

The work of the Salesians in the Maghreb

The Salesians are in 136 countries around the world, including several countries in North Africa, where a new circumscription encompassing Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria was created last year.

When we contacted missionary Fr Domenico Paternò, a Salesian priest, to ask him to share a few outlines of the Salesian presence in North Africa with us, he wanted to start with a reflection on the Mediterranean.

The Mediterranean is not only a sea that is geographically very well known, but it is a real cradle of civilisations that have grown up around it over the millennia, giving the whole of humanity contributions of cultures, knowledge, human, social and political experiences that are still the subject of study and investigation today.

All the countries that are bathed by what the Romans called “Mare Nostrum” have a very rich history and are all bearers in various ways of important cultural and natural riches.

Moreover, the Mediterranean, the natural border between Europe and Africa, has a not inconsiderable geopolitical and strategic importance.

If we cross the Mediterranean from Europe, we arrive in the Maghreb, a North African region that is becoming increasingly familiar with the charism of Don Bosco. Last year, in fact, the Special Circumscription of North Africa (CNA) was officially created on 28 August, the feast of St Augustine, to whom the circumscription, which includes Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia, was dedicated. This is a new missionary frontier full of challenges and opportunities.

The Maghreb has clear, classical Roman roots. It was called

“Afriquia”, thus giving its name to the whole continent that begins here. The sons of Don Bosco, who, incidentally, are in almost all the countries bordering the Mediterranean and have therefore established the Mediterranean Region of the Congregation, have recently decided to develop their presence and service among the young people of these countries. The Maghreb is not “the wrong part” of the Mediterranean, as misinformed people say, but is instead a geographical, human and cultural area that one never ceases to discover and appreciate!

The Salesians are interested in the education of the many young people who flock to these countries: almost 50% of the population is under 25 years of age. These are, therefore, countries rich in hope and future. The aim of the Salesians and their collaborators is to support and develop the dream of these young people.

A “dream that makes one dream” as the Strenna of our Rector Major this year, recalling the bicentenary of Don Bosco’s childhood points out, and if this is true in Salesian life everywhere, in Maghreb it is even more true and significant. The presence today of Don Bosco’s sons seeks to implement the Founder’s dream and make the “wolves” become lambs who are not only peaceful but builders of peace and development. And so, even though we have different religions, Christians and Muslim, all descendants of Abraham, we find ourselves journeying together for the good of the young people and families around us and with us. The school, the oratory, training for work, the playground, human and religious formation, the sharing of joys and sorrows, the mutual knowledge and dignity that each recognises in the other, the family spirit and collaboration – all this helps us to walk together and concretely do good to all.

What is the goal of the Salesians working in these countries? The answer to this question is very simple: in the Maghreb, Don Bosco’s sons and daughters strive every day for the common good, that is, to become, as Don Bosco wanted, “upright

citizens" and "good believers", each in his own Faith, without renouncing the witness of Christian life, while respecting the culture and religion of others.

Even with some common elements, each country has its own peculiarities that distinguish it.

The Salesians have been in Morocco since 1950 in Kenitra, a large city on the Atlantic coast between Rabat and Tangier.

There is no shortage of work in the fields of education, recreation, welcoming, faith. The Salesians run schools of various levels and types: a primary school, a secondary school and a vocational training centre. This responds to the need for education and employment of the many young Moroccans to give them greater opportunities in life.

In addition, many sports and associative activities are organised in line with Don Bosco's Preventive System.

The Parish of Christ the King supports the faith of the Christian minority and is attended mainly by young African students studying in Morocco and by Europeans who are in the city. Other specific works include two houses for young migrants, a children's home and job training for girls. All these initiatives involve more than 1,500 people including children, staff, families and other recipients, who are, with the exception of the parish, all Muslims and all united in the Don Bosco style of inclusive family and mutual assistance. The Salesian presence in Morocco has a point of reference in the archbishop of Rabat, Salesian Cardinal Cristóbal López Romero, a former missionary in Paraguay before coming to Morocco from 2003 to 2011 and returning after nine years as pastor of the archdiocese. Until last year, Morocco was entrusted to the Province of France (FRB). In addition to the people, the intercultural experience is also lived in the Salesian community, made up of four priests from France, Spain, Poland and DR Congo.

Another Maghreb country with two Salesian presences is Tunisia, where, in Manouba and Tunis, the Salesians run two

primary schools, a secondary school, a nascent vocational training centre, two oratories, collaboration activities with the local Church, a parish in Hammamet for Italian and European residents, and other special initiatives. It is a growing presence to which new missionaries have recently been entrusted, also from different countries: Italy, Syria, Lebanon, Spain, DR Congo, Chad.

It is an experience of family and, in particular, of the Salesian Family, with two communities of Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, the "Friends of Don Bosco", a group of lay Muslims close to Don Bosco's charism, and many lay people involved in various capacities. The hope is to establish a group of Salesian Cooperators as well. A total of at least 3,000 people are involved in educational work. Until last year, the province of Sicily took care of the Salesian presence in Tunisia, and Fr Domenico Paternò, originally from Messina, who arrived in Manouba more than ten years ago, was appointed superior.

This brings us to the last country, one of the newest missionary frontiers for the Salesian Congregation, still being defined in terms of details on locations and personnel: Algeria, where the first Salesians will soon arrive.

Actually, it must be said that Algeria was the first country in Africa where the Salesians landed as far back as the 19th century, in 1891, in Oran, where there was an oratory. Subsequently there were two more openings in the capital Algiers, but after several years the unstable and hostile political situation did not allow the work to continue and forced the final closure of the work in 1976. The Salesians thus responded to the invitation of the Archbishop of Algiers after several years of dialogue and study.

In addition to this picture of the Salesian presence in the Maghreb, there are many activities with religious communities and civil society in which the Salesians are involved. For the sake of completeness and seriousness of information, we cannot

forget the difficulties that exist and which certainly also give reasons for difficulties that cannot always be overcome. Suffice it to think of the language, which is not easy, the rather fragile socio-economic context often due to international politics, families in difficulty, youth unemployment, the great scourge of the entire region, the absence of effective youth policies capable of providing a future. But despite the undeniable challenges, the possibility and hope for positive development, not only economic but also human and social is great. Sometimes there are signs of intolerance and unreasonable radicalism, but these are very minor phenomena. They are young societies and therefore open to the future 'more future than past', as Fr Egidio Viganò used to say.

In the past months, the Special Circumscription of North Africa held its first Provincial Chapter on the theme of General Chapter 29: "Passionate for Jesus Christ, dedicated to the young. Living our Salesian vocation faithfully and prophetically". Fr Domenico Paternò stressed how it is a grace to live this moment after only a few months of existence of the Circumscription. The Chapter members drafted the Salesian Provincial Directory and the Salesian Educative and Pastoral Project, the first fundamental steps for the future development of the Salesian presence.

In the last Salesian missionary expedition, two Salesians were assigned to the North African circumscription: Brothers Joseph Ngo Duc Thuan (from Vietnam) and Kerwin Valeroso (from the Philippines), currently in France, in Paris, to study French. The Salesian Congregation, guided by the Holy Spirit, welcomes the challenge of these new frontiers with courage and determination, and is ready to bet on them in order to give renewed missionary enthusiasm and reach more and more poor and abandoned young people in every part of the world.

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