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From Croatia to Ethiopia: don Bosco's missionary dream continues

Testimony of Josip Ivan SOLDO sdb, a Croatian Don Bosco missionary sent to Ethiopia among the members of the 151st missionary expedition. The missionary call arises within the Salesian vocation as an invitation to go out and go wherever the Lord calls us.

My name is Josip SOLDO, I am a Croatian Salesian born in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Let me begin by saying that my family has always played an important role in my life: I have three brothers and two sisters, one of whom is my twin sister. I am very proud of my sixteen grandnephews and nieces; my mother Veronica is still alive while my father died in 2006.

If I look back in the story of my vocation, I can say that from a very young age I felt the desire to become a priest. I was already an altar boy at the age of five and I kept up this service until middle school. As a teenager, however, I drifted away from the Church, keeping only the tradition of going to Mass on Sundays and going to confession, but without any real interest or involvement.

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Around the age of 24-25 my conversion began. At that time I worked in a fast-food company and felt the need to reconnect with God, reading the Bible in my breaks from work. The Word of God slowly filtered into my heart and I felt confused. I was a 'normal' young man who loved going to discos, going out with friends and having fun with them, getting girls to notice me, hoping one day to find my soul mate. Meeting a Salesian priest changed my life and I made the decision to deepen my understanding of Don Bosco's charism with the desire to one day become a Salesian priest. For two years I was in the pre-novitiate community; I needed to really get to know Don Bosco because the Salesians had no community where I lived. Suffice it to say that in my village they asked me if the Salesians were part of the Catholic Church, thinking they were a sect instead. The idea of helping poor young people, educating them for a better life and bringing them closer to Christ immediately fascinated me.

In 2016 I moved to Italy, to Rome where I stayed for three years, first in the novitiate in Genzano, where I took my first vows as a religious on 8 September 2017, and then in the Community of San Tarcisio to study philosophy at the Pontifical Salesian University. Inside me I felt a strong desire to go further, to go far, but I was not yet mature enough to make a serious and difficult decision such as missionary life. When I returned to Croatia for my internship, I realised that my doubts, uncertainties, fears, not feeling up to it, or inexperience could not stop me from being willing to become a missionary. God works through us even when we are not aware and we cannot rely solely on our own, limited, human strength, He uses our weaknesses, our little nuances to show His greatness. Many times it had happened to me that I had prepared well for meetings with the young people and then they often remembered nothing of the meeting, but they would tell me how significant for them were the things said in informal moments, which I often did not even realise. I understood that God does not need superheroes but “useless servants” who have in their hearts the desire to serve Him, and so I wrote my application to the Rector Major to be a Salesian missionary, *ad gentes*. In the very year that the Covid pandemic started, I received the answer from the Generalate: missionary with destination Ethiopia! The first step was to learn patience amidst the limitations due to the health situation and the slowness of the bureaucracy to obtain the necessary documents. In the meantime, I did my practical training in the communities in Split and Zagreb, two different experiences which gave me the opportunity to get to know many saintly confreres and young people who showed me the face and voice of God.

Finally, at the beginning of September last year, I arrived in Ethiopia! At the “Bosco Children” in Addis Ababa I was able to be among the boys: many of them come from the street. The Salesians give them a second chance by welcoming them into the centre. There are young refugees, boys who have had to flee their cities or their homes, while others were born and have always lived on the street. We Salesians offer them the chance to have a new life, through education, housing and all that is necessary for a life worthy of a human being. The boys who enter the Bosco Children programme live there for two to three years until they are ready to be reintegrated into their family or society. Another service I performed this year was building the website (boscochildren.com), with the help and support of some good confreres from Croatia and the Croatian youth movement called Nova Eva. Having had experience as a cook in the past, it was suggested that I bake bread with the young people: every day we baked bread for the whole centre and community, with

the dream of one day opening a real bakery with jobs and training courses. For the rest, our centre is a 'Valdocco in Addis Ababa': a farm with rabbits, chickens and cows, school for auto mechanics, carpentry, metalworkers, electricians, cooking, tailoring... everything to educate our boys and prepare them for life.



The culture shock for me was quite strong: the different food, a language that I could not learn straight away, the customs of a new culture... I experienced many emotions, I felt nervous and often wanted to isolate myself.

I have to thank the Congregation's Missions Sector for the missionary training course that has just ended because it was an opportunity to name these shocks, to see that other missionaries also experience the same challenges and that the process of inculturation is not easy. In spite of the difficulties, I feel in my heart a strong desire to go forward and urge myself to overcome myself. With time I know that I will understand that in missionary life the Lord does not ask for much - "He asks for everything" to give you everything.

My formation towards the priesthood continues by beginning my studies in theology, before returning to the mission. Surely there will be new challenges, but there will also be the joy of being where the Lord wants me, the fullness of knowing that what I am doing is God's will. Now I feel that there is nothing that can fill your heart as the Lord does when you are there where He wants you, when you know that your life finds fullness of meaning in His Divine plan, and the hope that He will never leave your hands until heaven, where I hope to be one day together with many brothers and sisters.



Interviewer: Marco FULGARO