 Reading time: 5 min.

Accompanied by a local Salesian, we get to know a significant educational presence in Oceania.

The presence of Don Bosco has reached every continent in the world. We can say that only Antarctica is missing, and even in the islands of Oceania the Salesian charism, which is well adapted to the different cultures and traditions, is spreading.

For almost 30 years, the Salesians have also been working in the Solomon Islands, a country in the southwest Pacific comprising more than 900 islands. They arrived on 27 October 1995, at the request of Archbishop Emeritus Adrian Smith, and started work with three confreres from Japan, the first Salesian pioneers in the country. Initially they moved to Tetere, in the parish of Christ the King on the outskirts of the capital Honiara on the island of Guadalcanal, and later opened another presence in Honiara in the Henderson area. There are fewer than ten Salesians working in the country and they come from different countries in Asia and Oceania: Philippines, India, Korea, Vietnam, Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands.



The Solomon Islands is a very poor country in the oceanic region of Melanesia, which has experienced a lot of political instability and social problems since independence in 1978, experiencing conflicts and violent ethnic clashes within its borders. Although known as the “Happy Islands”, the country is gradually moving away from this identity, as it is facing all kinds of challenges and problems stemming from drug and alcohol abuse, corruption, early pregnancies, broken families, lack of employment and educational opportunities, and so on, says Salesian Thomas Bwagaaro, who accompanies us in this article.

Solomon Islands has an estimated population of about 750,000 people, and the majority are young people. The population is predominantly Melanesian, with some Micronesian, Polynesian and other peoples. The majority of the population is Christian, but there are also other faiths such as the Bahai Faith and Islam that are gradually making their way into the country. The paradisical seascapes and the rich biodiversity make these islands a fascinating and fragile place at the same time.

Thomas tells us that the young people are generally docile and dream of a better future. However, with the increase in population and the lack of services and even a space to get a higher education, it seems that today's youth are generally frustrated with the government and many young people resort to crime, such as dealing illegal drugs, drinking, pickpocketing, stealing and so on, especially in the city, just to earn an income. In this not easy situation, the Salesians roll up their sleeves to offer hope for the future.

In the Tetere community, the work is concentrated in the school, a vocational training centre offering agricultural courses, and in the parish of Christ the King. In addition to the formal education courses, there are playgrounds in the school for students, young people attending the parish and communities living in the same area, and the oratory is open at weekends. The challenge the community faces is the distance from Honiara and the lack of resources to help the school meet the welfare of the students. As far as the parish is concerned, the poor condition of the roads leading to the villages is a major concern, which often contributes to vehicle problems and therefore makes transportation more difficult.

The Honiara-Henderson community runs a vocational technical school that caters for young men and women who have dropped out of school and do not have the opportunity to continue their studies. Technical courses range from electrical technology, metal fabrication and welding, business office administration, hospitality and tourism, information technology, automotive technology, building construction and solar energy course.

In addition to this, the community also supports a learning centre that mainly caters for children and young people from the Honiara landfill and the communities surrounding the school who do not have the opportunity to attend normal schools.



However, due to the lack of facilities, not everyone can be accommodated at the centre, despite the efforts of the entire community. Following Don Bosco's Preventive System, the Salesians not only offer educational opportunities, but also take care of the spiritual aspect of the students through various programmes and religious activities, to form them to be 'good Christians and upright citizens'. Through its programmes, the Salesian school conveys positive messages to the children and educates them in discipline and balance, to prevent them from falling into the problems of drug and alcohol abuse, which are widespread among young people. One challenge the Salesian community faces in providing quality education is the training of staff, so that they are always professional and at the same time share Salesian charismatic values, in a spirit of educational co-responsibility. The school needs lay missionaries and volunteers who are committed to helping young people realise their dreams and become a better version of themselves.
Although the current situation in the country is likely to be more difficult in the years to come, Thomas tells us, " believe that the young people of Solomon Islands want and hope for a better future, they want people who inspire them to dream,

who accompany them, who listen to them and guide them to hope and to look beyond the challenges and problems they continually experience every day, especially when they migrate to the city."

But how can a vocation to Salesian consecrated life be born in Solomon Islands?
Thomas Bwagaaro is one of only two Salesians from Solomon Islands. "It is a privilege for me to work for young people in my country. As a local, dealing with young people and listening to the struggles they sometimes face gives me strength and courage to be a good Salesian." The educational work and personal testimony of life can be a source of inspiration for other young people who want to join the Salesian congregation and continue Don Bosco's dream of helping young people in this region, as happened in Thomas' story. His journey to become a Salesian began as a student at Don Bosco Tetere in 2011. Inspired by the way the Salesians interacted with the students, he was captivated and remembers his two years there as the best student experience, which gave him hope and the chance to dream of a bright future, despite the difficult situation and lack of opportunities. The vocational journey in the community began with participation in the Salesians' morning and evening prayer times, with a gradual and growing sense of sharing. Thus, in 2013, Thomas entered the Salesian Savio Haus aspirantate in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, attending boarding school for four years with other companions. The clearly international Salesian formation continued in the Philippines, in Cebu, with the pre-novitiate and subsequent novitiate, at the end of which Thomas made his first vows as a Salesian at the Shrine of Mary Help of Christians in Port Moresby on the solemnity of Mary Help of Christians, 24 May 2019. He then returned to the Philippines to study philosophy and finally returned to the PGS Vice-Province that includes Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands. "As a local Salesian, I am very grateful to my family who supported me wholeheartedly and to the brothers who set a good example and accompanied me on my journey as a young Salesian." Religious life, alongside young people together with many exemplary lay people, is still as relevant today as it was in the past. "Looking to the future, I can confidently say that the Solomon Islands will continue to have many young people and the need for Salesians, Salesian volunteers and lay missionary partners to continue this wonderful apostolate of helping young people to be good Christians and upright citizens will be very relevant."

Marco Fulgaro