

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!

Venerable Ottavio Ortiz Arrieta Coya, Bishop

Octavio Ortiz Arrieta Coya, born in Lima, Peru, on 19 April 1878, was the first Peruvian Salesian. As a young man, he trained as a carpenter, but the Lord called him to a higher mission. He made his first Salesian profession on 29 January 1900 and was ordained a priest in 1908. In 1922, he was consecrated bishop of the diocese of Chachapoyas, a role he held with dedication until his death on 1 March 1958. Twice he refused appointment to the more prestigious see of Lima, preferring to remain close to his people. A tireless shepherd,

he travelled throughout the diocese to personally know the faithful and promoted numerous pastoral initiatives for evangelisation. On 12 November 1990, under the pontificate of St John Paul II, his cause for canonisation was opened, and he was granted the title of Servant of God. On 27 February 2017, Pope Francis recognised his heroic virtues, declaring him Venerable.

The Venerable Bishop Ottavio Ortiz Arrieta Coya spent the first part of his life as an Oratory boy, a student and then became a Salesian himself, engaged in the works of the Sons of Don Bosco in Peru. He was the first Salesian formed in the first Salesian house in Peru, founded in Rimac, a poor neighbourhood, where he learned to live an austere life of sacrifice. Among the first Salesians to arrive in Peru in 1891, he got to know the spirit of Don Bosco and the Preventive System. As a Salesian of the first generation he learnt that service and the gift of self would be the horizon of his life; that is why as a young Salesian he took on important responsibilities, such as opening new works and directing others, with simplicity, sacrifice and total dedication to the poor.

He lived the second part of his life, from the beginning of the 1920s, as bishop of Chachapoyas, an immense diocese, vacant for years, where the prohibitive conditions of the territory added up to a certain closure, especially in the most remote villages. Here the field and the challenges of the apostolate were immense. Ortiz Arrieta was of a lively temperament, accustomed to community life; moreover, he was delicate of spirit, to the point of being called "pecadito" in his younger years, for his exactitude in detecting shortcomings and helping himself and others to amend themselves. He also possessed an innate sense of rigour and moral duty. The conditions under which he had to carry out his episcopal ministry, however, were diametrically opposed to him: loneliness and the substantial impossibility of sharing a Salesian and priestly life, despite repeated and almost

pleading requests to his own Congregation; the need to reconcile his own moral rigour with an increasingly docile and almost disarmed firmness; a fine moral conscience continually put to the test by coarseness of choices and lukewarmness in following, on the part of some collaborators less heroic than himself, and of a people of God that knew how to oppose the bishop when his word became a denunciation of injustice and a diagnosis of spiritual evils. The Venerable's path towards the fullness of holiness, in the exercise of the virtues, was therefore marked by hardships, difficulties and the continual need to convert his gaze and heart, under the action of the Spirit.

While we certainly find episodes in his life that can be defined as heroic in the strict sense, we must also, and perhaps above all, highlight those moments in his virtuous journey when he could have acted differently, but did not; giving in to human despair, while renewing hope; being content with great charity, but not fully willing to exercise that heroic charity that he practised with exemplary fidelity for several decades. When, twice, he was offered a change of See, and in the second case he was offered the primatial See of Lima, he decided to remain among his poor, those whom no one wanted, truly on the periphery of the world, remaining in the diocese he had always espoused and loved as it was, committing himself wholeheartedly to making it even a little better. He was a 'modern' pastor in his style of presence and in his use of means of action such as associationism and the press. A man of decisive temperament and firm convictions of faith, Bishop Ortiz Arrieta certainly made use of this "don de gobierno" (gift of leadership) in his leadership, always combined, however, with respect and charity, expressed with extraordinary consistency.

Although he lived before the Second Vatican Council, the way in which he planned and carried out the pastoral tasks entrusted to him is still relevant today: from the pastoral care of vocations to the concrete support of his seminarians and priests; from the catechetical and human

formation of the youngest to the pastoral care of families through which he met married couples in crisis or cohabiting couples reluctant to regularise their union. Bishop Ortiz Arrieta, on the other hand, did not only educate by his concrete pastoral action, but by his very behaviour: by his ability to discern for himself, first of all, what it means and what it entails to renew fidelity to the path taken. He truly persevered in heroic poverty, in fortitude through the many trials of life, and in radical fidelity to the diocese to which he had been assigned. Humble, simple, always serene; between the serious and the gentle; the gentleness of his gaze let all the tranquillity of his spirit shine through: this was the path of holiness he travelled.

The beautiful characteristics that his Salesian superiors found in him before his ordination to the priesthood – when they described him as a ‘Salesian pearl’ and praised his spirit of sacrifice – returned as a constant throughout his life, including as a bishop. Indeed, Ortiz Arrieta can be said to have “made himself all things to all people, in order to save someone at any cost” (1 Cor 9:22): authoritative with the authorities, simple with children, poor among the poor; meek with those who insulted him or tried to delegitimise him out of resentment; always ready not to return evil for evil, but to overcome evil with good (cf. Rom 12:21). His whole life was dominated by the primacy of the salvation of souls: a salvation to which he would also like to actively dedicate his priests, whose temptation to retreat into easy security or entrench themselves behind more prestigious positions, to commit them instead to pastoral service, he tried to fight. He can truly be said to have placed himself in that “high” measure of Christian life which makes him a pastor who embodied pastoral charity in an original way, seeking communion among the people of God, reaching out to those most in need and witnessing a poor evangelical life.

The Syndrome of Philip and the Syndrome of Andrew

In the Gospel account of John, chapter 6, verses 4-14, which recounts the multiplication of the loaves, there are certain details that I dwell on at length whenever I meditate on or comment on this passage.

It all begins when, faced with the 'large' hungry crowd, Jesus invites His disciples to take responsibility for feeding them. The details I refer to are, first, when Philip says it is impossible to answer this call due to the sheer number of people present. Andrew, on the other hand, points out that "there is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish," only to dismiss the possibility with a simple remark, "but what are these for so many?" (v.9).

I simply wish to share with you, dear readers, how we Christians—who are called to share the joy of our faith—can sometimes, unknowingly, be affected by either Philip's syndrome or Andrew's syndrome. At times, perhaps, even by both!

In the life of the Church, as well as in the life of the Salesian Congregation and Family, challenges are never lacking and never will be. Ours is not a call to form a group where people merely seek to be comfortable, without disturbing, and without being disturbed. It is not an experience of pre-packaged certainties. Belonging to the body of Christ must not distract us or remove us from the reality of the world as it is. On the contrary, it urges us to be fully engaged in the events of human history. This means first and foremost, looking at reality not only with human eyes but also, and

above all, with the eyes of Jesus. We are called to respond guided by love, which finds its source in the heart of Jesus—that is, to live for others as Jesus teaches us and shows us.

Philip's Syndrome

Philip's syndrome is subtle, and for this reason, it is also very dangerous. His analysis is correct and accurate. His response to Jesus' invitation is not wrong. His reasoning follows a very straightforward and flawless human logic. He looked at reality with his human eyes, with a rational mind, and concluded that it was unfeasible. Faced with this "calculated" approach, the hungry person ceases to concern me—the problem is theirs, not mine. To be more precise in light of our daily experiences, the refugee could have stayed home; they shouldn't bother me. The poor and the sick must deal with their own issues, and it's not my place to be part of their problem, much less to find them a solution. This is Philip's syndrome. He is a follower of Jesus, yet his way of seeing and interpreting reality remains stagnant, unchallenged, light-years away from that of his Master.

Andrew's Syndrome

Then there is Andrew's syndrome. I wouldn't say it's worse than Philip's, but it comes close to being more tragic. It is a subtle and cynical syndrome; it sees some possible opportunity but doesn't go further. There is a tiny glimmer of hope, but humanly speaking, it's unworkable. So, both the gift and the giver are disqualified. And the giver, who in this case has the 'misfortune' of being a boy, is simply willing to share what he has!

These two syndromes are still with us today, in the Church and even among us pastors and educators. Crushing a small hope is easier than making room for God's surprise—a surprise that can make even the smallest hope blossom. Allowing ourselves to be conditioned by dominant clichés, avoiding opportunities that challenge reductive interpretations, is a constant temptation.

If we're not careful, we become prophets and executors of our own downfall. By stubbornly clinging to a human logic—'academically' refined and 'intellectually' qualified—the space for an evangelical reading becomes increasingly limited and eventually disappears.

When this human and horizontal logic is challenged, one of the defensive reactions it provokes is that of 'ridicule.' Those who dare to defy human logic by letting in the fresh air of the Gospel will be mocked, attacked, and ridiculed. When this happens, strangely enough, we can say we are on a prophetic path. The waters are stirring.

Jesus and the Two Syndromes

Jesus overcomes both syndromes by "taking" the loaves, which were considered too few and therefore irrelevant. He opens the door to that prophetic and faithful space we are called to inhabit. Faced with the crowd, we cannot settle for self-referential readings and interpretations. Following Jesus means going beyond human reasoning. We are called to look at challenges through His eyes. When Jesus calls us, He does not ask for solutions but for the gift of our whole selves—with all that we are and all that we have. Yet, the risk is that, faced with His call, we remain stuck, enslaved by our own thinking and clinging to what we believe we possess.

Only in generosity, grounded in abandonment to His Word, do we come to gather the abundance of Jesus' providential action. "So, they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves left by those who had eaten" (v.13). The boy's small gift bears astonishing fruit only because the two syndromes did not have the final word.

Pope Benedict XVI commented on the boy's gesture, "In the scene of the multiplication, the presence of a boy is also noted, who, faced with the difficulty of feeding so many people, shares the little he has: five loaves and two fish. The miracle does not come from nothing, but from an initial modest sharing of what a simple boy had with him. Jesus does

not ask for what we do not have, but shows us that if each one offers the little they have, the miracle can always happen anew. God can multiply our small gesture of love and make us sharers in His gift" (*Angelus*, 29 July 2012).

Faced with the pastoral challenges before us, faced with the deep thirst and hunger for spirituality that young people express, let us not be afraid, let us not cling to our own things or ways of thinking. Let us offer the little we have to Him, trusting in the light of His Word—and may this, and only this, be the enduring criterion of our choices and the guiding light of our actions.

Photo: Evangelical miracle of the multiplication of loaves and fishes, stained glass window at Tewkesbury Abbey in Gloucestershire (United Kingdom), an 1888 work created by Hardman & Co

The Venerable Father Carlo Crespi “witness and pilgrim of hope”

ather Carlo Crespi, a Salesian missionary in Ecuador, lived his life dedicated to faith and hope. In recent years, in the Shrine of Mary Help of Christians, he consoled the faithful, instilling optimism even in times of crisis. His exemplary practice of the theological virtues, highlighted by the testimony of those who knew him, was also expressed in his commitment to education. By founding schools and institutes, he offered young people new perspectives. His example of resilience and dedication continues to illuminate the spiritual and human path of the community. His legacy endures

and inspires generations of believers.

In the last years of his life, Father Carlo Crespi (Legnano, May 29, 1891 – Cuenca, April 30, 1982), a Salesian missionary in Ecuador, having gradually put aside the academic aspirations of his youth, surrounded himself with essentiality, and his spiritual growth appeared unstoppable. He was seen in the Shrine of Mary Help of Christians spreading devotion to the Virgin, confessing and advising endless lines of faithful, for whom schedules, meals, and even sleep no longer matter. Just as he had done in an exemplary manner throughout his life, he kept his gaze fixed on eternal goods, which now appeared closer than ever.

He had that eschatological hope that is linked to the expectations of man in life and beyond death, significantly influencing his worldview and daily behaviour. According to Saint Paul, hope is an indispensable ingredient for a life that is given, that grows by collaborating with others and developing one's freedom. The future thus becomes a collective task that makes us grow as people. His presence invites us to look to the future with a sense of confidence, resourcefulness, and connection with others.

This was the hope of the Venerable Father Crespi! A great virtue that, like the arms of a yoke, supports faith and charity: like the transverse arm of the Cross. It is a throne of salvation. It is the support of the healing serpent raised by Moses in the desert; a bridge of the soul to take flight in the light.

The uncommon level reached by Father Crespi in the practice of all the virtues was highlighted, in a concordant manner, by the witnesses heard during the Diocesan Inquiry for the Cause of Beatification, but it also emerges from the careful analysis of the documents and the biographical events regarding Father Carlo Crespi. The exercise of Christian virtues on his part was, according to those who knew him, not only extraordinary, but also constant throughout his long life. People followed him faithfully because in his daily life

the exercise of the theological virtues shone through almost naturally, among which hope stood out in a particular way in the many moments of difficulty. He sowed hope in the hearts of people and lived this virtue to the highest degree.

When the “Cornelio Merchan” school was destroyed in a fire, to the people who rushed in tears before the smoking ruins, he, also weeping, manifested a constant and uncommon hope, encouraging everyone: *“Pachilla is no more, but we will build a better one and the children will be happier and more content.”* From his lips never came a word of bitterness or sorrow for what had been lost.

At the school of Don Bosco and Mamma Margherita, he lived and witnessed hope in fullness because, trusting in the Lord and hoping in Divine Providence, he carried out great works and services without a budget, even if he never lacked money. He had no time to agitate or despair, his positive attitude gave confidence and hope to others.

Fr. Carlo was often described as a man with a heart rich in optimism and hope in the face of the great sufferings of life, because he was inclined to relativise human events, even the most difficult ones. In the midst of his people, he was a witness and pilgrim of hope in the journey of life!

In order to understand how and in what areas of the Venerable’s life the virtue of hope found concrete expression, the account that Father Carlo Crespi himself makes in a letter sent from Cuenca in 1925 to the Rector Major Fr. Filippo Rinaldi is also quite edifying. In it, accepting his insistent request, he relates an episode he experienced firsthand, when, in consoling a Kivaro woman for the premature loss of her son, he announces the good news of life without end. *“Moved to tears, I approached the venerable daughter of the forest with her hair loose in the wind: I assured her that her son had died well, that before dying he had only the name of his distant mother on his lips, and that he had been buried in a specially made coffin, his soul certainly having been gathered by the great God in Paradise [...]. I was therefore*

able to exchange some words calmly, casting into that broken heart the sweet balm of faith and Christian hope."

Practicing the virtue of hope grew parallel to the practice of the other Christian virtues, encouraging them: he was a man rich in faith, hope, and charity.

When the socio-economic situation in Cuenca in the 20th century worsened considerably, creating significant repercussions on the lives of the population, he had the intuition to understand that by forming young people from a human, cultural, and spiritual point of view, he would sow in them the hope for a better life and future, helping to change the fate of the entire society.

Father Crespi, therefore, undertook numerous initiatives in favour of the youth of Cuenca, starting first of all with school education. The Salesian Popular School "Cornelio Merchán"; the Normal Orientalist College for Salesian teachers; the founding of schools of arts and crafts – which later became the "*Técnico Salesiano*" and the Higher Technological Institute, culminating in the Salesian Polytechnic University – confirm the desire of the Servant of God to offer the Cuenca population better and more numerous prospects for spiritual, human, and professional growth. The young and the poor, considered first of all as children of God destined for eternal beatitude, were therefore reached by Father Crespi through a human and social promotion capable of flowing into a broader dynamic, that of salvation.

All this was carried out by him with few economic means, but abundant hope in the future of young people. He worked actively without losing sight of the ultimate goal of his mission: to attain eternal life. It is precisely in this sense that Father Carlo Crespi understood the theological virtue of hope, and it is through this perspective that his entire priesthood was based.

The reaffirmation of eternal life was undoubtedly one of the central themes addressed in the writings of Father Carlo Crespi. This fact allows us to grasp the evident importance he assigned to the virtue of hope. This fact

clearly shows how the practice of this virtue constantly permeated the earthly path of the Servant of God.

Not even illness could extinguish the inexhaustible hope that always animated Father Crespi.

Shortly before ending his earthly existence, Fr. Carlo asked that a Crucifix be placed in his hands. His death occurred on April 30, 1982, at 5:30 p.m. in the Santa Inés Clinic in Cuenca due to bronchopneumonia and a heart attack.

The personal physician of the Venerable Servant of God, who for 25 years and until his death, was a direct witness to the serenity and awareness with which Father Crespi, who had always lived with his gaze turned to Heaven, lived the long-awaited encounter with Jesus.

In the process he testified: *“For me, a special sign is precisely that attitude of having communicated with us in a simply human act, laughing and joking and, when – I say – he saw that the doors of eternity were open and perhaps the Virgin was waiting for him, he silenced us and made us all pray.”*

Carlo Riganti

President of the Carlo Crespi Association

Father Crespi and the Jubilee of 1925

In 1925, in anticipation of the Holy Year, Father Carlo Crespi promoted an international missionary exhibition. Recalled by the Collegio Manfredini of Este, he was given the task of documenting the missionary endeavours in Ecuador, collecting scientific, ethnographic, and audio visual materials. Through travels and screenings, his work connected Rome and Turin,

highlighting the Salesian commitment and strengthening ties between ecclesiastical and civil institutions. His courage and vision transformed the missionary challenge into an exhibition success, leaving an indelible mark on the history of Propaganda Fide and the Salesian missionary work.

When Pius XI, in view of the Holy Year of 1925, wanted to plan a documented Vatican International Missionary Exhibition in Rome, the Salesians embraced the initiative with a Missionary Exhibition, to be held in Turin in 1926, also in celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Salesian Missions. For this purpose, the Superiors immediately thought of Fr. Carlo Crespi and called him from the *Collegio Manfredini* of Este, where he had been assigned to teach Natural Sciences, Mathematics, and Music.

In Turin, Fr. Carlo conferred with the Rector Major, Fr. Filippo Rinaldi, with the superior responsible for the missions, Fr. Pietro Ricaldone, and, in particular, with Msgr. Domenico Comin, Apostolic Vicar of Méndez and Gualaquiza (Ecuador), who was to support his work. At that moment, travels, explorations, research, studies, and everything else that would arise from Carlo Crespi's work, received the approval and official start from the Superiors. Although the planned Exhibition was four years away, they asked Fr. Carlo to take care of it directly, so that he could carry out a complete scientifically serious and credible work.

This involved:

1. Creating a climate of interest in favour of the Salesians operating in the Ecuadorian mission of Méndez, enhancing their endeavours through written and oral documentation, and providing an appropriate collection of funds.

2. Collecting material for the preparation of the International Missionary Exhibition in Rome and, subsequently transferring it to Turin, to solemnly commemorate the first fifty years of the Salesian missions.

3. Conducting a scientific study of the

aforementioned territory in order to channel the results, not only into the exhibitions in Rome and Turin, but especially into a permanent Museum and a precise “historical-geo-ethnographic” work.

From 1921 onwards, the Superiors commissioned Fr. Carlo to conduct propaganda activities in various Italian cities in favour of the missions. To raise public awareness in this regard, Fr. Carlo organised the projection of documentaries on Patagonia, *Tierra del Fuego*, and the Indians of Mato Grosso. He combined the films shot by the missionaries with musical comments personally performed on the piano.

The propaganda with conferences yielded about 15 thousand Lire [re-evaluated this corresponds to € 14,684] later spent for travel, transport, and for the following materials: a camera, a movie camera, a typewriter, some compasses, theodolites, levels, rain gauges, a box of medicines, agricultural tools and field tents.

Several industrialists from the Milan area offered several quintals of fabrics for the value of 80 thousand Lire [€ 78,318], fabrics that were later distributed among the Indians.

On March 22, 1923, Fr. Crespi embarked, therefore, on the steamship “Venezuela,” bound for Guayaquil, the most important river and maritime port of Ecuador. In fact, it was the commercial and economic capital of the country, nicknamed for its beauty: “The Pearl of the Pacific.”

In a later writing, with great emotion he would recall his departure for the Missions: “*I remember my departure from Genoa on March 22 of the year 1923 [...]. When, once the decks that still held us bound to our native land had been removed, the ship began to move, my soul was pervaded by a joy so overwhelming, so superhuman, so ineffable, that I had never experienced it at any moment of my life, not even on the day of my First Communion, not even on the day of my first Mass. In that instant I began to understand who a missionary was and what God reserved for him [...]. Pray fervently, so that God may preserve our holy vocation and make us worthy of our*

holy mission; so that none of the souls may perish, which in His eternal decrees God wanted to be saved through us, so that He may make us bold champions of the faith, even unto death, even unto martyrdom" (Carlo Crespi, New detachment. The hymn of gratitude, in *Bollettino Salesiano*, L, n.12, December 1926).

Fr. Carlo fulfilled the task he received by putting into practice his university knowledge, in particular through the sampling of minerals, flora, and fauna from Ecuador. Soon, however, he went beyond the mission entrusted to him, becoming enthusiastic about topics of an ethnographic and archaeological nature that, later, would occupy much of his intense life.

From the first itineraries, Carlo Crespi did not limit himself to admiring, rather he collected, classified, noted, photographed, filmed, and documented anything that attracted his attention as a scholar. With enthusiasm, he ventured into the Ecuadorian East for films, documentaries, and to collect valuable botanical, zoological, ethnic, and archaeological collections.

This is that magnetic world that already vibrated in his heart even before arriving there, of which he reports as follows inside his notebooks: *"In these days a new, insistent voice sounds in my soul, a sacred nostalgia for the mission countries; sometimes also for the desire to know scientific things in particular. Oh Lord! I am willing to do anything, to abandon family, relatives, fellow students; all to save some soul, if this is your desire, your will"* (place and date unknown). – *Personal notes and reflections of the Servant of God on themes of a spiritual nature taken from 4 notebooks*).

A first itinerary, lasting three months, began in Cuenca, touched Gualaceo, Indanza, and ended at the Santiago River. Then he reached the valley of the San Francisco River, the Patococha Lagoon, Tres Palmas, Culebrillas, Potrerillos (the highest locality, at 3,800 m a.s.l.), Rio Ishpingo, the hill of Puerco Grande, Tinajillas, Zapote, Loma de Puerco

Chico, Plan de Milagro, and Pianoro. In each of these places, he collected samples to dry and integrate into the various collections. Field notebooks and numerous photographs document everything with precision.

Carlo Crespi organised a second journey through the valleys of Yanganza, Limón, Peña Blanca, Tzaranbiza, as well as along the Indanza path. As is easy to suppose, travel at the time was difficult: there were only mule tracks, as well as precipices, inhospitable climatic conditions, dangerous beasts, lethal snakes, and tropical diseases.

In addition to this there was the danger of attacks by the indomitable inhabitants of the East that Fr. Carlo, however, managed to approach, laying the foundations for the feature film "*Los invencibles Shuaras del Alto Amazonas*," which he would shoot in 1926 and screen on February 26, 1927, in Guayaquil. Overcoming all these pitfalls, he managed to gather six hundred varieties of beetles, sixty embalmed birds with wonderful plumage, mosses, lichens, ferns. He studied about two hundred local species and, using the sub-classification of the places visited by naturalists on Allionii, he came across 21 varieties of ferns, belonging to the tropical zone below 800 m a.s.l.; 72 to the subtropical one that goes from 800 to 1,500 m a.s.l.; 102 to the Subandean one, between 1,500 and 3,400 m a.s.l., and 19 to the Andean one, higher than 3,600 m a.s.l. (A very interesting comment was made by Prof. Roberto Bosco, a prestigious botanist and member of the Italian Botanical Society who, fourteen years later, in 1938, decided to study and systematically order "the showy collection of ferns" prepared in a few months by "Prof. Carlo Crespi, botanizing in Ecuador).

The most noteworthy species, studied by Roberto Bosco, were named "Crespiane."

To summarise: already in October 1923, to prepare the Vatican Exhibition, Fr. Carlo had organised the first missionary excursions throughout the Vicariate, up to Méndez, Gualaquiza, and Indanza, collecting ethnographic materials and lots of photographic documentation. The expenses were covered

through the fabrics and funds collected in Italy. With the material collected, which he would later transfer to Italy, he organised a trade fair Exhibition, between the months of June and July 1924, in the city of Guayaquil. The work aroused enthusiastic judgments, recognitions, and aid. He would report on this Exhibition, ten years later, in a letter of December 31, 1935, to the Superiors of Turin, to inform them about the funds collected from November 1922 to November 1935.

Father Crespi spent the first semester of 1925 in the forests of the Sucúa-Macas area, studying the Shuar language and collecting further material for the missionary Exhibition of Turin. In August of the same year, he began a negotiation with the Government to obtain a significant funding, which concluded on September 12 with a contract for 110,000 Sucres (equal to 500,000 Lire of the time and which today would be € 489,493.46), which would allow the Pan-Méndez mule track to be completed). Furthermore, he also obtained permission to withdraw from customs 200 quintals of iron and material confiscated from some traders.

In 1926, having returned to Italy, Fr. Carlo brought cages with live animals from the eastern area of Ecuador (a difficult collection of birds and rare animals) and boxes with ethnographic material, for the Missionary Exhibition of Turin, which he personally organised, also giving the official closing speech on October 10.

In the same year, he was busy organising the Exhibition and then giving several conferences and participating in the American Congress of Rome with two scientific conferences. This enthusiasm and his competence and scientific research responded perfectly to the directives of the Superiors, and, therefore, through the International Missionary Exhibition of 1925 in Rome and that of 1926 in Turin, Ecuador became more widely known. Furthermore, at the ecclesial level, he contacted the Society of the Propagation of the Faith, the Holy Childhood, and the Association for the Indigenous Clergy. At the civil level, he established relationships with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the

Italian Government.

From these contacts and from the interviews with the Superiors of the Salesian Congregation, some results were obtained. In the first place, the Superiors gave him the gift of granting him 4 priests, 4 seminarians, 9 coadjutor brothers, and 4 sisters for the Vicariate. Furthermore, he obtained a series of economic funds from the Vatican Organisations and collaboration with sanitary material for the hospitals, for the value of about 100,000 Lire (€ 97,898.69). As a gift from the Major Superiors for the help given for the Missionary Exhibition, they took charge of the construction of the Church of Macas, with two instalments of 50,000 lire (€ 48,949.35), sent directly to Msgr. Domenico Comin.

Having exhausted the task of collector, supplier, and animator of the great international exhibitions, in 1927 Fr. Crespi returned to Ecuador, which became his second homeland. He settled in the Vicariate, under the jurisdiction of the bishop, Msgr. Comin, always dedicated, in a spirit of obedience, to propaganda excursions, to ensure subsidies and special funds, necessary for the works of the missions, such as the Pan Méndez road, the Guayaquil Hospital, the Guayaquil school in Macas, the Quito Hospital in Méndez, the Agricultural School of Cuenca, the city where, since 1927, he began to develop his priestly and Salesian apostolate.

For some years, he then continued to deal with science, but always with the spirit of the apostle.

Carlo Riganti

President of the Carlo Crespi Association

Image: March 24, 1923 – Fr. Carlo Crespi Departing for Ecuador on the Steamship Venezuela

Venerable Francesco (Francis) Convertini, pastor according to the Heart of Jesus

The venerable Father Francesco Convertini, a Salesian missionary in India, emerges as a shepherd after the Heart of Jesus, forged by the Spirit and totally faithful to the divine plan for his life. Through the testimonies of those who met him, his profound humility, unconditional dedication to the proclamation of the Gospel, and fervent love for God and neighbor are revealed. He lived with joyful evangelical simplicity, facing hardships and sacrifices with courage and generosity, always attentive to everyone he met along his path. The text highlights his extraordinary humanity and spiritual richness, a precious gift for the Church.

1. Farmer in the vineyard of the Lord

Presenting the virtuous profile of Father Francesco Convertini, Salesian missionary in India, a man who let himself be moulded by the Spirit and knew how to realise his spiritual physiognomy according to God's plan for him, is something both beautiful and serious because it recalls the true meaning of life, as a response to a call, a promise, a project of grace.

There is a quite original summary sketched about him by a priest from his town, Fr Quirico Vasta, who got to know Father Francis (as he was known in India) on rare visits to his beloved Apulia. This witness offers us a summary of the virtuous profile of the great missionary, introducing us in an authoritative and compelling way to discover something of the human and religious stature of this man of God.

"The way to measure the spiritual stature of this holy man, Father Francis Convertini, is not an analytical approach, comparing his life to the many religious 'parameters of behaviour' (Father Francis, as a Salesian, also accepted the

commitments proper to a religious: poverty, obedience, chastity, and remained faithful to them throughout his life). On the contrary, Father Francis Convertini appears, in summary, as he really was from the beginning: a young peasant farmer who, after – and perhaps because of – the ugliness of the war, opened himself up to the light of the Spirit and leaving everything behind, set out to follow the Lord. On the one hand, he knew what he was leaving behind; and he left it not only with the vigour typical of the southern peasant who was poor but tenacious; but also joyfully and with the very personal strength of spirit that the war had invigorated: the strength of someone who intends to pursue headlong, albeit silently and in the depths of his soul, what he has focused his attention on. On the other hand, again like a peasant who has grasped the ‘certainties’ of the future and the groundedness of his hopes in something or someone and knows ‘who to trust’ he allowed the light of the one who has spoken to him put him in a position of clarity in what to do. And he immediately adopted the strategies to achieve the goal: prayer and availability without measure, whatever the cost. It is no coincidence that the key virtues of this holy man are silent activity without show (cf. St Paul: ‘It is when I am weak that I am strong’) and a very respectful sense of others (cf. Acts: ‘There is more joy in giving than in receiving’).

Seen in this way, Father Francis Convertini was truly a man: shy, inclined to conceal his gifts and merits, averse to boasting, gentle with others and strong with himself, measured, balanced, prudent and faithful; a man of faith, hope and in habitual communion with God; an exemplary religious, in obedience, poverty and chastity.”

2. Distinguishing traits: “charm emanated from him, which healed you”.

Retracing the stages of his childhood and youth, his preparation for the priesthood and missionary life, God’s special love for his servant and his correspondence with this good Father are evident. In particular, they stand out as

distinctive features of his spiritual character:

– *Unbounded faith and trust in God, embodied in filial abandonment to the divine will.*

He had great faith in the infinite goodness and mercy of God and in the great merits of the passion and death of Jesus Christ, in whom he confided everything and from whom he expected everything. On the firm rock of this faith he undertook all his apostolic labours. Cold or heat, tropical rain or scorching sun, difficulty or fatigue, nothing prevented him from always proceeding with confidence when it was a matter of God's glory and the salvation of souls.

– *Unconditional love for Jesus Christ the Saviour, to whom he offered everything as a sacrifice, beginning with his own life, consigned to the cause of the Kingdom.*

Father Convertini rejoiced in the promise of the Saviour and rejoiced in the coming of Jesus, as universal Saviour and sole mediator between God and man: "Jesus gave us all of Himself by dying on the cross, and shall we not be able to give ourselves completely to Him?"

– *Integral salvation of our neighbour, pursued with passionate evangelisation.*

The abundant fruits of his missionary work were due to his unceasing prayer and unsparing sacrifices made for his neighbour. It is people and missionaries of such temperament who leave an indelible mark on the history of the Salesian missions, charism and priestly ministry.

Even in contact with Hindus and Muslims, while on the one hand he was urged by a genuine desire to proclaim the Gospel, which often led to the Christian faith, on the other hand he felt compelled to emphasise the basic truths easily perceived even by non-Christians, such as the infinite goodness of God, love of neighbour as the way to salvation, and prayer as the means to obtain graces.

– *Unceasing union with God through prayer, the*

sacraments, entrustment to Mary Mother of God and ours, love for the Church and the Pope, devotion to the saints.

He felt himself to be a son of the Church and served her with the heart of an authentic disciple of Jesus and missionary of the Gospel, entrusted to the Immaculate Heart of Mary and in the company of the saints felt as intercessors and friends.

– Simple and humble evangelical asceticism in the following of the cross, incarnated in an extraordinarily ordinary life.

His profound humility, evangelical poverty (he carried with him only what was necessary) and angelic countenance transpired from his whole person. Voluntary penance, self-control: little or no rest, irregular meals. He deprived himself of everything to give to the poor, even his clothes, shoes, bed and food. He always slept on the floor. He fasted for a long time. As the years went by, he contracted several illnesses that undermined his health: he suffered from asthma, bronchitis, emphysema, heart ailments... many times they attacked him in such a way that he was bedridden. It was a marvel how he could bear it all without complaining. It was precisely this that attracted the veneration of the Hindus, for whom he was the “sanyasi”, the one who knew how to renounce everything for the love of God and for their sake.

His life seemed to be a straight ascent to the heights of holiness in the faithful fulfilment of God’s will and in the gift of himself to his brothers and sisters through the priestly ministry lived faithfully. Lay, religious and clergy alike speak of his extraordinary way of living daily life.

3. Missionary of the Gospel of joy: “I proclaimed Jesus to them. Jesus the Saviour. Merciful Jesus.”

There was not a day when he did not go to some family to talk about Jesus and the Gospel. Father Francis had such enthusiasm and zeal that he even hoped for things that seemed humanly impossible. Father Francis became famous as a

peacemaker between families, or between villages in discord. "It is not through arguments that we come to understand. God and Jesus are beyond dispute. We must above all pray and God will give us the gift of faith. Through faith one will find the Lord. Is it not written in the Bible that God is love? By the way of love one comes to God."

He was an inwardly peaceful man and brought peace. He wanted this to exist among people, in homes or villages, where there should be no quarrels, or fights, or divisions. "In our village we were Catholics, Protestants, Hindus and Muslims. So that peace would reign among us, from time to time father would gather us all together and tell us how we could and should live in peace among ourselves." Then he would listen to those who wanted to say something and at the end, after praying, he would give the blessing: a wonderful way to keep the peace among us. He had a truly astonishing peace of mind; it was the strength that came from the certainty he had of doing God's will, sought with effort, but then embraced with love once found.

He was a man who lived with evangelical simplicity, the transparency of a child, a willingness to make every sacrifice, knowing how to get in tune with every person he met on his path, travelling on horseback, or on a bicycle, or more often walking whole days with his rucksack on his shoulders. He belonged to everyone without distinction of religion, caste or social status. He was loved by all, because to all he brought "the water of Jesus that saves".

4. A man of contagious faith: lips in prayer, rosary in hands, eyes to heaven

"We know from him that he never neglected prayer, both when he was with others and when he was alone, even as a soldier. This helped him to do everything for God, especially when he did first evangelisation among us. For him, there was no fixed time: morning or evening, sun or rain; heat or cold were no impediment when it came to talking about Jesus or

doing good. When he went to the villages he would walk even at night and without taking food in order to get to some house or village to preach the Gospel. Even when he was placed as a confessor in Krishnagar, he would come to us for confessions during the sweltering heat of after lunch. I once said to him, "Why do you come at this hour?" And he replied, "In the passion, Jesus did not choose his convenient time when he was being led by Annas or Caiaphas or Pilate. He had to do it even against his own will, to do the Father's will."

He evangelised not by proselytism, but by attraction. It was his behaviour that attracted people. His dedication and love made people say that Father Francis was the true image of the Jesus he preached. His love of God led him to seek intimate union with him, to collect himself in prayer, to avoid anything that might displease God. He knew that one only knows God through charity. He used to say, "Love God, do not displease Him."

"If there was one sacrament in which Father Francis excelled heroically, it was the administration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. For any person in our diocese of Krishnagar to say Father Francis is to say the man of God who showed the Father's fatherhood in forgiveness especially in the confessional. He spent the last 40 years of his life more in the confessional than in any other ministry: hours and hours, especially in preparation for feasts and solemnities. Thus the whole night of Christmas and Easter or patronal feasts. He was always punctually present in the confessional every day, but especially on Sundays before Masses or on the evening eve of feasts and Saturdays. Then he would go to other places where he was a regular confessor. This was a task very dear to him and much expected by all the religious of the diocese, for who he was available weekly. His confessional was always the most crowded and most desired. Priests, religious, ordinary people: it seemed as if Father Francis knew everyone personally, so pertinent was he in his advice and admonitions. I myself marvelled at the wisdom of his admonitions when I

went to confession to him. In fact, the Servant of God was my confessor throughout his life, from the time he was a missionary in the villages until the end of his days. I used to say to myself: "That is just what I wanted to hear from him...". Bishop Morrow, who went to him regularly for confession, considered him his spiritual guide, saying that Father Francis was guided by the Holy Spirit in his counsels and that his personal holiness made up for his lack of natural gifts.

Trust in God's mercy was an almost nagging theme in his conversations, and he used it well as a confessor. His confessional ministry was a ministry of hope for himself and for those who confessed to him. His words inspired hope in all who came to him. "In the confessional the Servant of God was the model priest, famous for administering this sacrament. The Servant of God was always teaching, trying to lead everyone to eternal salvation... The servant of God liked to direct his prayers to the Father who is in heaven, and he also taught people to see the good Father in God. Especially to those in difficulties, including spiritual ones, and to repentant sinners, he reminded them that God is merciful and that one must always trust in him. The Servant of God increased his prayers and mortifications to discount his infidelities, as he said, and for the sins of the world."

Father Rosario Stroschio, religious superior, who concluded the announcement of Father Francis' death, spoke eloquently as follows: "Those who knew Father Francis will always remember with love the little warnings and exhortations he used to give in confession. With his weak little voice, yet so full of ardour: 'Let us love souls, let us work only for souls... Let us approach the people... Let us deal with them in such a way that the people understand that we love them...' His entire life was a magnificent testimony to the most fruitful technique of priestly ministry and missionary work. We can sum it up in the simple expression: 'To win souls to Christ there

is no more powerful means than goodness and love!’”

5. He loved God and loved his neighbour for God’s sake: Put love! Put love!

His mother Catherine used to say “Put love! Put love!” to Ciccilluzzo, his nickname at home as he helped in the fields watching turkeys and doing other work appropriate to his young age,

“Father Francisco gave everything to God, because he was convinced that having consecrated everything to him as a religious and missionary priest, God had full rights over him. When we asked him why he did not go home (to Italy), he replied that he had now given himself entirely to God and to us.” His being a priest was all for others: “I am a priest for the good of my neighbour. This is my first duty.” He felt indebted to God in everything, indeed, everything belonged to God and to his neighbour, while he had given himself totally, reserving nothing for himself: Father Francesco continually thanked the Lord for choosing him to be a missionary priest. He showed this sense of gratitude towards anyone who had done anything for him, even the poorest.

He gave extraordinary examples of fortitude by adapting to the living conditions of the missionary work assigned to him: a new and difficult language, which he tried to learn quite well, because this was the way to communicate with his people; a very harsh climate, that of Bengal, the grave of so many missionaries, which he learned to endure for the love of God and souls; apostolic journeys on foot through unknown areas, with the risk of encountering wild animals.

He was a tireless missionary and evangeliser in a very difficult area such as Krishnagar – which he wanted to transform into Christ-nagar, the city of Christ – where conversions were difficult, not to mention the opposition of Protestants and members of other religions. For the administration of the sacraments he faced all possible dangers: rain, hunger, disease, wild beasts, malicious people.

"I have often heard the episode about Father Francesco, who one night, while taking the Blessed Sacrament to a sick person, came across a tiger crouching on the path where he and his companions had to pass... As the companions tried to flee, the Servant of God commanded the tiger: "Let your Lord pass!", and the tiger moved away. But I have heard other similar examples about the Servant of God, who many times travelled on foot at night. Once a band of brigands attacked him, believing they could steal something from him. But when they saw him thus deprived of everything except what he was carrying, they excused themselves and accompanied him to the next village."

His life as a missionary was constant travelling: by bicycle, on horseback and most of the time on foot. This walking on foot is perhaps the attitude that best portrays the tireless missionary and the sign of the authentic evangeliser: "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of the messenger of glad tidings who proclaims peace, the messenger of good things who proclaims salvation" (Is 52:7).

6. Clear eyes turned to heaven

"Observing the smiling face of the Servant of God and looking at his eyes clear and turned to heaven, one thought that he did not belong here, but in heaven. On seeing him for the very first time, many reported an unforgettable impression of him: his shining eyes that showed a face full of simplicity and innocence and his long, venerable beard recalled the image of a person full of goodness and compassion. One witness stated: "Father Francis was a saint. I do not know how to make a judgement, but I think that such people are not easily found. We were small, but he talked to us, he never despised anyone. He did not differentiate between Muslims and Christians. Father went to everyone in the same way and when we were together he treated us all the same. He would give us children advice: 'Obey your parents, do your homework well, love each other as brothers'. He would then give us little sweets: in his pockets there was always something for us."

Father Francis displayed his love for God above all through prayer, which seemed to be uninterrupted. He could always be seen moving his lips in prayer. Even when he spoke to people, he always kept his eyes raised as if he were seeing someone he was talking to. What most often struck people was Father Convertini's ability to be totally focused on God and, at the same time, on the person in front of him, looking with sincere eyes at the brother he met on his path: "Without a doubt he had his eyes fixed on the face of God. This was an indelible trait of his soul, a spiritual concentration of an impressive level. He followed you attentively and answered you with great precision when you spoke to him. Yet, you sensed that he was 'elsewhere', in another dimension, in dialogue with the Other."

He encouraged others to holiness, as in the case of his cousin Lino Palmisano, who was preparing for the priesthood: "I am very happy knowing you are already in practical training; this too will soon pass, if you know how to take advantage of the graces of the Lord that he will give you every day, to transform yourself into a Christian saint of good sense. The most satisfying studies of theology await you, which will nourish your soul with the Spirit of God, who has called you to help Jesus in His apostolate. Think not of others, but of yourself alone, of how to become a holy priest like Don Bosco. Don Bosco also said in his time: times are difficult, but we will *puf, puf*, we will go ahead even against the current. It was the heavenly mother telling him: *infirmum mundi elegit Deus*. Don't worry, I will help you. Dear brother, the heart, the soul of a holy priest in the eyes of the Lord is worth more than anything else. The day of your sacrifice together with that of Jesus on the altar is near, prepare yourself. You will never regret being generous to Jesus and to your Superiors. Trust in them, they will help you overcome the little difficulties of the day that your beautiful soul may encounter. I will remember you at Holy Mass every day, so that you too may one day offer yourself wholly to the Good Lord."

Conclusion

As at the beginning, so also at the end of this brief excursus on the virtuous profile of Father Convertini, here is a testimony that summarises what has been presented.

“One of the pioneer figures that struck me deeply was that of the Venerable Father Francis Convertini, a zealous apostle of Christian love who managed to bring the news of the Redemption to churches, parish areas, to the alleyways and huts of refugees and to anyone he met, consoling, advising, helping with his exquisite charity: a true witness to the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, on which we shall be judged: always ready and zealous in the ministry of the sacrament of forgiveness. Christians of all denominations, Muslims and Hindus, accepted with joy and readiness the one they called the man of God. He knew how to bring to each one the true message of love, which Jesus preached and brought to this land: with evangelical direct and personal contact, for young and old, boys and girls, poor and rich, authorities and pariahs (outcasts), that is, the last and most despised rung of (sub)human refuse. For me and for many others, it was deeply emotional experience that helped me to understand and live the message of Jesus: ‘Love one another as I have loved you’.”

The last word goes to Father Francis, as a legacy he leaves to each of us. On 24 September 1973, writing to his relatives from Krishnagar, the missionary wanted to involve them in the work for non-Christians that he had been doing with difficulty since his recent illness, but always with zeal: “After six months in hospital my health is a little weak, I feel like a broken and patched piñata. However, the merciful Jesus miraculously helps me in his work for souls. I let Him take me to the city and then return on foot, after making Jesus and our holy religion known. Having finished hearing confessions at home, I go among the pagans who are much better than some Christians. Affectionately yours in the Heart of Jesus, Father Francis.”.

The Cemetery Boys

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

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

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

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

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

"It is truly very heart-breaking when you walk through the cemetery and see boys coming out of the tombs. They lie down with the dead because they no longer have a place in society. Such a situation is scandalous."

A multiple approach: from the cemetery to detention cells

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

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

To cope with this situation, he organises everyday visits to the prison, bringing drinking water, hot meals, and a psycho-social support that becomes a lifeline. His constant presence is essential to try to re-establish a dialogue with the authorities and families, also raising awareness of the importance of protecting the rights of minors, who are often forgotten and abandoned to a dire fate. "We do not leave them

alone in their solitude, but we try to give them hope,” Lothar emphasises with the firmness of someone who knows the everyday pain of these young lives.

A day for awareness in Vienna

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

In addition to daily emergencies, the work of Lothar and his collaborators also focuses on long-term interventions. The Salesian missionaries are in fact involved in rehabilitation programmes ranging from educational support to vocational training for young prisoners, to legal and spiritual assistance. These interventions aim to reintegrate young people into society once they are released, helping them build a dignified and fulfilling future. The goal is clear: to offer not only immediate help, but to create a path that allows young people to develop their potential and actively contribute to the rebirth of the country.

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

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

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

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

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 Cosi, 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 Servant of God Andrej Majcen: a Salesian completely dedicated to the young

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the passing into eternity of the Servant of God Fr Andrej Majcen. As a teacher in Radna, he came to the ranks of the Salesians out of love for the young. A life of self-giving.

The first thing is that **Fr Andrej loved young people very much**: for them he consecrated his life to God as a Salesian, a priest, a missionary. Being a Salesian does not only mean giving one's life to God: it means giving one's life for the young. So without the young, Fr Andrej Majcen would not have been a Salesian, a priest, a missionary: for the young, he made demanding choices, accepting conditions of poverty, hardship, worries so that 'his boys' would find a roof over their heads, a plate to fill their stomachs, and a light to guide them through life.

The first message, then, is that Fr Majcen loved young people and interceded for them!

The second is that **Andrej was a young man capable of listening**. Born in 1904, still a child during the First World War, sick and poor, scarred by the death of a little brother, Andrej kept great desires in his heart and above all many questions: he was open to life and wanted to understand why it deserved to be lived. He never discounted questions and was always committed to seeking answers, even in environments other than his own, without closures or prejudices. At the same time, Andrej was docile: he paid

attention to what his mother, father, educators told him and asked him... Andrej trusted that others might have some answers to his questions and that in their suggestions there was not a desire to replace him, but to point him in a direction that he would then follow in his own freedom and on his own two feet.

His father, for example, advised him to always be good to everyone and that he would never regret it. He worked for the court, dealt with probate cases, with many difficult things where people often quarrel and even the most sacred ties are offended. From his father, Andrej learnt to be good, to bring peace, to reconcile tensions, not to judge, to be in the world (with its tensions and contradictions) as a just person. Andrej listened to and trusted his father.

His mother was a great woman of prayer (Andrej considered her a religious in the world and confided that she had not achieved her devotion even as a religious). In his teenage years, when he could have lost touch with ideas and ideologies, she asked him to go to church for a few moments every day. Nothing in particular, or too long: *"When you go to school, don't forget to enter the Franciscan church for a moment. You can enter through one door and leave through the other; you make the sign of the cross with holy water, say a short prayer and entrust yourself to Mary."* Andrej obeyed his mother and every day he came to greet Mary in the church even though – 'out there' – many companions and lively discussions awaited him. Andrej listened to and trusted his mother, and discovered that therein lay the roots of many things, there was a bond with Mary that would accompany him forever. It is these small drops that dig great depths in us, almost without us realising it!

A teacher invited him to go to the library and there he was given a book with the *Aphorisms* of Th. G. Masaryk: politician, man of government, today we would say a 'layman'. Andrej read that book and it became decisive for his growth. There he discovered what a certain amount of work on himself, character formation, commitment meant. Andrej listened to the advice and listened to Masaryk, not letting himself be too influenced by

his 'Curriculum' but seeing the good even in someone far from the Catholic way of thinking of his own family. He discovered that there are universal human values and that there is a dimension of commitment and seriousness that is 'common ground' for all.

A teacher at the Salesians, in Radna, young Majcen finally listened to those who – in different ways – gave him the idea of a **possible consecration**. There were many reasons why Andrej could have backed out: the family's investment in his education; the job he had found only a few months before; having to leave everything and exposing himself to total uncertainty if he failed... He was at that moment a young man looking towards the future, who had not considered that proposal. At the same time, he was looking for something more and different and, as a man and as a teacher, he realised that the Salesians not only taught, but oriented to Jesus, Master of Life. Don Bosco's pedagogy for him was that 'piece' he was missing. Andrej listened to the vocational proposal, he faced a hard struggle during prayer, on his knees, and decided to apply for admission to the novitiate: he did not let much time pass, but he thought seriously, prayed and said yes. He did not miss the opportunity, he did not let the moment pass...: he listened, he trusted, he decided by agreeing and knowing so little of what he was going to encounter.

Often we all believe that we see ourselves right in our own lives, that we hold the keys to it, its secret: sometimes, however, it is precisely others who invite us to straighten our gaze, our ears and our hearts, showing us paths towards which we would never have gone on our own. If these people are good and want our good, obeying them is important: therein lies the secret of happiness. Fr Majcen trusted, he did not waste years, he did not waste life... He said yes. Deciding in time was also the great secret recommended by Don Bosco.

The third thing is that **Andrej Majcen allowed himself to be surprised**. He always welcomed surprises,

proposals and changes: the meeting with the Salesians, for example; then the encounter with a missionary that made him burn with the desire to be able to spend himself for others in a faraway land. He also received some not-so-good surprises: he went to China and found Communism there; they chased him out, he entered North Vietnam and Communism did damage there too; they chased him out, he went south, then arrived in South Vietnam; but Communism reached that area too and they chased him out again (it sounds like an action film, with a long chase with sirens wailing!). He returned home, to his beloved Slovenia, and – in the meantime – the Communist regime was established there, and there was persecution of the Church. What is this? A joke? Andrej did not complain! He lived for decades in countries at war or in situations at risk, with persecution, emergencies, mourning... He slept for more than twenty years while outside the window, over there, they were shooting... At other times he cried... Yet – even though he had positions of responsibility and so many lives to save – he was almost always serene, with a beautiful smile, so much joy and love in his heart. How did he do it?

He did not place his heart in external events, into things, into what you cannot control or... into his own plans ('it has to be like this because I have decided so': when it 'isn't like this' you go into crisis). He had put his heart in God, in the Congregation and in his dear young people. Then he was truly free, the world could fall away, but the roots were safe. The roots were in *relationships*, in a good way of *spending oneself for others*; the foundation was in *something that does not pass away*.

So many times, all we need is for them to move a small thing and we get angry because it is not according to our needs, desires, plans or expectations. Andrej Majcen tells me, he tells us: "be free!", "entrust your heart to those who will not steal it or damage it", "build on something that will remain forever!", "then you will be happy even if they take everything away from you and you will always have ALL."

The fourth thing is that **Fr Andrej Majcen made his examination of conscience well**. Every day he examined himself to see where he had done well, less well or badly. When he had the chance (i.e. when there were no more bombs near his home or the Viet Cong at a short distance, etc.) he would take a notebook, write down questions, reflect on the Word of God, verify that he had put it into practice... He would question himself.

Today we live in a society that places great importance on outward appearances: it too is a gift (e.g. taking care of oneself, dressing with propriety, presenting oneself well), but it is not everything. We have to dig inside ourselves, go deep -maybe with the help of someone.

Andrej always had the courage to look himself in the face, to peer into his own heart and conscience, to ask for forgiveness. In doing so, he has encountered some not very beautiful aspects of himself, on which to work and to entrust: but he has also seen so much good, beauty, purity, love that would otherwise have remained 'under the radar'.

Many times, it takes more courage to travel within ourselves than to go to the other side of the world! Fr Andrej Majcen faced both of these journeys: from Slovenia he reached the Far East, and yet the most demanding itinerary always remained – right to the end – within his own heart.

St Augustine, a young man who sought the truth in so many ways before encountering it in the person of Jesus, within himself, says: "*Noli foras ire, redi in te ipsum, in interiore homini habitat veritas*" ("Do not want to go outside, return within yourself, the truth dwells in human inwardness").

And so I have concluded with a little exercise in Latin: a language very dear to Andrej and linked to his vocational discernment. But that would really be..., at least for now, another story!

Caught between admiration and sorrow

Today I bid you farewell for the last time from this page of the Salesian Bulletin. On 16 August, the day we commemorate Don Bosco's birth, my service as Rector Major of the Salesians of Don Bosco ends.

It is always a reason to give thanks! First of all to God, to the Congregation and the Salesian Family, to so many dear people and friends, to so many friends of Don Bosco's charism, the many benefactors.

On this occasion too, my greeting conveys something I have experienced recently. Hence the title of this greeting: A mixture of admiration and sorrow. Let me tell you about the joy that filled my heart in Goma, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, wounded by an interminable war, and the joy and testimony I received yesterday.

Three weeks ago, after visiting Uganda (in the Palabek refugee camp which, thanks to Salesian help and work in recent years, is no longer a camp for Sudanese refugees but a place where tens of thousands of people have settled and found a new life), I crossed Rwanda and arrived at the border in the region of Goma, a wonderful area, beautiful and rich in nature (and precisely for this reason so desired and desirable). Well, because of the armed conflicts, there are more than a million displaced people in that region who have had to leave their homes and their land. We too had to leave our Salesian presence in Sha-Sha, which was occupied militarily.

This million displaced people arrived in the city of Goma. In Gangi, one of the districts, there is the Don Bosco Salesian work. I was immensely happy to see the good

that is being done there. Hundreds of boys and girls have a home. Dozens of teenagers have been taken off the streets and are living in the Don Bosco house. It was there, because of the war, that 82 newborn babies and young boys and girls who lost their parents or were left behind ('abandoned') because their parents could not look after them, found a home.

And there, in that new Valdocco, one of the many Valdocco's around the world, a community of three Sisters from San Salvador, together with a group of women, all supported by the Salesian house with aid that arrives thanks to the generosity of benefactors and Providence, take care of these little boys and girls. When I went to visit them, the Sisters had dressed everyone up, even the children sleeping in their cots. How could I not feel my heart filled with joy at this reality of goodness, despite the pain caused by abandonment and war!

But my heart was touched when I met several hundred people who came to greet me on the occasion of my visit. They are among the 32,000 displaced people who left their homes and their land because of the bombs and came to seek refuge. They found it in the fields and grounds of the Don Bosco house in Gangi. They have nothing, they live in shacks of a few square metres. This is their reality. Together every day we look for a way to find food for them. But do you know what struck me most? What impressed me most was that when I was with these hundreds of people, mostly elderly people and mothers with children, they had not lost their dignity and had not lost their joy or their smile. I was amazed and my heart was saddened by so much suffering and poverty, even though we are doing our part in the name of the Lord.

An extraordinary concert

I experienced another great joy when I received a testimony of life that made me think of the teenagers and young people in our presence, and of the many children of parents who may be reading me and who feel that their children are unmotivated, bored by life, or have no passion for almost

anything. Among the guests in our house these days was an extraordinary pianist who has toured the world giving concerts and has been part of great philharmonic orchestras. She is a former pupil of the Salesians and had a Salesian, now deceased, as a great reference and model. She wanted to offer us this concert in the atrium of the Sacred Heart Church as a homage to Mary Help of Christians, whom she loves so much, and as a thank you for all that her life has been so far.

And I say the latter because our dear friend gave us a wonderful concert, with exceptional quality at the age of 81. She was accompanied by her daughter. And at that age, perhaps when some of our elders in the family have long since said that they no longer want to do anything, or do anything that requires effort, our dear friend, who practises the piano every day, moved her hands with wonderful agility and was immersed in the beauty of music and its performance. Good music, a generous smile at the end of her performance, and the handing over of orchids to Our Lady Help of Christians were all we needed on that wonderful morning. And my Salesian heart could not help but think of those boys, girls and young people who perhaps have had or no longer have anything to motivate them in their lives. She, our concert pianist friend, lives with great serenity at 81 years of age and, as she told me, continues to offer the gift God has given her and every day she finds more and more reasons to do so.

Another lesson in life and another testimony that does not leave one's heart indifferent.

Thank you, my friends, thank you from the bottom of my heart for all the good we are doing together. However small it may be, it contributes to making our world a little more human and more beautiful. May the good Lord bless you.