

Missionary in Patagonia

Patagonia, the southern region of South America, divided between Argentina and Chile, is a territory present in Don Bosco's first missionary dreams. This "dream" has also been realised in a mission that bears fruit even today.

The name comes from the natives of those lands, Patagonians, a term used by Ferdinand Magellan, natives that today are identified as the Tehuelche and Aonikenk tribes. These natives were dreamt of by Don Bosco in 1872, as Fr Lemoyne recounts in his *Biographical Memoirs* (BM X,54-55).

"I seemed to be in a wild region I had never before seen, an immense untilled plain, unbroken by hills or mountains, except at the farthest end, where I could see the outline of jagged mountains. Throngs of naked, dark-skinned, fierce-looking, long-haired men of exceptional They were almost naked, of an extraordinary height and stature, of a fierce appearance, with shaggy and long hair, of tan and black color, and only dressed in wide cloaks of animal skins, which came down from their shoulders. Their weapons were long spears and slings.

These throngs, scattered about, presented varied sights to the spectator: some men were hunting, others were carrying bloodied chunks of meat at spear point, still others were fighting among themselves or with European soldiers. I shuddered at the sight of corpses lying all over the ground. Just then many people came into sight at the far edge of the plain. Their clothing and demeanor told me they were missionaries of various orders who had come to preach the Christian faith to these barbarians. I stared intently at them but could recognize no one. They strode directly to those savages, but the latter immediately overwhelmed them with fiendish fury and hatred, killing them, ripping them apart, hacking them into pieces, and brandishing chunks of their flesh on the barbs of their long spears.

After witnessing this horrible bloodshed, I said to myself:

‘How can one convert so brutal a people?’

Then I saw a small band of other missionaries, led by a number of young boys, advance cheerfully toward those savages.

I feared for them, thinking:

‘They are walking to their death.’

I went to meet them; they were clerics and priests. When I looked closely at them, I recognized them as our own Salesians. I personally knew only those in front, but I could see that the others too were Salesians.

‘How can this be?’ I exclaimed.

I did not want them to advance any further because I feared that soon their fate would be that of the former missionaries. I expected at any moment that they would suffer the same fate as the former Missionaries. I was about to force them back when I saw that the barbarians seemed pleased by their arrival. Lowering their spears, they warmly welcomed them.

In utter amazement I said to myself:

‘Let’s see how things will turn out!’

I saw that our missionaries mingled with them and taught them, and they docilely listened and learned quickly. They readily accepted the missionaries’ admonitions and put them into practice.

As I stood watching, I noticed that the missionaries were reciting the rosary as they advanced, and that the savages, closing in from all sides, made way for them and joined in the prayers.

After a while, our Salesians moved into the center of the throng and knelt. Encircling them, the barbarians also knelt, laying their weapons at the missionaries’ feet. Then a missionary intoned: Praise Mary, Ye Faithful Tongues, and, as with one voice, the song swelled in such unison and power that I awoke, partly frightened.

I had this same dream four or five years ago, and it sharply impressed me because I took it as a heavenly sign. . Though I did not thoroughly grasp its specific meaning, I understood that it referred to the foreign missions, which even at that

time were one of my most fervent aspirations."

Thus the dream dated back to about 1872. At first Don Bosco believed that it referred to the tribes of Ethiopia, later to the regions around Hong Kong. and finally to the aborigines of Australia and of the [East] Indies. It was only in 1874, when, as we shall see, he received most pressing requests to send Salesians to Argentina, that he clearly understood that the natives he had seen in his dream lived in Patagonia, an immense region then almost entirely unknown.

The mission, which began almost 150 years ago, continues today.

One Salesian, Father Ding, felt the missionary call on his 50th birthday. It is a call within a call: within the vocation to follow God as a consecrated person in the Salesian Congregation, someone feels the call to take a further step, to leave everything and leave to take the Gospel to new places, the "missio ad gentes" for life. After finishing his assignment as Provincial Delegate for Missions in his last years in the Philippines, he made himself available to be part of the 152nd missionary expedition, and in 2021, he was assigned to Patagonia, in the Argentina-South Province (ARS).

After a course for new Salesian missionaries, which was shortened due to COVID, and the delivery of the missionary cross on 21 November 2021, the first commitment was to study Spanish, together with his companion Father Barnabé, from Benin, in Salamanca, Spain. But once they arrived in Argentina, Father Ding realised he could not understand so much because of how fast they seemed to speak and the differences in the accent. He continued in Buenos Aires, after which he reached his destination, Patagonia, land of the first Salesian missionaries. The welcome and kindness of the people in Buenos Aires made him feel at home and helped him overcome the cultural 'shocks'.

He tells us:

How do you come to be confirmed in your missionary vocation? In daily life, through everyday activities at school, in the parish and in the oratory. The spirit of Don Bosco is alive in the country that welcomed the first Salesian missionaries, precisely in La Boca where the first Salesian parish work began. One of the secrets that allows this vitality to continue today is the commitment of co-responsible lay people, who faithfully and creatively make themselves available, working side by side with the Salesians. A true example of family spirit and dedication to the mission, which practically realises the reflections of General Chapter 24 on collaboration between Salesians and lay people.

Another striking aspect here is the tireless work on behalf of the poor and marginalised. At La Boca, a Sunday lunch is prepared for the city's poor, and school staff, parishioners and members of the Salesian Family can be seen cooking and helping the needy, all together, starting with the community director and school headmaster. The oratory is very active, with fervent animators and the group of 'scouts', similar to the scouts who follow the values of the Gospel and Don Bosco.

Despite the challenge of the language barrier, Father Ding tells us: What I have learnt here is that you understand everyone and everything only if you give yourself wholeheartedly for the mission entrusted to you, for the people with whom and for whom you live.

In the coming months, Villa Regina (Río Negro) will be his new home, in Patagonia. We wish him a holy mission.

Marco Fulgaro

Salesian presence in the Caribbean

Beneath the Caribbean sun, in villages full of life and joy, Don Bosco continues to be a significant response for the young people of these lands.

For more than one hundred years, the Salesian presence has found both a fertile environment and climate in some Caribbean countries which today, as in the past, confirm their importance in the presence of their young people, in their joyful, affectionate and simple people, in their religious sensitivity and in the welcome they offer others: Cuba, Haiti, the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico have offered and continue to offer a propitious environment for the Salesian mission and a fertile land for Don Bosco's charism.

The Salesians, organised into two Provinces, the Antilles and Haiti, together with many other members of the Salesian Family, make this presence concrete today. They are the fruit of the generosity and passion of great missionaries with good will, big dreams, trust in Providence and commitment to the education and evangelisation of the young; this is how Don Bosco's presence was consolidated. There were also natural or social historical events that motivated the decisions that led to its current conformation.

A bit of history

Although the first request for Salesians in the West Indies dates back to 1896, the first country to receive a Salesian presence was Cuba in 1916, followed by the Dominican Republic in 1933, then Haiti in 1936 and finally Puerto Rico in 1947.

Dolores Betancourt, a native of Camagüey, had signed a private agreement in Turin with Fr Paul Albera regarding a foundation in her home town. The first Salesians arrived in Cuba on 4

April 1917 to open a work in Camagüey.

Fr José Calasanz (1872-1936), originally from Azanuy, Spain, a Salesian since 1890, was sent as a missionary to promote foundations in Cuba, Peru and Bolivia. In 1917, the first Salesians entered Cuba, together with Fr Esteban Capra and two Brothers (Bros Ullivarri and Celaya). In 1917, the Salesians were entrusted with the church dedicated to Our Lady of Charity in a rural area of Camagüey, from where they coordinated the first school of arts and trades.



Haiti, Cap-Haïtien

Salesian communities began to grow and consolidate in Cuba, first sharing canonical property with the Salesian Province of Tarragona, Spain. In 1924, it passed to the Province of Mexico and three years later, due to the religious persecution suffered in Mexico, the headquarters of the Province was transferred to Havana, Cuba.

Father Pittini carried out the duties of Provincial in the eastern part of the United States and there he received instructions from the Superior General, Fr Peter Ricaldone, to move to Santo Domingo to examine the possibility of the Congregation establishing itself in the Dominican Republic.

On 16 August 1933, Fr Pittini arrived in the port of San Pedro de Macorís. In February 1934, Fr Pittini took on the role of Superior of the Salesians who had just arrived in the Dominican Republic; he supervised the work of the school under construction and got to know the people. On 11 October 1935, Pope Pius XI appointed him Archbishop of Santo Domingo.



Haiti, Pétion-Ville

The Salesians arrived in Haiti in 1936. The Rector Major delegated Fr Peter Gimbert, former Provincial of Lyon, to implant the Salesian charism in Haiti. He arrived on 27 May 1936, accompanied by Salesian Bro. Adriano Massa. Later, other confreres arrived to complete the community.

From its foundation, Haiti was successively part of the Salesian Province of Mexico-Antilles with its headquarters in Havana; later it became part of the Province of the Antilles – along with Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico – with its headquarters in Santo Domingo.



Haiti, Gressier

The foundation in Puerto Rico became a reality on 24 April 1947, when Fr Pedro M. Savani, former Provincial of Mexico-Antille, arrived to take charge of the Parish of St John Bosco in Santurce, Lutz Street. From here, he began the management of an Oratory on what is now Cantera land, where, in 1949, he began the construction of the chapel that would later become the imposing Church of Mary Help of Christians.

The canonical erection of the Antilles Province took place on 15 September 1953 when Fr Renato Ziggiotti was Rector Major, under the patronage of St John Bosco, with its headquarters in La Víbora (Havana, Cuba). It was later transferred to Compostela (Old Havana). After the Cuban Revolution, the provincial headquarters was transferred to Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, at the Don Bosco College where it remained until 1993, when it was moved to its present location at Calle 30 de Marzo #52, in the city of Santo Domingo.

Since January 1992, Haiti has been a Vice-Province based in Port-au-Prince.

Don Bosco in the Caribbean today

The Salesian Province of the Antilles is made up of three countries in the Caribbean region: Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico. Haiti forms a separate Vice-Province. In total there are 169 Salesians of Don Bosco in the four countries: 15 in Cuba, 74 in Haiti, 67 in the Dominican Republic and 13 in Puerto Rico.

The works that animate the two Provinces in 32 communities include 41 educational centres (of which at least 20 are technical training centres), 33 oratories, 23 social works, 8 retreat-meeting houses, 1 environmental training centre, 3 formation houses, 4 social communication centres-recording studios, 2 radio stations and 18 parishes with 80 chapels and 44 mission houses.

The Salesian Family in the Caribbean has great vitality and is made up of various groups: Salesians of Don Bosco, Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, Salesian Cooperators, Association of Mary Help of Christians, Past Pupils (SDB-FMA), Daughters of the Sacred Hearts, Volunteers of Don Bosco, Damas Salesians and Parish Missionaries of Mary Help of Christians (the latter, a Pious Union, approved by the Archbishop of Santo Domingo, Archbishop Octavio A. Beras, was founded by Fr Andrés Nemeth, sdb, on 16 June 1961; although it is not part of the Salesian Family, but because of its closeness to it, it attends its meetings). Relations are warm, some pastoral projects are shared and they meet frequently.

In a very particular social and political climate, the four countries are experiencing a mass migration of their young people and entire families, motivated by hunger, lack of food and work, violence and the search for better paid opportunities. In these circumstances, the Salesian presence continues to be very committed to the processes of education, job training, citizenship and life of faith. There is a serious commitment to defending the rights to education, food and a dignified life for children, adolescents and young adults; playgrounds are used to accompany and encourage

playful activities and encounters that allow people to make friends. Music and dance are natural expressions that find in Salesian oratories the stimulus and space to express themselves at their best. Their courtyards have always been places of encounter and refuge, even in the face of natural events.

This presence today is prophetic in sharing with people the social realities that each country is experiencing, deciding to remain close to those most in need, encouraging daily faith, a simple friendship that speaks of God, full of hope and comfort, with fraternal gestures of solidarity and love for the most vulnerable, especially children and young people.



Santo Domingo, La Plaza

Fr Hugo OROZCO SÁNCHEZ, sdb
Regional Councillor for Interamerica

Mary Help of Christians in the city of eternal heat

“Once again I was able to see for myself, travelling in the Salesian world, that Mary Help of Christians – as promised by Don Bosco – is a beacon of light, a safe harbour, the maternal love of her son and of us all.”

Dear friends of Don Bosco, of the Salesian Bulletin and his precious charism, as I often do I want to share with you, in this month of May, an event that I experienced recently and

that touched my heart, and at the same time, made me think a lot about the responsibility we have regarding devotion to Mary Help of Christians.

On the day John Bosco entered the seminary, Mamma Margaret told him: “‘When you came into the world, I consecrated you to the Blessed Virgin: when you began your studies I recommended to you the devotion to this Mother of ours: now I say to you to be completely hers: love those of your companions who have devotion to Mary; and if you become a priest, always preach and promote devotion to Mary.’ My mother was deeply moved as she finished these words. ‘Mother,’ I replied, ‘I thank you for all you have said and done for me; these words of yours will not prove vain, I will treasure them all my life.’”

As our Memoirs often recall, Don Bosco threw himself into the arms of divine Providence, like a child into those of his mother.

A Salesian city



At the end of March, when I went to Peru again – Latin America – I wanted to go to the north-western part of the country and visit a city and a very significant Salesian presence. For several reasons.

First of all because Piura is called ‘the city of eternal heat’ by the locals themselves, or even ‘the city where summer never ends.’ It is certainly very hot there and the humidity makes it even hotter.

But at the same time it is a very Salesian city. More than a century of presence here has marked the spirit of the people with a very familiar, very simple, in short, very Salesian style of educational and relational ties.

Above all, it is a very Marian city, and within the sphere of the two Salesian presences it is very devoted to Mary Help of Christians.

Finally, I would like to emphasise the magnificent educational service that has been provided since the beginning of the presence with the Don Bosco school and especially, in recent decades, with the Salesian presence in Bosconia, a humble and beautiful presence in one of the most troubled, most peripheral and poorest neighbourhoods, and where, thanks to the commitment of so many people (both in civil society and in the Church) and above all thanks to the charism of Don Bosco, this part of the city continues to be transformed, offering vocational training opportunities to hundreds of boys and girls who, where they would have had no chance, today leave this Salesian home with a profession learned, practised and trained for the world of work.

In Bosconia there is even a magnificent Salesian medical centre run by a branch of our family, the Salesian Sisters. I think I have quickly described what I found in the 'city of eternal heat'. Everything is noteworthy, but I was particularly touched by the deep devotion to Mary Help of Christians. Almost unexpectedly – because only a couple of weeks before had I announced that I would like to come – I found myself at 6pm on a normal weekday in the midst of a crowd of more than three thousand people who had gathered to celebrate the Eucharist in honour of our Mother Help of Christians.

I saw hundreds of children and young people with their parents, dozens and dozens of boys, girls, teenagers from the various local Salesian oratories, teachers, educators, etc. The 'eternal heat of the city' seemed little compared to the faith, devotion, interiority and prayer, singing and everything else that I imagined filled the hearts of those people, just as it filled mine.

Once again I was able to see for myself, travelling in the Salesian world, that Mary Help of Christians – as promised by Don Bosco – is a beacon of light, a safe haven, the maternal love of her son and of all of us, her sons and daughters. She is ultimately the MOTHER in whom we abandon ourselves and who will always lead us to her beloved Son. I also saw this in

Piura.

Our Lady on the balcony

And at the same time I would like to add another small comment with a necessary self-criticism for all of us who are sons and daughters of Don Bosco. It comes down to this: God's spirit reaches where it wills and touches the hearts of his faithful in a way that only he knows how. This is the case with the devotion to the Mother of the Son of God, and my critical note is that not in all parts of the world has the Mother of Heaven, our Mother Help of Christians, been made known in the same way, with the same intensity, with the same apostolic passion. There are places where we have developed schools, where we have taken steps, where we have certainly served the good of the people, but we have not succeeded in making her known and loved.

This would be incomprehensible to Don Bosco. I will tell you that for me it is equally incomprehensible and unacceptable. Because, moreover, if there were people in Don Bosco's family who did not refer to Mary Help of Christians, they would be something else, but they would not be sons and daughters of Don Bosco. She, the Mother, and devotion to Mary Help of Christians as Mother of the Lord and our mother is not optional in the Salesian charism, as it was not for Don Bosco. It is, quite simply, essential. "Mary Most Holy is the foundress and she will be the supporter of our works," Don Bosco used to repeat continuously, "She will be generous with us with temporal and spiritual gifts. She will be our guide, our teacher, our mother. All the Lord's goods come to us through Mary."

In one of his dreams, Don Bosco saw a very noble Lady dressed royally, who came out on her balcony shouting: "My children, come, shelter yourselves under my mantle."

It is my fervent wish that she, the Mother of the beloved Son, she, the Help of Christians, continue to be as special in all parts of the world as she is in the "city of eternal heat" (Piura-Peru).

Happy Feast of Mary Help of Christians to everyone throughout the world.

Don Bosco in Uruguay. The missionary dream has become a reality

The Salesian mission in Uruguay, as shared by a Vietnamese priest, Father Domenico Tran Duc Thanh: Christian love through life lived with the local people.

The Salesians were officially founded as a Congregation in 1859, but the dream had been in the pipeline for a long time. Already at the beginning of his work, Don Bosco realised that the work had to be shared, as he had sensed in many of his dreams. So he involved people from all walks of life to collaborate in various ways in the youth mission that God had entrusted to him. In 1875, with the start of the missions, an important stage in the history of the Congregation began. The first destination would be Argentina.

On 13 December 1875, the first Salesian missionary expedition, led by Fr John Cagliero, bound for Buenos Aires, passed through Montevideo. Thus Uruguay became the third country outside Italy reached by the Salesians of Don Bosco. The Salesians settled in the Villa Colón neighbourhood, amidst enormous difficulties, starting their work at the *Colegio Pío*, which was inaugurated on 2 February 1877. In the same year, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians arrived in Uruguay and also settled in this neighbourhood: in this way, Villa Colón became the cradle from which the charism spread not only in Uruguay, but also in Brazil, Paraguay and other lands of

the Latin American continent.

Over time, that Salesian presence became a Province and today has a variety of Salesian works in different parts of the country: schools, social services, parishes, basilicas, shrines, rural and urban chapels, health centres, student and university residences, Salesian Youth Movement and more. The breadth of the work shows the response to the needs of the area and the flexibility of the Salesians in adapting to the local situation. By visiting people in the neighbourhood, trying to understand what the people are experiencing through dialogue and daily life, adaptation to new situations is carried out in order to better respond to the mission entrusted. This going out to meet young people, especially those most in need, makes the Salesians happy, allowing them to continue to discover the beauty of the Salesian vocation day by day.

The efforts in these works has been shared with the lay faithful, and having taken care of their formation, today we find a good number of them working in these activities, sharing their lives with the Salesians and strengthening their mission. Openness to others has also allowed Salesians who are not native to the area to be welcomed here. This is the case of Fr Dominic, who carries out his Salesian mission there.

The response to the missionary vocation is one that has left a strong mark on his life. He tells us that he found himself almost suddenly in an unfamiliar country, with a different language and culture, having had to separate himself from all the people he knew, who had remained far away. He had to start from scratch, with a different openness, with a new sensitivity. If before he thought that being a missionary meant taking Jesus to another place, once he arrived in Uruguay he discovered that Jesus was already there, waiting for him in other people. "Here in Uruguay, through others, I was able to encounter a totally different Jesus: closer, more human, simpler."

What he was not lacking was the maternal presence of Mary, who accompanies him in the daily routine of missionary life and gives him a profound strength, which drives him to love Christ in others. "When I was a child, my grandmother took me to a church every day to pray the rosary. From those days at her feet until today, I still feel protected under the mantle of Mary." Marian worship bears fruit; love is paid with love.

He confesses to us that: "In Uruguay I am a young man who has nothing; I only have faith, the faith of knowing that Christ and Mary are always present in my life; the hope of an ever closer Church, full of holiness and joy." But it is perhaps this poverty that helps him prepare his heart to follow Christ, educate his heart to be with the brothers and sisters he meets along the way. This leads him to see the Church as a place of joyful encounter, a celebration that manifests the faith of the other, an encounter that implies unity and holiness.

And this also leads him to realise that his place is right where he is, in his community with his brothers, with the people of the neighbourhood, with the animators, with the children, with the laity, with the educators.

This is how the beauty of the missionary vocation is manifested: by letting Providence act, through humility and docility to the Holy Spirit, one transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary.

Article edited by
Marco Fulgaro

**Don Bosco in Uruguay. The
missionary dream has become a
reality**



2 / 18



3 / 18



4 / 18



5 / 18



6 / 18



7 / 18



8 / 18



9 / 18



10 / 18



11 / 18



12 / 18



13 / 18



14 / 18



15 / 18



16 / 18



17 / 18



18 / 18



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