 Reading time: 5 min.

Missionary volunteering is an experience that profoundly transforms the lives of young people. In Mexico, the Salesian Province of Guadalajara has for decades developed an organic path of Salesian Missionary Volunteering (SMV) that continues to have a lasting impact on the hearts of many young men and women. Thanks to the reflections of Margarita Aguilar, coordinator of missionary volunteering in Guadalajara, we will share the journey regarding the origins, evolution, formation phases, and motivations that drive young people to get involved in serving communities in Mexico.

Origins

Volunteering, understood as a commitment to others born from the need to help one's neighbour both socially and spiritually, strengthened over time with the contribution of governments and NGOs to raise awareness on issues of health, education, religion, the environment, and more. In the Salesian Congregation, the voluntary spirit has been present since its origins. Mamma Margherita, alongside Don Bosco, was among the first "volunteers" in the Oratory, committing herself to assisting young people to fulfil God's will and contribute to the salvation of their souls. Already the XXII General Chapter (1984) began to speak explicitly of volunteering, and subsequent chapters insisted on this commitment as an inseparable dimension of the Salesian mission.

In Mexico, the Salesians are divided into two Provinces: Mexico City (MEM) and Guadalajara (MEG). It is precisely in the latter that, starting from the mid-1980s, a youth volunteer project was structured. The Province of Guadalajara, founded 62 years ago, has for almost 40 years offered young people eager to experience the Salesian charism the opportunity to dedicate a period of their lives to serving communities, especially in border areas.

On 24 October 1987, the Provincial sent a group of four young people together with Salesians to the city of Tijuana, in a rapidly expanding Salesian border area. This marked the beginning of Salesian Youth Volunteering (SYV), which gradually developed and became increasingly structured.

The initial objective was proposed to young people around 20 years old, available to dedicate one to two years to build the first oratories in the communities of Tijuana,

Ciudad Juárez, Los Mochis, and other locations in the north. Many remember the early days: shovel and hammer in hand, living together in simple houses with other volunteers, afternoons spent with children, adolescents, and young people from the neighbourhood playing on the land where the oratory would be built. Sometimes the roof was missing, but there was no lack of joy, a sense of family, and encounter with the Eucharist.

Those first communities of Salesians and volunteers brought in their hearts love for God, for Mary Help of Christians, and for Don Bosco, demonstrating a pioneering spirit, missionary ardour, and total care for others.

Evolution

As the Province and Youth Ministry grew, the need for clear formation itineraries for volunteers emerged. The organisation was strengthened through:

Application questionnaire: each aspiring volunteer filled out a form and answered a questionnaire that outlined their human, spiritual, and Salesian characteristics, initiating the personal growth process.

Initial formation course: theatre workshops, games and group dynamics, catechesis and practical tools for field activities. Before leaving, volunteers met to conclude their formation and receive their assignment to Salesian communities.

Spiritual accompaniment: the candidate was invited to be accompanied by a Salesian in their community of origin. For a period, the preparation was carried out together with Salesian Aspirants, strengthening the vocational aspect, although this practice later underwent changes based on the vocational animation of the Province.

Annual provincial meeting: every December, near International Volunteer Day (5 December), volunteers meet to evaluate the experience, reflect on each person’s journey, and consolidate the accompaniment processes.

Visits to the communities: the coordination team regularly visits the communities where volunteers work, to support not only the young people themselves, but also Salesians and lay people of the educational-pastoral community, strengthening support networks.

Personal life project: each candidate develops, with the help of the spiritual guide, a

life project that helps to integrate the human, Christian, Salesian, vocational, and missionary dimensions. A minimum preparation period of six months is foreseen, with online moments dedicated to the various dimensions.

Family involvement: informative meetings with parents on the SYV processes, to help them understand the path and strengthen family support.

Continuous formation during the experience: each month a dimension (human, spiritual, apostolic, etc.) is addressed through reading materials, reflection, and in-depth work in progress.

Post-volunteering: after the conclusion of the experience, a closing meeting is organised to evaluate the experience, plan the next steps, and accompany the volunteer in reintegration into their community of origin and family, with in-person and online phases.

New stages and renewals

Recently, the experience has taken the name of Salesian Missionary Volunteering (SMV), in line with the Congregation's emphasis on the spiritual and missionary dimension. Some new features introduced:

Short pre-volunteering: during school holidays (December-January, Holy Week and Easter, and especially summer) young people can experience community life and service commitment for short periods, to get a first "taste" of the experience.

Formation for international experience: a specific process has been established to prepare volunteers to live the experience outside national borders.

Greater emphasis on spiritual accompaniment: no longer just "sending to work", but placing the encounter with God at the centre, so that the volunteer discovers their vocation and mission.

As Margarita Aguilar, SMV coordinator in Guadalajara, points out, "A volunteer needs to have empty hands to be able to embrace their mission with faith and hope in God."

Motivations of young people

At the heart of the SMV experience is always the question, “What is your motivation to become a volunteer?” Three main groups can be identified:

Operative/practical motivation: those who believe they will carry out concrete activities related to their skills (teaching in a school, serving in a canteen, animating an oratory). They often discover that volunteering is not just manual or didactic work and may be disappointed if they expected a merely instrumental experience.

Motivation related to the Salesian charism: former beneficiaries of Salesian work who wish to deepen and live the charism more fully, imagining an intense experience like a long festive meeting of the Salesian Youth Movement, but for a prolonged period.

Spiritual motivation: those who intend to share their experience of God and discover Him in others. Sometimes, however, this “fidelity” is conditioned by expectations (e.g. “yes, but only in this community” or “yes, but if I can return for a family event”), and it is necessary to help the volunteer mature their “yes” freely and generously.

Three key elements of SMV

The Salesian Missionary Volunteering experience is based on three fundamental dimensions:

Spiritual life: God is the centre. Without prayer, sacraments, and listening to the Spirit, the experience risks being reduced to a simple operational commitment, tiring the volunteer to the point of abandonment.

Community life: communion with the Salesians and with other members of the community strengthens the volunteer’s presence among children, adolescents, and young people. Without community, there is no support in times of difficulty nor context to grow together.

Apostolic life: joyful witness and affectionate presence among young people evangelises more than any formal activity. It is not just about “doing”, but about “being” salt and light in everyday life.

To fully live these three dimensions, an integral formation path is needed that accompanies the volunteer from beginning to end, embracing every aspect of the person (human, spiritual, vocational) according to Salesian pedagogy and the missionary mandate.

The role of the host community

The volunteer, to be an authentic instrument of evangelisation, needs a community that supports them, be an example and guide. Likewise, the community welcomes the volunteer to integrate them, supporting them in moments of fragility and helping them to free themselves from ties that hinder total dedication. As Margarita highlights, “God has called us to be salt and light of the Earth and many of our volunteers have found the courage to take a plane leaving behind family, friends, culture, their way of life to choose this lifestyle focused on being missionaries.”

The community offers spaces for discussion, common prayer, practical and emotional accompaniment, so that the volunteer can remain firm in their choice and bear fruit in service.

The history of Salesian missionary volunteering in Guadalajara is an example of how an experience can grow, structure, and renew itself by learning from mistakes and successes. By always placing the young person’s deep motivation, the spiritual and community dimension at the centre, a path capable of transforming, not only the realities served, but also the lives of the volunteers themselves, is offered. Margarita Aguilar tells us, “A volunteer needs to have empty hands to be able to embrace their mission with faith and hope in God.”

We thank Margarita for her valuable reflections. Her testimony reminds us that missionary volunteering is not a mere service, but a journey of faith and growth that touches the lives of young people and communities, renewing hope and the desire to give oneself for the love of God and neighbour.