

□ Reading time: 6 min.

On 13 December 2025, three Salesian missionaries landed in Vanuatu, an archipelago of 83 islands in the south-western Pacific. It is the 137th Country where the Congregation is taking root. Fr. Alfred Maravilla, Fr. Moïse Paluku, and Brother Paulus Bataona arrived without facilities, without resources, without anyone knowing the name of Don Bosco. They embraced the logic of smallness, like the travelling oratory of the early days: listening, observing, understanding the young people and their needs. Eight months later, the first fruits are surprising: six aspiring Salesian Cooperators, a procession of Mary Help of Christians more crowded than expected, an oratory that is being born. Thus, the dream that Don Bosco had in 1885 is fulfilled: from the islands of Oceania, a multitude of young people still cries out, "Come and help us!"

Vanuatu is an archipelago of 83 islands in the south-western Pacific, east of Australia and north of New Zealand. This Melanesian country, an independent republic since 1980, has an area of 12,200 km² and a population of about 375,000 inhabitants. Christianity is the most widespread religion: the majority is Presbyterian (31%), while Catholics and Anglicans each represent 13% of the population. The others belong to various Christian denominations; a very small minority is Muslim.

The invitation to the Salesians dates back to 2018 and came from the local bishop, Mgr. John Bosco Baremes, a Marist. In his letter to the Rector Major, Fr. Ángel Fernández Artime, he wrote: "I invite the Salesians, not because I bear the same name as your Founder, but because I believe that Don Bosco's charism is deeply needed for our islands...". After numerous exploratory visits, Fr. Ángel Fernández Artime accepted the invitation to open a new presence.

Starting from scratch, with the logic of smallness

We arrived with practically very little. We knew no one, the name of Don Bosco was unknown, and we had to start from scratch, introducing ourselves to the local Church and to ordinary people. As pioneers, we embraced the logic of smallness. We had no resources, facilities or any social presence in the Country. But, trusting in the words of the Lord – “Do not be afraid, little flock” (Lk 12:32) – we carried Don Bosco’s missionary zeal in our hearts. Animated by his passion for the young, we live with a confident hope, rooted in faith and in union with God, certain that Don Bosco’s charism will grow and bear abundant fruit in this land of Oceania.

We arrived as preparations were underway to celebrate Christmas. The liturgical season reminded us that precisely in the smallness and humility of the Child of Bethlehem lies the greatness of our salvation. In the same way, in the humility of our new presence, God makes Himself present in the lives of the people. Indeed, God was already here, even before our arrival!

For me this mission is a new experience. Already in 1985, I had been part of the first group of Salesians who started the presence in Port Moresby, in Papua New Guinea. I was a young Salesian in the period of practical training, and it was a beautiful experience, because my main task was to be among the young people. Leading a group of pioneers today, however, is something completely different. I consider it a great challenge and an even greater responsibility: laying the foundations for the future development of Don Bosco’s work and spirit in a new Country. Being pioneers is certainly a privilege, but the responsibility that comes with it is even greater.

Listening, observing, understanding

During the first few months our main objective was to listen, observe, and understand the local pastoral reality, the situation and the needs of the young people. We hope to open an oratory soon, even if for now we have neither facilities nor animators. We only have an old soccer field and a basketball court in poor condition. We are like Don Bosco’s travelling oratory; we are starting from nothing.

Little by little, we have gathered some young leaders and we are forming them to become animators. We also count on the support of friends and all people of good will, so that our oratory can be born and grow.

With a view to launching a Salesian educational project in Vanuatu, we have undertaken an initial planning process to better understand the reality and aspirations of the Country's young people and to identify the most effective educational responses to their needs. The process is divided into four phases.

The first phase was dedicated to careful listening, research and discussion on the current situation of young people in Vanuatu, with particular attention to the challenges in the social, educational, and employment sectors. This preliminary study offered us valuable insights into the opportunities and needs of today's youth.

The second phase focused on community discernment, guided by the charism of Don Bosco, who educates and evangelises the young, especially the neediest. We reflected together on the possible directions of the mission and explored concrete ways to respond to local realities.

The third phase led to the elaboration of some decisions and proposals for the future. The community reaffirmed its commitment to offering quality education and formation, capable of preparing young people for meaningful entry into the world of work and the responsible exercise of citizenship. Priority areas include post-secondary technical education and vocational training, in response to the growing demand for practical skills and professional qualifications in the Country.

The fourth phase, currently underway, will translate these choices into a concrete operational project.

We are doing everything possible to start a real Salesian oratory, convinced that the most effective way to root Don Bosco's charism in this Country is precisely to start from there. In these islands there are so many young people who, in a certain sense, are waiting for Don Bosco.

The first fruits

During the novena to Don Bosco last January, a married Catholic teacher approached us asking to "become a Salesian". To our surprise, we realised that he meant becoming a Salesian Cooperator. His request caught us unprepared, because up to that moment we had not yet spoken about the Association of Salesian Cooperators. After about a month of insistent requests, I told him that I would be willing to offer him a formation path if he found three other interested people. His reply left me speechless, "But I have already found five others!" So, we began the formation journey of the first six aspiring Salesian Cooperators.

In May, we introduced the devotion to Mary Help of Christians and the population welcomed it with great enthusiasm. The procession in her honour on 24 May was attended by many more people than we expected. Today there is already a group interested in joining ADMA, the Association of Mary Help of Christians.

The dream fulfilled

When I think back to what has happened in Vanuatu since we arrived just eight months ago, I cannot help but be amazed at the welcome the people have given us. They welcomed us, but above all they welcomed Don Bosco and his charism. I have been able to experience first-hand the realisation of the dream that Don Bosco had about Oceania in July 1885, when he saw a multitude of young people from countless islands crying out to him: "Come and help us!".

This is how he recounts the fourth missionary dream:

“Finally, it seemed to me that I was in Australia. Here too there was an Angel, but he had no name. He was guiding and walking and making the people walk towards the south. Australia was not a continent, but an aggregate of many islands, whose inhabitants were of different character and appearance. A multitude of children who lived there tried to come towards us, but were prevented by the distance and the waters that separated them. However, they held out their hands towards Don Bosco and the Salesians, saying: – Come to our aid! Why do you not complete the work that your fathers began? – Many stopped; others with a thousand efforts passed among ferocious animals and came to mingle with the Salesians, whom I did not know, and began to sing: *Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini* (Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, Ps 118:26; Mt 21:9). At some distance, aggregates of innumerable islands could be seen; but I could not discern their details. It seems to me that all this together indicated that Divine Providence was offering a portion of the evangelical field to the Salesians, but in the future. Their labours will obtain fruit, because the hand of the Lord will constantly be with them, if they do not become unworthy of His favours” (MB XVII, 644-645).

I have always kept in my heart the profound conviction that in Oceania there is a great harvest awaiting the Congregation. The experience I am living today, in starting this new Salesian presence in Vanuatu, has made me realise that it is not only the young people who are waiting for us in Oceania. Don Bosco has preceded us. He is already here, and he is waiting for his own.

Fr. Alfred Maravilla, SDB