

□ Reading time: 5 min.

*The Mission Sector of the Salesian Congregation, with its headquarters in Rome, organised a Missionary renewal course called Corso Respiro, in English language, for the missionaries who are already in the missions for many years and were desirous of a spiritual renewal and updating. The course which began at Colle Don Bosco on 11 September 2024 was successfully concluded in Rome on 26 October 2024.*

The *Corso Respiro* had 24 participants from 14 countries: Azerbaijan, Botswana, Brazil, Cambodia, Eritrea, India, Japan, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines, Samoa, South Sudan, Tanzania and Turkey. Though we, the participants of the course came from various countries with our diverse cultural backgrounds and belonged to the different branches of the Salesian Family, we quickly established a strong bond among ourselves, and all of us felt at home in each other's company.

One of the uniqueness of the *Corso Respiro* was that it was a missionary course in which several members of the Salesian Family took part for the first time: 16 Salesians of Don Bosco (SDB), 3 Sisters of Charity of Jesus (SCG), 2 Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians (MSMHC), 2 Visitation Sisters of Don Bosco (VSDB) and 1 Salesian Cooperator. Another positive aspect was the lived experience with some of the lesser known and smaller members of the Salesian Family.

The seven weeks of the *Corso Respiro* was a time of spiritual renewal which enabled us to deepen our knowledge of Don Bosco, Salesian history, charism, spirit and spirituality and to know better the different members of the Salesian Family. The Salesian *Lectio Divina*, pilgrimages to the places connected with the life and apostolate of Don Bosco at Becchi, Castelnuovo Don Bosco, Chieri and Valdocco, the days spent at Annecy and at Mornese, pilgrimage in the footsteps of St Paul the Apostle in Rome, participation in the general audience given by Pope Francis at the Vatican, visit to the Basilica of Sacro Cuore built by Don Bosco and the Salesian Generalate, sharing of missionary experiences by all the participants of the course, taking part in the solemn "Missionary Sending" from the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians at Valdocco, time spent daily in personal prayer and reflection, common eucharistic celebration and so on helped us very much to personalise and deepen our Salesian values and missionary vocation. The days we spent in Rome reflecting on the various aspects of the theology of the missions, sessions on Salesian youth ministry, personal discernment, on-going formation, missionary catechesis,

emotional literary, missionary volunteering, missionary animation of the Congregation, etc., with the help of experts in the respective fields were also very enriching. The pilgrimage to Assisi, the place sanctified by Saint Francis of Assisi, with the theme to “thank”, to “re-think” and to “re-launch”, was an occasion for us to thank God for our missionary vocation and ask Him for the grace to return to our mission lands with greater enthusiasm to do better in the future. Another speciality of the *Corso Respiro* was that it was not academic in nature with credits, theses, examinations and grading, but one which laid emphasis on the Word of God, sharing of experiences, reflection, prayer and contemplation with only a minimum theoretical input.

As participants of the *Corso Respiro*, we had the special privilege of witnessing the 155th “Missionary Sending” from the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians at Valdocco, Turin, on 29 September 2024. A total of 27 Salesians, practically all of them very young, left for different countries as missionaries after having received the missionary cross from Don Stefano Martoglio, the Vicar of the Rector Major. That memorable event reminded us of our own reception of the missionary cross and the departure for the missions many years ago. We were also made aware of the uninterrupted “Missionary Sending” from Valdocco since 1875, and the perennial commitment of the Salesians Congregation to the missionary charism of Don Bosco.

A very enriching aspect of the *Corso Respiro* was the sharing of the vocation stories and the missionary experiences by all the participants. Each one prepared himself or herself for it in advance and shared their vocational story and missionary experiences in creative ways. While some shared their experiences in the form of simple talks, others used photos, video clips and PowerPoint presentations. There was ample time to interact with each missionary to clarify doubts and gather more information about their missionary vocation, the country and the culture of their missions. This sharing was an excellent spiritual exercise because each one of us had the opportunity to reflect deeply on our own missionary vocation and to discover the hand of God at work in our life. This interior journey was very formative and it enabled us to strengthen our missionary vocation and helped us to resolve to commit ourselves with greater generosity to *Missio Dei* (“Mission of God”).

During the *Corso Respiro*, through the sharing of our missionary experiences, we were once again deeply convinced that the life of a missionary is not an easy one. Most of the missionaries work in the “peripheries” of various kinds (geographical, existential, economic, cultural, spiritual and psychological), and a good number of

them in very difficult conditions, under challenging circumstances and with many privations. In many contexts there is no religious freedom to preach the Gospel openly. In other places there are governments with fascist ideologies which oppose Christianity and have anti-conversion laws in force. There are countries where one cannot reveal one's priestly or religious identity. Then there are places where neither the Catholic institution nor the religious personnel is permitted to exhibit Christian religious symbols like the cross, the Bible, statues of Christ or saints or religious habit. There are territories where the missionaries cannot come together for meetings or spiritual exercises or lead a community life. There are nations that do not allow any foreign Christian missionary to enter their country and block all financial assistance from abroad to Christian institutions. There are mission lands that do not have enough vocations to priestly and religious life, and as a consequence, the missionary is overburdened with many works and responsibilities. Then there are situations where finding the financial resources needed to meet the ordinary expenses of running institutions like schools, boarding houses, technical institutions, youth centres, dispensaries and so on is one of the major worries of the missionaries. There are missions that lack the financial resources needed to build up the much needed infrastructure or persons qualified to teach in schools and technical institutions or offer basic health care services to the poor. This list of the problems which the missionaries face is not exhaustive. But the positive thing about the missionaries is that they are people of deep faith and happy in their missionary vocation. They are glad to be with the people and satisfied with what they have, and trusting in God's Providence they go ahead with their missionary work in spite of the numerous challenges and privations. Some of the missionaries are radiant examples of Christian holiness which make their life itself a powerful proclamation of the Gospel. These valiant missionaries deserve our appreciation, encouragement, spiritual and material support to continue with their missionary work.

A special word of appreciation to all the members of the Mission Sector who worked very hard and made many sacrifices to organise the *Corso Respiro* 2024. I hope that the Mission Sector will continue to offer this course every year, and if possible, in different languages, and with the participation of more members of the Salesian Family, especially the smaller and the lesser known ones. The course will definitely provide opportunity for the missionaries to have a spiritual renewal, theological updating, physical and mental rest, which are essential to offer better quality missionary and pastoral service in the missions and to establish stronger bonds among the members of the Salesian Family.

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