 Reading time: 4 min.

The ordeal of abandoned young people continues to resonate in the contemporary world. Statistics speak of approximately 150 million children forced to live in the streets, a reality that is also dramatically evident in Monrovia, the capital of Liberia. To mark the feast day of St. John Bosco, a campaign was held in Vienna, promoted by Jugend Eine Welt, an initiative that highlighted not only the local situation but also the difficulties encountered in distant countries, such as Liberia, where the Salesian, Lothar Wagner, dedicates his life to giving these young people hope.

Lothar Wagner: A Salesian who dedicates his life to street children in Liberia

Lothar Wagner, a German Salesian Cooperator, has dedicated over twenty years of his life to supporting children in West Africa. After gaining extensive experience in Ghana and Sierra Leone, over the last four years he has focused his passion on Liberia, a country marked by prolonged conflicts, health crises, and devastation such as the Ebola epidemic. Lothar has become a spokesman for a reality that is often ignored, where social and economic scars compromise opportunities for young people to grow.

Liberia, with a population of 5.4 million, is a country where extreme poverty is accompanied by fragile institutions and widespread corruption. The consequences of decades of armed conflict and health crises have left the education system among the worst in the world, while the social fabric has frayed under the weight of economic hardship and lack of essential services. Many families are unable to guarantee their children’s basic needs, thus pushing a large number of young people to seek refuge on the streets.

In particular, in Monrovia, some young people find refuge in the most unexpected places: the city’s cemeteries. Known as the “cemetery boys,” these young people, lacking a safe home, take refuge among the graves, a place that becomes a symbol of total abandonment. Sleeping outdoors, in parks, in landfills, even in sewers or inside tombs, has become the tragic daily refuge for those who have no other choice.

“It is truly very heart-breaking when you walk through the cemetery and see boys coming out of the tombs. They lie down with the dead because they no longer have

a place in society. Such a situation is scandalous."

A multiple approach: from the cemetery to detention cells
The cemetery boys are not the only focus of Lothar's attention. The Salesian also dedicates himself to another dramatic reality: that of underage prisoners in Liberian prisons. The Monrovia prison, built for 325 inmates, now houses over 1,500 prisoners, including many young people incarcerated without a formal charge. The cells, extremely overcrowded, are a clear example of how human dignity is often sacrificed.

"There is a lack of food, clean water, hygienic standards, medical and psychological assistance. Constant hunger and the dramatic spatial situation due to overcrowding greatly weaken the boys' health. In a small cell, intended for two inmates, eight to ten young people are locked up. They sleep in shifts, because this cell size only offers standing space to its many inhabitants."

To cope with this situation, he organises everyday visits to the prison, bringing drinking water, hot meals, and a psycho-social support that becomes a lifeline. His constant presence is essential to try to re-establish a dialogue with the authorities and families, also raising awareness of the importance of protecting the rights of minors, who are often forgotten and abandoned to a dire fate. "We do not leave them alone in their solitude, but we try to give them hope," Lothar emphasises with the firmness of someone who knows the everyday pain of these young lives.

A day for awareness in Vienna
Support for these initiatives also comes from international attention. On January 31, in Vienna, Jugend Eine Welt organised a day dedicated to highlighting the precarious situation of street children, not only in Liberia, but throughout the world. During the event, Lothar Wagner shared his experiences with students and participants, involving them in practical activities – such as using barrier tape to simulate the conditions of an overcrowded cell – to give them a first-hand understanding of the difficulties and anguish of young people who live in minimal spaces and in degrading conditions every day.

In addition to daily emergencies, the work of Lothar and his collaborators also focuses on long-term interventions. The Salesian missionaries are in fact involved in rehabilitation programmes ranging from educational support to vocational training for young prisoners, to legal and spiritual assistance. These interventions aim to

reintegrate young people into society once they are released, helping them build a dignified and fulfilling future. The goal is clear: to offer not only immediate help, but to create a path that allows young people to develop their potential and actively contribute to the rebirth of the country.

The initiatives also encompass the construction of vocational training centres, schools, and reception facilities, with the hope of expanding the number of young beneficiaries and ensuring constant support, day and night. The success story of many former “cemetery boys” – some of whom have become teachers, doctors, lawyers, and entrepreneurs – is tangible confirmation that, with the right support, transformation is possible.

Despite the commitment and dedication, this path is fraught with obstacles: bureaucracy, corruption, the children’s distrust, and the lack of resources represent daily challenges. Many young people, marked by abuse and exploitation, struggle to trust adults, making the task of establishing a relationship of trust and offering real and lasting support even more difficult. However, every small success – every young person who regains hope and begins to build a future – confirms the importance of this humanitarian work.

The path undertaken by Lothar and his collaborators testifies that, despite the difficulties, it is possible to make a difference in the lives of abandoned children. The vision of a Liberia in which every young person can realise their potential translates into concrete actions, from international awareness to the rehabilitation of prisoners, through educational programmes and reception projects. The work, based on love, solidarity, and a constant presence, represents a beacon of hope in a context in which despair seems to prevail.

In a world marked by abandonment and poverty, the stories of rebirth of street children and young prisoners are an invitation to believe that, with the right support, every life can rise again. Lothar Wagner continues to fight to guarantee these young people not only shelter, but also the possibility of rewriting their destiny, demonstrating that solidarity can truly change the world.