

Luigi Variara the Founder who was himself 'founded'

'Founded' in a glance that marked a lifetime

Louis Variara was born on 15 January 1875 in Viarigi (Asti). Don Bosco had come to this village in 1856 to preach a mission. And it was to Don Bosco that the father, on 1 October 1887, entrusted his son to take him to Valdocco. Don Bosco would die four months later, but the knowledge that Louis had of him was enough to mark him for life. He himself remembered the event as follows: "It was in the winter season and one afternoon we were playing in the large courtyard of the oratory when suddenly there was a shout from one side to the other: 'Don Bosco, Don Bosco!' Instinctively we all rushed towards the spot where our good Father appeared, whom they were taking out for a ride in his carriage. We followed him to the place where he was to get into the vehicle; immediately Don Bosco was surrounded by a crowd of his beloved boys. I was anxiously searching for a way to put myself in a place where I could see him at my leisure, for I longed to meet him. I got as close as I could, and as they helped him into the carriage, he gave me a gently look, and his eyes rested intently on me. I don't know what I felt at that moment... it was something I cannot express! That day was one of the happiest for me; I was sure that I had met a saint, and that that saint had read in my soul something that only God and he could know."

He asked to become a Salesian: he entered the novitiate on 17 August 1891 and completed it on 2 October 1892 with perpetual vows in the hands of Blessed Michael Rua, who whispered in his ear: "Variara, don't vary!" He studied philosophy at Valsalice, where he met the Venerable Fr Andrea Beltrami. Here, in 1894, Fr Michael Unia, the famous missionary who had recently started working among the lepers in Agua de Dios, Colombia, passed by. "What an astonishment and joy" Frn Variara recounts" when, among the 188 companions

who had the same aspiration, fixing his gaze on me, he said 'This one is mine'".

He arrived at Agua de Dios on 6 August 1894. The place had a population of 2,000, 800 of whom were lepers. He immersed himself totally in his mission. Gifted with musical skills, he organised a band that immediately created a festive atmosphere in the "City of Sorrow". He transformed the sadness of the place with Salesian cheerfulness, with music, theatre, sport and the lifestyle of the Salesian oratory.

On 24 April 1898, he was ordained a priest and soon proved to be an excellent spiritual director. Among his penitents were members of the Association of the Daughters of Mary, a group of about 200 girls, many of whom were lepers. It was in the face of this realisation that the first idea of consecrated young women, albeit lepers, was born in him. The Congregation of the Daughters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary began on 7 May 1905. It was "founded" in full submission to religious obedience and, a unique case in the history of the Church. He founded the first religious community made up of people affected by leprosy or daughters of leprosy sufferers. He wrote: "Never have I felt as happy to be a Salesian as I do this year, and I bless the Lord for sending me to this leprosarium, where I have learnt not to let heaven be stolen from me."

Ten years had passed since he arrived at Agua de Dios: a happy decade full of achievements, including the completion of the "Don Miguel Unia" kindergarten. But now a period of suffering and misunderstandings was beginning for the generous missionary. This period would last 18 years, until his death at Cúcuta in Colombia on 1 February 1923 at 48 years of age and 24 of priesthood.

Fr Variara knew how to combine in himself both fidelity to the work that the Lord asked of him, and submission to the orders that his legitimate superior imposed on him and that seemed to lead him away from the ways willed by God. He was beatified by Pope John Paul II on 14 April 2002.

Founded in spiritual friendship

In Turin-Valsalice, Fr Variara got to know the Venerable Andrea Beltrami, a Salesian priest stricken with consumption, who had offered himself as a victim to God for the conversion of all sinners in the world. A spiritual friendship was born between Fr Variara and Fr Beltrami, and Fr Variara was to be inspired by him when he founded the Congregation of the Daughters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary in Colombia, to whom he proposed 'victim consecration'.

The Venerable Andrea Beltrami is the forerunner of the victim-oblative dimension of the Salesian charism, "The mission that God entrusts to me is to pray and to suffer" he said. "Neither to heal nor to die, but to live to suffer", was his motto. Very exact in his observance of the Rule, he had a filial openness to his superiors and an ardent love for Don Bosco and the Congregation. His bed became an altar and pulpit, where he immolated himself together with Jesus and from which he taught how to love, how to offer and how to suffer. His little room became his whole world, from which he wrote and in which he celebrated his bloody Mass: "I offer myself as a victim with Him, for the sanctification of priests, for the people of the whole world", he repeated; but his Salesianity also led him to have relationships with the outside world. He offered himself as a victim of love for the conversion of sinners and for the consolation of the suffering. Fr Beltrami fully grasped the sacrificial dimension of the Salesian charism, desired by the founder Don Bosco.

Fr Variara's daughters wrote of Fr Beltrami as follows: "We are poor young people struck down by the terrible disease of leprosy, violently torn and separated from our parents, deprived in a single moment of our liveliest hopes and our most ardent desires... We felt the caressing hand of God in the holy encouragements and pitiful industries of Fr Louis Variara in the face of our acute pains of body and soul. Persuaded that it is the will of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and finding it easy to accomplish, we began to offer ourselves as

victims of expiation, following the example of Fr Andrea Beltrami, a Salesian.”

Founded in the Hearts of Jesus and Mary

Founder ... founded, of the Institute of the Daughters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. In his life he encountered great difficulties, such as in 1901 when the “Don Miguel Unia” house was being built, but he entrusted himself to the Virgin, writing: “Now more than ever I have confidence in the success of this work, Mary Help of Christians will help me”; “I only have money to pay for one week, so ... it is up to Mary Help of Christians, because the work is in her hands.” In painful moments, Father Variara renewed his devotion to the Virgin, thus finding the serenity and trust in God to continue his mission.

In the great obstacles he encountered in founding the Congregation of the Daughters of the Sacred Hearts, Father Variara acted in the same way as at other times. At the time he had to leave Agua de Dios. In the same way he acted when he was told he had contracted leprosy. “Some days” he confessed, “despair assails me, with thoughts that I hasten to banish by invoking the Virgin.” And to his spiritual daughters, far away and removed from his paternal guidance, he wrote: “... Jesus will be your strength, and Mary Help of Christians will spread her mantle over you.” “I have no illusions” he wrote on another occasion, “I leave everything in the hands of the Virgin.” “May Jesus and Mary be blessed a thousand times over, live always in our hearts.”

Mamma Margaret’s basket

At the end of a year, we all have a memory basket in our soul. It contains what we have experienced – a rich year, full of

pleasant memories, but also of unexpected events. A year in which there was no lack of surprises.

Dear friends of Don Bosco and his charism. At the end of the year 2023, it seemed interesting to me to use the symbolism of the basket that Mamma Margaret always carries on her arm. Even in the new Strenna poster, her distinguishing mark is the basket hanging from her arm. We are all used to seeing Mamma Margaret like this. Without the basket, the handkerchief on her head and the poor peasant's dress, she would not look like herself.

The basket was made of wicker woven with great care. She had carried layettes for her grandchildren, fragrant freshly baked loaves of bread and clean-smelling linen.

But on 3 November 1846, as Don Bosco recounts in his *Memoirs of the Oratory*, when he and his mother came down from the Becchi to Turin to take in the city's abandoned youngsters, Mamma Margaret filled it with her wedding trousseau, carefully folded and, in the middle, deposited a few lavender bunches. In the bottom, well hidden under the fabric lining, she hid her little treasure: a small velvet parcel with two rings and a gold pendant.

With these few possessions, they were able to meet the first needs of the Oratory. Mamma Margaret had a heart as big as all the hills of Asti and the linen began to disappear, turning into shirts and underwear for the boys. Curious was the fate of the wedding dress that became the first altar cloth in the Pinardi Chapel and then a sheet for a cholera patient.

But the basket was not empty, it contained the scent of all the good and beautiful things in her life.

The treasure chest of happy memories

At the end of the year, we should all have a basket like this. Hanging in our minds and hearts. A basket which is a treasure chest of happy memories. We should fill it with the amazement of the dance of life that has quickly passed: the people who have done us good, graced events, the encounters that have

given us breath and courage, the certainties, the hopes and beneath, all the precious gold of God's presence.

In my basket I found many things to thank the Lord of Life, our good God and Father, for. And certainly, as happens in everyone's life including you who are reading me now, not everything you experience in a year has produced joy. There are also sorrows, hardships, demands, losses, but all this, lived in faith, is illuminated in a precious way.

- In my basket I find so many efforts, both mine and of those who help me in the animation and governance of the Congregation, and which have served to give life, so much life: we have been able to help so many people, so many children and young people throughout the Salesian world, encouraging my confreres and the Salesian Family to continue on a path of Salesian fidelity. The basket is filled with so many donations from so many people around the world, in the 135 nations and in the thousands of works of the entire Salesian Family around the world.

- In my basket this year is Don Bosco's visit to the centre for minors (the old Generala that Don Bosco visited with Fr Cafasso), and from which I returned home with a heavy heart and full of sorrow at being there with those young people (who I hope will soon overcome this situation), but with the joy of knowing that they will make it through. The farewell from the young man who asked me "When are you coming back?" is etched in my memory. And I will be back soon.

- In my basket is the joy of so many trips made during the year – this time again to the five continents, as I came back to Australia. I could write pages about all the trips. I will only mention my visit to Peru, twice in February, to the plateau of Huancayo, with its cold and hills and the meeting with more than a thousand young people at an altitude of 2,500 metres, and the immense heat of the city of eternal warmth (as they like to say) that is Piura, where I found a devotion to Mary Help of Christians that moved me.

- My basket contains the joy of seeing myself in Viedma – Argentina, five months after the canonisation of

Salesian Brother St Artemides Zatti and retracing the roads he travelled on, and living where he lived and where he made holiness a reality in everyday life.

- And this year, the basket, deep in my heart, contains the most profound experience a human being can have. The experience of losing one's mother, especially when one's father has already gone to heaven. You really feel that the "umbilical cord" that supported you not only until you were brought into the world, but throughout your life, is permanently cut. But, with the Lord's grace, while this was certainly a loss, I have also experienced it as something full of meaning, full of hope, and with immense gratitude to the Lord of life for a long and beautiful life in the case of both my father and my mother. How can I not thank the Lord for that?

- My basket this year contains the immense joy of the precious days spent in Lisbon for World Youth Day. More than a million young people gave a precious testimony of humanity and humanism, of the ability to live in harmony, friendship and peace despite being very different, coming from all over the world. What a great lesson they teach us.

- And finally, my basket this year contains a profound act of faith and obedience. Undoubtedly faith since the Holy Father has done so by appointing me Cardinal of the Holy Roman Church. And certainly in faith, and with the certainty that our God accompanies the life of each of us in the unique way that only He knows, I have accepted this design and this obedience. Certainly with gratitude and with the promise of fidelity and loyalty to the Vicar of Christ, as we declared when we receive the cardinal's ring. Only in faith can such a thing be lived worthily.

As you can see, my friends, my basket is full. I am sure it is the same in the life of each of you. This is the great gift of life from God.

I wish you a blessed time this month. And I wish you that, as you await the coming of Jesus Christ, you continue to work as a Salesian Family to ensure that our world is purified of

hatred and discord and filled with the Christian spirit, so that we may all always live in peace with one another.

Don Bosco and his mother

The 150th anniversary of Don Bosco's birth was commemorated in 1965. Among the conferences for the occasion was one given by Bishop Giuseppe Angrisani, then Bishop of Casale, and National President of the Past Pupils Priests. Referring to Mamma Margaret, he said of Don Bosco, *"Fortunately for him that mother was at his side for many and many years, and I think and believe I am right in saying that the eagle of the Becchi would not have flown to the ends of the earth if the swallow of the Serra di Capriglio had not come to nest under the beams of the very humble house of the Bosco family"* (BS, Sept. 1966, p. 10).

This was a highly poetic image, which nevertheless expressed a reality. 30 years earlier, G. Joergensen, without wishing to profane Sacred Scripture, allowed himself to begin his *Don Bosco* published by SEI with the words *"In the beginning there was the mother."*

The maternal influence in the religious attitudes of the child and in the religiosity of the adult is recognised by experts in religious psychology and is, in our case, more than evident: St John Bosco, who always had the greatest veneration for his mother, copied a profound religious sense of life from her. "God dominated Don Bosco's mind like the midday sun" (Pietro Stella).

God at the top of his thoughts

It is an easy fact to document: Don Bosco always had God at the top of all his thoughts. A man of action, he was first and foremost a man of prayer. He himself recalls

that it was his mother who taught him to pray, that is, to converse with God:

"She made me kneel with [my brothers] morning and evening. We would all recite our prayers together" (MO 33).

When John had to leave his mother's roof and go to work as a farm hand at the Moglia farmstead, prayer was already his habitual food and comfort. In the house in Moncucco "the duties of a good Christian were fulfilled with the regularity of inveterate domestic habits, always tenacious in country families, very tenacious in those days of healthy country life" (E. Ceria). But John was already doing something more: he prayed on his knees, he prayed often, he prayed at length. Even outside the house, while driving the cows to pasture, he would pause occasionally in prayer.

His mother had also instilled in his heart a tender devotion to the Blessed Virgin. When he entered the seminary, she had told him:

"When you came into the world, I consecrated you to the Blessed Virgin; when you began your studies, I recommended to you devotion to this Mother of ours; and if you become a priest, always preach and promote devotion to Mary." (MO, 79).

Mamma Margaret, after educating her son John in the cottage at the Becchi, after allowing him and encouraging him on his hard vocational journey, lived for ten more years at his side, carrying out a very delicate maternal role in the education of the youngsters he had gathered, with a style that continues in so many aspects of Don Bosco's educational praxis: awareness of God's presence, industriousness that is a sense of human and Christian dignity, courage that inspires works, reason that is dialogue and acceptance of others, demanding but reassuring love.

Without any doubt, therefore, the mother played a unique role in the education and early apostolate of her son, profoundly influencing the spirit and style of his future work.

Having become a priest and begun work among the

youth, Don Bosco gave the title "Oratory" to his work. It is not without reason that the driving centre of all Don Bosco's works was called the Oratory. The title indicates the dominant activity, the main purpose of an undertaking. And Don Bosco, as he himself confessed, gave the name Oratory to his "house" to clearly indicate that prayer was the only power he relied on.

He had no other power at his disposal to animate his oratories, start the hospice, solve the problem of daily bread, lay the foundations of his Congregation. So many, we know, even doubted his sanity.

What the great did not understand, the little ones understood implicitly, that is, the young people who, after getting to know him, could no longer tear themselves away from him. They saw in him the living image of the Lord. Always calm and serene, always at their disposal, fervent in prayer, humorous in speech, paternal in guiding them to the good, always keeping the hope of salvation alive in everyone. If someone, one witness asserted, had asked him point blank, "Don Bosco, where are you off to?" he would have replied: "Let's go to Paradise!"

This religious sense of life, which permeated all Don Bosco's works and writings, was an obvious inheritance from his mother. Don Bosco's holiness was drawn from the divine source of Grace and modelled on Christ, the master of all perfection, but it was rooted in a maternal spiritual value, Christian wisdom. The good tree produces good fruit.

She had taught him this

Don Bosco's mother, Margherita Occhiena, had been sharing a life of deprivation and sacrifice with her son at Valdocco since November 1846, when at 58 years of age, she had left her home at the Becchi, a life of deprivation and sacrifice all spent for young urchins on the outskirts of Turin. Four years passed, and she now felt her strength waning. A great weariness had penetrated her bones, a strong nostalgia in her heart. She entered Don Bosco's room and said,

“Listen to me, John, it is no longer possible to go on like this. Every day the boys are up to something. They throw my clean laundry lying in the sun on the floor, and they trample my vegetables in the garden. They tear their clothes so that there is no way of patching them up. They lose socks and shirts. They take things away from the house to play with and make me walk around all day to find them. In the midst of this confusion, I am losing my mind, You see! I’m just about ready to return to the Becchi.”

Don Bosco stared into his mother’s face, without speaking. Then he pointed to the Crucifix hanging on the wall. Mamma Margaret understood. Her eyes filled with tears.

“You are right, you are right, she exclaimed” and she went back to her chores, for another six years, until her death (G.B. LEMOYNE, Mamma Margherita, Torino, SEI, 1956, p. 155-156).

Mamma Margaret nourished a deep devotion to the Passion of Christ, to the Cross that gave meaning, strength and hope to all her crosses. She had taught this to her son. One glance at the Crucifix was enough for her! For her, life was a mission to be fulfilled, time a gift from God, work a human contribution to the Creator’s plan, human history a sacred thing because God, our Lord, Father and Saviour, is at the centre, beginning and end of the world and of humanity.

She had taught all this to her son by word and example. Mother and son: a faith and hope placed in God alone, and an ardent charity that burned in their hearts until death.

Alexandre Planas Saurì, the

deaf martyr (2/2)

[\(continuation from previous article\)](#)

The Salesian

He was close to the sick, the children. The Oratory, which the Salesians had founded at the beginning of the house, ended with his departure back in 1903. But the parish of Sant Vicenç picked up the torch through a young man, Joan Juncadella, a born catechist, and *El Sordo*, his great assistant. As mentioned earlier, a very strong friendship and ongoing collaboration grew between them, which was only ended by the tragedy in 1936. Alexandre took care of the cleanliness and orderliness of the place, but he soon proved to be a real animator of the games and excursions that were organised. And if necessary, he did not hesitate to make available the money he saved.

And he had a Salesian heart. Deafness did not allow him to profess as a Salesian, which he certainly wanted. However, it appears that he took private vows, which he made with the permission of the then Provincial, Fr Philip Rinaldi, according to the testimony of one of the rectors of the house, Fr Crescenzi.

He demonstrated his identification with the Salesian cause in a thousand ways, but in a particularly significant way by taking personal care of the house for almost 30 years and defending it in the difficult situation in the summer and autumn of 1936.

"He seemed like the father to each of us. When, in 1935, three boys drowned in the river, the man's grief was as if he had lost three sons at once. We know that the Salesians did not consider him an employee, but one of the family, or a cooperator. Today perhaps we could say a consecrated layman in the style of the Volunteers with Don Bosco. A Salesian of great spiritual stature."

Embracing the Cross, a true witness of faith and

reconciliation

The Salesians returned to Sant Vicenç dels Horts in the autumn of 1931. The unrest that led to the fall of the Spanish monarchy affected the house in El Campello (Alicante) where the aspirantate was located at that time. The decision was therefore taken to move it to Sant Vicenç. The house, although relatively dilapidated, was ready. It was able to expand with the purchase of an adjacent tower. It was here that the life of the aspirants took place, whose testimony on *el Sordo* has made it possible to draw the portrait of the man, the artist, the believer and the Salesian to which we have referred.



Christ nailed to the cross, in the courtyard of the house, by Alexandre



The Deposition in the hands of Mary, in the courtyard of the house, by Alexandre



The Holy Sepulchre, in the courtyard of the house, by Alexandre

Now is not the time to refer to the critical situation of the years 1931-1936 in Spain. Despite all this, life in the Sant Vicenç aspirantate passed quite normally. The driving force of daily life was the vocational awareness of the young people, which always inspired them to look ahead in the hope of tying themselves to Don Bosco for good at a not too distant date.

Until the revolution came on 18 July 1936, on the same day Salesians and young people made their pilgrimage excursion to Tibidabo. When they returned in the afternoon, things were changing. In just a few days, the parish house in the village was burnt down, the Salesian seminary was seized,

a climate of religious intolerance had spread everywhere, the parish priest and his assistant were arrested and killed, the forces of law and order were unable or unwilling to cope with the riots. In Sant Vicenç, the "Antifascist Committee" took power, which was clearly anti-Christian.

Although at first the life of the teachers was respected because of the care for the children they housed, they nevertheless had to witness the destruction and burning of all religious objects, in particular the three monuments erected by *el Sordo*. *"How he suffered"* seeing himself having to collaborate in the destruction of what was an expression of his deep spirituality and witnessing the expulsion of the priests.

In those days, *el Sordo* became clearly aware of the new role that the revolution forced him to take on: without ceasing to be the community's main link with the outside world (he had always moved freely as an errand boy and in every kind of need), he had to guard the property as before and, above all, protect the seminarians. "In reality, he was the one who represented the Salesians and acted as our father. Within a few days, in fact, only the Brothers and an increasingly small group of aspirants remained.

The ultimate expulsion of both took place on 12 November. In Sant Vicenç, only Mr Alexandre remained. For his last days of life we know only three certain facts: two of the expelled Brothers returned to the village on the 16th to convince him to seek a safer place outside the village, which Alexandre refused. He could not leave the house he had guarded for so many years, nor could he maintain the Salesian spirit even in the midst of those difficult circumstances. One of them, Eliseo García, not wanting to leave him alone, stayed with him. Both were arrested on the night of the 18th. A few days later, seeing that Eliseo had not returned to Sarrià, another Salesian brother and a seminarian went to Sant Vicenç to get news of them. *"Don't they know what happened?"* said a lady friend they knew who ran a bar. *"She told us in a few words about the disappearance of el Sordo and Eliseo."*

How did he spend this last week? Knowing *el Sordo's* life as we do, always faithful to his principles and his way of doing things, it is not difficult to imagine him: helping others, without hiding his faith and charity, in the knowledge that he was doing good, contemplating the mystery of Christ's passion and death, real and present in the lives of the persecuted, the disappeared and the murdered... Perhaps in the hope that he could be the guardian not only of the Salesians' property, but the guardian of so many of the people who suffered. As we have recalled, he did not want to strip himself of the crucifix even during the months of religious persecution that culminated in his martyrdom. With this faith, with this hope, with this immense love he would hear from the Lord of glory: *"Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful in small things; I will entrust much more to you. Enter into the joy of your Lord"* (Mt 25:21).

El Sordo's gospel

Having reached this point, anyone, no matter how insensitive, can only be silent and try to collect, to the best of one's ability, the precious spiritual legacy Alexandre left to the Salesian Family, his adoptive family. Can we say something about "his gospel", that is, about the Good News that he made his own and continues to propose to us with his life and death?

Alexandre is like the "man who had an impediment in his speech" of Mk 7:32. His parents' plea to Jesus for healing would have been continuous. Like him, Jesus took him to a lonely place away from his people and said to him: *"Ephata!"* The miracle was not in the healing of the physical ear, but in the spiritual ear. It seems to me that the acceptance of his situation with a spirit of faith was one of the founding experiences of his believing life that led him to proclaim, like the deaf man in the Gospel, to the four winds: *"He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak"* (Mk 7:37).

And from here in the life of *el Sordo* we can

contemplate “the hidden treasure of the Kingdom” (Mt 13:44); “the yeast that leavens the entire dough” (Mt 13:33); Jesus himself “who welcomes the sick” and “blesses the children”; Jesus who prays to the Father for hours and hours and teaches us the Our Father (to give glory to the Father, to desire the Kingdom, to do his will, to trust in daily bread, to forgive, to free from evil. ...) (Mt 7:9-13); “the householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old” (Mt 13:52); “the Good Samaritan who takes pity on the beaten man, approaches him, binds up his wounds and takes charge of his healing” (Lk 10:33-35); “the Good Shepherd, keeper of the sheepfold, who enters through the door, loves the sheep, even to the point of laying down his life for them” (Jn 10:7-11)... In a word, a living icon of the Beatitudes, of all of them, in everyday life (Mt 5:3-12).

But, even more, we can approach Alexandre and contemplate with him the Mystery of Jesus’ passion, death and resurrection. A mystery that takes place in his life from birth to death. A mystery that strengthens him in his faith, nourishes his hope and fills him with love, with which to give glory to God, made all things to all people with the children and young people of the Salesian home, and with the villagers of Sant Vicenç, especially the poorest, including those who took his life: “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do” (Lk 23:34). Make me, Lord, a witness of faith and reconciliation. May they too, one day, hear from your lips: “Today you will be with me in Paradise” (Lk 23:43).

Blessed Alexandre Planas Saurí, layman, Salesian martyr, witness of faith and reconciliation, fruitful seed of the civilisation of Love for today’s world, intercede for us.

Alexandre Planas Saurí, the deaf martyr (1/2)

Alexandre Planas Sauri, born in Mataró (Barcelona) on 31 December 1878, was a lay collaborator of the Salesians until his glorious death as a martyr in Garraf (Barcelona) on 19 November 1936. His beatification took place together with other Salesians and members of the Salesian Family on 11 March 2001, by Pope Saint John Paul II.

The list of Spanish martyrs beatified by Pope John Paul II on 11 March 2001 includes layman Alexandre PLANAS SAURÍ. His name is one of the Salesian martyrs of the Tarraconense Province, a subgroup of Barcelona. The testimonies about his life also describe him as “of the family” or “cooperator”, but everyone describes him as “a genuine Salesian”. The village of Sant Vicenç dels Horts, where he lived for 35 years, knew him by the nickname “El Sord’” “El Sord dels Frares” (The Deaf man of the friars). And this is the expression that appears on the beautiful plaque in the parish church, placed on at the back, on the exact spot where Alexandre stood when he went to pray.

His life was cut short on the night of 18 November 1936, along with a Salesian Brother, Eliseo García, who stayed with him so as not to leave him alone, as Alexandre did not want to leave the village and seek a safer place. Within hours both were arrested, condemned by the anarchist committee in the municipality, and taken to the banks of the Garraf, on the Mediterranean, where they were shot. Their bodies were not recovered. Alexandre was 58 years old.

This is a note that could have made it onto the events page of any newspaper and fallen into utter oblivion. But it did not. The Church proclaimed them both blessed. For the Salesian Family they were and always will be “signs of faith and reconciliation”. Reference will be made in these

pages to Mr Alexandre. Who was this man whom people nicknamed "*el Sord dels frares*"?

The circumstances of his life

Alexandre Planas Saurí was born in Mataró (province of Barcelona) in 1878, six years before the train that took Don Bosco to Barcelona (to visit and meet with the Salesians and the young people at the Sarrià house), stopped at the station in this city to pick up Doña Dorotea de Chopitea and those from Martí Codolar who wanted to accompany him on the last leg of the journey to Barcelona.

Very little is known of his childhood and adolescence. He was baptised in the city's most popular parish, St Joseph and St John. He was, without a doubt, a regular attender at Sunday celebrations, activities and parish celebrations. Judging by the trajectory of his later life, he was a young man who was able to develop a solid spiritual life.

Alexandre had a significant physical impairment: he was totally deaf and had an ungainly body (short in stature, and curvature of the spine). The circumstance that brought him to Sant Vicenç dels Horts, a town about 50 km from his home town, is unknown. The truth is that in 1900 he was among the Salesians in the small town of Sant Vicenç as an employee in the daily activities of the Salesian house: gardening, cleaning, farming, running errands... A clever and hard working young man. And, above all, "good and very pious".

The house in Sant Vicenç dels Horts was bought by Fr Philip Rinaldi, former Provincial of Spain, in 1895, to house the novitiate and the philosophy studies that were to be carried out later. It was the first Salesian formation centre in Spain. Alexandre arrived there in 1900 as an employee, immediately earning the respect of everyone. He felt very comfortable, fully integrated in the spirit and mission of the house.

At the end of the 1902-1903 school year, the house underwent a major change of direction. The Rector Major, Fr

Michael Rua, had created the three provinces of Spain. Madrid and Seville Provinces decided to organise formation in their respective provinces. Barcelona also transferred the novitiate and philosophy to Girona. The house in Sant Vicenç dels Horts remained practically empty within a few months, inhabited only by Mr Alexandre.

From that year until 1931 (28 years!), he became the guardian of the house. Not only of the property, but above all of the Salesian traditions that had become strongly rooted in the population in just a few years. His was a benevolent presence and work, living like an anchorite but in no way foreign to the friends of the house who protected him, for the sick of the town he visited, life in his parish, the parishioners he edified with the example of his piety, and for the children at parish catechesis and the festive oratory he animated together with a young man from the town, Joan Juncadella, with whom he formed a strong friendship. Distant yet close at the same time, with no small influence on people. A singular character. The reference person for Salesian spirit in the village. *"El sord dels frares"*.

The man

Alexandre, a handicapped and deaf person who understood others thanks to his penetrating gaze, of the movement of their lips, always answered lucidly, even if he spoke softly. A man with a good and bright heart: *"A treasure in an ugly earthenware jar, but we, the children, were able to perceive his human dignity perfectly."*

He dressed as a poor person, always with his bag slung over his shoulder, sometimes accompanied by a dog. The Salesians let him stay at the house. He could live on what the garden produced and the help he received from a few people. His poverty was exemplary, more than evangelical. And if he had stoo much, he gave it to the poor. In the midst of this kind of life, he carried out the task of caretaker of the house with absolute fidelity.

As well as the faithful and responsible man, was the good, humble, self-sacrificing man of an invincible, though firm, warmth. "He would not allow anyone to be spoken ill of." Then there was the gentleness of his heart. "The comforter of all families." A man of transparent heart, and upright intention. A man who made himself loved and respected. The people were with him.



The artist

Alexandre also had the soul of an artist, an artist and a mystic. Isolated from outside noise he lived absorbed in constant mystical contemplation. And he was able to capture the innermost feelings of his religious experience in material things, which almost always revolved around the passion of Jesus Christ.

In the courtyard at the house he created three clearly visible monuments: Christ nailed to the cross, being laid in Mary's hands and the holy sepulchre. Among the three, the cross presided over the courtyard. Passengers on the train that ran past the farm could see it perfectly. On the other hand, he set up a small workshop in one of the outbuildings of the house where he carried out the orders he received or small images with which he satisfied the tastes of popular piety and distributed them freely among his neighbours.

The believer

But what dominated his personality was his Christian faith. He professed it in the depths of his being and manifested it with total clarity, sometimes even ostentatiously, by professing it in public. "*A true saint*" a "*man of God*" people said. "*When we arrived at the chapel in the morning or in the afternoon we would always unfailingly find Alexandre praying, on his knees, doing his pious practices.*" "*His piety was very deep.*" A man totally open to

the voice of the Spirit, with the sensitivity that saints possess. The most admirable thing about this man was his thirst and hunger for God, *"seeking ever more spirituality."*

Alexandre's faith was first of all open to the mystery of God, before whose greatness he would fall on his knees in profound adoration: *"Bowed down by his body, his eyes lowered, full of interior life... placed at one side of the church, his head bowed, kneeling, absorbed in the mystery of God, fully immersed in meditation on holy pleasure, he would give vent to his affections and emotions..."*

"He would spend hours before the tabernacle, kneeling, with his body bent almost horizontally to the ground, after communion." From contemplation of God and his saving greatness, Alexandre drew a great trust in Divine Providence, but also a radical aversion to blasphemy against the glory of God and his holy name. He could not tolerate blasphemy. *"If he sensed a blasphemy he would either become tense as he looked intensely at the person who had uttered it, or he would whisper with compassion, so that the person could hear: 'Our Lady weeps, Our Lord weeps.'"*

His faith was expressed in the traditional devotions of the Eucharist, as we have seen, and the rosary. But where his religious impulse found the channel best suited to his needs was undoubtedly in meditation on the passion of Christ. *"I remember the impression we had of this deaf man on hearing him speak of the Passion of Christ."*

He bore the mystery of the cross in his flesh and in his soul. In its honour he had erected the monuments of the cross, the deposition and the burial of Christ. All accounts also mention the iron crucifix he wore hanging from his chest, and whose chain was embedded in his skin. And he always slept with a large crucifix beside him. He did not want to take off the crucifix even during the months of religious persecution that culminated in his martyrdom. *"Am I doing anything wrong?"* he would say. *"And if they kill me, so much the better, then I already have heaven open."*

Every day he would make the Stations of the Cross:

“When he went up to the study room, Mr Planas would enter the chapel, and when we came down after an hour, he was finishing the Stations of the Cross, which he did totally bent over, until his head touched the ground.”

Founded on this experience of the cross to which was added his profound devotion to the Sacred Heart, the Deaf man's spirituality was projected towards asceticism and solidarity. He lived as a penitent, in evangelical poverty and a spirit of mortification. He slept on planks without a mattress or pillow, having beside him a skull that reminded him of death and “some instruments of penance”. He did not learn this from the Salesians. He had learnt it previously and explained it by recalling the spirituality of Jesuit St Alphonse Rodríguez, whose manual he used to read in the novitiate house and which he sometimes meditated on during those years.

But his love for the cross also drove him to solidarity. His austerity was impressive. He dressed like the poor and ate frugally. He gave all he could give: not money, because he had none, but always his fraternal help: *“When there was something to be done for someone, he would leave everything and go where it was needed.”* Those who benefited most were the children in catechesis and the sick. *“He never missed the bedside of a seriously ill person: he would watch over him while the family rested. And if there was no one in the family who could prepare the deceased, he was ready for this service. Favoured were the poor, whom, if he could, he helped with the alms he collected or with the fruit of his labour.”*

[\(continued\)](#)

don Joan Lluís Playà, sdb

Venerable Dorotea Chopitea

Who was Dorotea de Chopitea? She was a Salesian cooperator, a true mother of the poor in Barcelona, creator of numerous institutions at the service of charity and the apostolic mission of the Church. Her figure takes on special importance today and encourages us to imitate her example of being “merciful like the Father”.

A Biscayan in Chile

In 1790, during the reign of Charles IV, a Biscayan, Pedro Nicolás de Chopitea, a native of Lequeitio, emigrated to Chile, then part of the Spanish Empire. The young migrant prospered and married a young Creole woman, Isabel de Villota.

Don Pedro Nolasco Chopitea and Isabel Villota settled in Santiago de Chile. God granted them 18 children, although only 12 survived, five boys and seven girls. The youngest of these was born, baptised and confirmed on the same day: 5 August 1816, taking the names Antonia, Dorotea and Dolores, although she was always known as Dorotea (Dorothy), which in Greek means “gift of God”. Peter and Elizabeth’s family was wealthy, Christian, and committed to using their wealth for the benefit of the poor people around them.

In 1816, the year of Dorotea’s birth, Chileans began to openly demand independence from Spain, which they achieved in 1818. The following year, Don Pedro, who had aligned himself with the royalists, i.e. in favour of Spain, and had been imprisoned for it, moved his family across the Atlantic to Barcelona, so that the political turmoil would not compromise his older children, although he continued to maintain a dense network of relations with political and economic circles in Chile.

In the large house in Barcelona, the three-year-old Dorotea was entrusted to the care of her twelve-year-old sister

Josefina. Thus Josefina, later “Sister Josefina”, was Dorotea’s “little young mother”. She entrusted herself to her with total affection, allowing herself to be guided by her.

When she was thirteen years old, on Josefina’s advice she took Father Pedro Nardó, from the parish of Santa María del Mar, as her spiritual director. For 50 years Pedro was her confessor and counsellor in delicate and difficult moments. The priest taught her with kindness and strength to “separate her heart from riches”.

Throughout her life, Dorotea considered the riches of her family not as a source of amusement and dissipation, but as a great means placed in her hand by God to do good for the poor. Fr Pedro Nardó had her read the Gospel parable of the rich man and the poor Lazarus many times. As a distinctive Christian sign, he advised Josefina and Dorotea to always dress modestly and simply, without the cascade of ribbons and light silk gauze that the fashion of the time imposed on young aristocratic women.

Dorotea received the solid home schooling which at that time was given to girls from well-to-do families. In fact, she later helped her husband many times in his profession as a merchant.

Wife at the age of sixteen

The Chopiteas had met up in Barcelona with friends from Chile, the Serra family, who had returned to Spain for the same reason, independence. The father, Mariano Serra i Soler, came from Palafrugell and had also carved out a brilliant financial position for himself. Married to a young Creole girl, Mariana Muñoz, he had four children, the eldest of whom, José María, was born in Chile on 4 November 1810.

At the age of sixteen, Dorotea experienced the most delicate moment of her life. She was engaged to José María Serra, although the marriage was spoken of as a future event. But it

happened that Don Pedro Chopitea had to return to Latin America to defend his interests, and shortly afterwards his wife Isabel prepared to cross the Atlantic to reach him in Uruguay together with their youngest children. Suddenly, Dorotea was faced with a fundamental decision for her life: to break the deep affection that bound her to José María Serra and leave with her mother, or to marry at the age of sixteen. On the advice of Fr Pedro Nardó, Dorotea decided to marry. The marriage took place in Santa Maria del Mar on 31 October 1832.

The young couple settled in Carrer Montcada, in the palace belonging to her husband's parents. The understanding between them was perfect and a source of happiness and well-being.

Dorotea was a slim, lanky individual with a strong and determined character. The "I will always love you" sworn by the two spouses before God, developed into an affectionate and solid married life which gave birth to six daughters: all of them receiving the name Maria with various complements: Maria Dolores, Maria Ana, Maria Isabel, Maria Luisa, Maria Jesus and Maria del Carmen. The first came into the world in 1834, the last in 1845.

Fifty years after the "yes" pronounced in the church of Santa Maria del Mar, José Maria Serra would say that in all those years "our love grew day by day".

Dorotea, mother of the poor

Dorotea was the lady of the house, in which several families of employees worked. She was José María's intelligent co-worker, who soon achieved fame in the business world. She was by his side in times of success and in times of uncertainty and failure. Dorotea was by her husband's side when he travelled abroad. She was with him Tsar Alexander II' Russia, in the Savoy family's Italy and Pope Leo XIII's Rome.

On her visit to Rome, at the age of sixty-two, she was accompanied by her niece Isidora Pons, who testified at the

apostolic process: "She was received by the Pope. The deference with which Leo XIII treated my aunt, to whom he offered her a white sundress as a gift, has stayed with me."

Affectionate and strong

The employees of the Serra house felt like part of the family. Maria Arnenos declared under oath: "She had a motherly affection for us, her employees. She cared for our material and spiritual welfare with real love. When someone was ill, she saw to it that they lacked nothing, she took care of even the smallest details." "Her salary was higher than that given to the employees of other families.

A delicate person, a strong and determined character. This was the battlefield on which Dorotea struggled throughout her life to acquire the humility and calm that nature had not given her. As great as her impetus was, greater was her strength to live always in the presence of God. Thus she wrote in her spiritual notes: "I will make every effort to ensure that from morning all my actions are directed to God", "I will not give up meditation and spiritual reading without serious reason", "I will make twenty daily acts of mortification and as many acts of love of God", "To do all actions from God and for God, frequently renewing purity of intention.... I promise God to purify my intention in all my actions."

Salesian Cooperator

In the last decades of the 1800s, Barcelona was a city in the throes of the "industrial revolution". The outskirts of the city were full of very poor people. There was a lack of shelters, hospitals and schools. During the retreat she made in 1867, Doña Dorotea wrote among her resolutions: "My favourite virtue will be charity towards the poor, even if it costs me great sacrifices." And Adrián de Gispert, Dorotea's nephew, testified: "I know that Aunt Dorotea founded hospitals, shelters, schools, workshops for arts and trades and many other works. I remember visiting some of them in her company. When her husband was alive, he helped her in these

charitable and social works. After his death, she first of all saw to the patrimony of her five daughters; then, her “personal” goods (her very rich dowry, the patrimony received personally in inheritance, the goods that her husband wanted to register in his name), she used for the poor with careful and prudent administration.” A witness stated under oath: “After having provided for her family, she dedicated the rest to the poor as an act of justice.”

Having heard from Don Bosco, she wrote to him on 20 September 1882 (she was sixty-six, Don Bosco sixty-seven). She told him that Barcelona was an “eminently industrial and mercantile” city, and that his young and dynamic Congregation would find plenty of work among the boys in the suburbs. She offered a school for apprentice workers.

Fr Philp Rinaldi arrived in Barcelona in 1889, and he writes: “We went to Barcelona at her call, because she wanted to provide especially for young workers and abandoned orphans. She bought a plot of land with a house, the extension of which she took care of. I arrived in Barcelona when the construction had already been completed... With my own eyes I saw many cases of assistance to children, widows, the elderly, the unemployed and the sick. Many times I heard it said that she personally performed the most humble services for the sick.”

In 1884 she thought of entrusting a nursery school to the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians: it was necessary to think of the children in the outer suburbs.

Don Bosco was not able to go to Barcelona until the spring of 1886, and the chronicles amply report the triumphant welcome he was given in the Catalan metropolis, and the affectionate and respectful attentions with which Doña Dorotea, her daughters, grandchildren and relatives surrounded the saint.

On 5 February 1888, when he was informed of Don Bosco’s death, Blessed Michael Rua wrote to her: “Our dearest father Don

Bosco has flown to heaven, leaving his children full of sorrow." He always showed a lively esteem and grateful affection for our mother of Barcelona, as he called her, the mother of the Salesians and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

Moreover, before he died, he assured her that he was going to prepare a good place for her in heaven. That same year, Doña Dorotea handed over the oratory and the schools in Rocafort Street, in the heart of Barcelona to the Salesians.

The last handing over to the Salesian Family was the Santa Dorotea school entrusted to the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. 60,000 pesetas were needed for its purchase, and she handed it over saying: "God wants me poor." That sum was her provision for her old age, what she kept to live modestly together with Mary, her faithful companion.

On Good Friday 1891, in the cold church of Marie Reparatrice, as she was taking up the collection she contracted pneumonia. She was seventy-five years old, and it was immediately clear that she would not overcome the crisis. Fr Rinaldi came to her and stayed for a long time at her bedside. He wrote: "In the few days he was still alive, she did not think of her illness but of the poor and her soul. She wanted to say something in particular to each of her daughters, and blessed them all in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, like an ancient patriarch. As we stood around her bed commending her to the Lord, at a certain moment she raised her eyes. The confessor presented the crucifix to her to kiss. Those of us who were present knelt down. Doña Dorotea recollected herself, closed her eyes and gently breathed her last."

It was 3 April 1891, five days after Easter.

Pope John Paul II declared her "Venerable" on 9 June 1983, i.e. "a Christian who practised love of God and neighbour to an heroic degree,"

Rector Major, Fr Angel FERNANDEZ ARTIME, appointed cardinal

At the end of the Marian prayer on Sunday, 9 July 2023, Pope Francis announced the creation of 21 new cardinals, including the Rector Major of the Salesians, Fr Angel FERNANDEZ ARTIME.

We wish our Rector Major many graces from the Lord to guide him in the new mission entrusted to him by the Universal Church!

The official news can be found [HERE](#).

St Francis de Sales. Mary's presence (8/8)

[\(continuation from previous article\)](#)

THE PRESENCE OF MARY IN SAINT FRANCIS DE SALES (8/8)

The first information we have about devotion to Mary in the de Sales family refers to his mother, the young Françoise de Sionnaz, a devotee of the Virgin, faithful to the Rosary. She

passed love for this pious practice on to her son, who, as a young boy in Annecy, enrolled in the Confraternity of the Rosary, committing himself to say all or part of it every day. Fidelity to this would accompany him throughout his life.

Devotion to the Virgin continued during his Parisian years. "He entered the Congregation of Mary, which brought together the spiritual elite of the students at their college."

Then there was the **spiritual crisis** that broke out at the end of 1586: for several weeks he did not eat, sleep, and was in despair. He had the idea in his head that he had been abandoned by God's love and would "never be able to see your sweet face again". Until one day, in January 1587, on his return from college, he entered the church of Saint-Etienne-des-Grès and made an act of abandonment before the Virgin: he said the Salve Regina and was freed from temptation and regained his serenity.

His prayer and devotion to the Mother of God certainly continued during his years in Padua: he would entrust his vocation to the priesthood to her, and on 18 December 1593, he was ordained a priest and would certainly have celebrated a few masses in the church at Annecy, dedicated to Notre Dame de Liesse (Our Lady of Joy), to thank Her for taking him and leading him by the hand during those long years of study.

Years passed and August 1603 came, when Francis received the letter of invitation from the Archbishop of Bourges to preach for the upcoming Lent in Dijon.

"Our Congregation is the fruit of the journey to Dijon," he wrote to his friend Fr Pollien.

It would be during this Lent, which began on 5 March 1604, that Francis would meet Baroness Jane Frances Frémyot de Chantal. He would begin a journey towards God in search of His will, a journey that would last six years and end on 6 June 1610, the day on which the Visitation was born with Jane

Frances and two other women entering the novitiate.

"Our little Congregation is truly a work of the Heart of Jesus and Mary," and after a short time he confidently added: "God takes care of his servants and Our Lady provides them with what they need."

His Daughters would be called Religious of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Four hundred years after its foundation, the Monastery of the Visitation in Paris writes that the Order has never ceased to draw all the best of its spirituality from this Gospel scene.

"Contemplation and praise of the Lord, united to the service of one's neighbour; the spirit of thanksgiving and the humility of the Magnificat; real poverty that throws itself with infinite confidence on the goodness of the Father; availability to the Spirit; missionary ardour to reveal the presence of Christ; joy in the Lord; Mary who faithfully keeps all these things in her heart."

Jane Frances de Chantal summarises the Salesian spirit as follows: "a spirit of profound humility towards God and of great gentleness towards one's neighbour", which are precisely the virtues that immediately arise from the lived contemplation of the mystery of the Visitation.

In the Treatise on the spirit of simplicity, Francis told his Visitandines:

"We must have a totally simple trust which makes us remain quiet in the arms of our Father and our dear Mother, confident that Our Lord and Our Lady, our dear Mother, will always protect us with their care and motherly tenderness."

The Visitation is the living monument of Francis' love for the Mother of Jesus.

His friend Bishop J.P. Camus sums up Francis' love for the Virgin in this way: "His devotion to the Mother of splendid love, of wisdom, of chaste love and of holy hope was truly great. From his earliest years he devoted himself to honouring

her.”

Mary’s presence is like yeast in the dough for his letters: discreet, silent, active and effective. There is no lack of prayers composed by Francis himself.

On 8 December (!) 1621, he sent one to a Visitandine:

“May the most glorious Virgin fill us with her love, so that together, you and I, who have had the good fortune to be called and have embarked under her protection and in her name, may accomplish our voyage in humble purity and simplicity, so that one day we may find ourselves in the port of salvation, which is Paradise.”

When he wrote letters around some Marian feast, he did not miss an opportunity to mention her or make a point for reflection. Thus,

– for the Assumption of Mary into heaven: “May this holy Virgin, with her prayers, have us live in this holy love! May this love always be the sole object of our heart.

– for the Annunciation: it is the day “of the most blessed greeting ever given to anyone. I beseech this glorious Virgin to grant you some of the consolation she received.”

Who was Mary for Francis?

a. She was the Mother of God

Not only Mother, but also... grandmother!

“Honour, reverence and respect the holy and glorious Virgin Mary with a special love: she is the Mother of our sovereign Father and therefore also our dear grandmother. Let us have recourse to her as grandchildren, let us throw ourselves upon her knees with absolute trust; at all times, in all circumstances, let us appeal to this sweet Mother, let us invoke her maternal love and, making every effort to imitate her virtues, let us have the sincere heart of children for her.”

She leads us to Jesus: "Do whatever He tells you!"

"If we want Our Lady to ask her Son to change the water of our lukewarmness into the wine of His love, we must do all that He will tell us. Let us do what the Saviour will tell us well, let us fill our hearts well with the water of penance, and this lukewarm water will be changed for us into the wine of fervent love."

b. She was the model we must imitate

In listening to the Word of God.

"Receive it in your heart like a precious ointment, following the example of the Blessed Virgin, who carefully kept all the praises spoken in honour of her Son in her own,"

Model for living in humility.

"The Most Blessed Virgin, Our Lady, gave us a most remarkable example of humility when she pronounced these words: Behold the handmaid of the Lord, let it be done to me according to your word; in saying that she is the handmaid of the Lord, she expresses the greatest act of humility that can be done and immediately performs an act of most excellent generosity, saying: Let it be done to me according to your word."

Model for living *common* holiness.

"If one wants to be a saint of true holiness, it must be common, daily, everyday holiness like that of Our Lord and Our Lady."

Model for living in serenity:

"If you feel excessively worried, soothe your soul and try to give it back its tranquillity. Imagine how the Virgin worked calmly with one hand, while with the other she held Our Lord, during her childhood: she held Him on one arm, never taking her gaze away from Him."

Model for giving ourselves to God in time:

"Oh how happy are the souls who, in imitation of this holy Virgin, consecrate themselves as first fruits, from their

youth, to the service of Our Lord.”.

c. Strength in suffering

Madame de Granieu’s husband suffered very painful attacks of gout.

Francis shared in the gentleman’s suffering sayings:

“A pain that our Blessed Lady and Abbess (the Virgin Mary) can greatly alleviate by leading you to Mount Calvary, where she holds the novitiate of her monastery, teaching you not only to suffer well, but to suffer everything that happens both for us and for our loved ones with love.”

Let me conclude with this beautiful passage that underlines the bond that unites Mary and the believer every time we approach the Eucharist:

“Do you want to become relatives of the Virgin Mary? Go to communion! For in receiving the Holy Sacrament you receive the flesh of her flesh and the blood of her blood, since the precious body of the Saviour, which is in the divine Eucharist, was made and formed with her most pure blood and with the collaboration of the Holy Spirit. Since you cannot be related to Our Lady in the same way as Elizabeth, be so by imitating her virtues and holy life.”

The Charism of Presence and Hope. A year travelling with

Fr Angel

The slowdown in the pandemic has allowed the Rector Major to resume his travels to meet the Salesian Family around the world, to animate them to live and transmit the charism of the holy founder, John Bosco. Spain, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Thailand, Hungary, Brazil, India, Italy, Croatia, the United States and Peru welcomed and listened to the successor of Don Bosco. We present the introduction to the book that sets the story of these journeys.

The globetrotter of the Salesian charism

The book that I have the honour of presenting is quite special. It is the chronicle of the journeys around the world made by the Rector Major of the Salesians over the last fifteen months (from the beginning of 2022 until March 2023), dedicated to visiting the houses of a Congregation that has been present for a long time on all continents and which constitutes the largest “religious family” of the Catholic Church. It is a family that operates in 136 countries of the world, whose global dimensions drive its leader (and his closest collaborators) to live continuously with suitcase in hand, meeting brothers and sisters scattered across the various nations, to get to know the specific situations, to monitor the effectiveness in the different cultures of the educational charism of Don Bosco, which is the trademark of this unique “multinational” of the faith.



The book, therefore, illustrates one of the most important tasks connected to the role of the Rector Major of the Salesians, that of guiding a worldwide Congregation not only remotely (staying at the headquarters in Rome), but as much as possible seeing it in person, since even in the digital era,

face-to-face relationships, personal knowledge, sharing experiences, “being there” at certain special moments, represent the added value of every human and spiritual enterprise. A value, moreover, that is entirely congenial with the human traits of Fr Ángel Fernández Artime, the tenth successor of Don Bosco, who, since he has been at the head of the Salesian Family (since 2014) has already visited around 100 works around the world; in this way aligning himself (on a more limited scale, of course) with the “globetrotter” style of Catholicism that has characterised the most recent pontiffs, especially John Paul II and the current pope.

Fr Artime’s world tour, after having undergone a forced interruption in 2020-2021 (due to the outbreak of the pandemic everywhere), resumed its course with renewed vigour in 2022, with a series of stages that gradually took him to Iberian soil, to two African countries (Zimbabwe and Zambia), in the footsteps of the Salesian mission in Thailand, to Hungary, France, Brasilia and Belo Horizonte, to six provinces of India (on two different occasions), to Croatia, the United States and Canada, Peru, and in some Italian regions.

All-round visits, not just celebrations



Viedma, Argentina – March 2023

“Touch and go” images or the mere celebration of important events do not suit the Rector Major’s visits. His presence is often requested by Salesian houses or Provinces to celebrate a significant milestone in their history, such as the 100th or 50th anniversary of the foundation, the beginning of a new work, the profession of vows or priestly ordination of new confreres, the commemoration of Salesian figures who are exemplary for the different lands and for the entire Church. However, the celebratory intent is always part of a meeting rich in content and comparisons on the state of health of the Salesian charism in the local situation.

Hence the multifaceted character of these visits, marked by moments of celebration and glances upwards, of ribbon cutting and discernment, of emotional involvement and mutual commitments, of reporting on the situation and focusing on the educational challenges; all moments that involve the various branches of the great family (Salesians, Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, past pupils, etc.), often also Bishops and clergy of the local Church; but above all the young people, since their leadership and active involvement is in the DNA of Salesian pedagogy.

Don Bosco's successor is not only paid homage (and, in the "hottest" areas of the globe, "welcomed like a king", honoured with the "robes and symbols of the local authorities"); but he is also made the object of great expectations, of a "word" that both reassures and broadens horizons. Here emerges one of the most precious features of these visits *ad gentes*: the attitude of the Rector Major to act as a "communicating vessel", a "connector" between what the Salesian Family experiences and plans in the different areas of the world: from the mature, reflective, sometimes tired pace observed in the old continent, to the energy found in Africa and the East; from the best practices in place in some countries to the difficulties and problems encountered elsewhere. Another comparison concerns the reception in the various Salesian provinces of the indications that emerged from the last General Chapter of the Congregation (the 28th), to ensure that everyone is tuned in to the common objectives.

And it is in bridging the different Salesian areas and "souls" around the world that the Rector Major speaks of the "miracles" he witnesses. When he reminds everyone that what makes the Congregation great are above all the minimal presences, such as the Salesian missionary from the Czech Republic who lives in Siberia, in the middle of the ice, and has a community 1000 km away, which he manages to join no more than once a month; an occasion blessed by the faithful of the place, which makes them say that "God has not forgotten about us".

Or again when he brings to everyone's attention the redemption of a land that in December 2004 was hit by the greatest natural disaster of modern times, the tsunami that resulted in 230,000 dead, thousands missing and destroyed entire countries. Precisely in one of the hardest hit areas, a Salesian house was reborn to take in many orphans, who are flourishing again after many years: "12% of these Don Bosco boys/girls have gone to university; 15% have continued their technical studies in our vocational schools; more than 50%, after finishing public school, have found a job with which to start their lives independently."

Key words

There is a leitmotif in all these visits: the evocation of certain key words that reaffirm the particular mission of the sons of Don Bosco, called to take care of the young, but with a distinctive attention and method, with a "Salesian" pedagogy in fact, which has been the subject of long reflection throughout history. Some of these "icons" are the aphorisms introduced by the holy founder to summarise his educational intuitions; others are more recent, but have the same nature, they serve to update the Salesian charism over the years, in the face of new demanding challenges.

I resoconti delle visite del Rettor Maggiore alle case salesiane sparse nel mondo, sono ricchi di questi appelli. Anzitutto *"credere nei giovani"*, *"essere fedeli ai giovani"*, aver fiducia nelle loro potenzialità, trasmettere fiducia; il che implica non avere pregiudizi nei loro confronti, accompagnarli con empatia nel loro cammino, sostenerli nei momenti accidentati, condividere valori e suscitare libertà. Rientra nel richiamo alla fiducia l'impegno di *"dar vita ai sogni dei giovani"*, di far sì che essi tornino a pensare in grande, a non vivere con le ali tarpate; monito questo che sembra applicabile più alle nuove generazioni presenti nelle società mature (in Occidente) che a quelle dei paesi emergenti.



Australia – April 2023

The reports of the Rector Major's visits to Salesian houses around the world are full of these appeals. First and foremost, "to believe in young people", "to be faithful to young people", to trust in their potential, to transmit confidence; which implies not being prejudiced towards them, accompanying them with empathy on their journey, supporting them in difficult moments, sharing values and inspiring freedom.

Included in the call to trust is the commitment to "give life to young people's dreams", to make them think big again, not to live with clipped wings; a warning that seems more applicable to the new generations in mature societies (in the West) than to those in emerging countries. There are also many references to two concepts (love and heart) that are much abused in contemporary culture, but which in Don Bosco's pedagogy represent the strong points of an educational perspective: "loving the young", making them understand that "one loves them" (dedicates one's life to them), and "making oneself loved"; images that derive directly from the Saint's great intuition that "education is a thing of the heart".

Other fruitful images are those dedicated to the enduring "relevance of the preventive system" and to the criterion that can make it effective: the "Salesian sacrament of presence among the young" (as defined by the Rector Major) that fosters knowledge, produces sharing, creates exchange and educational passion.

The most recent icon is the heartfelt invitation to all Salesian communities around the world to "be another Valdocco", to remain faithful to the essential features of a mission born in the 19th century in Turin, but which has universal value in time and space. To be "another Valdocco" means renewing at all latitudes the choice of the field of popular education, spending one's life for that part of

society that in Don Bosco's time was the "poor and abandoned youth", and that today takes on the profile of the disadvantaged youth, "at risk", exploited and discarded by society, of those who inhabit the urban and existential peripheries. "Valdocco" is the symbol of the global "human neighbourhood" to which citizenship must be given, which must discover its active role, for full inclusion/emancipation in society.

Increasingly multicultural environments

The Rector Major's world tour also makes it evident how the shape of the Congregation is changing, as a result of recent migratory flows from the South and East of the world (partly due to dramatic events/situations) towards the Old Continent and North America; a demographic evolution that crowds emerging countries and burdens the more developed nations; and more generally, because of the tendency of populations to mix on planet earth.



Zambia – April 2022

The Salesian environment (like the whole of Catholicism) is also involved in these dynamics and does not cease to change. Africa and the East are today the areas most generous with vocations and with the highest percentage of Salesians in formation; therefore from mission lands they are gradually destined to have an ever greater weight in the balance of the Congregation.

At every latitude, Salesian houses host young people from different cultures, often of different religions and ethnicities; because Don Bosco's charism (though born in a particular cultural and religious context) knows no "confessional" boundaries, it also infects those who live and believe otherwise. Thus this multicultural imprinting now characterises many Salesian environments (oratories and

schools) in Europe and North America, and is a constitutive feature of the works of Don Bosco's sons in Asia, Africa and Latin America. In Asia, for example, Salesians are in areas where the population is 90% Muslim or Buddhist, within a context that on the one hand deeply challenges them and on the other requires dialogue and discussion. In these lands with different cultures and religions, in these laboratories of anthropological confrontation, there is a whole baggage of reflections and experiences that deserves to be collected and deepened; also to better position a Congregation and a Church called to bear witness to a specific message in an increasingly global world.

New educational challenges

The Congregation has always considered the education of the young as its inalienable task and as a challenge. But it is a challenge that takes on particular features depending on historical moments. Today, according to Fr Arttime's dialogues with the young people he met on his world tour, some noteworthy priorities emerge in this field.

On the one hand, education must come to terms with the digital culture that now permeates the experience of the new generations, whose great potential must be understood within the framework of harmonious use to avoid imbalances or penalising consequences. The proposal to set up "digital courtyards", which is circulating in Salesian circles, therefore responds to this need, and does not demonise a tool that is now vital, but accepts it within a constructive approach.

On the other hand, "preparing young people for life" also involves – in the current era – the attention that the new generations must pay to the environmental issue, to the care and protection of a creation endangered by an unwise world system, for which adults have a serious responsibility, but whose immense costs will be borne by the young. Here, then, is another piece that enriches and updates the educational

project.

Here and there in Salesian circles (and in the young people who attend them), a greater interest can be seen in “political commitment” understood in a broad sense as a contribution to achieving a more human, less unequal, more inclusive society.



Thailand – May 2022

This is what emerged in particular during the Rector Major’s visit to Peru and the United States, where the educational discourse and social voluntary work are certainly considered by young people as “pre-political” activities, but which must increasingly be understood as a commitment to social justice, to reducing inequalities, to allowing everyone a dignified life. Don Bosco’s motto of forming young people to “be good Christians and upright citizens” takes on a new emphasis here, more congruent with the sensibilities and challenges of today’s times.

Finally, photos

Finally, there are the photographs scattered throughout this extensive chronicle, which speak more than words, testifying to the atmosphere of the long journey, giving space to faces, postures, feelings. Where the tenth Successor of Don Bosco appears either presiding at the Eucharist or in shirtsleeves surrounded by young people or confreres: the two icons of a Salesian style that sees in his presence with the young a sign of God’s benevolence.

Franco GARELLI

University of Turin

Don Bosco's benefactors

Doing good for the young requires not only dedication but also huge material and financial resources. Don Bosco used to say "I trust in Divine Providence without limit, but Providence also wants to be helped by our own immense efforts"; said and done.

Don Bosco gave 20 precious "Reminders" to his departing missionaries, on 11 November 1875. The first was: "Seek souls, but not money, nor honours nor dignity."

Don Bosco himself had to go in search of money all his life, but he wanted his sons not to toil in seeking money, not to worry when they lacked it, not to lose their heads when they found some, but to be ready for every humiliation and sacrifice in the search for what was needed, with full trust in Divine Providence who would never fail them. And he gave them the example.

"The Saint of millions!"

Don Bosco handled large sums of money in his lifetime, collected at the price of enormous sacrifices, humiliating begging, lotteries that were hard to organise, endless wanderings. With this money he gave bread, clothing, lodging and work to many poor boys, bought houses, opened hospices and colleges, built churches, launched great printing and publishing initiatives, launched Salesian missions in America and, finally, already weakened by the aches and pains of old age, he erected the Basilica of the Sacred Heart in Rome, in obedience to the Pope.

Not everyone understood the spirit that animated him, not everyone appreciated his multifaceted activities and the anticlerical press indulged in ridiculous insinuations. On 4 April 1872 the Turin satirical periodical *Il Fischietto* said Don Bosco had "fabulous funds", while at his death Luigi Pietracqua published a blasphemous sonnet in *Il Birichin* in which he called Don Bosco a cunning man "capable of drawing

blood from a turnip" and described him as "the Saint of millions" because he would have counted millions by the handful without earning them through his own sweat.

Those who know the style of poverty in which the Saint lived and died can easily understand how unfair Pietracqua's satire was. Yes, Don Bosco was a skilful steward of the money that the charity of good people brought him, but he never kept anything for himself. The furniture in his little room at Valdocco consisted of an iron bed, a small table, a chair and, later, a sofa, with no curtains on the windows, no carpets, not even a bedside table. In his last illness, tormented by thirst, when they provided him with seltzer water to give him relief. He did not want to drink it, believing it to be an expensive drink. They needed to assure him that it only cost seven cents a bottle. A few days before he died, he ordered Fr Viglietti to look in the pockets of his clothes and give Fr Rua his purse, so that he could die without a penny in his pocket.

Philanthropic Aristocracy

Don Bosco's *Biographical Memoirs* and the *Epistolario* provide a wealth of documentation regarding his benefactors. There we find the names of almost 300 aristocratic families. It is impossible to list them all here.

Certainly, we must not make the mistake of limiting Don Bosco's benefactors to the aristocracy alone. He obtained help and disinterested collaboration from thousands of other people from the ecclesiastical and civil classes, the middle class and ordinary people, starting with the incomparable benefactor who was Mamma Margaret.

But let us look at one aristocrat who distinguished himself in supporting Don Bosco's work, pointing to the simple and delicate and at the same time, courageous and apostolic attitude that he knew how to keep in order to receive and do good.

In 1866 Don Bosco addressed a letter to Countess

Enrichetta Bosco di Ruffino, née Riccardi, who had been in contact with the Valdocco Oratory for years. She was one of the women who met weekly to repair the clothes of the young boarders. Here is the text:

“Worthy Countess,

I cannot go and visit you as I would like to, but I am coming in the person of Jesus Christ hidden beneath these rags which I recommend to you, so that in your charity you may mend them. It is a poor thing in temporal terms, but I hope that it will be a treasure for eternity for you.

God bless you, your labours and all your family, while I have the honour to be able to profess myself with full esteem

Your most obliged servant”.

Fr Bosco Gio. Turin, 16 May 1866



Don Bosco's letter to benefactors

In this letter Don Bosco apologises for not being able to go in person to visit the Countess. In return he sends her a bundle of rags from the Oratory boys to be patched up... *roba grama* (Piedmontese for rubbish) before human beings, but a precious treasure to those who clothe the naked for the love of Christ!

Some have tried to interpret Don Bosco's relations with the rich as ingratiating himself with the wealthy. But there is an authentic evangelical spirit here!