

The Venerable Monsignor Stefano Ferrando

Monsignor Stefano Ferrando was an extraordinary example of missionary dedication and episcopal service, combining the Salesian charism with a profound vocation to serve the poorest. Born in Piedmont in 1895, he entered the Salesian Congregation at a young age and, after serving in the military during the First World War, for which he was awarded the Silver Medal for Valour, he dedicated himself to apostolate in India. As Bishop of Krishnagar and then Shillong for over thirty years, he tirelessly walked among the people, promoting evangelisation with humility and profound pastoral love. He founded institutions, supported lay catechists, and embodied the motto "Apostle of Christ" in his life. His life was an example of faith, surrender to God, and total self-giving, leaving a spiritual legacy that continues to inspire the Salesian mission worldwide.

Venerable Bishop Stephen Ferrando knew how to combine his Salesian vocation with his missionary charism and episcopal ministry. Born on 28 September 1895 in Rossiglione (Genoa, diocese of Acqui) to Agostino and Giuseppina Salvi, he was distinguished by an ardent love of God and a tender devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. In 1904 he entered Salesian schools, first at Fossano and then at Valdocco in Turin where he got to know Don Bosco's successors and the first generation of Salesians, and undertook his priestly studies; in the meantime he nurtured the desire to leave as a missionary. On 13 September 1912, he made his first religious profession in the Salesian Congregation at Foglizzo. Called to arms in 1915, he took part in the First World War. For his courage he was awarded the silver medal for valour. Returning home in 1918, he took his perpetual vows on 26 December 1920. He was ordained a priest in Borgo San Martino (Alessandria) on

18 March 1923. On 2 December of the same year, with nine companions, he embarked in Venice as a missionary to India. On 18 December, after 16 days of travel, the group arrived in Bombay and on 23 December in Shillong, the place of his new apostolate. As novice master, he educated the young Salesians in the love of Jesus and Mary and had a great spirit of apostolate.

On 9 August 1934, Pope Pius XI appointed him Bishop of Krishnagar. His motto was "Apostle of Christ". In 1935, on 26 November, he was transferred to Shillong where he remained bishop for 34 years. While working in a difficult situation of cultural, religious and social impact, Bishop Ferrando worked tirelessly to be close to the people entrusted to him, working zealously in the vast diocese that encompassed the entire region of North East India. He preferred to travel on foot rather than by car, which he would have had at his disposal: this allowed him to meet the people, to stop and talk to them, to be involved in their lives. This live contact with people's lives was one of the main reasons for the fruitfulness of his evangelical proclamation: humility, simplicity, love for the poor led many to convert and request Baptism. He established a seminary for the formation of young Indian Salesians, built a hospital, erected a shrine dedicated to Mary Help of Christians and founded the first Congregation of indigenous sisters, the Congregation of the Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians (1942).

A man of strong character, he was not discouraged in the face of countless difficulties, which he faced with a smile and meekness. Perseverance in the face of obstacles was one of his main characteristics. He sought to unite the Gospel message with the local culture in which it was to be embedded. He was intrepid in his pastoral visits, which he made to the most remote places in the diocese, in order to recover the last lost sheep. He showed particular sensitivity and promotion for lay catechists, whom he considered complementary to the bishop's mission and on whom depended much of the fruitfulness

of the proclamation of the Gospel and its penetration into the territory. His attention to family pastoral work was also immense. Despite his numerous commitments, the Venerable was a man with a rich interior life, nourished by prayer and recollection. As a pastor, he was appreciated by his sisters, priests, Salesian brothers and in the episcopate, as well as by the people, who felt him deeply close to them. He gave himself creatively to his flock, caring for the poor, defending the untouchables, caring for the cholera patients.

The cornerstones of his spirituality were his filial bond with the Virgin Mary, his missionary zeal, his continuous reference to Don Bosco, as emerges from his writings and in all his missionary activity. The most luminous and heroic moment of his virtuous life was his departure from the diocese of Shillong. Archbishop Ferrando had to submit his resignation to the Holy Father when he was still in the fullness of his physical and intellectual faculties, to allow the appointment of his successor, who was to be chosen, according to his superiors' instructions, from among the indigenous priests he had formed. It was a particularly painful moment, experienced by the great bishop with humility and obedience. He understood that it was time to retire in prayer according to the Lord's will.

He returned to Genoa in 1969 and continued his pastoral activity, presiding over the ceremonies for the conferral of Confirmation and dedicating himself to the sacrament of Penance.

He was faithful to the Salesian religious life to the last, deciding to live in community and renouncing the privileges that his position as bishop might have reserved for him. He continued to be "a missionary" in Italy. Not "a missionary who moves, but [...] a missionary who is". His life in this last stage of life became a "radiating" one. He became a "missionary of prayer" who said: "I am glad I came away so that others could take over to do such wonderful works."

From Genoa Quarto, he continued to animate the mission in Assam, raising awareness and sending financial aid. He lived

this hour of purification with a spirit of faith, of abandonment to God's will and obedience, touching with his own hand the full meaning of the evangelical expression "we are only useless servants", and confirming with his life the *caetera tolle*, the sacrificial aspect of the Salesian vocation. He died on 20 June 1978 and was buried in Rossiglione, his native land. In 1987 his mortal remains were brought back to India.

In docility to the Spirit he carried out a fruitful pastoral action, which manifested itself in great love for the poor, in humility of spirit and fraternal charity, in the joy and optimism of the Salesian spirit.

Together with many missionaries who shared the adventure of the Spirit with him in the land of India, including Servants of God Francis Convertini, Costantine Vendrame and Orestes Marengo, Bishop Ferrando gave rise to a new missionary method: to be an itinerant missionary. Such an example is a providential warning, especially for religious congregations tempted by a process of institutionalisation and closure, not to lose the passion to go out to meet people and situations of the greatest material and spiritual poverty and destitution, going where no one wants to go and entrusting themselves as he did. "I look to the future with confidence, trusting in Mary Help of Christians... I will entrust myself to Mary Help of Christians who already saved me from so many dangers."

Becoming a sign of hope in eSwatini – Lesotho – South

Africa after 130 years

In the heart of Southern Africa, amidst the natural beauty and social challenges of eSwatini, Lesotho, and South Africa, the Salesians celebrate 130 years of missionary presence. In this time of Jubilee, General Chapter, and historical anniversaries, the Southern Africa Province shares its signs of hope: fidelity to Don Bosco's charism, educational and pastoral commitment among young people, and the strength of an international community that bears witness to fraternity and resilience. Despite the difficulties, the enthusiasm of young people, the richness of local cultures, and the spirituality of Ubuntu continue to point towards paths of future and communion.

Fraternal greetings from the Salesians of the smallest Vice-Province and the oldest presence in the Africa-Madagascar Region (since 1896, the first 5 confreres were sent by Fr. Rua). This year we thank the 130 SDBs who have worked in our 3 countries and who now intercede for us from heaven. "Small is beautiful"!

In the AFM territory live 65 million people who communicate in 12 official languages, amidst many natural wonders and great underground resources. We are among the few sub-Saharan African Countries where Catholics are a small minority compared to other Christian Churches, with only 5 million faithful.

What are the signs of hope that our young people and society are looking for?

Firstly, we are trying to overcome the infamous world records of the growing gap between rich and poor (100,000 millionaires versus 15 million unemployed young people); the lack of security and increasing violence in daily life; the collapse of the educational system, which has produced a new generation of millions of illiterates, struggling with various addictions

(alcohol, drugs...). Furthermore, 30 years after the end of the apartheid regime in 1994, society and the Church are still divided among the various communities in terms of economy, opportunities, and many unhealed wounds. Indeed, the “Rainbow Nation” community is struggling with many “gaps” that can only be “filled” with the values of the Gospel.

What are the signs of hope that the Catholic Church in South Africa is looking for?

Participating in the triennial “Joint Witness” meeting of religious superiors and bishops in 2024, we realised many signs of decline: fewer faithful, lack of priestly and religious vocations, aging, and decreasing number of religious, some dioceses bankrupt, continuous loss/decrease of Catholic institutions (medical care, education, social works or media) due to the sharp decline in committed religious and laity. The Catholic Bishops’ Conference (SACBC – which includes Botswana, eSwatini, and South Africa) indicates as a priority, assistance to young people addicted to alcohol and various other substances.

What are the signs of hope that the Salesians of Southern Africa are looking for?

We pray daily for new Salesian vocations, to be able to welcome new missionaries. Indeed, the era of the Anglo-Irish Province (until 1988) has ended, and the Africa Project did not include the southern tip of the continent. After 70 years in eSwatini (Swaziland) and 45 years in Lesotho, we have only 4 local vocations from each Kingdom. Today we have only 5 young confreres and 4 novices in initial formation. However, the smallest Vice-Province in Africa-Madagascar, through its 7 local communities, is responsible for education and pastoral care in 6 large parishes, 18 primary and secondary schools, 3 vocational training centres (TVET), and various social assistance programmes. Our provincial community, with 18 different nationalities among the 35 SDBs living in the 7 communities, is a great gift and a challenge to embrace.

As a minority and fragile Catholic community in Southern Africa

We believe that the only way forward is to build more bridges and communion between religious and dioceses. The weaker we are, the more we strive to work together. As the entire Catholic Church seeks to focus on young people, Don Bosco has been chosen by the Bishops as the Patron of Youth Ministry, and his Novena is celebrated with fervour in most dioceses and parishes at the beginning of the pastoral year.

As Salesians and Salesian Family, we constantly encourage each other: “work in progress” (constant work)

In the last two years, following the Rector Major’s invitation, we have sought to relaunch our Salesian charism, with the wisdom of a common vision and direction (starting from the annual provincial assembly), with a series of small and simple daily steps in the right direction, and with the wisdom of personal and communal conversion.

We are grateful for the encouragement of Fr. Pascual Chávez for our recent Provincial Chapter of 2024: “You know well that it is more difficult, but not impossible, to ‘re-found’ than to found [the charism], because there are habits, attitudes or behaviours that do not correspond to the spirit of our Holy Founder, Don Bosco, and his Project of Life, and have ‘citizenship rights’ [in the Province]. There is truly a need for a true conversion of every confrere to God, holding the Gospel as the supreme rule of life, and of the entire Province to Don Bosco, assuming the Constitutions as a true project of life.”

Fr. Pascual’s advice and commitment were voted on: “To become more passionate about Jesus and dedicated to young people,” investing in personal conversion (creating a sacred space in our lives, to let Jesus transform it); in communal conversion (investing in systematic monthly ongoing formation according to a theme); and in provincial conversion (promoting the provincial mentality through “One Heart One Soul” – the fruit

of our provincial assembly), and with monthly online meetings of the Directors.

On the souvenir image of our Vice-Province of Blessed Michael Rua, next to the faces of all 46 confreres and 4 novices (35 live in our 7 communities, 7 are in formation abroad, and 5 SDBs are awaiting visas, with one at San Callisto-catacombs and one missionary undergoing chemotherapy in Poland). We are also blessed by a growing number of missionary confreres who are sent by the Rector Major or for a specific period from other African Provinces to help us (AFC, ACC, ANN, ATE, MDG, and ZMB). We are very grateful to each of these young confreres. We believe that, with their help, our hope for charismatic relaunch is becoming tangible. Our Vice-Province – the smallest in Africa-Madagascar, almost 40 years after its foundation, still does not have a proper provincial house. Construction began, with the help of the Rector Major, only last year. Here too we say: “work in progress”...

We also want to share our humble signs of hope with all the other 92 Provinces in this precious period of the General Chapter. The AFM has a unique experience of 31 years of local missionary volunteers (involved in the Youth Ministry of the Bosco Youth Centre in Johannesburg since 1994), the “Love Matters” programme for healthy adolescent sexual development since 2001. Our volunteers, in fact, involved for a whole year in the life of our community, are the most precious members of our Mission and of the new groups of the Salesian Family that are slowly growing (VDB, Salesian Cooperators, and Past Pupils of Don Bosco).

Our mother house in Cape Town will celebrate its one hundred and thirtieth (130th) anniversary next year, and thanks to the one hundred and fiftieth (150th) anniversary of the Salesian Missions, we have created, with the help of the China Province, a special “St. Louis Versiglia Memorial Room,” where our Protomartyr spent a day during his return from Italy to China-Macau in May 1917.

Don Bosco 'Ubuntu' – synodal journey

"We are here thanks to you!" – Ubuntu is one of Southern African cultures' contributions to the global community. The word in the Nguni language means, "I am because you are!" (Other possible translations: "I exist because you exist"). Last year we undertook the "Eco Ubuntu" project (a 3-year environmental awareness project) involving about 15,000 young people from our 7 communities in eSwatini, Lesotho, and South Africa. In addition to the splendid celebration and sharing of the 2024 Youth Synod, our 300 young people [who participated] especially retain Ubuntu in their memories. Their enthusiasm is a source of inspiration. The AFM needs you: We are here thanks to you!

Leaving for the missions... trusting in dreams

Don Bosco's missionary dreams, without anticipating the course of future events, had the flavour of being predictions for the Salesians.

The missionary dreams of 1870-1871 and especially those of the 1880s also contributed in no small part to Don Bosco's attention to the missionary problem. While in 1885 he invited Bishop Giovanni Cagliero to be prudent: "do not pay much attention to dreams" unless "they are morally useful", Cagliero himself, who left as head of the first missionary expedition (1875) and future cardinal, considered them to be mere ideals to be pursued. Other Salesians, on the other hand, and above all Fr Giacomo Costamagna, missionary of the third expedition (1877) and future provincial and bishop, understood them to be a series of steps to be taken almost almost

compulsorily, so much so that he asked Don Bosco's secretary, Fr Giovanni Battista Lemoyne, to send him the "necessary" updates. In turn, Fr Giuseppe Fagnano, also one of the first missionaries and future Prefect Apostolic, saw them as the expression of a desire of the whole Congregation, therefore the Congregation had to feel responsible for carrying them out by finding the means and personnel. Lastly, Fr Luigi Lasagna, a missionary who left with the second expedition in 1876, and also a future bishop, saw them as a key to knowing the future Salesian in mission. Later, Fr Alberto Maria De Agostini, in the first half of the 20th century, would personally embark on dangerous and countless excursions to South America in the wake of Don Bosco's dreams.

However they may be understood today, the fact remains that Don Bosco's missionary dreams, although they did not anticipate the course of future events, had the flavour of predictions for the Salesians. Given that they were devoid of symbolic and allegorical meanings and instead were rich in anthropological, geographic, economic and environmental references (one speaks of tunnels, trains, planes...) they were an incentive for the Salesian missionaries to act, all the more so since their actual realisation could have been verified. In other words, missionary dreams guided history and outlined a programme of missionary work for the Salesian society.

The call (1875): an immediately revised project

In the 1870s, a remarkable attempt at evangelisation was underway in Latin America, thanks above all to the religious, despite the strong tensions between the Church and the individual liberal states. Through contacts with the Argentine consul in Savona, Giovanni Battista Gazzolo, Don Bosco in December 1874 offered to provide priests for the *Misericordia Church* (the church of the Italians) in Buenos Aires, as requested by the Vicar General of Buenos Aires Monsignor Mariano Antonio Espinosa, and accepted the invitation of a Commission interested in a boarding school in

San Nicolás de los Arroyos, 240 km north west of the Argentine capital. In fact, the Salesian society – which at the time also included the female branch of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians – had as its first objective the care of poor youth (with catechism, schools, boarding schools, hospices, festive oratories), but did not exclude extending its services to all kinds of sacred ministries. So at that end of 1874 Don Bosco was offering nothing more than what was already being done in Italy. Besides, the Salesian Constitutions, finally approved in the previous April, just when negotiations for Salesian foundations in non-European “mission lands” had been going on for years, contained no mention of possible *missiones ad gentes*.

Things changed in the space of a few months. On 28 January 1875 in an address to the rectors, and the following day to the whole Salesian community, including the boys, Don Bosco announced that the two aforementioned requests in Argentina had been accepted, after requests in other continents had been refused. He also reported that “the Missions in South America” (which no one had actually offered precisely in those terms) had been accepted on the conditions requested, subject only to the pope’s approval. Don Bosco with a master stroke thus presented to Salesians and young people an exciting “missionary project” approved by Pius IX.

A feverish preparation for the missionary expedition immediately began. On 5 February his circular letter invited the Salesians to offer themselves freely for such missions, where, apart from a few civilised areas, they would exercise their ministry among “savage peoples scattered over immense territories.” Even if he had identified Patagonia as the land of his first missionary dream – where cruel savages from unknown areas killed missionaries and instead welcomed Salesian ones – such a plan to evangelise “savages” went far beyond the requests received from America. The archbishop of Buenos Aires, Federico Aneiros, was certainly not aware of this, at least at the time.

Don Bosco proceeded with determination to organise

the expedition. On 31 August he communicated to the Prefect of Propaganda Fide, Cardinal Alessandro Franchi, that he had accepted the running of the college of S. Nicolás as “a base for the missions” and therefore asked for the spiritual faculties usually granted in such cases. He received some of them, but did not receive any of the financial grants he had hoped for because Argentina did not depend on the Congregation of Propaganda Fide, since with one archbishop and four bishops it was not considered to be a “mission land”. And Patagonia? What about Tierra del Fuego? And the tens and tens of thousands of Indians living there, two, three thousand kilometres away “at the end of the world”, without any missionary presence?

At Valdocco, in the church of Mary Help of Christians, during the famous farewell ceremony for missionaries on 11 November, Don Bosco dwelt on the universal mission of salvation given by the Lord to the Apostles and therefore to the Church. He spoke of the shortage of priests in Argentina, of the families of emigrants who had subscribed and of the missionary work among the “great hordes of savages” in the Pampas and in Patagonia, regions “surrounding the civilised part” where “neither the religion of Jesus Christ, nor civilisation, nor commerce has yet penetrated, where European feet have so far left no traces.”

Pastoral work for the Italian emigrants and then *plantatio ecclesiae* in Patagonia: this was the original twofold objective that Don Bosco left to the first expedition. (Strangely enough, however, he made no mention of the two precise places of work agreed upon on the other side of the Atlantic). A few months later, in April 1876, he would insist with Fr Cagliero that “our aim is ultimately to attempt an expedition to Patagonia [...] always taking as our base the establishment of colleges and hospices [...] in the vicinity of the savage tribes.” He would repeat this on 1 August: “In general, always remember that God wants our efforts towards the Pampas and the Patagonian people, and towards the poor and abandoned children.”

In Genoa, on embarking, he gave each of the ten missionaries – including five priests – twenty special *reminders*. We reproduce them:

REMINDERS FOR THE MISSIONARIES

1. Seek souls and not money, honours or dignities.
2. Be charitable and most courteous towards all, but avoid conversation and familiarity with persons of the opposite sex or with persons whose conduct is open to suspicion.
3. Do not go visiting, except for motives of charity and necessity.
4. Do not accept invitations to dinner except for grave reasons. In such cases ensure that a confrere accompanies you.
5. Take special care of the sick, of the young, of the old and the poor, and you will win the blessing of God and the goodwill of men.
6. Show respect to all persons in authority whether civil or religious.
7. On meeting a person in authority, take care to greet him with all due respect.
8. Do the same towards ecclesiastics or persons belonging to religious institutes.
9. Shun idleness and disputes. And observe great moderation in eating, drinking and sleeping.
10. Love, reverence and respect other Religious Orders and always speak well of them. In this way you will be esteemed by all and will promote the good of the Congregation.
11. Take care of your health. Work well, but only do as much as your strength allows.
12. Let the world know that you are poor in clothing, food and abode, and you will be rich in the sight of God and win the hearts of men.
13. Love one another, advise one another, correct one another, and do not be carried away by either envy or rancour, but let the good of one be the good of all; and let the troubles and sufferings of one be regarded as the troubles and sufferings

of all, and let each one strive to banish or at least to mitigate the sorrows of others.

14. Observe your Rules, and never forget the monthly Exercise for a Happy Death.

15. Every morning commend to God the occupations of the day , especially confessions, lessons, religious instructions and sermons.

16. Constantly promote devotion to Mary Help of Christians and to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament.

17. Recommend to the boys frequent Confession and Communion.

18. In order to cultivate ecclesiastical vocations, constantly inculcate 1. love of chastity, 2. horror of the opposite vice, 3. avoidance of bad companions, 4. frequent communion, 5. always be charitable, gentle and kind.

19. Hear both sides before making up your mind regarding reports and matters in dispute.

20. In time of fatigue and suffering, do not forget that we have a great reward prepared for us in heaven.

Amen.

The history of the Salesian missions (1/5)

The 150th anniversary of the Salesian missions will be held on November 11, 2025. We believe it might be interesting to offer our readers a brief history of what has gone before and early stages of what was to become a kind of Salesian missionary epic in Patagonia. We will do so over five episodes, with the help of unpublished sources that allow us to correct the many inaccuracies that have passed into history.

Let us clear the field immediately: it is said and

written that Don Bosco wanted to leave for the missions both as a seminarian and as a young priest. This is not documented. While, as a 17 year old student (1834) he applied to join the Franciscan Reformed friars at the Convent of the Angels in Chieri who had missions, the request was apparently made mainly for financial reasons. If ten years later (1844), when he left the "Convitto" in Turin, he was tempted to enter the Congregation of the Oblates of the Virgin Mary, who had just been entrusted with missions in Burma (Myanmar), it is however also true that a missionary vocation, for which he had perhaps also undertaken some study of foreign languages, was only one of the possibilities of apostolate for the young Don Bosco that opened up before him. In both cases Don Bosco immediately followed the advice, first of Fr Comollo to enter the diocesan seminary and, later, of Fr Cafasso to continue to dedicate himself to the young people of Turin. Even in the twenty years between 1850 and 1870, busy as he was in planning the continuity of his "work of the Oratories", in giving a juridical foundation to the Salesian society he was setting up, and in the spiritual and pedagogical formation of the first Salesians and all young people from his Oratory, he was certainly not in a position to follow up on any personal missionary aspirations or those of his "sons". There is not even a hint of him or the Salesians going to Patagonia, although we see this in writing or on the web.

Heightening missionary sensitivity

This does not detract from the fact that the missionary sensitivity in Don Bosco, probably reduced to faint hints and vague aspirations in the years of his priestly formation and early priesthood, sharpened considerably over the years. Reading the Annals of the Propagation of the Faith gave him good information on the missionary world, so much so that he drew episodes from them for some of his books and praised Pope Gregory XVI who encouraged the spread of the Gospel to the far corners of the earth and approved new religious Orders with missionary aims. Don Bosco could have

received considerable influence from Canon G. Ortalda, director of the diocesan Council of the Propaganda Fide Association for 30 years (1851-1880) and also promoter of "Apostolic Schools" (a sort of minor seminary for missionary vocations). In December 1857 he had also launched the project of an Exposition in favour of the Catholic Missions entrusted to the six hundred Sardinian Missionaries. Don Bosco was well informed about it.

Missionary interest grew in him in 1862 at the time of the solemn canonisation in Rome of the 26 Japanese protomartyrs and in 1867 on the occasion of the beatification of more than two hundred Japanese martyrs, also celebrated with solemnity at Valdocco. Also in the papal city during his long stays in 1867, 1869 and 1870 he was able to see other local missionary initiatives, such as the foundation of the Pontifical Seminary of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul for foreign missions.

Piedmont with almost 50% of Italian missionaries (1500 with 39 bishops) was in the vanguard in this field and Franciscan Luigi Celestino Spelta, Apostolic Vicar of Hupei, visited Turin in November 1859. He did not visit the Oratory, instead Fr Daniele Comboni did so in December 1864, publishing his Plan for Regeneration for Africa in Turin with the intriguing project of evangelising Africa through Africans.

Don Bosco had an exchange of ideas with him. In 1869 Comboni tried, unsuccessfully, to associate him with his project and the following year invited him to send some priests and lay people to direct an institute in Cairo and thus prepare him for the missions in Africa, at the centre of which he counted on entrusting the Salesians with an Apostolic Vicariate. At Valdocco, the request, which was not granted, was replaced by a willingness to accept boys to be educated for the missions. There, however, the group of Algerians recommended by Archbishop Charles Martial Lavigerie found difficulties, so they were sent to Nice, France. The request in 1869 by the same archbishop to have Salesian helpers in an orphanage in Algiers in times of emergency was not granted. In

the same way, the petition by Brescian missionary Giovanni Bettazzi to send Salesians to run an up-and-coming institute of arts and trades, as well as a small minor seminary in the diocese of Savannah (Georgia, USA) was suspended from 1868. Proposals from others, whether to direct educational works in “mission territories”, or direct action *in partibus infidelium*, could also have been attractive, but Don Bosco would never give up either his full freedom of action – which he perhaps saw compromised by the proposals he had received – or above all his special work with the young, for whom he was at the time very busy developing the newly approved Salesian Society (1869) beyond the borders of Turin and Piedmont. In short, until 1870 Don Bosco, although theoretically sensitive to missionary needs, was cultivating other projects at a national level.

Four years of unfulfilled requests (1870-1874)

The missionary theme and the important questions related to it were the object of attention during the First Vatican Council (1868-1870). If the document *Super Missionibus Catholicis* was never presented in the general assembly, the presence in Rome of 180 bishops from “mission lands” and the positive information about the Salesian model of religious life, spread among them by some Piedmontese bishops, gave Don Bosco the opportunity to meet many of them and also to be contacted by them, both in Rome and Turin.

Here on 17 November 1869 the Chilean delegation was received, with the Archbishop of Santiago and the Bishop of Concepción. In 1870 it was the turn of Bishop D. Barbero, Apostolic Vicar in Hyderabad (India), already known to Don Bosco, who asked him about Sisters being available for India. In July 1870 Dominican Archbishop G. Sadoc Alemany, Archbishop of San Francisco in California (USA), came to Valdocco. He asked, successfully, for the Salesians for a hospice with a vocational school (which was never built). Franciscan Bishop L. Moccagatta, Apostolic Vicar of Shantung (China) and his confrere Bishop Eligio Cusi, later his successor, also visited

Valdocco. In 1873 it was the turn of Bisop T. Raimondi from Milan who offered Don Bosco the possibility of going to direct Catholic schools in the Apostolic Prefecture of Hong Kong. The negotiations, which lasted over a year, came to a standstill for various reasons, just as in 1874 did a project for a new seminary by Fr Bertazzi for Savannah (USA) also remain on paper. The same thing happened in those years for missionary foundations in Australia and India, for which Don Bosco started negotiations with individual bishops, which he sometimes gave as a *fait accompli* to the Holy See, while in reality they were only projects in progress.

In those early 1870s, with a staff consisting of little more than two dozen people (including priests, clerics and brothers), a third of them with temporary vows, scattered across six houses, it would have been difficult for Don Bosco to send some of them to mission lands. All the more so since the foreign missions offered to him up to that time outside Europe presented serious difficulties of language, culture and non-native traditions, and the long-standing attempt to have young English-speaking personnel, even with the help of the Rector of the Irish college in Rome, Msgr Toby Kirby, had failed.

(continued)

Historic photo: The Port of Genoa, November 14, 1877.

The Salesian presence in Ethiopia and Eritrea

The Salesian mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea had its beginnings in 1975, when the first three Salesians –from

Ireland Fr Patrick Morrin, from USA Bro. Joseph Reza and from Italy Bro. Cesare Bullo – arrived in Mekele (Tigray-Ethiopia). Under the guidance of the Middle East (MOR) Province, they responded to the Congregation's call to explore new frontiers. Later, in 1982, other missionaries from the Lombardo-Emiliana Province (ILE) arrived in Dilla as part of *Project Africa*. The Salesian presence in Eritrea began in Dekemhare in 1995. In 1998, the communities of the two provinces united to form the Mariam Kidane Meheret Vice-Province (AET).

In October 2025 we will celebrate fifty (50) years of presence (Golden Jubilee). It is the time to thank the Lord and praise him, and to remember and thank those who have made the blessing of Salesian Charism reality for the young people of Ethiopia and Eritrea. Special thanks goes to all the missionaries and all the benefactors, may God bless you abundantly.

When God wants to bless His people, he makes use of other people. When he wanted to bless all his people he called Abraham: *"and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice"* (Genesis 22:18), when He wanted to free his people from slavery he called Moses (Exodus 3), and when he wanted to remind his people of his love he called prophets. And in our time God has spoken through his Son: *"but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds"* (Hebrews 1:2). His love is revealed to us through the incarnation of the Second Person of the most Holy Trinity – the Word of God became flesh (cf. John 1:14) comes to show us how much God loves us: *"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life"* (John 3:16).

And when he wanted to bless Ethiopian and Eritrean young people through the Charism of the Salesians he inspired the late bishop of the Adigrat Eparchy Bishop Abune Hailemariam

Kahsay who asked the Salesians to come to his Eparchy and offer holistic education to young people. If we say yes to the Lord to collaborate with him in blessing his people, we need to be consistent, persevering and take commitment to try to understand his plan and his time, as well as to make our contribution. Since the answer of the Salesians was late in coming he asked three of his priests who were studying in Italy to become Salesians, and in this way to start the Salesian presence in Ethiopia. One of those three – Abba Sebhattleab Worku – after becoming a Salesian, was teaching philosophy in Lebanon, while following his initial formation – and was appointed as bishop of the Adigrat Eparchy succeeding Abune Hailemariam Kahsay. As the Word of God says *“Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit”* (John 12:24). The fruit did not come when Abune Hailemariam was alive but the seed with which he collaborated to sow gave fruit after his death. Then Abba Sebhattleab Worku made his final profession before being consecrated bishop, and he was able to welcome the first Salesians on 17 October 1975 in Mekele. From then on it spread to different parts of Ethiopia (Adigrat, Adwa, Shire, Dilla, Soddo, Adamitullu, Zway, Debrezeit, Addis Abeba, Gambella) and in Eritrea (Dekemhare, Asmara and Barentu).

There are sixteen presences (13 communities in Ethiopia, two communities and one presence in Eritrea). In Ethiopia we are running Six (6) Technical Institutes, Eight (8) Primary Schools, Five (5) Secondary Schools, thirteen (13) Oratory/Youth Centers, one (1) home for Children at Risk, Five (5) Parishes, three (3) Aspirantates, formation houses for the novices and postnovices.

Geographically Ethiopia is located in East Africa (Horn of Africa) bordering with Kenya, Somalia, Djibouti, Eritrea, Sudan and South Sudan. It is one of the ancient countries (sometimes called Aksumite Kingdom). In history it developed

but through lack of continuity and conflict, much of the past has been destroyed and it is trying to start anew, instead of building on what was already begun, causing the country to remain as one of under-developed countries.

In just the last fifty years of Salesian presence, we have seen three bloody wars: 1974-1991 – seventeen (17) years of civil war to overthrow the dictator and to build a democratic government; 1998-2000 two years of bloody war with the excuse of a “border” conflict with Eritrea. In 2020, a conflict broke out between the Federal Government and its allies and the Tigray Region; although it apparently ended in 2022 with the Pretoria Agreement, the war continued between the Federal Government and the Amhara Region and is still ongoing. Moreover, conflicts that began years ago in the Oromia region – one of Ethiopia’s largest regions – continue to persist.

War consumes immense human and material resources, destroys infrastructure and human relations, and hampers investment and tourism. We witness these effects in our own countries and in many parts of the world.

As Salesians, we believe that the only way out from conflicts and war, from poverty and lack of peace is through education and we have continued within the war and conflict giving education for the poor young people to build their future and their peaceful co-existence. Practising the Salesian preventive system: being with the young, being interested in their life and with a readiness to listen to them and to dialogue with them, trying to give them the values of *Religion, being reasonable with them, and starting everything by loving them* makes it possible for us to educate them.

Throughout our fifty year journey we have faced political (lack of stability and wars), social, economic challenges. Nowadays the main challenge is political instability and the issue of resources (human and financial). Following the directions of the General Chapters, we have sought to work

together with lay people, and even though we have made progress, there is still a long way to go. The work with the Salesian Family is also another challenge that needs to be addressed. We are so grateful for the provinces who have contributed to the foundation and growth of the Salesian presence in Ethiopia and Eritrea.

We are still in an emergency situation following the war and lack of stability, because there are many Internally Displaced People in the camps – in schools (many government schools are not providing education for students) in Tigray. Our schools are accommodating students from among Internally Displaced People (IDPs), and these students and their families are still in need of daily food. We intervene when we can – thanks to the help that comes from the Don Bosco network and from other benefactors, and the students are fully dependent on us for all school materials.

For religious life we face a lack of prepared formation guides. Even though there are still vocations, our capacity to take care of them is difficult, considering the times we are living in. We need more prepared personnel.

There are one hundred and four (104) Salesians in Ethiopia and Eritrea including those who are in initial formation. The majority are local vocations already holding responsibility which shows that the foundation is established. The Vice-Province (AET) has three main priorities – *Salesian Charismatic Religious Identity, Youth Ministry involving the lay people, and Self-sustainability.*

And we hope that slowly we will learn from our own history and make an effort to live together in harmony so that the mission moves smoothly towards the young people who are in need, and make a good contribution to the education and growth of the young – *Good Believers and Upright Citizens.*

Together with our benefactor and all collaborators, we are

committed to continuing to journey with the young people to work for a better society and the Church!

Fr Hailemariam Medhin, sdb
Superior of the AET Vice-Province

Interview with Fr Aurélien MUKANGWA, Superior of the Africa Congo Congo Vice-Province

We put a few questions to Fr Aurélien MUKANGWA, Superior of the Africa Congo Congo (ACC) Vice-Province, for readers of the Salesian Bulletin OnLine.

Fr Aurélien was born on 9 November 1975 in Lubumbashi, Democratic Republic of Congo. He completed his novitiate at Kansebula from 24 August 1999 to 24 August 2000. He then made his perpetual profession in Lubumbashi on 8 July 2006 and was ordained a priest on 12 July 2008.

At local level, he has held the positions of Headmaster in Uvira, Kinshasa, Lukunga and Le Gombe, and of School Principal in Masina. Before the establishing of the current ACC Vice-Province, he was chosen to be the Superior of the DRC-WEST Delegation for four years, and at the time of this appointment, he was again the Provincial Delegate in the new AFC East Delegation, based in Goma.

Fr Mukangwa is the son of Donatien Symba Mukangwa and Judith Munyampala Mwange, and holds a Diploma in Pedagogy. He has taken on this new role of leadership and governance of the ACC

Vice-Province – covering part of the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Republic of Congo – for the six-year period 2023-2029.

Can you present yourself?

My name is Mukangwa Mwanangoy Aurélien, and I was born in Lubumbashi (Haut Katanga) in the Democratic Republic of Congo on 9 November 1975 to my late father Donatien Symba Mukangwa and my mother Judith Munyampara Mwange. I am the second of 11 children, 7 boys and four girls.

I became a Salesian of Don Bosco nearly 24 years ago, on 24 August 2000. And since 24 May 2023, I have been installed as the second provincial superior of the vice-province of Mary Help of Christians Africa Congo-Congo (ACC). Immediately after my initial formation, I worked in Uvira, Kinshasa, Lubumbashi and Goma, and now I'm at the Vice-Province headquarters in Kinshasa.

What is the story of your vocation?

Thank you very much for this beautiful question, which I find very essential, because what's important for me is the encounter with Don Bosco that led to my being called a Salesian.

The vocational influence I've had depends on the place of my birth, my childhood and my youth. I was born and grew up in a district that was pastorally served exclusively by the Salesians of Don Bosco. At the time, all the parishes in the commune of Kenya (Lubumbashi-RDC) were run by the Salesians of Don Bosco. My first contact with the Salesians was at kindergarten (aged 4), where I met Salesians such as Fathers Eugène, Carlos Sardo, Angelo Pozzi and Luigi Landoni. In my parish of Saint Benoit (Kenya), when I was very young, I used to go to the oratory and the playground, where I also met Father Jacques Hantson, SDB, and the young Salesians in formation who came from Kansebula (post-novitiate). In the same parish, I also met Father André Ongenaert, SDB. Around 1987, the family moved to the neighbourhood behind the Cité

des Jeunes de Lubumbashi, founded by the Salesians. And there I had the privilege of getting to know many African Salesians and missionaries.

So, from an early age, I harboured the desire to become like these Salesians who came to do pastoral work in my parish, because they inspired me so much by their way of doing things and being with us, their way of welcoming children and the availability they had to listen to young people, especially their commitment to the service of poor young people and the joy they put around us all.

How did you get to know Don Bosco / the Salesians?

As I said earlier, I got to know Don Bosco through the Salesians of Don Bosco in my parish, in my school, in my education through the Salesians, books and films about Don Bosco.

Do you remember a particular teacher?

Father Jacques Hantson, for the Salesian and missionary spirit with which he guided us in the oratory of the parish of Saint Benoît in Lubumbashi. Father Hantson was a Belgian missionary and today he rests with his heavenly father.

What were the greatest difficulties you encountered?

The greatest difficulties we have encountered so far are the poverty of young people abandoned by the state, their parents and adults; young people who have become victims of war, unemployment, drugs, prostitution, poverty and exploitation in various forms. The other difficulty is the lack of real solutions to the problems of young people and the lack of human, material and financial resources to provide proper assistance to these vulnerable young people in difficulty.

What is your best experience?

My best experience in my Salesian life has been as an assistant in the pre-novitiate house, in oratory activities, and in school and social pastoral work.

Over time I've learnt that from both positive and negative

experiences, we need to draw good lessons for life and try to be positive in order to make Salesian optimism a reality.

Are Christians in the region persecuted?

I have to say here that the geographical area of our vice-province is, by grace, predominantly Christian. So Christians are not persecuted here. However, they are sometimes victims of the socio-political and security situation in the countries that make up our Vice-Province.

What are the major challenges of evangelisation and mission today?

Today the great challenges of evangelisation and mission are those of the digital world, where we find a fairly large number of young people confronted with Artificial Intelligence, with all its pitfalls.

Another specific challenge for our Vice-Province is the expansion of the Salesian mission throughout our geographical area. There are young people on the periphery who need Don Bosco's charism. But for this to happen, we need to invest heavily in the formation of quality Salesians who are truly "passionate about Jesus Christ and dedicated to young people".

What role does Mary Help of Christians play in your life?

As a Catholic Christian and a Salesian of Don Bosco, Mary has an important place in my life. Thanks to Salesian spirituality, I have learnt to deepen the dimension of devotion to Mary Help of Christians. Every morning, at the end of our meditation, we pray the Salesian prayer to Mary Help of Christians, and I find time during the day and in the evening to ask the Virgin Mary for help with my vocation, the Salesian mission, the Salesian family and especially young people. I have great confidence in her. She is my Mother. She is intrinsically linked to my vocation; in fact, I owe it to her.

What would you say to the young people of today?

In view of the challenges facing young people today, there are many things to say. To young people, I say that God has given

them a great gift in the person of Don Bosco through the Salesian charism. Every young person who meets Don Bosco has a duty to build his or her life on Salesian values. I don't need to remind you of the command Don Bosco left us: "Teach young people the ugliness of sin and the beauty of virtue." Anyone who has not yet met Don Bosco should contact a Salesian organisation. Dear young people, you are the protagonists of your future, a better and radiant future! So don't waste time. Get involved. Take advantage of the Salesian charism. It's there for you.

A Salesian, Director of the Pontifical Missionary Works in Lithuania

On 16 June 2024, Cardinal Luis Antonio G. Tagle, Pro-Prefect of the Dicastery for Evangelisation, confirmed Fr Alessandro as National Director of the Pontifical Missionary Works (POM) in Lithuania for another five-year term (2024-2029). Fr Alessandro, a Salesian from Turin, has been working as a missionary in Lithuania since 1998. He is currently the rector of the Salesian community in Vilnius, pastor of the parish entrusted to the Salesians and editor of the Lithuanian Salesian Bulletin.

He was appointed national director of the POM in 2019 at the proposal of the Lithuanian Bishops' Conference, and his post can be summarised as the Church of Lithuania's national commissioner of missionary animation, especially with a special eye for missions directly dependent on the Pontifical Organisations.

What are the Pontifical Missionary Societies?

The Pontifical Missionary Societies (POM) are a worldwide network of prayer and solidarity in the service of the Pope to meet the spiritual and material needs of peoples and local Churches in the so-called mission territories. They are an organisation of the universal Catholic Church that promotes and supports missionary activities worldwide. Their main mission is to spread the Gospel and support Christian communities in developing countries. In each country of the world, there is a national POM directorate that, through the various diocesan directors or national appointees of religious congregations or ecclesial movements, coordinates the initiatives of that country for the growth of missionary attention.

Let us look in detail at the history, the theological and ecclesial motivation of these 4 Works and their specificity.

1. Work of the Propagation of the Faith: founded in 1822 in Lyon, France, by Blessed Pauline Jaricot. Its purpose is to provide financial and spiritual support to Catholic missions around the world. It was recognised as 'Pontifical' by Pope Pius XI in 1922.

2. *Opera dell'Infanzia Missionaria* (also known as Holy Childhood): founded in 1843 by Charles de Forbin-Janson, Bishop of Nancy, France. It aims to sensitise children in Christian countries to the missionary cause and to promote solidarity among children worldwide. It was also recognised as 'Pontifical' by Pope Pius XI in 1922.

3. *Opera di San Pietro Apostolo*: founded in 1889 by Jeanne Bigard and her mother Stéphanie in Caen, France. Its aim is to support the training of local clergy in mission territories. It supports scholarships for clergy and priests from mission countries, both locally and abroad. Declared 'Pontifical' in 1922 by Pope Pius XI.

4. Missionary Union of the Clergy: founded in 1916 by Father

Paolo Manna, a PIME (Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions) missionary. It promotes missionary awareness among clergy and pastoral workers. It is not just for the clergy, but for the awareness of the entire people of God as possessors of the universal missionary mandate. It became a pontifical work in 1956, under the pontificate of Pope Pius XII.

Theological and ecclesial motivation

POM is rooted in the Church's mission to evangelise, which originates from Christ's mandate to his disciples: "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19). Mission is therefore seen as a response to the divine invitation to share the Good News with all nations.

The heart of mission is the proclamation of salvation in Jesus Christ, the proclamation of the Kingdom of God and the witnessing of the Christian faith.

On the other hand, proclamation not supported by solidarity would not be very credible. The POMs express the solidarity of the universal Church with the young Churches, especially in the poorest countries, through spiritual and material aid.

From the ecclesial point of view, the POMs are a concrete expression of missionary cooperation within the universal Church. They provide support to local churches in mission territories, helping them to develop church structures and to train clergy and laity. They also promote missionary awareness among the faithful, stimulating prayer, missionary vocation and financial support for missions. They facilitate international cooperation within the Church, enabling an equitable distribution of resources for mission needs.

The Pontifical Mission Societies are a vital component of the Catholic Church, embodying a commitment to evangelisation and global solidarity. Their history reflects a continuous and growing attention towards missions, while their theological and ecclesial motivation highlights the importance of the missionary mandate in the context of the Christian faith.

We Salesians are also called to be part of this ecclesial

missionary journey of spiritual and material closeness and solidarity.

Universal Mission Collection

Since 1926, World Mission Day has been celebrated on the penultimate Sunday of October in all the Catholic communities of the world, as a day of prayer and universal solidarity among sister Churches. It is a time when each one of us is called to face up to the responsibility that is incumbent on every baptised person and on every Christian community, whether small or large, in response to Jesus' mandate "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mk 16:15). It is placed at the beginning of the pastoral year to remind us that the missionary dimension must inspire every moment of our lives and that "missionary action" Pope Francis reminds us "is the paradigm of every work of the Church" (EG 15).

The Day is associated with an annual collection of offerings with which the Pontifical Missionary Societies, an expression of the Pope's solicitude towards all the Christian communities of the world, come to the aid of the young missionary Churches, especially those in difficult situations and of greatest need, providing for their basic pastoral needs: training of local seminarians, priests, religious, catechists; construction and maintenance of places of worship, seminaries and parish structures; support for local Catholic TV, Radio and Press; provision of means of transport for missionaries (cars, motorbikes, bicycles, boats); support for the education, upbringing and Christian formation of children and young people. For this reason, this collection of offerings differs from other purposes, as well as from other possible forms of cooperation between particular Churches.

Theme of World Mission Day 2024

Every year the Holy Father sends a message to the whole Church on the occasion of World Mission Day. This message pays special attention to the activities of the POMs in the service

of the whole Church. This 2024, the theme of World Mission Day is “Go and invite everyone to the banquet”, inspired by Mt 22:9. This theme was chosen to emphasise the mission of the Church to bring the invitation to salvation to all humanity, reflecting the parable of the wedding feast in which the king invites everyone at the crossroads to participate in the banquet.

Pope Francis highlights three key aspects:

1. “Go and invite!” Mission as a tireless going out to everyone to invite them to an encounter and communion with God. This calls the Church to always be outgoing, overcoming obstacles and difficulties to bring the Gospel to all.
2. The “Banquet”. The eschatological and Eucharistic perspective of the mission. The eschatological banquet symbolises the final salvation in the Kingdom of God, and participation in the Eucharist anticipates this perfect communion with God.
3. “Everyone”. The universal mission of Christ’s disciples, who must go to the margins of society to invite all, without exclusion, to participate in the new life in Christ.

Fr Alessandro BARELLI, sdb

Don Bosco in the Solomon Islands

Accompanied by a local Salesian, we get to know a significant educational presence in Oceania.

The presence of Don Bosco has reached every continent in the world. We can say that only Antarctica is missing, and even in the islands of Oceania the Salesian

charism, which is well adapted to the different cultures and traditions, is spreading.

For almost 30 years, the Salesians have also been working in the Solomon Islands, a country in the southwest Pacific comprising more than 900 islands. They arrived on 27 October 1995, at the request of Archbishop Emeritus Adrian Smith, and started work with three confreres from Japan, the first Salesian pioneers in the country. Initially they moved to Tetere, in the parish of Christ the King on the outskirts of the capital Honiara on the island of Guadalcanal, and later opened another presence in Honiara in the Henderson area. There are fewer than ten Salesians working in the country and they come from different countries in Asia and Oceania: Philippines, India, Korea, Vietnam, Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands.



The Solomon Islands is a very poor country in the oceanic region of Melanesia, which has experienced a lot of political instability and social problems since independence in 1978, experiencing conflicts and violent ethnic clashes within its borders. Although known as the “Happy Islands”, the country is gradually moving away from this identity, as it is facing all kinds of challenges and problems stemming from drug and alcohol abuse, corruption, early pregnancies, broken families, lack of employment and educational opportunities, and so on, says Salesian Thomas Bwagaaro, who accompanies us in this article.

Solomon Islands has an estimated population of about 750,000 people, and the majority are young people. The population is predominantly Melanesian, with some Micronesian, Polynesian and other peoples. The majority of the population is Christian, but there are also other faiths such as the Bahai Faith and Islam that are gradually making their way into

the country. The paradisaical seascapes and the rich biodiversity make these islands a fascinating and fragile place at the same time. Thomas tells us that the young people are generally docile and dream of a better future. However, with the increase in population and the lack of services and even a space to get a higher education, it seems that today's youth are generally frustrated with the government and many young people resort to crime, such as dealing illegal drugs, drinking, pickpocketing, stealing and so on, especially in the city, just to earn an income. In this not easy situation, the Salesians roll up their sleeves to offer hope for the future.

In the Tetere community, the work is concentrated in the school, a vocational training centre offering agricultural courses, and in the parish of Christ the King. In addition to the formal education courses, there are playgrounds in the school for students, young people attending the parish and communities living in the same area, and the oratory is open at weekends. The challenge the community faces is the distance from Honiara and the lack of resources to help the school meet the welfare of the students. As far as the parish is concerned, the poor condition of the roads leading to the villages is a major concern, which often contributes to vehicle problems and therefore makes transportation more difficult.

The Honiara-Henderson community runs a vocational technical school that caters for young men and women who have dropped out of school and do not have the opportunity to continue their studies. Technical courses range from electrical technology, metal fabrication and welding, business office administration, hospitality and tourism, information technology, automotive technology, building construction and solar energy course.

In addition to this, the community also supports a learning centre that mainly caters for children and young people from the Honiara landfill and the communities

surrounding the school who do not have the opportunity to attend normal schools.



However, due to the lack of facilities, not everyone can be accommodated at the centre, despite the efforts of the entire community. Following Don Bosco's Preventive System, the Salesians not only offer educational opportunities, but also take care of the spiritual aspect of the students through various programmes and religious activities, to form them to be 'good Christians and upright citizens'. Through its programmes, the Salesian school conveys positive messages to the children and educates them in discipline and balance, to prevent them from falling into the problems of drug and alcohol abuse, which are widespread among young people. One challenge the Salesian community faces in providing quality education is the training of staff, so that they are always professional and at the same time share Salesian charismatic values, in a spirit of educational co-responsibility. The school needs lay missionaries and volunteers who are committed to helping young people realise their dreams and become a better version of themselves.

Although the current situation in the country is likely to be more difficult in the years to come, Thomas tells us, "believe that the young people of Solomon Islands want and hope for a better future, they want people who inspire them to dream, who accompany them, who listen to them and guide them to hope and to look beyond the challenges and problems they continually experience every day, especially when they migrate to the city."

But how can a vocation to Salesian consecrated life be born in Solomon Islands?

Thomas Bwagaaro is one of only two Salesians from Solomon Islands. "It is a privilege for me to work for young people in

my country. As a local, dealing with young people and listening to the struggles they sometimes face gives me strength and courage to be a good Salesian." The educational work and personal testimony of life can be a source of inspiration for other young people who want to join the Salesian congregation and continue Don Bosco's dream of helping young people in this region, as happened in Thomas' story. His journey to become a Salesian began as a student at Don Bosco Tetera in 2011. Inspired by the way the Salesians interacted with the students, he was captivated and remembers his two years there as the best student experience, which gave him hope and the chance to dream of a bright future, despite the difficult situation and lack of opportunities. The vocational journey in the community began with participation in the Salesians' morning and evening prayer times, with a gradual and growing sense of sharing. Thus, in 2013, Thomas entered the Salesian Savio Haus aspirantate in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, attending boarding school for four years with other companions. The clearly international Salesian formation continued in the Philippines, in Cebu, with the pre-novitiate and subsequent novitiate, at the end of which Thomas made his first vows as a Salesian at the Shrine of Mary Help of Christians in Port Moresby on the solemnity of Mary Help of Christians, 24 May 2019. He then returned to the Philippines to study philosophy and finally returned to the PGS Vice-Province that includes Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands. "As a local Salesian, I am very grateful to my family who supported me wholeheartedly and to the brothers who set a good example and accompanied me on my journey as a young Salesian." Religious life, alongside young people together with many exemplary lay people, is still as relevant today as it was in the past. "Looking to the future, I can confidently say that the Solomon Islands will continue to have many young people and the need for Salesians, Salesian volunteers and lay missionary partners to continue this wonderful apostolate of helping young people to be good Christians and upright citizens will be very relevant."

Missionaries in the Netherlands

In the common imagination 'missions' are about the south of the world, in reality it is not a geographical criterion at the basis and Europe is also a destination for Salesian missionaries: in this article we talk about the Netherlands.

When Don Bosco dreamt, between 1871 and 1872, of “barbarians” and “savages”, according to the language of the time, tall in stature and with fierce faces, dressed in animal skins walking in an area completely unknown to him with missionaries in the distance, in whom he recognised his Salesians, he could not have foreseen the enormous development of the Salesian Congregation in the world. Thirty-five years later – 18 years after his death – the Salesians would found their first province in India and 153 years later India became the first country in the world in terms of number of Salesians. What Don Bosco could not have imagined at all is that Indian Salesians would come to Europe, particularly the Netherlands, to work as missionaries and to live and experience their vocation.

Let us meet Fr Biju Oledath sdb, born in 1975 in Kurianad, Kerala, southern India. A Salesian since 1993, he arrived in the Netherlands as a missionary in 1998, after studying philosophy at the Salesian college in Sonada. After his practical training, he completed his theological studies at the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium. In 2004, he was ordained a priest in India and served as a young priest in the parish of Alapuzha, Kerala, before returning the following

year to the Netherlands as a missionary. He currently lives and works in the Salesian community in Assel.

In Fr Biju's heart, when he was young, was the seed of the mission *ad gentes* and, in particular, the desire to be destined for Africa, inspired by his Indian brothers who left for Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. This missionary dream was fuelled by their stories and all the material they wrote, letters and articles about Salesian work in Africa. However, his superiors thought he was still too young and not yet ready for this step and his family also thought it was too dangerous for him to leave at that time. Fr Biju tells us, "Looking back, I agree with them: I had to complete my initial formation first and I really wanted to study theology at a good university. It would not have been so easy in those countries at the time."

But if the missionary desire is sincere and comes from God, the moment of the call always arrives: the Salesian missionary vocation, in fact, is a call within the common call to consecrated life for the Salesians of Don Bosco. So in 1997 Fr Biju was offered the mission *ad gentes* in Europe, in the Netherlands, certainly a very different project from missionary life in Africa. After his practical training, he would study theology at the Catholic University of Leuven (Belgium). "I had to swallow for a moment, but I was still happy to be able to leave for a new country", Fr Biju admits. He was determined to travel the world for the sake of young people.

It is not obvious to know the place where one is sent as a missionary, perhaps one has heard something about the country or some story about it. "I had already heard about the Netherlands, I knew it was below sea level and I had read a story about a child who put his finger in a dam to prevent a flood, thus saving the country. I immediately started looking for a world atlas and at first I had some difficulty finding it among all the other big European countries." Fr Biju's

father was still against it, worried about the distance and the long journey, while his mother urged him to obey his vocation and follow his dream of happiness.

Before reaching Europe, there was a long wait to obtain a visa for the Netherlands. Thus, Fr Biju was destined to work with street children in Bangalore. In mid-December 1998, on a cold winter day, he finally arrived at Amsterdam airport, where the provincial and two other Salesians were waiting for the Indian missionary. The warm welcome compensated for the culture shock of approaching a new place, very different from India, where it is always hot and many people live in the streets. Enculturation takes time to get used to, getting to know and understand dynamics that are totally unknown at home.

Fr Biju's first year was spent getting to know the different Salesian houses and works: "I realised that there are really nice people and I started to adapt to all these new impressions and habits. The Netherlands is not only cold and rainy, but also beautiful, sunny and warm. The Salesians were very kind and hospitable to Fr Biju, concerned to make him feel comfortable and at home. Certainly the way the Dutch live their Christian faith is very different from India, and the impact can be shocking: big churches with few people, mostly elderly, different songs and music, a more humble style. On top of that, Fr Biju tells us, "I really missed the food, the family, the friends... especially the closeness of young Salesians my own age around me." But as the understanding of the situation improves, the differences begin to make sense and make sense.

To be an effective Salesian missionary in Europe, working in a secularised society often requires adaptability, cultural sensitivity and a gradual understanding of the local context, which cannot be obtained overnight. This work requires patience, prayer, study and reflection that help to discover the faith in the light of a new culture. This openness allows missionaries to dialogue with sensitivity and respect with the

new culture, recognising the diversity and plurality of religious values and perspectives.

Missionaries must develop a deeply rooted personal faith and spirituality in the place where they are, as men of prayer, in the face of declining rates of religious affiliation, less interest or openness to spiritual matters, and the absence of new vocations to religious/Salesians life.

There is a great risk of getting lost in a secularised society where materialism and individualism are prevalent and there may be less interest or openness to spiritual matters. If one is not careful, a young missionary can easily fall into religious and spiritual scepticism and indifference. In all these moments, it is important to have a spiritual director who can guide one to the right discernment.

Like Fr Biju, there are some 150 Salesians who have been sent all over Europe since the beginning of the new millennium, to this continent in need of re-Christianisation, where the Catholic faith needs to be reinvigorated and sustained. Missionaries are a gift for the local community, both Salesian and at the level of the Church and society. The richness of cultural diversity is a reciprocal gift for those who welcome and for those who are welcomed, and helps to open horizons by showing a more "catholic", i.e. universal, face of the Church. Salesian missionaries also bring a breath of fresh air to some Provinces that are finding it difficult to make a generational change, where young people are less and less interested in vocations to the consecrated life.

Despite the trend towards secularisation, there are signs of a revival of spiritual interest in the Netherlands, particularly among the younger generations. In recent years, an openness to religiosity and a decline in anti-religious sentiments can be noted. This manifests itself in various forms, including alternative forms of being church, the exploration of alternative spiritual practices, mindfulness and the re-evaluation of traditional religious beliefs. There is an

increasing need to assist young people, as a significant group of young people suffer from loneliness and depression, despite the general well-being of society. As Salesians, we must read the signs of the times to be close to young people and help them.

We see signs of hope for the Church, brought by migrant Christians arriving in Europe and by demographic, cultural and life changes in many local communities. In the Salesian community of Hassel, young Christian immigrants from the Middle East often gather, bringing their vibrant faith, their opportunities and contributing positively to our Salesian community.

“All this gives me a great feeling and makes me realise how good it is to be able to work here, in what is initially a foreign country for me.”

Let us pray that the missionary ardour may always remain burning and that there will be no lack of missionaries willing to listen to God's call to take his Gospel to all continents through the simple and sincere witness of life.

by Marco Fulgaro

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.

Marco Fulgaro