

Missionary experience in Peru

Interview with José Gallego Vázquez, Salesian Brother, who after many years of service in his homeland left it to go on mission, meeting many needs.

1. Who are you and how did the missions in Peru come about?

Hello, I am Salesian Brother José Gallego Vázquez. I was born 54 years ago in Vigo, Spain. I worked in several houses in the former Province of Santiago el Mayor de León for 22 years, before leaving as a missionary to Peru in 2010.

The Salesians arrived in Peru in 1891 and run an oratory in the Rímac neighbourhood of Lima, where they teach classes, prepare the sacraments and play with children.

2. What do the Salesians do in Peru?

We serve three missionary areas in the jungle, as well as schools, shelters, oratories and youth centres, vocational schools, parishes, Salesian Family groups and other pastoral and welfare activities.

3. Challenges of missionary life?

I have been working for more than seven years in the Amazon Mission of San Lorenzo, which has a population of 11,000 and is located on the banks of the Marañón river, in the Loreto region. I am responsible for the Oratories and the Youth Centre. We run five oratories once a week (one oratory two days a week) and a youth centre from Tuesday to Saturday evenings. The oratories and youth centre are attended by 430 children and older youth per week. We have moments of human formation (talks with city institutions, civic values, etc.), Christian formation, goodnights, sports, championships, Salesian evenings, conviviality, workshops (dance, football, handicrafts, ecology, etc.).

The children and older youth we serve come from low or very low-income families, from large families and with unmarried

parents who often come from other households.



Since 2016, we also run a vocational training centre, specialising in carpentry, agriculture and animal husbandry and motor mechanics. This centre is aimed at the indigenous people of the province. We have a residence five hours away from the mission, in a small indigenous community. We take care of up to 50 young men and women. They are also given a human and Christian formation and, those who request it, are prepared for the sacraments.

4. What can you say about community visits and your travels?

The missionary community covers an area of about 30,000 square kilometres, where we assist three parishes and about 130 indigenous and mestizo communities. It is an itinerant missionary community; the rivers are our meeting places with the mestizos and indigenous people, as we serve up to seven native peoples (Shawi, Kandozi, Chapra, Kocama, Aguajun, Achuar and Wampis). Their welcome is always good, expected and desired, nourished by our desire to say Mass, receive a word from the priest or Salesian brother. We would like to reach them more often, but distances, the cost of travel and the lack of missionaries make it very difficult to assist and accompany our brothers and sisters. This is why I encourage those who read these lines to lend a hand for a while, to help support these missions with resources, and to sensitise everyone to pray to the Lord for our recipients, the missionaries and the new native vocations.

5. Your personal experience as a missionary.

Meeting the missionaries, walking through the jungle, eating like the people, sleeping in their homes, living with them and learning so much from them, one gradually learns to appreciate them, to relativise so many things in the world, to appreciate and value life with a different way of managing time and the

environment. I greatly appreciate the balance in which they live in contact with nature, which they feel and experience as part of them, forming a whole, when they hunt, when they fish, when they gather in the fields or orchards, when they have their wayús or masato moments, or in community assemblies to regulate community life.

One also learns and appreciates how the Christian leaders of the communities, many fathers and mothers of families, animate the Christian life of their community with the celebration of the Word on Sundays, the preparation of the sacraments for children and adults, etc. Some of them have been there for 30, 40 or more years. This is a generous example and testimony of perseverance and vocation to service to help keep the faith of the Christian community alive.

6. What process is followed for young people interested in religious life?

My final words are to reflect on the vocational dimension in these mission lands. We see that there are young men with vocational concerns, who express the desire to become priests or religious. Accompaniment with a formation plan and overall planning is fundamental to help them in their discernment in these first moments of restlessness and search. Pastoral activity and involvement will help them, in their responsible performance, to mature in their lives as persons and as committed Christians, before taking other steps. All this will bear fruit if the entire missionary community is involved in this journey, contributing and facilitating the approach and living together with the young person. This is why it is so important to be open, welcoming communities that invite and share life and mission with them.



This process comes before sending them to the provincial vocational meeting, which is organised every year, to continue

the process in another Salesian house, either as a volunteer or as an aspirant or pre-novice. It is a personalised, slow and patient process.

In thanking José Gallego Vázquez for his service to those most in need, we pray that the Lord will raise up more vocations for the Salesian missions, remembering that God blesses this generosity with many more vocations. And let us remember that even if prayer is essential, we must also do our part, as Don Bosco used to say: “speak often of vocations, talk a lot about the missions, have the letters of the missionaries read” ([MB XIII,86](#)).

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