 Reading time: 5 min.

Between 1877 and 1880, the Salesian missionary shift towards Patagonia took place. After the offer of the parish of Carhué on May 12, 1877, Don Bosco dreamed of evangelizing the southern lands, but Don Cagliero urged caution in the face of cultural difficulties. The initial attempts were delayed, while General Roca's "desert campaign" (1879) reshaped the balance with the indigenous people. On August 15, 1879, Archbishop Aneiros entrusted the Patagonian mission to the Salesians: "The time has finally come when I can offer you the Mission of Patagonia, for which your heart has long yearned." On January 15, 1880, the first group led by Don Giuseppe Fagnano set out, marking the beginning of the Salesian epic in southern Argentina.

What made Don Bosco and Fr Cagliero suspend, at least temporarily, any missionary project in Asia was the news on 12 May 1877: the Archbishop of Buenos Aires had offered the Salesians the mission of Caruhé (south east of Buenos Aires Province), a place of garrison and frontier between numerous tribes of indigenous people from the vast desert of the Pampas and Buenos Aires Province.

Thus the doors of Patagonia were open to the Salesians for the first time: Don Bosco was thrilled, but Fr Cagliero immediately cooled his enthusiasm: "I repeat, however, that with regard to Patagonia we must not run with electric speed, nor go there by steam, because the Salesians are not yet prepared for this enterprise […] too much has been published and we have been able to do too little with regard to the Indians. It is easy to conceive, difficult to accomplish, and it is too short a time that we have been here, and we must work with zeal and activity to this end, but not make a fuss, so as not to arouse the admiration of these people here, seeking to aspire, having arrived yesterday, to the conquest of a country that we do not yet know and whose language we do not even know."

With the option of Carmen de Patagónes no longer available, since archbishop had entrusted the parish to a Lazarist (Vincentian) priest, the Salesians were left with the northernmost parish of Carhué and the southernmost parish of Santa Cruz. Fr Cagliero had obtained a passage there by sea in the spring, which would have delayed his planned return to Italy by six months.

The decision of who should "enter Patagonia first" was thus left to Don Bosco, who intended to offer him that honour. But before he even knew it, Fr Cagliero decided to return: "Patagonia is waiting for me, those from Dolores, Carhué, Chaco are asking for us, and I will please them all by running away!" (8 July 1877). He returned to attend the 1st General Chapter of the Salesian Society to be

held in Lanzo Torinese in September. Among other things, he was always a member of the Congregation's Superior Chapter, where he held the important position of Catechist General (he was number three in the Congregation, after Don Bosco and Fr Rua).

1877 closed with the third expedition of 26 missionaries led by Fr Giacomo Costamagna and with Don Bosco's new request to the Holy See for a Prefecture at Carhué and a Vicariate at Santa Cruz. Yet, to tell the truth, in the whole year the direct evangelisation of the Salesians outside the city had been limited to the brief experience of Fr Cagliero and cleric Evasio Rabagliati in the Italian colony at Villa Libertad, near Entre Ríos (April 1877) on the borders of the Diocese of Paranà, as well as some excursions to the Salesian camp in St. Nicolas de los Arroyos.

The dream is realised (1880)

In May 1878 the first attempt to reach Carhué by Fr Costamagna and the cleric Rabagliati failed because of a storm (they were travelling by sea). But in the meantime Don Bosco had already resumed his efforts with the new Prefect of Propaganda Fide, Cardinal Giovanni Simeoni, proposing a Vicariate or Prefecture based in Carmen, as Fr Fagnano himself had suggested, which he saw as a strategic point to reach the natives.

The following year (1879), just as a plan for the Salesians to enter Paraguay was eventuating, the doors of Patagonia were finally opened to them. In April in fact, General Julio A. Roca started the famous "desert campaign" with the aim of subduing the Indians and obtaining internal security, pushing them back beyond the Río Negro and Neuquén rivers. It was the "coup de grace" in their extermination, after the numerous massacres of the previous year.

The Vicar General of Buenos Aires, Monsignor Espinosa, as chaplain to an army of six thousand men, was accompanied by the Argentinean cleric Luigi Botta and Fr Costamagna. The future bishop immediately realised the ambiguity of their position, immediately wrote to Don Bosco, but saw no other way to open the road to Patagonia to the Salesian missionaries. And indeed, as soon as the government asked the archbishop to establish some missions on the banks of the Río Negro and in Patagonia, the Salesians were immediately thought of.

The Salesians, for their part, had the intention of asking the government for a ten-year concession of a territory administered by them in which to construct, with materials paid for by the government and with labour from the Indians, the buildings necessary for a sort of *reducción* in that territory: the poor would avoid the contamination of the "corrupt and vicious" Christian settlers and the missionaries would plant the cross of Christ and the Argentine flag there. But Salesian Provincial

Fr Francis Bodrato did not feel like deciding on his own, and Fr Lasagna advised against it in May on the grounds that the Avellaneda government was at the end of its term and was not interested in the religious problem. It was therefore better to preserve Salesian independence and freedom of action.

On 15 August 1879 Archbishop Aneiros formally offered Don Bosco the Patagonian mission: “The moment has finally arrived, in which I can offer you the Patagonian Mission, for which your heart has so longed, as the care of souls among the Patagonians, which can serve as a centre for the mission.”

Don Bosco accepted it immediately and willingly, even though it was not yet the longed-for consent to the erection of ecclesiastical circumscriptions autonomous from the Archdiocese of Buenos Aires, a reality constantly opposed by the diocesan Ordinary.

The departure

The group of missionaries left for the longed-for Patagonia on 15 January 1880: it was made up of Fr Giuseppe Fagnano, director of the Mission and parish priest in Carmen de Patagónes (the Lazarist Father had retired), two priests, one of whom was in charge of the parish of Viedma on the other bank of the Río Negro, a lay Salesian (Brother) and four Sisters. In December, Fr Dominic Milanesio arrived to help out, and a few months later Fr Joseph Beauvoir arrived with another novice Brother. The Salesian missionary epic in Patagonia was beginning.