

Becoming a sign of hope in eSwatini – Lesotho – South Africa after 130 years

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

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

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

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

Firstly, we are trying to overcome the infamous world records of the growing gap between rich and poor (100,000 millionaires

versus 15 million unemployed young people); the lack of security and increasing violence in daily life; the collapse of the educational system, which has produced a new generation of millions of illiterates, struggling with various addictions (alcohol, drugs...). Furthermore, 30 years after the end of the apartheid regime in 1994, society and the Church are still divided among the various communities in terms of economy, opportunities, and many unhealed wounds. Indeed, the "Rainbow Nation" community is struggling with many "gaps" that can only be "filled" with the values of the Gospel.

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

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

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

We pray daily for new Salesian vocations, to be able to welcome new missionaries. Indeed, the era of the Anglo-Irish Province (until 1988) has ended, and the Africa Project did not include the southern tip of the continent. After 70 years in eSwatini (Swaziland) and 45 years in Lesotho, we have only 4 local vocations from each Kingdom. Today we have only 5 young confreres and 4 novices in initial formation. However, the smallest Vice-Province in Africa-Madagascar, through its 7 local communities, is responsible for education and pastoral care in 6 large parishes, 18 primary and secondary schools, 3

vocational training centres (TVET), and various social assistance programmes. Our provincial community, with 18 different nationalities among the 35 SDBs living in the 7 communities, is a great gift and a challenge to embrace.

As a minority and fragile Catholic community in Southern Africa

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

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

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

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

Fr. Pascual’s advice and commitment were voted on: “To become more passionate about Jesus and dedicated to young people,”

investing in personal conversion (creating a sacred space in our lives, to let Jesus transform it); in communal conversion (investing in systematic monthly ongoing formation according to a theme); and in provincial conversion (promoting the provincial mentality through “One Heart One Soul” – the fruit of our provincial assembly), and with monthly online meetings of the Directors.

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

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

Our mother house in Cape Town will celebrate its one hundred and thirtieth (130th) anniversary next year, and thanks to the

one hundred and fiftieth (150th) anniversary of the Salesian Missions, we have created, with the help of the China Province, a special “St. Louis Versiglia Memorial Room,” where our Protomartyr spent a day during his return from Italy to China-Macau in May 1917.

Don Bosco ‘Ubuntu’ – synodal journey

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

Venerable Ottavio Ortiz Arrieta Coya, Bishop

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Syndrome of Philip and the Syndrome of Andrew

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

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

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

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

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

Philip's Syndrome

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

Andrew's Syndrome

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

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

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

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

Jesus and the Two Syndromes

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

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

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

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

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

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

Message from Father Fabio Attard on the Feast of the Rector Major

Dear Confreres, dear Collaborators in our Educative Pastoral Communities, dear young people,

Allow me to share with you this message that comes from the depths of my heart. I communicate it with all the affection, appreciation and esteem I have for each and every one of you as you are engaged in the mission of being educators, pastors and animators of young people on all continents.

We are all aware that the education of young

people increasingly requires significant adult figures, people with a solid moral backbone, capable of transmitting hope and vision for their future.

While we are all committed to walking with young people, welcoming them into our homes, offering them educational opportunities of every kind and type, in the variety of environments in which we work, we are also aware of the cultural, social and economic challenges we face.

Alongside these challenges, which are part of every pastoral educational process, since it is always a continuous dialogue with earthly realities, we recognise that, as a consequence of situations of wars and armed conflicts in various parts of the world, the call we are living is becoming more complex and difficult. All this has an effect on the commitment we are carrying out. Yet, it is encouraging to see that despite the difficulties we face, we are determined to continue living our mission with conviction.

In recent months, the message of Pope Francis and now the words of Pope Leo XIV have continually invited the world to face this painful situation, which seems like a spiral that is growing at an alarming rate. We know that wars never bring peace. We are aware, and some of us are experiencing it first-hand, that every armed conflict and every war brings suffering, pain and increases all kinds of poverty. We all know that those who ultimately pay the price for such situations are the displaced, the elderly, children and young people who find themselves without a present and without a future.

For this reason, dear confreres, dear collaborators and young people throughout the world, I would kindly ask you that on the feast of the Rector Major, which is a tradition dating back to the time of Don Bosco, every community around the feast day of the Rector Major celebrate the Holy Eucharist for peace.

It is an invitation to prayer that finds its source in the sacrifice of Christ, crucified and risen. A prayer as a testimony so that no one remains indifferent in a

world situation shaken by a growing number of conflicts.

This is our gesture of solidarity with all those, especially Salesians, lay people and young people, who at this particular moment, with great courage and determination, continue to live the Salesian mission in situations marked by war. They are Salesians, lay people and young people who ask for and appreciate the solidarity of the whole Congregation, human solidarity, spiritual solidarity, charismatic solidarity.

While I and the entire General Council are doing everything possible to be very close to everyone in a concrete way, I believe that at this particular moment, such a sign of closeness and encouragement should be given by the whole Congregation.

To you, our dear brothers and sisters in Myanmar, Ukraine, the Middle East, Ethiopia, East of Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, Haiti and Central America, we want to say loudly that we are with you. We thank you for your witness. We assure you of our human and spiritual closeness.

We continue to pray for the gift of peace. We continue to pray for our confreres, lay people and young people who in very challenging situations continue to hope and pray for peace to emerge. Their example, their self-giving and their belonging to the charism of Don Bosco are a powerful witness for us. They, together with many consecrated persons, priests and committed lay people, are modern martyrs, living witnesses engaged in education and evangelisation who, despite everything, as true shepherds and ministers of evangelical charity, continue to love, believe and hope for a better future.

All of us accept this call to solidarity with all our hearts. Thank you.

Prot. 25/0243 Rome, 24 June 2025

don Fabio ATTARD,

Rector Major

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

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

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

He had that eschatological hope that is linked to the expectations of man in life and beyond death,

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

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

The uncommon level reached by Father Crespi in the practice of all the virtues was highlighted, in a concordant manner, by the witnesses heard during the Diocesan Inquiry for the Cause of Beatification, but it also emerges from the careful analysis of the documents and the biographical events regarding Father Carlo Crespi. The exercise of Christian virtues on his part was, according to those who knew him, not only extraordinary, but also constant throughout his long life. People followed him faithfully because in his daily life the exercise of the theological virtues shone through almost naturally, among which hope stood out in a particular way in the many moments of difficulty. He sowed hope in the hearts of people and lived this virtue to the highest degree.

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

At the school of Don Bosco and Mamma Margherita, he lived and witnessed hope in fullness because, trusting in the Lord and hoping in Divine Providence, he carried out great works and services without a budget, even if he never lacked

money. He had no time to agitate or despair, his positive attitude gave confidence and hope to others.

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

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

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

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

Father Crespi, therefore, undertook numerous initiatives in favour of the youth of Cuenca, starting first of all with school education. The Salesian Popular School

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

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

The reaffirmation of eternal life was undoubtedly one of the central themes addressed in the writings of Father Carlo Crespi. This fact allows us to grasp the evident importance he assigned to the virtue of hope. This fact clearly shows how the practice of this virtue constantly permeated the earthly path of the Servant of God.

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

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

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

In the process he testified: *“For me, a special sign is precisely that attitude of having communicated with us*

in a simply human act, laughing and joking and, when – I say – he saw that the doors of eternity were open and perhaps the Virgin was waiting for him, he silenced us and made us all pray.”

Carlo Riganti

President of the Carlo Crespi Association

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

Don Bosco International

Don Bosco International (DBI) is a non-governmental organisation based in Brussels, representing the Salesians of Don Bosco to the institutions of the European Union, with a focus on the protection of children's rights, youth development, and education. Founded in 2014, DBI collaborates with various European partners to promote inclusive social and

educational policies, paying attention to vulnerable individuals. The organisation promotes youth participation in policy-making, emphasising the importance of informal education. Through networking and advocacy activities, DBI aims to create synergies with European institutions, civil society organisations, and Salesian networks globally. The guiding values are solidarity, the integral formation of young people and intercultural dialogue. DBI organises seminars, conferences, and European projects aimed at ensuring greater youth presence in decision-making processes, fostering an inclusive environment that supports them in their journey of growth, autonomy and spiritual development, through cultural and educational exchanges. The Executive Secretary, Sara Sechi, explains the activities of this institution.

Advocacy as an act of responsibility for and with our youth

Don Bosco International (DBI) is the organisation that manages the institutional representation of the Salesians of Don Bosco to the European institutions and civil society organisations that revolve around them. DBI's mission is centred on *advocacy*, which can be translated as "political influence", meaning all those actions aimed at influencing a decision-making-legislative process, in our case the European one. The DBI office is based in Brussels and is hosted by the Salesian community of Woluwe-Saint-Lambert (FRB Province). Working in the European capital is dynamic and stimulating. Nevertheless, the proximity of the community allows us to keep the Salesian charism alive in our mission, avoiding getting trapped in the so-called "European bubble", that world of 'privileged' relationships and dynamics often distant from our realities.

DBI's action follows two directions: on the one hand, bringing the Salesian educational-pastoral mission closer to the institutions through the sharing of good practices, youth requests, projects and related results, creating spaces for dialogue and participation for those who traditionally would not have access to them. On the other

hand, they deal with bringing the European dimension within the Congregation through monitoring and information on ongoing processes and new initiatives, facilitating new contacts with institutional representatives, NGOs and confessional organisations that can give rise to new collaborations.

A question that often arises spontaneously is how DBI manages to concretely create political influence. In *advocacy* actions, networking with other organisations or entities that share principles, values, and objectives is fundamental. In this regard, DBI ensures an active presence in alliances, formal and informal, of NGOs or confessional actors who work together on issues dear to Don Bosco's mission: the fight against poverty and social inclusion, the defence of the rights of young people, especially those in vulnerable situations, and integral human development. Whenever a Salesian delegation visits Brussels, we facilitate meetings for them with Members of the European Parliament, Commission officials, diplomatic corps, including the Apostolic Nunciature to the European Union, and other actors of interest. We often manage to meet groups of young people and students from Salesian schools who visit the city, organising a moment of dialogue for them with other youth organisations.

DBI is a service that the Congregation offers to give visibility to its works and bring the voice of those who would otherwise not be heard to institutional forums. The Salesian Congregation has a potential for *advocacy* that is not fully expressed. The presence in 137 countries to protect young people at risk of poverty and social exclusion represents an educational and social network that few organisations can count on. However, it is still difficult to strategically present good results at decision-making tables, where policies and investments are outlined, especially at the international level. For this reason, ensuring a constant dialogue with the institutions represents both an opportunity and an act of responsibility. It is an opportunity because in the long term visibility facilitates contacts, new partnerships, funding for projects and the sustainability of

the works. It is also a responsibility because, not being able to remain silent in the face of the difficulties faced by our boys and girls in today's world, political influence is the active testimony of that civic commitment that we often try to generate in young people.

By guaranteeing rights and dignity for young people, Don Bosco was the first actor of political influence of the Congregation, for example through the signing of the first Italian apprenticeship contract. *Advocacy* represents an intrinsic element of the Salesian mission. Salesians do not lack experience, nor success stories, nor concrete and innovative alternatives to face current challenges, but often a cohesion that allows for coordinated networking and clear and shared communication. By giving voice to the authentic testimonies of young people, we can transform challenges into opportunities, creating a lasting impact in society that gives hope for the future.

Sara Sechi

Don Bosco International – DBI, Brussels

Sara Sechi, Executive Secretary of DBI, has been in Brussels for two and a half years. She is the daughter of the Erasmus+ generation, which together with other European programmes has guaranteed her life and training experiences that would otherwise have been denied. She is very grateful to Don Bosco and the Salesian Congregation, where she has found meritocracy, growth, and a second family. And we wish her good and fruitful work for the cause of young people.

Social inclusion according to Don Bosco

Don Bosco's far-sighted proposal for the 'unaccompanied minors' of Rome.

The history of the church of the Sacred Heart in Rome, now a basilica, is quite well known, and it is much frequented by people hurrying through the adjacent Termini station. A history fraught with problems and difficulties of all kinds for Don Bosco while the church was under construction (1880-1887), but also a source of joy and satisfaction once it was completed (1887). Less well known, however, is the story of the origin of the "house of charity capable of accommodating at least 500 youngsters" that Don Bosco wanted to build next to the church. A work, an extremely relevant reflection for today... from 140 years ago! Don Bosco himself presented it to us in the January 1884 issue of the *Salesian Bulletin*: "Today there are hundreds and thousands of poor children wandering the streets and squares of Rome, their faith and morals at risk. As already pointed out on other occasions, many young people, either alone or with their families, come to this city not only from various parts of Italy, but also from other nations, in the hope of finding work and money; but disappointed in their expectation they soon fall into misery and the risk of doing badly, and consequently of ending up in prison."

Analysing the condition of young people in the "eternal city" was not difficult: the worrying situation of "street kids", whether Italian or not, was there for all to see, for the civil and ecclesiastical authorities, for the Roman citizens and the multitude of "buzzurri" and foreigners who had arrived in the city once it had been declared capital of the Kingdom of Italy (1871). The difficulty stemmed from not knowing what solution to propose and whether there was the ability to

implement it once identified.

Don Bosco, not always well liked in the city because of his Piedmontese origin, proposed his solution to the Cooperators: "The aim of the Hospice of the Sacred Heart of Jesus would be to take in poor and abandoned youngsters from any city in Italy or any other country in the world, to educate them in knowledge and religion, to instruct them in some art or trade, and so remove them from the prison cell, give them back to their families and to civil society as good Christians, upright citizens capable of earning an honourable livelihood through their own labours."

Ahead of the times

Reception, education, training for work, integration and social inclusion: but is this not the prior objective of all youth policies in favour of immigrants today? Don Bosco had experience in this regard on his side: for 30 years at Valdocco they took in youngsters from various parts of Italy, for some years in Salesian houses in France there were children of Italian and other immigrants, since 1875 in Buenos Aires the Salesians had the spiritual care of Italian immigrants from various regions of Italy (decades later they would also take an interest in Jorge Mario Bergoglio, the future Pope Francis, the son of Piedmontese immigrants).

The religious dimension

Naturally, Don Bosco was interested above all in the salvation of the soul of the young, which required the profession of the Catholic faith: *Extra ecclesia nulla salus*, as they used to say. And in fact he wrote: "Others then from the city and foreigners, because of their poverty, are exposed daily to the risk of falling into the hands of the Protestants, who have, so to speak, invaded the city of St. Peter, and especially intend to ambush poor and needy youngsters. Under the guise of providing them with food and clothing for their bodies, they spread the poison of error and unbelief to their souls."

This explains how, in his educational project in Rome (we

would prefer to call it his “global compact on education”), Don Bosco does not neglect faith. A path of true integration into a “new” civil society cannot exclude the religious dimension of the population. Papal support came in handy: an extra stimulus “for people who love religion and society”: “This Hospice is very dear to the heart of the Holy Father Leo XIII. While with apostolic zeal he strives to spread faith and morality in every part of the world, he leaves no stone unturned on behalf of the children most exposed to danger. This Hospice should therefore be dear to the hearts of all people who love religion and society; it should be especially dear to the hearts of our Cooperators, to whom in a special way the Vicar of Jesus Christ entrusted the noble task of the Hospice itself and of the attached Church.”

Finally, in his appeal to the generosity of benefactors for the construction of the Hospice, Don Bosco could not fail to make explicit reference to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, to whom the adjoining church was dedicated: “We can also believe for certain that this Hospice will be well pleasing to the Heart of Jesus... In the nearby Church the divine Heart will be the refuge of adults, and in the adjoining Hospice he will show himself to be the loving friend, the tender father of the children. He will have a group of 500 children in Rome every day to divinely crown him, pray to him, sing hosannas to him, ask his holy blessing.”

New times, new peripheries

The Salesian hospice, built as a school of arts and crafts and an oratory on the outskirts of the city – which at the time began in Piazza della Repubblica – later became absorbed by the building expansion of the city itself. The first school for poor boys and orphans was moved to a new suburb in 1930 and was replaced in successive stages by various types of other schools (elementary, middle, high school). It also gave hospitality for a time to Salesian students attending the Gregorian University and some faculties of the Salesian Athenaeum. It always remained a parish and oratory as well as

the headquarters of the Roman Province. For a long time it housed some national offices and is now the headquarters of the Salesian Congregation: structures that have animated and still animate Salesian houses that have mostly come into being and grown on the outskirts of hundreds of cities, or on the “geographical and existential peripheries” of the world, as Pope Francis put it. Just like the Sacred Heart in Rome, which still preserves a small sign of Don Bosco’s great “dream”: it offers assistance to non-EU immigrants and with the Youth Centre’s “Talent Bank” provides food, clothing and basic necessities to the homeless at Termini station.

Blessed Luigi Variara: 150th Anniversary of His Birth

This year marks the 150th anniversary of the birth of Blessed Luigi Variara, an extraordinary priest and Salesian missionary. Born on January 15, 1875, in Viarigi, in the province of Asti, Luigi grew up in an environment enriched with faith, culture, and fraternal love, which shaped his character and prepared him for the extraordinary mission that would lead him to serve those most in need in Colombia.

From his childhood spent in Monferrato, in a family marked by the spiritual influence of Don Bosco, to his missionary vocation developed in Valdocco, the life of Blessed Variara represents a commendable example of dedication to others and fidelity to God. Let us retrace the highlights of his childhood and formation, offering a glimpse into the extraordinary spiritual and human legacy he left us.

From Viarigi to Agua de Dios

Luigi Variara was born in Viarigi, in the province of Asti, on January 15, 1875, 150 years ago, to a deeply Christian family. His father, Pietro, had listened to Don Bosco speak in 1856 when he came to the village to preach a mission. When Luigi was born, his father Pietro was forty-two years old and had married for the second time to Livia Bussa. Pietro had obtained a teaching diploma, loved music and singing, and animated parish functions as an organist and as the director of the choir he himself had founded. He was a highly esteemed and appreciated presence in the village of Viarigi. When Luigi was born, it was during a harsh winter, and due to the circumstances of his birth, the midwife deemed it prudent to baptise the newborn. Two days later, the baptismal rites were completed.

Luigi's childhood was inspired by local traditions and family life, a cultural and spiritual blend that helped shape his character and impart valuable meaning to the growth of the young boy, marking his future missionary vocation in Colombia.

Luigi's relationship with his father Pietro was important. Pietro was his mentor and teacher and instilled in him the Christian sense of life, the early fundamentals of school, and a love for music and singing—elements that, as we know, would affect the life and mission of Luigi Variara. His younger brother Celso recalls: "Although he never accomplished anything exceptional, Luigi was all goodness and love in the manifestations of his life, both with our parents, and especially with our mother, and with us... I don't remember my brother ever being less courteous and less fraternal with us, younger siblings. A faithful and devoted attendee of Church and its functions, he spent the rest of his time not having fun in the streets, rather at home, reading and studying his school books and keeping his mother company."

It is also nice to remember the relationship of young Luigi with his older sister Giovanna, daughter from the first marriage and godmother at his Baptism. Although she married young, Giovanna always maintained a special bond with

little Luigi, helping to strengthen the features of his personality, his inclination towards piety and study. Of Giovanna's children, one, Ulisse, would become a priest, and Ernestina, a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians. Furthermore, Giovanna, who would die at ninety in 1947, maintained the epistolary ties between Luigi and their mother Livia during her brother's missionary life.

Another aspect that would influence the growth of little Luigi is that the Variara home was almost always full of children. His father Pietro, at the end of lessons, would take the students most in need with him, and after doing some tutoring, he would entrust them to the care of mother Livia. Other families did the same. A witness recounts: "Mrs. Livia was the mother of the whole neighbourhood; her yard was always full of boys and girls; she taught us to sew, played with us, and was always in a good mood." Luigi grew up in this "oratory" atmosphere, where one felt at home, felt loved, and the paternal presence of father Pietro and the maternal presence of mother Livia were top-quality educational and affectionate resources not only for their children, but for many other children and young people, especially the poorest and most disadvantaged.

During these years, Luigi met and dedicated himself to a disabled companion, Andrea Ferrari, taking care of him and making him feel at ease. In this, one can glimpse a seed of that solicitude and closeness that would later mark the life and mission of Luigi Variara in serving leprosy patients in Agua de Dios, Colombia.

Indeed, as a child, Luigi Variara experienced, with his siblings and the neighbourhood children, the sincere love of his parents, and through their example, he came to know the true face of God the Father, the source of authentic love.

Passing through Valdocco

Don Bosco was well known in Monferrato. He had travelled through it in every direction with the well-known

autumn walks alongside his boys, who, with their noise and contagious joy, brought festivity wherever they went. The local boys happily joined the cheerful and lively troop, and later, many would leave to find themselves with that priest, eager to be educated by him in the oratory of Turin.

In Viarigi, the visit of Don Bosco in February 1856 left a deeply heartfelt memory. Don Bosco had accepted the invitation of the parish priest, Fr. Giovanni Battista Melino, to preach a mission, as the village was deeply troubled and divided due to the scandals of a former priest, a certain Grignaschi, who had gathered around himself a true sect, gaining great popularity. Don Bosco managed to attract a very large audience and invited the population to conversion. Thus, Viarigi regained its religious balance and spiritual peace. The spiritual bond that was created between this Asti village and the Saint of the young continued over time. It was young Luigi who, at his First Communion, was prepared by the parish priest Fr. Giovanni Battista Melino, the same one who had invited Don Bosco to preach the popular mission.

In the Variara family, according to the wishes of father Pietro, Luigi was to orient himself towards the priesthood: However, at the end of elementary school, he had no desire or particular vocational concerns. In any case, he had to continue his studies, and at this point, Don Bosco comes into play. The memory he left in Viarigi, his reputation as a man of God, his friendship with the parish priest, the dreams of father Pietro, the fame of the oratory in Turin led Luigi to enter Valdocco on October 1, 1887, having enrolled in his first year of middle school, with the desire of his father who wanted his son to be initiated into the priesthood. However, young Luigi, in all simplicity but firmly speaking, did not hesitate to declare that he felt no vocation, but his father replied: "If you don't have it, Mary Help of Christians will give it to you. Be good and study!" Don Bosco died four months after the arrival of young Variara at the oratory of Valdocco, but the encounter that Luigi had with him was enough to mark him for life. He himself recalls the event: "We were

in the winter season, and one afternoon we were playing in the large courtyard of the oratory when suddenly we heard shouting from one side to the other: 'Don Bosco, Don Bosco!' Instinctively, we all rushed towards the point where our good Father appeared, who was being taken out for a walk in his carriage. We followed him to the place where he was to get into the vehicle. Immediately, Don Bosco was seen surrounded by the beloved crowd of children. I was desperately looking for a way to get to a spot where I could see him how I wanted to, since I ardently desired to meet him. I got as close as I could, and the moment they were helping him get into the carriage, he turned to me with a sweet look, and his eyes rested attentively upon me. I do not 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 I had met a Saint, and that this Saint had read something in my soul that only God and he could know."

The Days of Salesian Spirituality

This year, the XLIII Days of Salesian Spirituality will take place from January 16 to 19, as usual, in Valdocco. They represent, for the entire Salesian Family spread around the world, a precious opportunity for meeting, reflection, and spiritual renewal. Every year, in January, religious, laypeople, and young people gather to rediscover the roots of the Salesian charism, celebrating the figure and legacy of Saint John Bosco, founder of the Salesian Congregation and a great friend of the young. The goal is to promote a communal reflection on the values of faith, fraternity, and educational mission, according to the Salesian spirit, in a context of

celebration and prayer.

Origin and meaning of the Days of Salesian Spirituality

The tradition of the Days of Salesian Spirituality has its roots in the educational practice of Don Bosco, who understood the importance of cultivating moments of formation for his young people and for the collaborators who assisted him in his mission. From the early decades of the Congregation's life, there was a need to periodically gather to reread the experiences lived in Salesian works and to dialogue with the challenges of the present. Over the years, the Salesian charism has spread well beyond the borders of Piedmont, reaching all five continents. At the same time, the need to come together for common reflection and discernment has become increasingly pressing, making it essential to have an opportunity for meeting that we now know as the Days of Salesian Spirituality.

The Days, typically celebrated in January close to the liturgical feast of Saint John Bosco (January 31), represent the synthesis of an entire year of work, prayer, and reflection around the theme proposed by the Rector Major of the Salesians with the so-called Strenna. The Strenna is an annual message that, starting from a phrase or a key concept, aims to guide Salesian life and mission in the world. During these days, participants delve into the meaning of this message, engaging with other Salesian realities, sharing testimonies, and allowing themselves to be inspired by moments of prayer and celebration.

Structure and highlights

The Days of Salesian Spirituality usually take place in a location particularly significant for the Congregation, such as Colle Don Bosco or Valdocco in Turin, where Saint John Bosco took his first steps in youth apostolate. In other cases, to facilitate the participation of the faithful and members of the Salesian Family residing in various parts of the world, parallel events or live streaming connections may

be organized. This allows anyone interested, even from a distance, to follow the main moments of prayer, listen to meditations, and interact with the speakers.

During these days, the agenda is marked by a series of appointments that range from theological and pastoral reflection to moments of conviviality and celebration. Among the highlights are:

1. Conferences and thematic presentations: authoritative figures from the Salesian world, theologians, educators, and leaders of the works present insights on the annual theme. These presentations provide a broad overview of contemporary educational and pastoral challenges, helping to place the Salesian charism in today's context.

2. Group work and workshops: to move from the theoretical to the practical, participants are involved in working groups or workshops, where they have the opportunity to compare experiences lived in their own realities and to imagine new ways of evangelization and youth accompaniment.

3. Celebrations and moments of prayer: the Days of Salesian Spirituality are not only about study and deepening but also, and above all, an opportunity to meet God. The liturgies and community prayers that punctuate the entire duration of the event constitute a source of spiritual nourishment that supports and strengthens the sense of belonging to the great Salesian Family.

4. Testimonies and sharing of experiences: listening to the stories of missionaries, educators, and young people from different socio-cultural contexts is a fundamental element. These concrete testimonies give a face to Salesian values and demonstrate the vitality of a charism that, more than a century after Don Bosco's death, continues to inspire generations of believers.

5. Meeting with the Rector Major: a particularly awaited and

significant moment is the meeting with the Rector Major, who represents the successor of Don Bosco. In his address, he urges the entire Salesian Family to continue with commitment the educational and pastoral work, reminding them of the importance of uniting spiritual life with concrete action in favor of young people, especially those in need.

The protagonists: the Salesian Family on the move

The Days of Salesian Spirituality involve not only Salesian religious (SDB) and Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (FMA) but also bring together all the groups that make up the varied Salesian Family: Salesian Cooperators, former students of Don Bosco, Volunteers of Don Bosco, and many others. This plurality of expressions and belonging reveals the richness of a charism that has been able to take on different forms and sensitivities, but always converging in love for young people and for the Church.

Towards a continuous renewal of the charism

One of the most important messages that emerge from the Days of Salesian Spirituality is the need for a continuous and creative renewal of Don Bosco's charism. The world is changing at a dizzying pace, with unprecedented challenges concerning the technological, social, and educational spheres. To remain faithful to the founder and the Gospel, the Salesian Family is called to always be outgoing, not to settle for "tried and tested" formulas, but to experiment with forms of apostolate that can speak to today's youth.

Faithfulness to Don Bosco does not mean blindly repeating what has been done in the past, but deepening his spirit and preventive method, to find new languages and educational experiences suitable for the present. This is the profound meaning of the Days of Salesian Spirituality: a time of listening, reflection, and sharing that opens to the future, keeping a firm gaze on that original inspiration that has made the Salesian Congregation a point of reference for millions of young people around the world.

The Days of Salesian Spirituality, celebrated every year in January, are not just a fixed appointment on the Salesian calendar, but a true “spiritual laboratory” where the richness of a constantly evolving charism is felt. In an era where human relationships are often fragmented and the search for meaning is increasingly pressing, the Salesian message retains its relevance: to place the young at the center, to love them, to value them, to accompany them on the journey towards human and Christian maturity. And it is precisely in this perspective that the Days of Salesian Spirituality reveal themselves as a precious gift for the Salesian Family and for the entire Church, a sign that Don Bosco’s educational passion still lives today, fruitful and full of hope, capable of generating good fruits in every corner of the planet.

To learn more, click [HERE](#).