 Reading time: 4 min.

The Salesian charism has put down roots in Albania, a country where the Salesian work is alive and fruitful: from the beginnings in the 1990s to looking towards the future, here are the experiences recounted by Fr Giuseppe Liano, a Guatemalan missionary at the service of Albanian youth, in the community at Scutari.

How did the Salesian presence in Albania come about? Fr Oreste Valle tells us that while looking at the dramatic Italian situation in the ports of Bari and Brindisi in 1991, it was Pope St John Paul II himself who asked the then Rector Major, Fr Egidio Viganò, for the Salesians' immediate willingness to go to Albania. The arrival of boats overflowing with people in search of a better future broke his heart and immediately made him realise that one could not limit oneself to welcoming them at the port: there was also an urgent need to take the opposite route and go out to meet these poor and abandoned young people left behind at home.
The first Salesian expedition from Italy arrived at the end of 1991. Officially, the Salesian presence began on 25 September 1992, in Shkodër, in northern Albania, destined for a promising future, starting with a full and joyful present. The context was an historically important city of great culture and faith, in the midst of appalling poverty, an unimaginable number of young people, with the memory of so much bloodshed, the blood of Catholic martyrs and those of other religions.
The work developed around the needs of the boys and their families: from the oratory, the heart and genesis of the Salesian presence, to the vocational school, then the boarding school, the church and the parish. A development according to the oratory criterion: courtyard, school, home and parish, as Don Bosco wanted. After Shkodra, horizons opened up in the capital Tirana, then in Kosovo, in Prishtina and Gjilan, and, for almost three years, also in Lushnje, in southern Albania.

The Salesian house in Shkodra is located in the centre of the city: there are a significant number of boys enrolled in the boarding school and the oratory continues to be a crowded courtyard every afternoon. From the little ones who come for their football training or the folk-dance school, to the "big ones" who enjoy playing volleyball, basketball or simply meeting to talk and spend time together in the oratory.
Every day, at 6pm, all activities stop for a good night and prayer, as is Salesian tradition. The catechetical groups meet each weekend (Friday) as well as the formation groups (Saturday).

This is the ordinary routine, but then we would have to add vocational meetings, apostolate experiences, preparation for the various sports and feast days depending on the liturgical season. All this is animated by a fairly large believing community and a substantial number of young people and young leaders.

One could say that the beauty and originality of the Albanian Salesian works is that, on the whole, hundreds of children and families of different creeds are welcomed, offering a service of education and communion in an interreligious context. The name and tradition of “Don Bosko” (with a k) are recognised as a model of trust, work and generous good for society. Each community carries out its mission in a totally different context in terms of faith, pastoral proposal and dialogue with the city, but efforts are made to share, as far as possible, between Salesians and Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.
For the youngsters, everything seems to be just one playground in different places. This harmony and trust are the trump card enabling the Salesians to offer games, courses, prayers and opportunities for growth without being judged as “propagandists of the faith” or “only interested in their own good”.



Those who enter a Salesian environment feel welcomed and able to welcome others, without distinction. And for Catholics, being part of the group of leaders and the playground means living their vocation in the service of young people according to the Salesian style, with the beauty of seeing them pray, go to confession and attend mass regularly.
What is currently challenging the Salesians is finding the right answers to the needs of this generation.
The phenomenon of migration is heart-breaking, poverty indicators are rising and the chances of a worthy future in Shkodra are dramatically reduced. One has to be very lucky or else leave the city to study and find a job. The Salesians dream of a day centre and a youth centre, with a worthy and profitable vocational school and a language, arts and sports school which would give their dreams a shape, a present and a future. Unfortunately, without financial support, these dreams remain ink on

blank sheets of paper. And, in the meantime, young people and families continue to leave here.
But the Salesians do not stop dreaming, living the present as a truly precious gift from God. Fr Giuseppe Liano, a Salesian missionary from Guatemala, tells us: “Personally, I feel like the luckiest Salesian on this earth: sharing the mission with Salesians from all over the world (Vietnam, Congo, Italy, Zambia, India, Slovenia, Slovakia, Guatemala, Albania and Kosovo), with such faithful young people and Salesians in such a beautiful city, dedicating myself to animating the oratory… this kind of thing doesn’t happen every day! All this, while still aware that getting into the context, getting to know the situation and understanding the language were slow and costly processes. But, after a while, one realises how much it was all worth it. Such a challenging and beautiful mission is a stimulus to creative fidelity and holiness!”
For Albania today, a complex future lies ahead. There is no shortage of problems. Lately, economic support and projects arriving in Albania have been directed to more needy recipients, especially in Ukraine and Turkey; this suggests that it is also time to begin not only to receive but also to generate support, although it is not yet possible to fully cover the costs. The young people, who are faithful and strong, are there by God’s grace. Today the challenge is to find the point of momentum, the way to turn the context together into a certainty, an “oasis” for future generations and a source of vocations, holiness and beauty.

Marco Fulgaro