 Reading time: 7 min.

In the life of a Salesian missionary, the mission rarely stems from a project built at a desk. It often takes shape through a calling, an accepted obedience, an unexpected departure. This is the case in the journey of Fr. Anthony Fernandes: born in Kenya to a family originally from Goa, formed in India, then sent to Africa and Europe. From Tanzania to Nairobi, from Glasgow to Bollington, every stage has been a service to the Church, to young people, to Salesian formation and to the communities entrusted to him. Not a story centred on his own achievements, but on the fruit born from the willingness to let himself be sent. Because, when obedience is lived with faith, it becomes a seed of the future for many.

When I look at the journey of my Salesian life, I do not feel I can recount it as a series of well-planned personal choices. Rather, I recognise it as a story guided by Providence, through encounters, obediences, unexpected destinations and responsibilities accepted little by little. At various times I was asked to leave what I knew, to start something new, to serve where there was a need. Each time I simply tried to say my yes.

I was born in Nairobi, Kenya, in 1946. My parents, Ambrose and Maria, were originally from Goa, India, and in the 1940s they had settled in Kenya, where their three children were born. My life therefore bears the mark of multiple lands and cultures from the very beginning: East Africa, where I was born and raised, and Goa, the land of my family roots. Only later did I understand how much this experience would help me to embrace the Salesian mission in different places, without feeling tied to a single environment or a single culture.

In 1964 I finished my secondary studies at the Dr Ribeiro Goan School in Nairobi. Shortly after, my father took the family to Goa, also to venerate the relics of St Francis Xavier in Old Goa, which were exposed for public veneration. In January 1965, during a trip to India, we also visited the Shrine of Don Bosco’s Madonna in

Mumbai. It was there that my path took a different direction from what I had imagined until then.

After the morning Mass, we were received by Fr. Aurelio Maschio, then director of the Shrine. My father offered him a donation for the maintenance of a seminarian. Fr. Maschio gently moved it on the table and, looking at us children, asked my parents if they hadn't thought of offering one of us to the priesthood. That simple and direct question remained in my heart. At that moment the seed of my Salesian vocation was sown.

It wasn't the plan my father had in mind for me. Probably, upon returning to Nairobi, he expected me to find a job. Instead, another path opened up. I was allowed to enter the Don Bosco Apostolic School in Lonavala, on the condition that an uncle living in Mumbai agreed to be my guardian. Thus, I began my Salesian formation: in 1968 I made my first profession and in December 1977 I was ordained a priest right in the Shrine of Don Bosco's Madonna in Mumbai, where my vocation had received its first impulse.

The first obedience, immediately after ordination, took me to the new Novitiate of the Mumbai Province, in Nashik. It was 1978 and I was asked to serve the first group of novices. It was a very significant beginning: my priestly life did not start with a role chosen by me, but with a service to the formation of other young Salesians. I found myself accompanying the first steps of those who wished to follow Don Bosco. This too helped me to understand that every vocation grows when it is supported by a community and by willing educators.

Shortly after came a second call. In 1979, the Rector Major, Fr. Egidio Viganò, asked for volunteers for "Project Africa". I responded to that invitation and was sent to Tanzania. I was not assigned to Kenya, even though I was born there, because the mission required going, not towards what was most familiar, but towards what was entrusted by obedience.

The parish of Mafinga, in the southern highlands of Tanzania, became my new home. The mission there had the simple face of the people, the villages, the celebrations, the weekend journeys to meet the Christian communities. During the week, I was also asked to teach in the diocesan Seminary of Iringa. Thus, the service took place on two fronts: on the one hand, pastoral life with the people, on the other, the formation of future priests. They were different activities, but united by the same desire, to serve the growth of the local Church.

When the Salesians were invited to take over the Catholic Youth Centre in Dar-es-Salaam, I received a new assignment as chaplain of the Archdiocese, then led by Cardinal Laurean Rugambwa. During that period, I worked with the Young Christian Students in secondary schools and universities. It was an important experience, because it brought me into contact with young people called to live their faith within the world of study, culture, and future responsibilities. There too, the task was not to build something around myself, but to help young people discover their Christian presence in society.

Later, when East Africa became a Delegation of the Mumbai Province, I was asked to take on the responsibility of Economer and to move to the Provincial House in Nairobi. At first it might have seemed a less directly pastoral role. Over time, however, I understood that even administration, if lived as a service, can become profoundly missionary.

In those years, thanks to the help of the Mumbai Province, the Rector Major, benefactors, lay people close to our communities, and many friends of the mission, it was possible to give substance to some fundamental structures for Salesian formation in Tanzania and Kenya: the pre-novitiate, the novitiate, the philosophical studentate and the theological one. The Shrine of Mary Help of Christians was also built in Nairobi. I do not consider these works as a personal achievement, but as the fruit of many obediences, much collaboration, and a great trust in Providence. Today those structures continue to serve the formation of young local Salesians and

are part of the growth of Don Bosco’s charism in East Africa.

In the early years of the mission, we didn’t always have all the tools, qualifications or securities that would seem necessary today. We did, however, have a strong Salesian formation, a family spirit, a willingness to work, and the trust that the Lord would open the way. We served in formation houses, youth centres, technical schools, parishes, and new presences where the local Bishops asked for the collaboration of the Salesians. We proceeded step by step, often with limited means, but with the desire to put down roots.

From 1996 to 2005, I was director of the Shrine of Mary Help of Christians in Upper Hill, Nairobi. This role also allowed me to collaborate more closely with the local Church. I was appointed president of the Senate of the Archdiocese of Nairobi and a member of the Archdiocesan Pastoral Council. For me it was above all a sign of the trust that the local Church had in the Salesian presence and in the service carried out in those years.

After almost thirty years in the East Africa Province, I felt that a new stage could open up. When “Project Europe” was launched, I offered my availability. In 2009, I was sent to the Great Britain Province, to collaborate in a parish in the east end of Glasgow, Scotland. It was a very different environment from those I had lived in before: a poor area, marked by social difficulties and a religious context very different from the African one.

There too I had to learn. The mission did not consist in repeating what I had done elsewhere, but in listening, understanding, adapting, and loving those people just as they were. The people proved to be very kind and affectionate. I had to get used to the Glasgow accent, but above all, I learned once again that God’s love has no borders and that every people also evangelise the missionary who is sent to serve them.

In 2011, I was assigned to Savio House, in Bollington, in the north-west of England. I stayed there for nine years, working with volunteers in animating retreats for young people. It was a very Salesian experience. The young people who arrived for the retreats brought questions, frailties, desires, sometimes even a distance from the faith; but above all they brought a great potential for good. In a secularised context, Don Bosco's charism appeared to me once again relevant: creating a welcoming environment, offering a listening ear, proposing experiences of faith, accompanying without forcing.

In 2020, I was called to take on the role of provincial Economer. This obedience too was a service to the mission, because educational and pastoral works need to be supported with responsibility, order, and care. Once that mandate ended, I was entrusted with the role of Provincial Delegate for Missionary Animation.

In this service today I try to gather what I have received in the different stages of my life: formation in India, the mission in Africa, service in Europe, work with young people, community and provincial responsibilities. Through the Rua Link, which plays a communication role within the Province, I try to make known to the Salesian Family the news, resources, and proposals offered by the Missions Sector in Rome. Furthermore, I am accompanying the animation of the Pastoral Councils of our parishes, in harmony with the theme of the 2026 Salesian Mission Day: "Open Hearts, Living Mission".

Looking back on the journey I have taken, I see three great calls: the Salesian vocation born in the Shrine of Don Bosco's Madonna in Mumbai; Project Africa, which took me to Tanzania and Kenya; Project Europe, which led me to Scotland and England. In each of these stages, obedience asked me to leave, to change, to take on new responsibilities. It was not always clear from the beginning what fruit would be born. But the Lord made good things grow through many people, many communities, and many collaborators.

For this reason, if I have to summarise my missionary life, I would not recount it as the story of what I have done, but as the story of what I have received and sought to serve. I have been called, sent, and committed. I have learned that the mission is not choosing the place most suited to oneself, but accepting the place and the task that are entrusted. And I have seen that, when an obedience is accepted with faith, it can become a seed of the future for many.

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