 Reading time: 6 min.

Don Bosco's missionary dreams, without anticipating the course of future events, had the flavour of being predictions for the Salesians.

The missionary dreams of 1870-1871 and especially those of the 1880s also contributed in no small part to Don Bosco's attention to the missionary problem. While in 1885 he invited Bishop Giovanni Cagliero to be prudent: "do not pay much attention to dreams" unless "they are morally useful", Cagliero himself, who left as head of the first missionary expedition (1875) and future cardinal, considered them to be mere ideals to be pursued. Other Salesians, on the other hand, and above all Fr Giacomo Costamagna, missionary of the third expedition (1877) and future provincial and bishop, understood them to be a series of steps to be taken almost almost compulsorily, so much so that he asked Don Bosco's secretary, Fr Giovanni Battitsta Lemoyne, to send him the "necessary" updates. In turn, Fr Giuseppe Fagnano, also one of the first missionaries and future Prefect Apostolic, saw them as the expression of a desire of the whole Congregation, therefore the Congregation had to feel responsible for carrying them out by finding the means and personnel. Lastly, Fr Luigi Lasagna, a missionary who left with the second expedition in 1876, and also a future bishop, saw them as a key to knowing the future Salesian in mission. Later, Fr Alberto Maria De Agostini, in the first half of the 20th century, would personally embark on dangerous and countless excursions to South America in the wake of Don Bosco's dreams.

However they may be understood today, the fact remains that Don Bosco's missionary dreams, although they did not anticipate the course of future events, had the flavour of predictions for the Salesians. Given that they were devoid of symbolic and allegorical meanings and instead were rich in anthropological, geographic, economic and environmental references (one speaks of tunnels, trains, planes…) they were an incentive for the Salesian missionaries to act, all the more so since their actual realisation could have been verified. In other words, missionary dreams guided history and outlined a programme of missionary work for the Salesian society.

The call (1875): an immediately revised project

In the 1870s, a remarkable attempt at evangelisation was underway in Latin America, thanks above all to the religious, despite the strong tensions between the Church and the individual liberal states. Through contacts with the Argentine consul

in Savona, Giovanni Battista Gazzolo, Don Bosco in December 1874 offered to provide priests for the *Misericordia Church* (the church of the Italians) in Buenos Aires, as requested by the Vicar General of Buenos Aires Monsignor Mariano Antonio Espinosa, and accepted the invitation of a Commission interested in a boarding school in San Nicolás de los Arroyos, 240 km north west of the Argentine capital. In fact, the Salesian society – which at the time also included the female branch of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians – had as its first objective the care of poor youth (with catechism, schools, boarding schools, hospices, festive oratories), but did not exclude extending its services to all kinds of sacred ministries. So at that end of 1874 Don Bosco was offering nothing more than what was already being done in Italy. Besides, the Salesian Constitutions, finally approved in the previous April, just when negotiations for Salesian foundations in non-European "mission lands" had been going on for years, contained no mention of possible *missiones ad gentes*.

Things changed in the space of a few months. On 28 January 1875 in an address to the rectors, and the following day to the whole Salesian community, including the boys, Don Bosco announced that the two aforementioned requests in Argentina had been accepted, after requests in other continents had been refused. He also reported that "the Missions in South America" (which no one had actually offered precisely in those terms) had been accepted on the conditions requested, subject only to the pope's approval. Don Bosco with a master stroke thus presented to Salesians and young people an exciting "missionary project" approved by Pius IX.

A feverish preparation for the missionary expedition immediately began. On 5 February his circular letter invited the Salesians to offer themselves freely for such missions, where, apart from a few civilised areas, they would exercise their ministry among "savage peoples scattered over immense territories." Even if he had identified Patagonia as the land of his first missionary dream – where cruel savages from unknown areas killed missionaries and instead welcomed Salesian ones – such a plan to evangelise "savages" went far beyond the requests received from America. The archbishop of Buenos Aires, Federico Aneiros, was certainly not aware of this, at least at the time.

Don Bosco proceeded with determination to organise the expedition. On 31 August he communicated to the Prefect of Propaganda Fide, Cardinal Alessandro Franchi, that he had accepted the running of the college of S. Nicolás as "a base for the missions" and therefore asked for the spiritual faculties usually granted in such cases. He received some of them, but did not receive any of the financial grants he had hoped for because Argentina did not depend on the Congregation of Propaganda Fide, since with one archbishop and four bishops it was not considered

to be a “mission land”. And Patagonia? What about Tierra del Fuego? And the tens and tens of thousands of Indians living there, two, three thousand kilometres away “at the end of the world”, without any missionary presence?

At Valdocco, in the church of Mary Help of Christians, during the famous farewell ceremony for missionaries on 11 November, Don Bosco dwelt on the universal mission of salvation given by the Lord to the Apostles and therefore to the Church. He spoke of the shortage of priests in Argentina, of the families of emigrants who had subscribed and of the missionary work among the “great hordes of savages” in the Pampas and in Patagonia, regions “surrounding the civilised part” where “neither the religion of Jesus Christ, nor civilisation, nor commerce has yet penetrated, where European feet have so far left no traces.”

Pastoral work for the Italian emigrants and then *plantatio ecclesiae* in Patagonia: this was the original twofold objective that Don Bosco left to the first expedition. (Strangely enough, however, he made no mention of the two precise places of work agreed upon on the other side of the Atlantic). A few months later, in April 1876, he would insist with Fr Cagliero that “our aim is ultimately to attempt an expedition to Patagonia […] always taking as our base the establishment of colleges and hospices […] in the vicinity of the savage tribes.” He would repeat this on 1 August: “In general, always remember that God wants our efforts towards the Pampas and the Patagonian people, and towards the poor and abandoned children.”

In Genoa, on embarking, he gave each of the ten missionaries – including five priests – twenty special *reminders*. We reproduce them:

REMINDERS FOR THE MISSIONARIES

1. Seek souls and not money, honours or dignities.
2. Ne charitable and most courteous towards all, but avoid conversation and familiarity with persons of the opposite sex or with persons whose conduct is open to suspicion.
3. Do not go visiting, except for motives of charity and necessity.
4. Do not accept invitations to dinner except for grave reasons. In such cases ensure that a confrere accompanies you.
5. Take special care of the sick, of the young, of the old and the poor, and you will win the blessing of God and the goodwill of men.
6. Show respect to all persons in authority whether civil or religious.
7. On meeting a person in authority, take care to greet him with all due respect.
8. Do the same towards ecclesiastics or persons belonging to religious institutes.

9. Shun idleness and disputes. And observe great moderation in eating, drinking and sleeping.
10. Love, reverence and respect other Religious Orders and always speak well of them. In this way you will be esteemed by all and will promote the good of the Congregation.
11. Take care of your health. Work well, but only do as much as your strength allows.
12. Let the world know that you are poor in clothing, food and abode, and you will be rich in the sight of God and win the hearts of men.
13. Love one another, advise one another, correct one another, and do not be carried away by either envy or rancour, but let the good of one be the good of all; and let the troubles and sufferings of one be regarded as the troubles and sufferings of all, and let each one strive to banish or at least to mitigate the sorrows of others.
14. Observe your Rules, and never forget the monthly Exercise for a Happy Death.
15. Every morning commend to God the occupations of the day , especially confessions, lessons, religious instructions and sermons.
16. Constantly promote devotion to Mary Help of Christians and to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament.
17. Recommend to the boys frequent Confession and Communion.
18. In order to cultivate ecclesiastical vocations, constantly inculcate 1. love of chastity, 2. horror of the opposite vice, 3. avoidance of bad companions, 4. frequent communion, 5. always be charitable, gentle and kind.
19. Hear both sides before making up your mind regarding reports and matters in dispute.
20. In time of fatigue and suffering, do not forget that we have a great reward prepared for us in heaven.
Amen.