 Reading time: 4 min.

Fr Rolando Fernandez, a Salesian missionary from the Philippines, currently in the community of Dili – Comoro belonging to the Timor-Leste (TLS) Vice-Province, has completed 50 years of service in priestly life, 40 of them in Timor-Leste.

The faithful in Baucau celebrated 50 years of priestly life of Fr Rolando Fernandez, sdb, a missionary from Pangasinan, Philippines, on the feast day of St Dominic Savio. Joining in the concelebration of the Mass of Thanksgiving were the TLS Superior, Fr Anacleto Pires, priests from the Diocese of Baucau and Salesian priests. Many people took part, including some religious sisters and Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, members of the Salesian Family, novices and pre-novices, government representatives, students and young people, gathered in Baucau Cathedral and animated by a joyful spirit of thanksgiving, celebrating God's love through the person of Fr Rolando Fernandez in his forty years of life and service on behalf of the Timorese people.

Amu Orlando, as he is called by the people, spent ten years of his missionary life in Papua New Guinea, before joining other missionaries working in Timor-Leste in the mid-1980s. This celebration took place in Baucau, because Fr Rolando worked there as parish priest (1992-1994) and director and founder of the well-known Escola Secundária Santo António (ESSA) Teulale-Baucau. Along with this, Fr Rolando completed many other works in Baucau. To name but a few, translations of the Word of God into the national language, Tetum, and other printed works. He made a great effort to offer the faithful prayers and worship texts for liturgical celebrations. The last of his legacies, but no less important, which will remain in the hearts of Timorese youth throughout the country, is the organisation of the Cruz Jovens event for the youth of Timor-Leste, initiated by Pope St John Paul II in Rome on 22 April 1984 (the first World Youth Day).



In his homily, Fr Rolando went to the heart of the meaning of assistance. Firstly, he spoke of the unworthiness of a man to become a priest. The priesthood is not a right, but a gift from God. It is God who calls, in his great love, and gives this grace to become a priest. It is God's trust to choose and raise up men to serve his people. This is also reflected in the second Eucharistic Prayer, in which the priest says: "…giving thanks that you have held us worthy to be in your presence and minister to you." For this great gift, Fr Rolando thanked God for calling him and giving him the opportunity to serve.

Then, looking back to the past, to his life journey, Fr Rolando saw how the finger of God had pointed out to him, shown him and prepared the way for this gift of ordained priesthood through the experiences he began in his devoted family of parents and brothers, and through the Salesian missionaries he met. We can add that the saying 'the fruit does not fall far from the tree' is once again confirmed. One of the memorable events that changed his life was that his father was impressed after visiting a Don Bosco technical school. There, he saw the boys making shoes, sewing, carpentry, mechanical and electrical work. His father bought

a pair of shoes for him and, on that occasion, a Salesian priest gave him a booklet with pictures of Mary Help of Christians, Don Bosco and Dominic Savio. Once home, his father told him: ‘Next year, you will go to the Don Bosco school’. Indeed, he went there. There he saw the life of the Salesians, learnt from them, wished to be like them and, in the end, became one of them, a Salesian brother and then a Salesian priest forever. Finally, Fr Rolando felt a great desire to become a sign and bearer of God’s love, especially for young people. For him, the love of his confreres and superiors who trusted him, who entrusted some responsibilities beyond his abilities to his care, the love of his former students, the boys and the people, enriched his life with meaning. And these are not empty words: so many events and experiences of love from Salesians and people could be enumerated. He could deeply feel their love even when he was ill.
Then, recalling the words of Don Bosco who said: ‘Bread, work and paradise: these are three things I can offer you in the name of the Lord’, he commented that bread, for him, was never lacking, but if there was no work, the risk was that we would not even have paradise. Intense work consumes life quickly, but he is not afraid of death because he has faith in the words that Don Bosco left as his testament: ‘When it happens that a Salesian succumbs and ceases to live working for souls, then you will say that our Congregation has had a great triumph and the blessings of Heaven will descend abundantly upon it’. And this confidence in Don Bosco’s words continues, giving credence to the Salesian Constitutions which state in article 54: ‘death for the Salesian is made bright by the hope of entering into the joy of his Lord’. And – we say – this trust expressed in the Constitutions is right, because Don Bosco himself said: ‘If you have loved me in the past, continue to love me in the future **with the exact observance of our Constitutions**‘.

After the homily, Fr Rolando renewed his religious vows once again before the Superior, Fr Anacleto Pires, Fr Manuel Ximenes, sdb, parish priest of Baucau, and Fr Agnelo Moreira, sdb, Rector of the Baucau community. He gave a living testimony of God’s love for mankind, especially for young people.
After the final blessing, there were a number of speeches by various representatives who expressed their gratitude to Fr Rolando for his presence, his life and his work for the Church in Timor-Leste, particularly in Baucau. Thanks to his example of life, there are many vocations to religious life, many sistersnd priests. Fr Rolando Fernandez, just like a drop of honey, has attracted many young people, boys and girls, to embrace the religious or priestly life. As a sign of gratitude on behalf of the confreres in Timor-Leste, Fr Anacleto presented Fr Rolando with a

statue of Don Bosco. And in memory of this event, a tree was also planted in Baucau by Fr Anacleto and Fr Rolando.



Fr *Julian Mota, sdb*