 Reading time: 5 min.

As preparations get under way for the 158th Salesian Missionary Expedition, the Rector Major, Fr Fabio Attard, addresses a renewed appeal to the entire Congregation for missionary availability “ad gentes – ad vitam”. Drawing on the experience of Don Bosco and his first missionaries, he invites confreres, especially younger Salesians, to discern God’s call and respond with generosity and courage. Faced with new forms of poverty, the challenges of evangelisation and the needs of missionary frontiers, he emphasises the importance of the missionary dimension as an essential element of the Salesian charism and a source of spiritual vitality, apostolic fruitfulness and new vocations.

Dear confreres,

Please accept our warm and affectionate greetings from the Basilica of the Sacred Heart in Rome, where the members of the General Council are currently gathered.

We still vividly recall the celebrations marking the 150th anniversary of the first missionary expedition sent out from the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians in Turin. Since the first dispatch, more than ten thousand Salesians have left their homelands to bring the joy of the Gospel to young people across the many continents. That humble beginning, when the Congregation was still fragile and had only a few confreres, has grown into a tree whose branches now extend across 137 countries. It all began in Don Bosco’s missionary heart: a heart passionate about the salvation of young people, sustained by faith, full of trust in Divine Providence and entrusted to the maternal guidance of Mary Help of Christians. That same heart continues to beat within the Congregation. Today it is up to us to listen to where it is leading us and inviting us to take new steps.

1. **Learning to see with the eyes and heart of Don Bosco**

From the Becchi, Chieri and Valdocco, Don Bosco’s vocation gradually revealed its missionary horizons. His way of looking at reality had a great deal to do with this. Encouraged by Father Cafasso, he went out to meet young people on the streets, in prisons and in the workplaces around Turin. Like Jesus, he looked upon them with compassion. He was deeply moved. He wept. He allowed their suffering to move him and, because of this, set to work with them and for them.

From that gaze sprang the oratory, the college-boarding school, the day school and vocational training workshops. His five missionary dreams expressed the universal dimension of that same vocation: to educate and evangelise young people throughout the world, coming from all peoples and cultures. Even today, the mission begins when we allow ourselves to be challenged by reality. Thousands of young people today are waiting for a supportive presence, an opportunity, a word of hope. Do we dare to look at them through the eyes of Don Bosco and allow ourselves to be transformed by that encounter?

2. **A personal vocation and a lifelong commitment**

Today I wish to issue a call to the whole Congregation: the willingness to go out on mission is a true call from God, a personal vocation, a free and prayerful response to God. We cannot reduce it to an administrative measure to meet the personnel needs of other provinces.

Article 30 of our Constitutions recognises missionary work as an ‘essential feature of our Congregation’. To lose this spirit would mean losing something vital to our very soul. The 29th General Chapter invites us to renew it in the face of new forms of poverty and emerging frontiers. The ‘*ad gentes*’ dimension of the missionary vocation directs us towards those who do not yet know Jesus Christ; the ‘*ad exteros*’ makes us ready to leave our homeland and our cultural environment, and to set aside our securities and comfortable life; the ‘*ad vitam*’ expresses the willingness to give our whole life, once and for all, putting down roots among the people to whom we are sent. This willingness comes to maturity through discernment and requires preparation, language learning, inculturation and accompaniment, even after we

have been sent out.

If Don Bosco and his first missionaries had waited until they had every guarantee, our history would have been very different. Their boldness and their trust in God opened up paths that we continue to follow.

At the meeting with the General Council on 19 December 2025, Pope Leo XIV asked us for that same boldness to go to the most challenging places, where no one else wants to go – to the apostolic vicariates and frontiers where Christ awaits to be proclaimed. He asked us to maintain the priority of the initial proclamation amongst peoples and young people who do not yet know him, while at the same time responding creatively to the need for a renewed evangelisation in lands of ancient Christian tradition, which today lie ‘asleep in the faith’; and to seek ways to evangelise other contexts marked by secularisation, indifference and digital saturation, where young people need witnesses capable of communicating hope and rekindling the faith.

This commitment concerns us all. Missionary generosity is a barometer of the spiritual vitality of our provinces and educative and pastoral communities: sending these confreres out on mission expresses our trust in God, renews the fruitfulness of our charism and attracts new vocations.

3. **Being present on the new frontiers**

Many young people bear the scars of war, forced migration, the ecological crisis and exclusion. Pope Francis warned that, having grown up in a ‘world in ashes’, they find it difficult to dream and to hold on to great hopes and plans (cf. *Christus Vivit*, 216). In so many mission countries there is a concentration of suffering. That suffering has specific faces: displaced young people who have lost their homes; teenagers scarred by hatred and violence; young people without access to education or work; boys and girls living on the streets or suffering all kinds of exploitation. It also has the face of so many young people who live ‘hyper-

connected’ lives and yet feel lonely, spiritually abandoned or without reasons to hope.

There we are called to make God’s love present through our closeness, our education and the proclamation of Jesus Christ. The Preventive System and our educational-pastoral approach in mission lands can open a door to trust and help young people discover that their lives are valuable and loved. The Church grows ‘by attraction’ (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 14): the joyful witness of those who have encountered Christ makes the Gospel credible. A fraternal community, which welcomes and accompanies, can kindle hope where everything seemed to have been extinguished and lost.

4. **A step towards the 158th Missionary Expedition**

I ask all provincials and Mission Animation delegates to foster this openness with courage and to carefully accompany the discernment of the confreres who feel this call. Every confrere who expresses a missionary calling deserves to be listened to and accompanied in his process of discernment.

To you, young Salesians, I extend a personal invitation: make room in your prayer for this question: ‘Lord, are you calling me to offer my life in the missions *ad gentes-ad vitam*?’ If you feel this calling, do not be afraid. Open your heart to the Lord who calls; share it with your spiritual director and your provincial, and take a concrete step towards presenting your willingness to the Rector Major.

For the forthcoming 158th Missionary Expedition, I propose the following priority destinations and areas of presence:

Africa: North Africa (CNA: Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco); Southern Africa (AFM: South Africa, Lesotho and Eswatini); West Africa (AON and AOS); Mozambique (MOZ); and Niger (ANN).

South America: Uruguay (URU); Argentina (ARS and ARN); Chile (CIL); and Bolivia (BOL).

Europe and presences linked to European provinces: Ancona and Genoa (ICC); Romania and Moldova (INE); Albania, Kosovo and Montenegro (IME); Greece (SLO); and Turkey (GER).

Middle East: Syria, Lebanon, Israel and Egypt (MOR).

Asia and Oceania: Mongolia (KOR); Pakistan (RMG); Bangladesh (INC); Cambodia (THA); Vanuatu (PGS); and Japan (GIA).

Apostolic Vicariates: Gambella (Ethiopia); Pucallpa (Peru); and Puerto Ayacucho (Venezuela).

Behind every missionary destination there are young people and communities waiting for us. Perhaps in one of these places the Lord is preparing a special path for your commitment. ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few’ (Lk 10:2). Let us not be afraid: the Lord who calls also grants the grace, the strength and the joy to respond.

I entrust this call to Mary Help of Christians, our Mother and Guide, Star of Evangelisation. May she teach us to listen and to set out on our journey, so that our beloved Congregation may continue to breathe with missionary vigour and every confrere may rediscover the joy of being sent forth.

Dear confreres: take this invitation into your prayers. Perhaps the Lord is also waiting for your ‘here I am’.

With fraternal affection and my blessing,

Prot. 26/0419 Rome, 14 November 2026

Fr Fabio ATTARD SDB

Rector Major