From this spirit of communion also arose a concrete commitment: six young volunteers responded to the call to leave for long-term missions in Chile, Tunisia, Madagascar, the Philippines, and Albania.

### **An experience that changes one's outlook**

Returning from the camp was not a simple "going home", but a profound inner passage. The experience of Calais left in each one an invitation to bear witness to goodness, peace, and fraternity in daily life. Looking closely at the migratory phenomenon has transformed eyes and hearts; exiles are no longer numbers or statistics, but faces, stories, hopes.

From the final sharing emerged a set of words that can become the compass of the missionary journey: compassion, fraternity, charity, attention to others, active listening, sensitivity to the cry of the poor. We all recognised ourselves, in different ways, as "exiles in search of a home", pilgrims of hope.

### **Overcoming borders, today**

The message of the camp does not only concern young volunteers, but challenges

each of us. We live in a society marked by cultural interconnections and differences that can become walls or bridges. The challenge is to overcome borders – linguistic, cultural, geographical, existential – and learn to live together.

Welcoming the other, with their fragilities and riches, is the way to build unity in diversity. It is a journey that does not end in two weeks, but continues in daily life, where each one is called to be a sign and bearer of the hope of the Gospel.

*Fr. Albert Kabuge, SDB*