 Reading time: 3 min.

*We met Fr Joseph Cosma Dang, a Vietnamese Salesian serving in Bangladesh, who told us about the history and challenges of this particular mission.*

Today's Bangladesh is a country formed after the partition of India in 1947. The region of Bengal was divided along religious lines: the western, Hindu part remained under India and the eastern, Muslim part joined Pakistan as a province called East Bengal and later renamed East Pakistan. At the time of the partition, there were millions of Hindus who migrated from Bangladesh to India and several thousand Muslims who moved from India to Bangladesh. It is understood that the religious character of this partition and migration was of great importance in the lives of this large population of about 170 million people, of whom more than 89% are Muslims, 9% Hindus, 1% Buddhists and 1% Christians.
The country became independent from Pakistan in 1971 and is currently a developing country that is facing many challenges, despite its cultural richness. Many children do not attend schools and spend their time helping their families find a way to survive, fishing, looking for firewood or in other ways. Health services are insufficient for the population, and many inhabitants cannot afford medical expenses.

In this complex situation, the Salesians have felt God's call to serve in this country, particularly because of the lack of Catholic pastors and the huge number of marginalised and poor young people. In 2009, Fr Francis Alencherry, who was General Councillor for Missions, laid the first foundations of the Salesian mission in the Mymensingh diocese in response to the invitation of the local bishop. The mission, under the Province of Kolkata (INC), developed rapidly with the help of other missionaries, including Fr Joseph Cosma Dang, from Vietnam, who arrived on 29 October 2012, on the feast of Blessed Michael Rua, after an interminable eighteen-month wait for a visa. Gradually, the number of Salesian houses, hostels, schools, youth centres, parish churches and village chapels is growing to serve poor young people and the pastoral needs of the local church. Currently, the Salesians are in two canonical communities with five permanent presences: Utrail-Telunjia in Mymensingh, Lukhikul-Khonjonpur in Rajshahi, and Moushair in Dhaka. Seeing what the Salesians are doing, the local church authorities have expressed their recognition and appreciation, and some bishops are still waiting for a Salesian presence in their dioceses.

This work is a seed of the Church that is slowly growing thanks to the help of many benefactors and collaborators. Providence is blessing Bangladesh with local Salesian vocations: 14 professed young Salesians come from the land of Bangladesh; among them, five young men have made their perpetual profession, and shortly afterwards, by 19 May 2024, another four young Salesians will make their final vows and make a permanent commitment to “Da mihi animas, cetera tolle”. Recently, the first Salesian priest in Bangladesh, Fr Victor Mankhin, was ordained. The Salesians are involved in vocational animation by regularly organising the ‘Come and See’ vocational camp every year to invite young people who have the desire to become Salesians. The Salesian charism has taken root and it seems that, in heaven, Don Bosco is smiling and taking care of Bangladesh.

Fr Joseph Cosma Dang recounts his missionary life as a faith experience of the mystery of the incarnation, what the second birth is. “I had to learn how to eat, speak new languages and live with the local people. I learnt to do many jobs that I had never thought of before coming to Bangladesh. With the mindset of learning, I have opened myself to new situations and challenges with an amazing eye”. Growth in faith is the most precious gift granted by God. Without a doubt, God is the provider, the author, and we are mere collaborators.

*Marco Fulgaro*