 Reading time: 4 min.

Upon arriving in Patagonia, the Salesians—led by Don Bosco—aimed to establish an Apostolic Vicariate to secure pastoral autonomy and support from Propaganda Fide. Between 1880 and 1882, repeated appeals to Rome, Argentine President Roca, and the Archbishop of Buenos Aires were thwarted by political unrest and ecclesiastical scepticism. Missionaries such as Rizzo, Fagnano, Costamagna, and Beauvoir travelled along the Río Negro, the Colorado, and as far as Lake Nahuel-Huapi, establishing missions among Indigenous communities and settlers. The turning point came on 16 November 1883: a decree established the Vicariate of Northern Patagonia, entrusted to Bishop Giovanni Cagliero, and the Southern Prefecture, led by Bishop Giuseppe Fagnano. From that moment, the Salesian mission took root "at the end of the world," laying the groundwork for its future flourishing.

The Salesians had only just arrived in Patagonia when Don Bosco, on 22 March 1880, returned again to the various Roman Congregations and Pope Leo XIII himself with a request for the erection of a Vicariate or Prefecture of Patagonia with its headquarters in Carmen, which would embrace the colonies already established or that were being organised on the banks of the Río Negro, from 36° to 50° South latitude. Carmen could have become "the centre of the Salesian Missions among the Indians".

But the military unrest at the time of General Roca's election as President of the Republic (May-August 1880) and the death of the Salesian Provincial, Fr Francis Bodrato (August 1880), caused the plans to be put on hold. Don Bosco also insisted with the President in November, but to no avail. The Vicariate was neither wanted by the archbishop nor liked by the political authority.

A few months later, in January 1881, Don Bosco encouraged the newly appointed Provincial, Fr Giacomo Costamagna, to get busy with the Vicariate in Patagonia and assured the rector-parish priest Fr Fagnano that with regard to Patagonia – "the greatest undertaking of our Congregation" – a great responsibility would soon fall on him. But the impasse remained.

Meanwhile in Patagonia Fr Emilio Rizzo, who in 1880 had accompanied the Vicar General of Buenos Aires, Monsignor Espinosa, along the Río Negro to Roca (50 km), with other Salesians was preparing for further flying missions along the same river. Fr Fagnano was then able to accompany the army up to the Cordillera in 1881. Don Bosco trembled impatiently and Fr Costamagna again in November 1881 advised him to negotiate directly with Rome.

As luck would have it, Monsignor Espinosa came to Italy at the end of 1881; Don Bosco took the opportunity to inform the Archbishop of Buenos Aires through him, who in April 1882 seemed favourable to the project of a Vicariate entrusted to the Salesians. More than anything, perhaps, because he did not have the clergy to serve there. But once again nothing came of it. In the summer of 1882 and then again in 1883 Fr Beauvoir accompanied the army as far as Lake Nahuel-Huapi in the Andes (880 km); other Salesians had made similar apostolic excursions in April along the Río Colorado, while Fr Beauvoir returned to Roca and in August Fr Milanesio went as far as Ñorquín in Neuquén (900 km).

Don Bosco was more and more convinced that without their own Vicariate Apostolic the Salesians would not have enjoyed the necessary freedom of action, given the very difficult relations he had had with his Archbishop in Turin and also taking into account that the First Vatican Council itself had not decided anything about the sometimes difficult relationships between Ordinaries and Superiors of Religious Congregations in mission territories. Furthermore, and this was no small thing, only a missionary Vicariate could have financial support from the Congregation of Propaganda Fide.

Therefore Don Bosco resumed his efforts, putting forward to the Holy See a proposal for the administrative subdivision of Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego into three Vicariates or Prefectures: from Río Colorado to Río Chubut, from these to Río Santa Cruz, and from these to the islands of Tierra del Fuego, including Malvinas (Falklands).

Pope Leo XIII agreed a few months later and asked him for possible names for these. Don Bosco then suggested to Cardinal Simeoni the erection of a single Vicariate for northern Patagonia with its headquarters in Carmen, on which a Prefecture Apostolic for southern Patagonia would depend. For the latter he proposed Fr Fagnano; for the Vicariate Fr Cagliero or Fr Costamagna.

A dream come true

On 16 November 1883 a decree from Propaganda Fide erected the Vicariate Apostolic of Northern and Central Patagonia, which included the south of the province of Buenos Aires, the national territories of La Pampa central, Río Negro, Neuquén and Chubut. Four days later he entrusted it to Fr Cagliero as Provicar Apostolic (and later Vicar Apostolic). On 2 December 1883, it was Fagnano’s turn to be appointed Prefect Apostolic of Chilean Patagonia, the Chilean territory of Magallanes-Punta Arenas, the Argentine territory of Santa Cruz, the Malvinas (Falkland) Islands and the undefined islands stretching as far as the Strait of Magellan. Ecclesiastically, the Prefecture covered areas belonging to the Chilean

diocese of San Carlos de Ancud.

The dream of the famous train journey from Cartagena in Colombia to Punta Arenas in Chile on 10 August 1883 was thus beginning to come true, all the more so since some Salesians from Montevideo in Uruguay had come to found the house of Niteroi in Brazil at the beginning of 1883. The long process of being able to run a mission in full canonical freedom had come to an end. In October 1884 Fr Cagliero would be appointed Vicar Apostolic of Patagonia, where he would enter on 8 July, seven months after his episcopal consecration at Valdocco on 7 December 1884.

The sequel

Although in the midst of difficulties of all kinds that history recalls – including accusations and outright calumnies – the Salesian work from those timid beginnings rapidly unfolded in both Argentine and Chilean Patagonia. It took root mostly in very small centres of Indians and settlers, which today have become towns and cities. Bishop Fagnano settled in Punta Arenas (Chile) in 1887, from where he shortly afterwards started missions in the islands of Tierra del Fuego. Generous and capable missionaries spent their lives on both sides of the Strait of Magellan" or the salvation of the souls" and even bodies (as far as they were able) of the inhabitants of those lands "down there, at the end of the world". Many recognised this, among them a person who knows about it, because he himself came "almost from the end of the world": Pope Francis.

Historical photograph: The three Bororòs who accompanied the Salesian missionaries to Cuyabà (1904)