

# 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!

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## **Salesians in Ukraine (video)**

*The Salesian Vice-Province of Mary Help of Christians of the Byzantine Rite (UKR) has reshaped its educational-pastoral mission since the beginning of the Russian invasion in 2022. Amidst air raid sirens, makeshift shelters, and schools in basements, the Salesians have become a tangible presence: they host displaced people, distribute aid, provide spiritual accompaniment to soldiers and civilians, transformed a house into a reception centre, and run the “Mariapolis” modular campus, where they serve a thousand meals daily and organize oratory and sports activities, even founding the first Ukrainian Amputee Football team. The personal testimony of a*

*confrere reveals the wounds, hopes, and prayers of those who have lost everything but continue to believe that, after this long national Way of the Cross, the Easter of peace will dawn for Ukraine.*

### **The Pastoral Work of the Vice-Province of Mary Help of Christians of the Byzantine Rite (UKR) During the War**

Our pastoral work had to change when the war began. Our educational-pastoral activities had to adapt to a completely different reality, often marked by the incessant sound of sirens announcing the danger of missile attacks and bombings. Every time the alarm sounds, we are forced to interrupt activities and go down with the young people into underground shelters or bunkers. In some schools, lessons are held directly in the basements to ensure greater safety for the students.

From the very beginning, we immediately set about helping and assisting the suffering population. We opened our houses to welcome displaced people, organized the collection and distribution of humanitarian aid: with our boys and young people, we prepare thousands of packages with food, clothing, and everything necessary to send to needy people in territories near the fighting or in the combat zones themselves. Furthermore, some of our Salesian confreres serve as chaplains in the combat zones. There, they provide spiritual support to young soldiers, but also bring humanitarian aid to people who have remained in villages under constant bombardment, helping some of them move to a safer place. One deacon confrere who was in the trenches suffered damage to his health and lost his ankle. When, some years ago, I read an article in the Italian Salesian Bulletin about Salesians in the trenches during the First or Second World War, I never thought this would happen in this modern era in my own country. I was once struck by the words of a very young Ukrainian soldier who, quoting a historian and eminent officer, defender, and fighter for our people's independence,

said: *"We fight defending our independence not because we hate those before us, but because we love those behind us."*

During this period, we also transformed one of our Salesian Houses into a reception centre for displaced people.

To support the physical, mental, psychological, and social rehabilitation of young people who lost limbs in the war, we created an Amputee Football team, the first team of its kind in Ukraine.

Since the beginning of the invasion in 2022, we made available to the Lviv City Council a plot of our land, intended for the construction of a Salesian school, to build a modular campus for internally displaced persons: "Mariapolis," where we Salesians operate in collaboration with the Centre of the City Council's Social Department. We provide welfare support and spiritual accompaniment, making the environment more welcoming. Supported by aid from our Congregation, various organizations including VIS and Don Bosco Missions, various mission offices and other charitable foundations, and even state agencies from other countries, we were able to set up the campus kitchen with its respective staff, allowing us to offer lunch every day for about 1,000 people. Furthermore, thanks to their help, we can organize various Salesian-style activities for the 240 children and young people present on the campus.

### **A Small Experience and a Humble Personal Testimony**

I would like to share my small experience and testimony here... I truly thank the Lord who, through my Provincial, called me to this particular service. For three years, I have been working in the campus that hosts about 1,000 internally displaced persons. From the beginning, I have been alongside people who lost everything in an instant, except their dignity. Their homes are destroyed and looted; the savings and possessions painstakingly accumulated over years of life have vanished. Many have lost much more, and more precious things:

their loved ones, killed before their eyes by missiles or mines. Some of the people on campus had to live for months in the basements of collapsed buildings, feeding on whatever little they could find, even if expired. They drank water from radiators and boiled potato peels to feed themselves. Then, at the first opportunity, they fled or were evacuated without knowing where to go, with no certainty about what awaited them. Moreover, some saw their cities, like Mariupol, razed to the ground. In fact, in honour of this beautiful city of Mary, we Salesians named the campus for the displaced "Mariapolis," entrusting this place and its inhabitants to the Virgin Mary. And She, like a mother, stands by everyone in these times of trial. In the campus, I set up a chapel dedicated to Her, where there is an icon painted by a lady from the campus, originally from the tormented city of Kharkiv. The chapel has become a place of encounter with God and with oneself for all residents, regardless of their Christian faith denomination.

Being with them, loving them, welcoming them, listening to them, consoling them, encouraging them, praying for them and with them, and supporting them in whatever way I can – these are the moments that make up my service, which has now become my life during this period. It is a true school of life, of spirituality, where I learn so much by being close to their suffering. Almost all of them hope that the war will end soon and peace will come, so they can return home. But for many, that dream is now unattainable: their homes no longer exist. So, as best I can, I try to offer them some anchor of hope, helping them to encounter the One who abandons no one, who is close in the sufferings and difficulties of life.

Sometimes they ask me to prepare them for Reconciliation: with God, with themselves, with the harsh reality they are forced to live. Other times, I help them with more concrete needs: medicine, clothes, diapers, hospital visits. I also do administrative work alongside my three lay colleagues. Every day, at 5:00 PM, we pray for peace, and a small group has



learned to recite the Rosary, praying it daily.

As a Salesian, I try to be attentive to the needs of the young people. From the beginning, with the help of animators, we created an oratory within the campus. We also have activities, trips, and mountain camps during the summer. Furthermore, one of the commitments I carry forward is overseeing the canteen, to ensure that none of the residents on campus go without a hot meal.

Among the campus inhabitants is little Maksym, who wakes up in the middle of the night, terrified by any loud noise. Maria, a mother who lost everything, including her husband, smiles at her children every day so as not to burden them with her suffering. Then there is Petro, 25 years old, who was at home with his girlfriend when a Russian drone dropped a bomb. The explosion amputated both his legs, while his girlfriend died shortly after. Petro lay dying all night until soldiers found him in the morning and brought him to safety. The ambulance couldn't get close due to the fighting.

Amidst so much suffering, I continue my apostolate with the Lord's help and the support of my confreres.

We Byzantine Rite Salesians, together with our 13 Latin Rite confreres present in Ukraine – largely of Polish origin and belonging to the Salesian Province of Krakow (PLS) – deeply share the pain and suffering of the Ukrainian people. As sons of Don Bosco, we continue our educative-pastoral mission with faith and hope, adapting daily to the difficult conditions imposed by the war.

We stand alongside the young, the families, and all those who suffer and need help. We wish to be visible signs of God's love, so that the life, hope, and joy of the young may never be stifled by violence and pain.

In this common witness, we reaffirm the vitality of our Salesian charism, which knows how to respond even to the most

dramatic challenges of history. Our two particularities, that of the Byzantine rite and that of the Latin rite, make visible the indivisible unity of the Salesian Charism as affirmed by the Salesian Constitutions in Art. 100: *"The Founder's charism is the principle of unity of the Congregation and, through its fruitfulness, is the origin of the different ways of living the one Salesian vocation."*

We believe that pain and suffering do not have the last word, and that in faith, every Cross already contains the seed of the Resurrection. After this long Holy Week, the Resurrection will inevitably come for Ukraine: true and just PEACE will arrive.

### **Some Information**

Some chapter confreres asked for information about the war in Ukraine. Allow me to say something in the form of a Snapshot. A clarification: the war in Ukraine cannot be interpreted as an ethnic conflict or a territorial dispute between two peoples with opposing claims or rights over a specific territory. It is not a quarrel between two parties fighting over a piece of land. And therefore, it is not a battle between equals. What is happening in Ukraine is an invasion, a unilateral aggression. Here, it is about one people improperly attacking another. A nation, which fabricated baseless motives, inventing a supposed right, violating international order and laws, decided to attack another State, violating its sovereignty and territorial integrity, its right to decide its own fate and direction of development, occupying and annexing territories. Destroying cities and towns, many razed to the ground, taking the lives of thousands of civilians. Here there is an aggressor and an attacked party: this is precisely the peculiarity and horror of this war.

And it is starting from this premise that the peace we await should also be conceived. A peace that has the flavour of justice and is based on truth, not temporary, not opportunistic, not a peace founded on hidden commercial

conveniences, avoiding the creation of precedents for autocratic regimes in the world that might one day decide to invade other countries, occupy or annex part of a neighbouring or distant country, simply because they wish to or because they feel like it, or because they are more powerful.

Another absurdity of this unprovoked and undeclared war is that the aggressor forbids the victim the right to defend itself, tries to intimidate and threaten all those – in this case, other countries – who side with the defenceless and set out to help the unjustly attacked victim defend itself and resist.

### **Some Sad Statistics**

From the beginning of the 2022 invasion until today (08.04.2025), the UN has recorded and confirmed data relating to 12,654 deaths and 29,392 injuries among CIVILIANS in Ukraine.

According to the latest available verified UNICEF news, at least 2,406 CHILDREN have been killed or injured by the escalation of the war in Ukraine since 2022. Child victims include 659 CHILDREN KILLED and 1,747 INJURED – meaning at least 16 children killed or injured every week. Millions of children continue to have their lives disrupted due to ongoing attacks or having to flee and evacuate to other places and countries. The children of Donbas have been already suffering from the war for 11 years.

Alongside the plan for an invasion of Ukraine, Russia also initiated a program of forced deportations of Ukrainian children. Latest data indicate 20,000 children taken from their homes, detained for months, and subjected to forced Russification through intense propaganda before forced adoption.

Fr. Andrii Platosh, sdb

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# Interview with the new inspector don Peter Končan

## **Short biography**

*He completed his novitiate in the community of Pinerolo, Italy, professed his first vows on September 8, 1993, in Ljubljana Rakovnik, and his perpetual vows six years later. He received his theological training at the Salesian Pontifical University in Rome from 1997 to 2000, and was ordained a priest in Ljubljana on June 29, 2001.*

*As a priest, most of his educational and pastoral work was carried out within the Salesian work of Želimlje. From 2000 to 2003, he served as an educator and then, until 2020, as Director of the boarding school. During those years, he also taught religion at the high school and was responsible for the Salesian formation of the laity.*

*From 2010 to 2016, he was the Director of the Želimlje community and from 2021 to 2024, the Director of the Salesian Community of Ljubljana Rakovnik. From 2018 to 2024, he served as Vicar of the Inspector and his Delegate for Formation. In 2021, he also took on the coordination of this sector at the European level as the coordinator of RECN.*

*On December 6, 2023, he was appointed the 15th Inspector of the Province of Saints Cyril and Methodius of Ljubljana.*

## **Can you introduce yourself?**

*I was born on May 30, 1974, in Ljubljana, Slovenia, into a farming family in a small village called Šentjošt. I am the youngest of 4 children, who all have families today, so I have 11 nieces and nephews and we are all very close. My native country and my family were strongly marked by the Communist terror during and after the Second World War. Some relatives*

were killed, houses destroyed... In the very difficult situation, my parents had to start building the farmhouse from scratch. They had to use all their hard work and resourcefulness to provide for us children. My parents involved us children in daily work and in this way, I also learned that to achieve something important you have to work hard.

### **Who first told you the story of Jesus?**

My parents always openly expressed their Christian identity, even though being a Christian was not appropriate in those times, and they had quite a few problems because of this. Every evening, after the work was done, we gathered as a family to pray the rosary, the litanies, and other prayers. I liked being an altar boy and for this, I often walked to the church, which was 2 kilometres from my house, to attend Mass. The example of my parents, Christian life in the family and in the parish are therefore the fundamental reasons for feeling God's call from an early age.

### **How did you meet Don Bosco?**

My parents often went on pilgrimage to Ljubljana Rakovnik where the Salesians were, and so I also met Don Bosco, who fascinated me immediately. I started attending retreats organised by the Salesians and after elementary school at 14, it was very natural for me to go to the minor seminary led by the Salesians in Želimlje. My parents were very happy with my decision and always supported me on my journey. I am truly very grateful to them for all the love, for the peaceful family in which I grew up, and for so many important values that they passed on to me. Don Bosco also fascinated them, and so, in the process of my formation, they also made the promise as Salesian cooperators.

### **The experience of initial formation**

I was in high school at the time when Communism collapsed and Slovenia became independent, and then the Salesians could resume our typical work. For this reason, I was taken by the

enthusiasm of so many opportunities for youth work that were opening up. In the years spent in international formation houses in Italy, my horizons were also broadened because I had the opportunity to meet many Salesians from all over the world and live many new experiences. During this period, I worked a lot on my human and spiritual growth, and I also learned to love Don Bosco and his way of being and working with young people very much. I became more and more convinced that this is a path thought of by God for me and that the Salesian charism is a great gift for the young people of our time.

### **What is your best experience?**

The 20 years spent in the boarding school in Želimplje and then in Rakovnik, living with almost 300 young people every day, were truly very beautiful and greatly marked my life. I had the privilege of following their human, intellectual, and spiritual growth and of touching their joys, hopes, and wounds from close up. The young people taught me how important it is to “waste” time being with them. In this period, I also learned and experienced how precious the lay collaborators are, without whom we cannot carry out our mission.

### **What are the local youth like and what are the most relevant challenges?**

In the Salesian works and around our programmes there are still many generous young people, with open hearts and willing to do good for their peers. I am very proud of their enthusiasm and also happy that many in Don Bosco find the model and strength for their human and spiritual growth.

On the other hand, it is also true that they are strongly marked by the virtual world and all the other challenges of our time. Fortunately, traditional values have not completely disappeared, but it is also true that they are no longer strong enough to guide young people. For this reason, we Salesians try to help young people with concrete proposals of support and by walking with them. At the last provincial chapter, we identified some poverties (challenges) of our

context: the weak family, lukewarm spiritual tendency, relativism and the search for identity, passivity, apathy, and the lack of concrete preparation of young people for life.

**Where do you find the strength to continue?**

First of all, in the confreres. Fortunately, I have very good and generous confreres around me who are of great support to me. The provincial alone cannot do much. I am convinced that the only right way to progress is that we all (Salesians, young people, and lay people) contribute our gifts and strengths for the common good. And secondly, we all and our mission are only a small part in a great design of God. It is He who is the true protagonist and this awareness gives me great inner serenity.

**What place does Mary Help of Christians occupy in your life?**

Already in my family, I learned that Mary is a great support for daily life. I very willingly and with great confidence go on pilgrimage to the various Marian shrines, where Mary fills me with peace and inner strength for all the challenges of my life. I can testify to many of the graces that have been granted to me or my loved ones through Mary.

Fr. Peter KONČAN,  
Slovenia Provincial

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## **Interview with the new provincial fr. Domingos LEONG**

*Don Domingos Leong is the Superior of the "Mary Help of Christians" Province (CIN) for the six-year term 2024-2030. He succeeds Don Joseph Ng Chi Yuen, who has served the China Province as Superior since 2018. We interviewed him.*

**Can you introduce yourself?**

My name is Domingos Leong, born into a Catholic family living in Macau, then Portuguese colony in China. I have two sisters, and I am the only boy in the family. Both of my parents were teachers in schools run by the Salesians and the FMA. All my education was carried out in Salesian schools, both in Macau and Hong Kong. I joined the Salesian after my graduation from high school and received my formation in Hong Kong. I was sent to study philosophy in the U.S. (Newton, New Jersey) where opened up my global view of the Congregation. After my ordination, I went to Rome to pursue my further study on Liturgy in San Anselmo, Rome.

**What did you dream of as a child?**

Since my parents were teachers, and some of my relatives were in the field of education, I was dreaming of becoming a teacher in the future.

**Do you remember any educators in particular?**

During my years in junior high school, I used to attend the Oratory on Sundays. I remember when I was only 12 years old, out of my surprise, I was asked to take charge of a group of youngsters, organized games for them, and teaching them catechisms. I believed that's the seed of Salesian vocation has been planted into my heart.

**What is your best experience?**

After my ordination, we have chances to organize 'volunteers group' serving in Mainland China during summer holidays. Young people coming from our schools, both in Hong Kong and Macau, went to serve in rural areas. Together with local young people, all shared the beautiful experiences, not only by serving, but also by witnessing our faith in a total different environment. I believed that is the best way to promote religious vocation.

**What are the most urgent local needs and those of young people?**



The local young people, may not be lacking of any materials, but, they would feel lonely and need accompaniment, both from their peers and adults. Young people are victims of dysfunctional families, they are not being listened to.

**What would you say to young people at this moment?**

Be courageous! We, the Salesians, are always available and willing to give our help whenever you need, especially in this year of Hope. Together with the members of Salesian Family, we are your BIG support and don't hesitate to ask.

*fr. Domingos LEONG*

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## **Interview to the new Superior of Malta, Fr. Eric CACHIA**

*Malta, a land blessed by the Apostle Paul, is an island located in the heart of the Mediterranean Sea between Europe and North Africa. Over the centuries, it has been influenced by numerous cultures, making it more enchanting. This small state, one of the most densely populated in the world, has hosted the Salesians of Don Bosco since 1903, passionately engaged in the education of young people. We interviewed Fr. Eric, recently appointed to lead the Maltese Salesian community.*

**Can you introduce yourself?**

My name is Fr. Eric Cachia, and I was born on August 4, 1976, in Malta. I am the eldest of three children. I have two younger sisters and two lovely nieces. I attended kindergarten at the state school in my hometown, Haż-Żebbuġ, for six years.

During the last year, it was necessary to take an exam to access the desired school. I dreamed of entering the minor seminary, but to make my mother happy, I also took the exam for the state high school and another for Savio College, the Salesian school, of which I knew almost nothing at the time, and which I initially did not want to attend. I took that exam reluctantly, but God's plans were for me to be admitted into the Salesian school.

After seven years of study, I obtained my high school diploma and began the Novitiate in Lanuvio, near Rome, making my first religious vows in the hands of the newly elected Rector Major, Fr. Juan E. Vecchi, at the Sacred Heart in Rome. I was the youngest in the group: I was only 19 years old. Back in Malta, I obtained a Bachelor's degree in Philosophy and Sociology and subsequently spent two years as the head of the Oratory in Sliema.

For my theological studies, I moved to Rome, attending the Pontifical Salesian University (UPS) and living at the Gerini community. I was ordained a deacon in 2004 and continued my training in Dublin, Ireland, obtaining a Master's in *Holistic Development in Family Pastoral Ministry*. Having returned to Malta, I was ordained a priest on July 21, 2005, along with nine other religious and diocesan members.

My first obedience was to be the Head of the Oratory in Sliema and Treasurer of the community. After a few months, I was appointed Delegate for Youth Pastoral in the Council of the Malta Delegation. I held this position for a year before being appointed Treasurer of the Delegation, a role I held for 10 years and then for another 6 years when, in 2018, Malta became a Vice-Province.

In the meantime, I also held other positions: Principal of Savio College, Supervisor in the post-novitiate training in Malta for six years, and for four years, Assistant Coordinator of the Association of Catholic Schools in Malta. To respond to

pastoral needs, I obtained a Master's in Systemic and Family Psychotherapy and was elected Secretary of the Committee of the National Association of Psychotherapy in Malta. In 2017, I became the Director of St. Patrick's, a structure that includes a school, a boarding school, and a public church, as well as being Principal of the school. Finally, in December 2023, I was appointed Provincial, a position I took on starting in July 2024.

### **What did you dream of as a child?**

When I was 7, I became an altar boy, and even today I cannot explain the experience I had during my first Mass as a ministrant. I felt a presence of love in my heart that invited me to become a priest. Even at home, I played "being a priest," and at school, despite the tension between Church and State at the time, I often debated religious topics.

The desire to become a priest included the wish to give a voice to those who did not have one. I liked writing stories, speaking in public, and organising events. At just 14, for example, I was already organising walks for the altar boys.

### **What is the story of your vocation?**

My vocation was born from the meeting with various priests whom I considered role models. However, it was in the Salesian school that I found new energy. There I discovered hidden talents and lived experiences that made me feel part of a large family. In that joyful and stimulating context, the Lord spoke to my heart.

During my last school year, I understood that my path would be Salesian. After a year of discernment and discussion with my family and a priest, I found peace in deciding: "I give myself for the boys of the future. I will be Salesian to carry on what I have received."

A curious anecdote was told to me by my paternal grandmother when I was close to the diaconate. My father was one of 18

children in a large and modest family. An English Salesian, Fr. Patrick McLoughlin, known for his reputation of holiness, would often stop by the nuns after Mass to bring a slice of cake to my grandmother. In the evening, he would return with leftover meals to help feed the struggling family. One day, my grandmother asked him: "How can I repay such kindness and providence?" He replied: "You just pray: who knows, maybe one of your children will become a Salesian." Among 51 cousins, I was the first – and one of two – to choose the religious life... and Salesian.

### **How did your family react?**

My family has always been very supportive. My parents never imposed their ideas but always tried to support my decisions. My father was a mason, and my mother was a housewife. Simplicity and family unity were among the strongest values that characterised us. They made sacrifices as an expression of a love lived in a concrete way that I would understand only as an adult. It was not easy to leave the country and start my journey at just 18, but today my parents are proud, and in some way, they are also part of the Salesian Family. For over 30 years, they have prepared meals for the boys during summer camps. Who knows how many times my father, despite being illiterate, spoke with the wisdom of the heart to some young person or parent. And how many times they have sent brochures at the provincial level to support our Salesian works!

### **The most beautiful joy and the greatest struggle**

There are many joys that are kept in the heart, but one of the greatest is when I meet an ex-student who tells me: "In you, I found the father I never had." Living one's vocation fully also means offering what could have been equally beautiful, like building a family. This sometimes involves having to suffer in silence for this choice offered. The greatest struggle, on the other hand, is seeing children suffer due to wars, violence, and abuse... seeing them deprived of the ability to dream of a world full of hope and possibilities. It is

equally difficult to remain credible and optimistic in a context of fierce secularism that often drains energy and tries to extinguish enthusiasm.

### **Local and youth needs**

Malta lives in a very particular reality. Culturally, it remains deeply Catholic, but in everyday practice, it is not so much. In recent years, politically oriented choices aimed primarily at boosting the economy have generated a deep crisis within families. Many young people grow up marked by the lack of reference figures and models to accompany them with love. There are no stable points of orientation, and at the same time, many young people are searching for new meaning in their lives. Faith, increasingly relegated to the private sphere, can, however, awaken interest when it manages to speak a language that challenges and invites to aim high. In these cases, young people are happy to come together to live experiences that require guidance. About 20% of the population is no longer Maltese. The economy, which has attracted people from all over the world, is transforming the face of the island. Many non-Maltese young people feel alone, while others begin or resume a journey of faith. These are new frontiers and emerging forms of poverty, marked by psycho-affective challenges and mental health issues. These situations highlight the urgency of addressing isolation, precariousness, and relational deficiencies that characterise this complex reality.

### **The great challenges of evangelisation**

Everything can be summed up in one word: credibility. Young people today, more than ever, do not need simple transmitters of content, rather people with authentic hearts and ears capable of listening to the heartbeat of hearts searching for meaning in their lives. They need educators who know how to create processes, companions who are not afraid to show their fragility and limits, but who are authentic guides. These are guides who propose what they themselves have lived: the

encounter with Jesus as a goal and calling for every person. A guide leads to rediscovering oneself as part of a Church on the move towards the peripheries, ready to embrace and heal wounds, even before indicating what must be done. The real challenge, at least for Europe, is to find young people who have the courage to bet their lives on Jesus. As emerged during the Synod, some structures, contexts, and languages of the Church are no longer incisive. This is compounded by a Church that, in some cases, appears tired and distracted, too focused on self-preservation. This situation also reflects that of families, which must be placed back at the centre of priorities in every nation. They are the future of the State and the Church. That is why Salesian environments, with their humanism that values the beauty present in every person, must present themselves not only as immediate responses, but also as models for other groups and realities. Perhaps only today do we understand that the joy and hope of Don Bosco go far beyond simple emotions. They are the foundations upon which to build the relaunch of a renewed humanity redeemed by Christ.

### **How do you see the future?**

I look to the future with hope. The present we live in, in my opinion, is marked by numerous crises on various fronts: I would say it could not be worse than this. Therefore, it is a time for renewal. We rely on Christ in this time of purification and transformation. Yes, there are challenges that will surely shape the future.

### **What place does Mary Help of Christians occupy in your life?**

As a child, we prayed the Rosary as a family every day. However, for me, it was perhaps just a practice of popular piety. Over time, especially during my years as a Salesian, I realised how close this heavenly mother is to me. I remember numerous moments when, caught up in practical difficulties and concerns related to pastoral work, I was about to give up. But she always intervened at the right moment. Every day I realise how truly "it was she who did everything." I have a deep

affection for the blessing of Mary Help of Christians. Every morning I entrust to her all the young people and lay collaborators, but especially those who find themselves in the peripheries of society. A year ago, on the occasion of the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, I shared on social media a phrase that Mary said to Juan Diego: "Do not be afraid. Am I not here, I who am your Mother? Are you not under my shadow and protection? Am I not the source of your joy? Are you not in the fold of my cloak, in the crossing of my arms? Do you need anything else? Do not let anything else worry or disturb you." Two hours later, I received a call from the Rector Major and the request to accept or not the appointment as Provincial.

### **What would you say to young people?**

Do not give up! I would recall the words of Pope Francis addressed to young people in April 2024: " Rise to stand in front of life, not to sit on the couch. There are several "couches" that take hold of us and do not let us get up again." If only young people understood that they are the hope of today and tomorrow, that they are like delicate and fragile seeds, but at the same time rich with infinite possibilities! I would urge them to challenge Christ, but also to allow Christ to challenge them. Only then do we understand that with Him we build an intimate relationship with a living God, not with an image shaped by fears or anxieties. I would challenge those young people who have already experienced Don Bosco. It is extraordinary to throw oneself into the Heart of Christ, giving one's life for the young who will come. "Whom shall I send?" Christ asked His disciples. If only many others had the same determination: "Send me!"

Fr. Eric CACHIA, sdb  
Superior of Malta

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# **Interview with the new superior Don Vincentius Prastowo**

*Don Vincentius Prastowo is the new Salesian provincial for Indonesia, a country that, with its 279 million inhabitants and over 700 languages, ranks fourth in the world by population. Indonesia is the largest archipelagic state on the planet, made up of 17,508 islands, and is home to the largest Muslim community in the world. The Salesian presence in this nation dates back to 1985, although the first experience in present-day East Timor began as early as 1927. We interviewed him.*

## **Can you introduce yourself?**

My name is Vincentius Prastowo. I was born on November 28, 1980, in Magelang, Central Java. I am the second generation in my family to embrace the Catholic faith. My parents were the first in our extended family to receive the sacrament of baptism—a decision that profoundly changed the course of our lives. From them, I came to know Jesus Christ and the Catholic values that have been instilled in me since childhood. I attended a Catholic primary school run by the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception (SPM), where my faith grew through religious education, liturgical activities, and close interactions with religious sisters.

## **What is the story of your vocation?**

My interest in religious life began during my teenage years, inspired by the Jesuit priests who served in my parish. Their genuine dedication to service, intellectual depth, and profound spirituality left a lasting impression on me. This



inspiration led me to continue my education at Stella Maris Minor Seminary in Bogor, run by the Franciscans, from 1994 to 1998.

At the seminary, I not only learned basic theology and philosophy but also deepened my understanding of prayer life, discipline, and community living. These years were foundational in shaping my path and clarifying my desire to pursue a life of service to God and others.

### **How did you meet the Salesians?**

Every year, Stella Maris Seminary hosted visits from various religious congregations, introducing seminarians to different spiritualities and missions. During one of these visits, I met Fr. Jose Llopiz Carbonell and Fr. Andress Calejja, two Salesian priests who frequently came to the seminary. They brought annual calendars featuring the image of Mary, Help of Christians, which immediately captured my attention.

Through conversations with them, I became intrigued by the Salesian mission and decided to explore their community further. My curiosity led me to regular visits to the Salesian community in Jakarta every year-end. I was deeply impressed by their approach to education and their commitment to accompanying young people. They didn't just preach about faith; they practiced it by mentoring youth from humble backgrounds.

The warmth and love I experienced in the Salesian community eventually solidified my decision to choose this path.

### **What difficulties did you encounter?**

Choosing the Salesian path was not without challenges. My initial formation took place in Timor Leste, a region embroiled in political conflict at the time due to its struggle for independence from Indonesia. The situation created significant tension, both for me and my family. My parents were deeply concerned for my safety and even suggested I consider a "safer" congregation.

However, my resolve was firm. I believed that this calling was

the life God had planned for me. Amid the ongoing conflict, I faced numerous trials, including the threat of violence, cultural adaptation, and longing for my family. Yet, in every hardship, I found strength through prayer and God's protection.

This experience taught me to rise above fear and strengthened my conviction. One of my greatest joys was the freedom and courage to determine my life's calling, despite the obstacles along the way.

As a Salesian, I've come to realize the immense challenges faced by communities in Indonesia's archipelagic regions. Our nation, comprised of thousands of islands, grapples with disparities in access to education and economic opportunities. In remote areas, young people's most pressing needs are quality education and access to decent jobs.

I firmly believe that collaboration between central and local governments is essential to alleviating poverty in these regions. Prioritizing the development of educational infrastructure, offering scholarships for underprivileged children, and creating equitable job opportunities are vital steps.

As part of the Salesian community, I feel called to contribute to these efforts, especially through vocational education programs aimed at empowering youth with skills that prepare them for the workforce and foster self-reliance.

### **How is your Salesian work in the context of the country?**

Indonesia is known as the country with the largest Muslim population in the world. However, I am grateful that its people are generally moderate and open to diversity. In this context, Salesians work in predominantly Muslim areas with a spirit of brotherhood and collaboration. Our mission seeks to build bridges through education and service, respecting individual beliefs while upholding universal values such as love, justice, and peace.

This awareness of diversity is a treasure that we must

continue to celebrate. In daily life, we learn to respect one another and work together with various communities. I believe Indonesia's cultural, religious, and traditional diversity is a blessing that must be preserved and cherished.

### **How do you see the future of young people and Salesian education?**

Indonesia is projected to experience a demographic boom starting in 2030. This means a significant increase in the working-age population, presenting both opportunities and challenges. While this growth offers the potential for economic advancement, it also poses risks of widespread unemployment if not managed well.

As an education-focused community, the Salesians play a crucial role in preparing young people to face the future. We focus on vocational training that aligns with industry needs while fostering strong character and discipline. One of our main projects is uplifting the dignity of young people in remote islands by equipping them with skills for the digital and technological era.

To thrive in the 5.0 era, Indonesia's youth need adaptability, creativity, and collaboration skills. The training programs we offer aim to meet these needs, empowering young people not only to compete in the job market but also to become agents of change in their communities.

### **What place does Mary Help of Christians occupy in your life?**

Mary has always held a special place in my journey. Since childhood, I have known and loved her through the Rosary prayers often held in our neighbourhood. Her image as Mary, Help of Christians, has continuously strengthened and guided me through life's challenges.

In Salesian tradition, devotion to Mary is highly emphasized. We believe she is ever-present, accompanying and protecting us in every step of our journey. My personal experiences affirm that through prayer and entrusting ourselves to Mary, seemingly insurmountable difficulties can be overcome.

### **What would you say to young people at this moment?**

To young people, my message is this: never lose hope. Do not let difficulties, challenges, or obstacles crush your dreams. Believe that there is always a way forward, especially when we lean on God and seek the intercession of Mary.

Life is a gift full of opportunities. Do not fear stepping out of your comfort zone, facing challenges, and pursuing your true calling. In every journey, God provides the strength, and Mary will always be present as a loving and faithful mother.

May Indonesian youth rise, grow, and become agents of change, bringing hope to the nation and the world. Let us walk together in faith, love, and service.

*Fr. Vincentius Prastowo*

*Provincial of Indonesia*

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## **Interview with the new Provincial Fr. Simon Zakerian**

*He made his First Profession in Damascus on September 8, 2002, and his Perpetual Profession in Aleppo on August 2, 2008. He was ordained a priest in his hometown, Qamishli, on September 11, 2010.*

*After initial formation, he served the Provincial in several ministries, taking on various responsibilities. From 2010 to 2014 in Aleppo, Syria, he served as a pastoral collaborator; from 2015 to 2017 in Damascus, he served as Director. From 2017 to 2018 in Alexandria, Egypt, he again held the role of Director, and from 2018 to July 2024 in Al-Fidar and El Houssoum, Lebanon, he continued with the responsibility of Director. At the provincial level, he served as the pastoral delegate for Youth Pastoral for about 12 years, finishing this*

*service in June 2024 and then starting the new service on July 6, 2024, as provincial.*

*The Middle East Province includes Palestine – Israel, Syria, Egypt, and Lebanon.*

Can you introduce yourself?

I was born in Syria, in a city called al-Qamishli (northeast Syria), on July 2, 1978, to an Armenian family. Like all Armenians of the diaspora, I survived the Ottoman genocide of 1915, when my grandparents fled and made it to Qamishli. My father's name is Aram and my mother's name is Araxi; we are a family of two brothers and six sisters.

**Who first told you the story of Jesus?**

My family has always had a deep Christian faith that my parents passed on to me since I was a child, even with the help of my grandmother, who spoke to me about Jesus. The Armenian Church also helped me because as a child I served as an altar boy and assisted at Mass. Then I started attending the oratory of Don Bosco in my city, starting from the fifth grade. Since I really enjoyed playing soccer, I continued to attend Don Bosco for years, and gradually my belonging to the oratory grew more and more, involving me not only in sports activities, but also in animation and service.

**What is the story of your vocation?**

My vocation was born from a desire that God placed in my heart. When I served at Mass, I would tell myself: when I grow up, I will also be on the altar like this priest. After getting to know the Salesians, this desire matured more and more, and the example of the Salesians, who were with us in the courtyard, in church, and in various moments of our lives, made me think seriously about my life and its meaning. So I began to reflect more deeply and to ask myself about the purpose of my existence and the meaning of my life. Therefore, I started to wonder how I could discern my vocation, to ask what God wanted from me. With these thoughts, with prayer and

service, I walked in search of the Lord's will for me. In Qamishli there was an Italian missionary who was always with us in the courtyard. He organised soccer tournaments, encouraged us, accompanied us to church to experience the Holy Mass and Eucharistic adoration, and showed us films about the lives of saints to then encourage us to do works of charity and service in the oratory and outside. His testimony made me reflect that I too could live and do like him. So with his help and that of other Salesians, I began my discernment. I loved the life of that Salesian because he was close to God, to people, and to young people like Don Bosco, with a joyful and beautiful life, simple and profound. It was clear that his was not a job rather a divine vocation!

### **How did your family react?**

My family is simple, and at first, they did not want me to leave home. But then they understood that it was a call from the Lord, and so I was allowed to begin the journey. From that moment on, my family has always encouraged my vocation with affection and prayer.

### **What have the biggest challenges been?**

The biggest challenge was leaving the world to follow Christ in the consecrated life. This was not easy because my life was bound to many friends and soccer. I was a soccer player, and I played on a major league team in my city. So, leaving all this was difficult.

### **What is your most beautiful experience?**

However, I must say that once I started the journey, I experienced what Jesus says in the Gospel, that whoever follows Him will have in return many brothers, sisters, friends, confreres, young people, and laypeople with whom to share life and mission. This is truly a beautiful gift.

### **What are the young people like in your area?**

The young people of our province are heroes. They are wonderful. As I always tell everyone, they are the true

protagonists of the history of our lands because they have always lived in very difficult and war-torn situations. It is because they have learned to live in these situations as Christians and as witnesses, with great faith and hope. For me, they were and still are a beautiful example.

**What more could be done and improved?**

The future of the young people of our lands today is very ambiguous and not easy. However, they can do a lot. Thus I pray to God that He grants us peace so that they can build a future in these lands and look to tomorrow with hope and without fear because He is with us and does not abandon us.

**What place does Mary Help of Christians occupy in your life?**

In our houses in the Middle East, we Salesians, together with the young people, are used to frequently invoking Mary Help of Christians because we know that it was she who helped Don Bosco, especially in the most difficult moments. And we, especially in these moments of war, do not cease to ask for her maternal intercession, she our refuge, she the Madonna of difficult times, as Don Bosco used to say.

**What would you say to young people at this moment?**

I tell young people to not be afraid of life and difficulties, rather to face everything with love and hope; not alone, but with God and with brothers and sisters, because together we can change ourselves and the world. This is how our saints and our founding father Don Bosco lived and acted. Therefore, I invite young people to open their hearts to God's call, and not be indifferent when they hear His voice... do not harden your hearts!

And I conclude by saying to myself and to all young people the same words of Pope Francis in *Christus Vivit*: "Christ is alive and He wants you to be alive!"

*Fr. Simon ZAKERIAN*

*Middle East Provincial*

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# Interview with the New Provincial, fr. Milan Ivančević

*Salesian Croatia represents a part of the Salesian Congregation that deserves special attention. In a country with nearly 4 million inhabitants, numerous vocations are emerging, not only among the Salesians but also among the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. Recently, the community welcomed a new Salesian provincial: Father Milan Ivančević. We had the pleasure of interviewing him and wish to share his testimony.*

## **Can you introduce yourself?**

Milan Ivančević, Salesian, born on 25 October 1962 in Šlimac (Rama – Prozor, BiH). Of three brothers and three sisters, I have 29 nieces and nephews. I completed my primary and secondary education in my hometown. After studying mathematics and physics in Mostar and spending two years teaching at a primary school, I joined the Salesian community in the autumn of 1989. I took my perpetual vows on 8 September 1997 and was ordained a priest on 27 June 1998.

As a Salesian priest, I have served in the following capacities:

1998 – 1999: Parish assistant at the Parish of Our Lady Help of Christians in Knežija;

1999 – 2002: Religion teacher in Žepče;

2002 – 2003: Adviser for the Salesian Vocational Education Community in Podsused;

2003 – 2005: Specialist studies in Rome at the UPS (licence in spirituality);



2005 – 2006: Adviser for the Salesian Vocational Education Community in Podsused;  
2006 – 2015: Director in the same community and member of the Inspection Council;  
2015 – 2021: Director of the Salesian community in Žepče and director of the KŠC Don Bosco;  
2021 – 2024: Parish priest and community director in Split;  
2024 – present: Inspector.

**Who was the first person to tell you the story of Jesus?**

My mother taught me my first steps in faith, both through her words and her example. Later, as I grew up, the rest of my family also nurtured our faith, as regular prayer was a constant at home: morning and evening prayers, before and after meals.

We lived in a village 7 km from the church, yet we regularly attended Sunday Mass. Everything was imbued with faith, but also with great suffering. My area suffered greatly during the Second World War. One day, when I was only 11, my mother lost two brothers who were killed by Chetniks (Serbs) in the autumn of 1942 simply because they were Croats. That wound marked the family for life, along with poverty.

**How did you come to know about Don Bosco / the Salesians?**

I heard about the Salesians rather late. During my studies in mathematics, I expressed my wish to become a priest to my aunt, now deceased, who was a nun in Germany. She provided me with four addresses in Germany that one could approach regarding a vocation to the priesthood. Among these was the Salesian congregation in Germany. I began corresponding with them, and the letters were translated by the Croatian Salesian Don Franjo Crnjaković, who was then working in Germany. When the time was right to join a community, the issue arose that I did not know the German language. Then Don Franjo sent me the address of the Salesians in Zagreb, and that is how I became a Croatian Salesian.

**You studied mathematics at school. Why did you choose the**

## **Salesian path?**

I loved mathematics and working with children at school. I enjoyed helping young people solve mathematical problems. Since my childhood, the call to the priesthood had been quietly growing within me. The first instance I remember was an experience with an elderly relative who was among the few relatives receiving a pension. When I was in Year Three of primary school, one day he saw me happy because of my excellent grades and said, "Promise me that you will study to become a priest, and from now on I shall give you 5 stotinki of each of my pensions" (now worth about 10 euros). Naturally, I promised, because as a child that was of great value to me. Many years later, when I was already working in a school and close to deciding to join the community, I attended his funeral, and at his open grave I thanked him and promised that I would become a priest. Among the children to whom I taught mathematics were also those abandoned by their parents. Observing their situation helped me decide to embark on the path of serving young people as a Salesian.

## **The greatest joy and the greatest challenge**

The experiences in the confessional make me especially happy. When I witness the transformation of a human soul and recognise that I am the means through which it happens, it is incomparable to anything on earth – it is a celestial event. This is particularly true when it comes to young people, although in these situations every soul is young because it is beautiful. What hurts me most is the despair of children and young people when their parents separate. I am always deeply moved by their suffering. I am also pained by the thoughtlessness with which people make the decision to have an abortion. I get goosebumps thinking of the blindness in which people do not realise the enormity of the error they are committing. These issues penetrate deeply into humanity and call it into question.

**What are the most urgent local needs, especially for young**

### **people? What could be done more and better?**

The most urgent need of our population is to restore hope in people so that they are not afraid of life, and to strengthen them in the faith that God guides and sustains this world. Life is so much more beautiful and rich when it is imbued with faith, because it is in faith that it finds a clear meaning and constant reasons for joy. Modern culture steals this value from young people and replaces it with fleeting values, which quickly and easily fade away, leaving a void in the soul. We are fortunate that a large number of young people are able to nurture and live their faith, sometimes even against the prevailing current. But sadly, many are still far from faith and seek meaning in something smaller than themselves.

Perhaps we could go out even more and start seeking the homeless. However, it is necessary to go out prepared; if we rely solely on our own strength we might achieve a little, but if we proceed with the strength of God, then He does a great deal with our small endeavours. I believe that in our hearts, which are consecrated to God, we need to recover that original love and bear witness with renewed vigour that God is truly alive and that He invites us to share in His life. And this cannot be hidden – the souls see it.

### **How do you see the future?**

The future, like the present, is in God's hands. The Bible teaches us that the world is in good hands. That is why we must not be afraid. "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31). It is true that changes are happening at an incredible speed, and the world is becoming ever smaller because everything is easily and quickly accessible. Cultures and traditions mingle, and no one can predict what the consequences will be. But if we have trust in the Lord, the source of life, He will bring everything to good. It is up to us to listen, discern, and find our place and our role in what He asks of us. And if we are on that path, then we are ready for the wonderful surprises that the Lord is preparing for us.

**What place does Our Lady Help of Christians hold in your life?**

Mary, the Mother of Jesus, holds an important place in my life. My own mother pointed out the presence of the Madonna throughout her life and whispered prayers, reciting the Rosary until her last breath. I too gladly make pilgrimages to the sanctuaries of the Madonna and testify to how her gaze infuses hope in people. Don Bosco left us the devotion to Our Lady Help of Christians and promised that we would witness miracles if we have childlike trust in the Immaculate Help of Christians. The mystery of Christmas and the Eucharist cannot be fully understood without delving deeply, and the simplest way to do so is to pray the Rosary.

**What would you say to young people at this moment?**

My message to young people is not to be afraid to be believers, even if society labels it as old-fashioned. Indeed, no one is as invested in our tomorrow as God, who, through His commandments, gives us strength for the future. He prepares us for the future with His commandments. If each day we strive to align our lives with the Decalogue, then we can already say of ourselves: blessed are those who follow in our footsteps, for they will have people ahead of them. Therefore, young people, be courageous, do not fear life—it is God's most beautiful gift.

Milan Ivančević, SDB  
Provincial, Croatia

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**Interview with the new  
Superior Fr Gabriel**

# NGENDAKURIYO

*We interviewed the new Superior Fr Gabriel NGENDAKURIYO, of the African Great Lakes Visitatory (AGL), which includes Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi. The Visitatory's name recalls its proximity to Lake Victoria, the largest in Africa and the second largest in the world.*

## **Can you introduce yourself?**

My name is Gabriel NGENDAKURIYO, a Salesian of Don Bosco and a priest. I was born on 3 July 1954 in Burundi, where I attended school until the end of secondary school. Soon after, I entered the Salesian Congregation: I did my novitiate in Butare, Rwanda (1978-1979), and then studied Philosophy at the interdiocesan seminary in Nyakibanda (Rwanda).

In 1981, I moved to Lubumbashi (then Zaire) for practical training. I completed my Theology in Kolwezi, in the same country, and was ordained a priest in Lubumbashi on 11 August 1987. A month later I was already in Rukago, Burundi, as parish vicar.

In 1991 I was sent to Rome and then to Jerusalem for studies to prepare me for the role of formator at our *St Francis de Sales Theology Institute* in Lubumbashi. I stayed there from 1994 to 2006, until the Rector Major (Fr Pascual Chávez) appointed me Provincial Superior of a new Circumscription called *Great Lakes Africa* (AGL), with activities in three countries: Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda.

At the end of my six-year term (2006-2012) and after a sabbatical year in the Holy Land, I was appointed Director in Buterere (Burundi). Subsequently, for two years, I directed the Don Rua Community at UPS (Rome). Six years later (August 2021), I returned to Buterere as Rector of the Shrine dedicated to Mary Help of Christians. From there I left for Kigali for a new term as Provincial Superior. I am now in Rome for a formation session for the 'new' provincials.

## **Who first told you the story of Jesus?**

I come from a deeply Christian and practising family. I got to know Jesus in a 'vital and concrete' way before being theoretical: we prayed the rosary every day, went to Mass on Sundays (two hours of walking), I was an altar boy, and I followed my older sister to catechumenate before starting primary school. So it was my parents who first told me about Jesus.

**What is the story of your vocation?**

At the end of primary school, I asked to enter the small diocesan seminary because I wanted to become a priest. It was not possible for me; so I was directed to a short-cycle school, run by the *Brothers of Our Lady of Mercy*, to train primary school teachers. Here I found people who edified me greatly. Then, at 17, I arrived at a Salesian school and felt the 'fire' of Don Bosco in my heart.

**What is your fondest memory?**

The moment of my priestly ordination is one of my most precious memories. Another is linked to my first arrival in the Holy Land and, later, in Lourdes.

**What are the most urgent local needs and what are the needs of young people?**

In my AGL Province, the most urgent priority is formation in *authentic* human and Christian values . Today there are so many 'teachers' of all kinds and it has become complicated to distinguish the weeds from the good wheat. Let us therefore work for deep evangelisation, based on the principles of Don Bosco's own 'preventive system'.

**Are the Christians in the region persecuted?**

Absolutely not. At the moment Christians enjoy sufficient freedom to live and proclaim their faith, obviously with respect for public order.

**Do you have relations with people of other religions in your region?**

Relations are not always idyllic between Catholic Christians and some new forms of Protestant obedience, but disagreements never result in violence.

**How do you see the future?**

I look at the future with optimism and realism. Human history is dynamic, made up of ups and downs. Today we are certainly going through a delicate period, which requires that we read the 'signs of the times' well and take the right direction.

**What place does Mary Help of Christians occupy in your life?**

Ever since I was a child I have always had a very important relationship with Mary (I only came to know the title 'Help of Christians' later). Once I discovered that she listens to me and takes care of me, I speak to her with respect but also with spontaneity and familiarity. I do everything to make her known and loved. I feel like her 'son', 'confidante' and 'disciple'.

**What would you say to young people at this time?**

I would tell them that life is beautiful and worthy of being lived to the full. And that this 'life in fullness', though wonderful, also requires effort (in the ascetic sense), capable of ennobling the human person. Come on, young people!

*Fr Gabriel NGENDAKURIYO,*

*Superior of the Great Lakes Visitation of Africa*

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## **Basilicata – Calabria Missionary Project**

*Within the "Project Europe," Italy South has launched a new missionary project in the regions of Calabria and Basilicata,*

*welcoming the first missionaries "ad gentes", a sign of missionary generosity and an opportunity for growth in the global outreach of the charism of Don Bosco.*

Europe as a land of mission: in a new Salesian missiological perspective, missions are increasingly losing a geographical connotation, as a movement towards "the lands of mission". Today, missionaries come from all five continents and are sent to all five continents. This multidirectional missionary movement is already taking place in many dioceses and congregations. With the "Project Europe," Salesians have confronted this change in the missionary paradigm, for which a journey of conversion of mind and heart is necessary. The "Project Europe," in the idea of Fr. Pascual Chávez, is an act of apostolic courage and an opportunity for charismatic rebirth in the European continent to be inserted into the broader context of the new evangelisation. The goal is to engage the entire Salesian congregation in strengthening the Salesian charism in Europe, especially through a profound spiritual and pastoral renewal of the confreres and communities, in order to continue Don Bosco's project in favour of young people, especially the poorest.

The Salesian provinces involved are called to rethink their Salesian presence for a more effective evangelisation that responds to today's context. Among them, the province of Italy South has developed a new missionary project that involves the regions of Basilicata and Campania. Starting from an analysis of the territory, it can be observed that southern Italy is characterised by a fairly consistent presence of young people, with a lower birth rate compared to other Italian regions, and that emigration is a phenomenon that is very present, causing many young people to leave to study or work elsewhere. Religious and family traditions, which have always constituted an important identity reference for the community, are less relevant than in the past, and many young people experience faith as distant from their lives, although they do not show



themselves as being totally opposed to it. The Salesians experience good participation in youth spiritual experiences but, at the same time, a poor receptivity to systematic paths and definitive life proposals.

Other issues affecting the youth world include emotional and affective illiteracy, relational crises in families, abandoning school, and unemployment. All of this fuels phenomena of widespread poverty and the growth of criminal organisations that find fertile ground to involve and deviate the youth.

In this context, many young people express a strong desire for social commitment, particularly in political and ecological fields and in the world of volunteerism.

In recent years, the Salesian province has reflected upon what can be done to be relevant in the territory and has made several important choices, including the development of works and projects for the poorest young people, such as family homes and day centres that directly and clearly manifest the choice in favour of at-risk youth. The integral care of young people must aim for a formation that is not only theoretical so that the young person can discover or become aware of his/her own abilities. Furthermore, a more courageous missionary practice is required to realise paths of education in faith that help young people fulfil their Christian vocation.

All this must be realised with the active involvement of all: consecrated, laypeople, young people, families, members of the Salesian family... in a fully synodal style that promotes co-responsibility and participation.

Basilicata and Calabria have been chosen as charismatically significant areas in need of consolidation and new educational-pastoral momentum. These are territories to bet upon by opening new pastoral frontiers and resizing some already present. The Salesian presences are six: Potenza, Bova Marina, Corigliano Rossano, Locri, Soverato, and Vibo

Valentia. What kind of Salesians are needed for this missionary project? Salesians willing to work in poor, popular, and densely populated contexts, with economic difficulties and sometimes a lack of cultural stimuli, and particularly attentive to the initial announcement. Salesians should be well-prepared, at the spiritual, Salesian, cultural, and charismatic levels. It is necessary to be well aware of the reason why this project has been developed, that is namely to take care of Basilicata and Calabria, two poor regions with few systematic pastoral proposals in favour of the neediest young people, where the first announcement increasingly becomes a necessity even in contexts of Catholic tradition. The educational and pastoral work of the Salesians seeks to give hope to many young people who are often forced to leave their homes and move north in search of a better life. The contrast of this reality with pastoral and formative offers with a look to the future, particularly vocational training, attention to youth distress, and collaboration with institutions to find answers becomes increasingly urgent. In addition to the consecrated Salesians, this territory is enriched by the beautiful presence of laypeople and members of the Salesian Family, and the local church, as well as the social reality, that nurtures great respect and consideration for the children of Don Bosco.

Welcoming new *ad gentes* missionaries is a blessing and a challenge that fits within this pastoral project. This year the Italy South province (IME) received four missionaries, who were sent in the 155th Salesian missionary expedition. Among them, two have become members of the new provincial delegation AKM (Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro), while the other two have been assigned to Italy South and will take part in the new missionary project of IME for Basilicata and Campania: Henri Mufele Ngankwini and Guy Roger Mutombo, from the Democratic Republic of Congo (ACC province). To best accompany the arriving missionaries, the IME province is committed to ensuring that they feel at home and are steadily integrated

into the new community and social reality. The missionaries are gradually blended into the history and culture of the place that will become their home, and from the very first days, they attend Italian language and culture courses for a duration of at least two years, which will help them achieve full inculturation. At the same time, they are introduced into the formative processes and take the first steps in the educational-pastoral action of the province with young people and children. A fundamental dimension is the attention towards the personal spiritual journey: each missionary is guaranteed adequate moments of personal and communal prayer, spiritual accompaniment and guidance, confession, preferably in a language they understand, and time for updating and formation. In a later phase, the missionary is guaranteed ongoing formation for an even fuller integration into the provincial dynamics, maintaining some specific attentions. The missionary experience will be periodically evaluated to identify strengths, weaknesses, and any corrective measures, in a fraternal spirit.

As Fr. Alfred Maravilla, General Councillor for the Missions, reminds us, "being missionaries in a secularised Europe poses significant internal and external challenges. Goodwill is not enough." "Looking back with the eyes of faith, we realise that through the launch of the 'Project Europe,' the Spirit was preparing the Salesian Society to face the new reality of Europe, so that we could be more aware of our resources as well as the challenges, and with hope to relaunch the Salesian charism throughout the Continent."

Let us pray that in the regions of Basilicata and Calabria, may the Salesian presence be inspired by the Spirit for the good of the young people most in need.

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