

# **Saint Francis de Sales, founder of a new school of perfection**

For Francis de Sales, religious life is “a school of perfection”, in which one “consecrates oneself more simply and more totally to Our Lord”. “Religious life”, adds the founder of the Visitation, “is a school where everyone must learn the lesson: the teacher does not require that the student knows the lesson perfectly every day; it is enough that they strive to do what they can to learn it”. Speaking of the congregation of the Visitation he founded, he used the same language: “The congregation is a school”; one enters it “to embark on the path toward the perfection of divine love”.

It was the founder’s responsibility to form his spiritual daughters, taking on the role of “instructor” and Novice Master. He performed this role excellently. According to T. Mandrini, “Saint Francis de Sales occupies a primary place in the history of religious life, like Saint Ignatius of Loyola; we can even say that, in the history of women’s religious life, Saint Francis de Sales occupies the place that Saint Ignatius holds in the history of men’s religious life”.

## **Joan of Chantal at the origins of the Visitation**

In 1604, in Dijon, where he was preaching during Lent, Francis de Sales met the woman who was to become the “cornerstone” of a new institute. At that time, Jeanne-Françoise Frémyot was a thirty-two-year-old young widow. Born in 1572 in Dijon, she was married at twenty to Christophe Rabutin, Baron of Chantal. They had one son and three daughters. Fifteen days after the birth of their last daughter, her husband was mortally wounded during a hunting party. Left as a widow, Joan courageously continued to care for her children’s education and to help the poor.

The meeting of Chantal with the Bishop of Geneva

marked the beginning of a true spiritual friendship that would lead to a new form of religious life. At first, Francis de Sales instilled in Joan the love of the humility required by her state as a widow, without thinking of a new marriage or religious life; the will of God would manifest itself in due time. He encouraged her in trials and temptations against faith and the Church.

In 1605, the baroness came to Sales to see her director again and to discuss the issues that concerned her. Francis evasively responded to Joan's desire to become a nun but added these strong words, "The day you abandon everything, you will come to me, and I will ensure that you find yourself in total detachment and nakedness, to belong entirely to God". To prepare her for this ultimate goal, he suggested: "sweetness of heart, poverty of spirit, and simplicity of life, along with these three modest exercises: visiting the sick, serving the poor, comforting the afflicted, and others like them".

At the beginning of 1606, as the baroness' father urged her to remarry, the issue of religious life became urgent. What to do, wondered the Bishop of Geneva? One thing was clear, but the other was uncertain:

*I have learned up to this moment, my Daughter, that one day you will have to leave everything; or rather, so that you do not understand the matter differently than I have understood it, that one day I will have to advise you to leave everything. I say leave everything. But that you should do it to enter religious life is unlikely, because it has not yet happened to me to be of this opinion: I am still in doubt, and I see nothing before me that invites me to desire it. Understand me well, for the love of God. I am not saying 'no', but I am only saying that my spirit has not yet found a reason to say 'yes'.*

The prudence and unhurriedness of Francis de Sales is easily explained. The baroness, in fact, perhaps dreamed of

becoming a Carmelite, and he, on the other hand, had not yet matured the project of the new foundation. But the main obstacle was constituted by the children of Madame de Chantal, who were all still young.

### **The foundation**

During a new meeting that took place in Annecy in 1607, Francis declared to her this time: "Well! My daughter, I have decided what I want to do with you"; and he revealed to her the project of founding a new institute with her. There remained two major obstacles towards its realization: the family duties of Madame de Chantal and her permanent move to Annecy, because, he said, "it is necessary to sow the seed of our congregation in little Annecy". And while Madame de Chantal was probably dreaming of a completely contemplative life, Francis cited the example of Saint Martha, but Martha "corrected" by the example of Mary, who divided the hours of her days in two, "dedicating a good part to external works of charity, and the better part to her own inner self through contemplation".

During the following three years, the main obstacles fell one after another: Chantal's father allowed her to follow her own path, also agreeing to care for the education of the firstborn; the eldest daughter married Bernard de Sales, Francis's brother, and joined him in Savoy; the second daughter would accompany her mother to Annecy; as for the youngest, she died at the end of January 1610 at the age of nine.

On June 6<sup>th</sup>, 1610, Joan of Chantal settled in a private house with Charlotte, a friend from Burgundy, and Jacqueline, daughter of President Antoine Favre. Their purpose was to "consecrate all the moments of their life to loving and serving God", without neglecting "the service of the poor and the sick". The Visitation would be a "small congregation", uniting interior life with a form of active life. The first three *Visitandines* (Visitation Sisters) made their profession

exactly one year later, on June 6<sup>th</sup>, 1611. On January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1612, they would begin visits to the poor and the sick, as provided in the original draft of the Constitutions. On October 30<sup>th</sup> of the same year, the community left the house, which had become too small, and moved to a new house, awaiting the construction of the first monastery of the Visitation.

During the early years, no other foundation was dreamed of, until in 1615 a persistent request came from some people in Lyon. The archbishop of that city did not want the Sisters to leave the monastery for visits to the sick; according to him, the congregation needed to be transformed into a true religious order, with solemn vows and enclosure, following the prescriptions of the Council of Trent. Francis de Sales had to accept most of the conditions: the visit to the sick was suppressed, and the Visitation became an almost monastic order, under the rule of Saint Augustine, while still retaining the possibility of welcoming outsiders for a bit of rest or for spiritual exercises. Its development was rapid: it would count thirteen monasteries at the founder's death in 1622 and eighty-seven at the death of Mother Chantal in 1641.

### **Formation through gatherings**

George Rolland has well described the role of the formation of the "daughters" of the Visitation, which Francis de Sales took on from the very beginning of the new institute:

*He assisted them in their beginnings, working hard and dedicating much time to educate them and guide them on the path of perfection, first all of them together and then each one in person. Therefore, he would go to them, often two or three times a day, giving them guidance on issues that came to their minds, both of a spiritual and material nature. [...] He was their confessor, chaplain, spiritual father, and director.*

The tone of his "gatherings" was very simple and familiar. A gathering, in fact, is a friendly conversation, a dialogue or family discussion, not a "sermon", but rather a

“simple conference in which each one expresses their opinion”. Normally, the questions were posed by the Sisters, as is clearly seen in the third of his *Gatherings* where he speaks of *Confidence and Abandonment*. The first question was to know “if a soul aware of its misery can turn to God with full confidence”. A little further on, the founder seems to seize the opportunity offered by a new question: “But you say that you do not feel this confidence at all”. A little further, he states: “Now let us move on to the other question, which is to abandon oneself”. And even further on, there is a chain of questions like these: “Now you ask me what this soul that completely abandons itself into the hands of God occupies itself with”; “you tell me at this hour”; “now you ask me”; “to respond to what you are asking”; “you want to know more”. It is possible, indeed probable, that the secretaries suppressed the questions of the interlocutors to place them on the bishop’s lips. The questions could also have been formulated in writing, because at the beginning of the eleventh *Gathering* we read, “Let me begin our conversation by responding to a question that was written to me on this note”.

### **Instructions and exhortations**

The other method used in the formation of the Visitation Sisters excluded questions and answers: they were *sermons* that the founder gave in the chapel of the monastery. The familiar tone that characterizes them does not allow them to be classified among the great sermons for the people according to the style of the time. R. Balboni prefers to call them *exhortations*. “The speech I am about to give you”, the founder would say as he began to speak. He would sometimes refer to his “little talk”, a qualification that certainly did not apply to its duration, which was usually about an hour. Once he said, “Having some time, I will treat of...”. The bishop addressed a particular audience, the Visitation Sisters, to which relatives and friends could be added. When he spoke in the chapel, the founder had to take this audience into account, which could be different from that of the *Gatherings*

reserved for the religious. The diversity of his interventions is well described by the comparison between the barber and the surgeon:

*My dear daughters, when I speak before the laity, I act like a barber; I am content to shave off the superfluous, that is, I use soap to soften a little the skin of the heart, as the barber does to soften that of the chin before shaving it; but when I am in the parlour, I behave like an expert surgeon, that is, I bandage the wounds of my dear daughters, even though they cry out a little: Ouch!, and I do not stop pressing my hand on the wound to ensure that the bandaging helps to heal it well.*

But even in the chapel, the tone continued to be familiar, similar to a conversation. "We need to go further", he would say, "because I lack the time to dwell longer on this topic"; or again, "Before finishing, let us say one more word". And another time, "But I will go beyond this first point without adding anything more, because it is not on this theme that I intend to dwell". When he speaks of the mystery of the Visitation, he needs extra time, "I will conclude with two examples, although time has already passed; in any case, a brief quarter of an hour will suffice". Sometimes he expresses his feelings, saying that he has felt "pleasure" in discussing mutual love. Nor did he fear to make some digression, "In this regard", he would say another time, "I will tell you two little stories that I would not narrate if I had to speak from another pulpit; but here there is no danger". To keep the audience attentive, he would engage them with a "tell me", or with the expression, "Notice then, I beg you". He often connected back to a topic he had previously developed, saying, "I wish to add one more word to the speech I gave you the other day". "But I see that the hour is passing quickly", he exclaims, "which will make me finish by completing, in the little time that remains, the story of this gospel". And, when the moment to conclude arrives, he says, "I have finished".

It is important to keep in mind that the preacher was welcomed, listened to attentively, and sometimes even authorized to tell the same story again, "Although I have already narrated it, I will not fail to repeat it, since I am not before people so appalled that they are unwilling to listen to the same story twice; those who have a good appetite gladly eat the same food twice".

The *Sermons* present themselves as a more structured instruction compared to the *Gatherings*, where the topics sometimes follow one another rapidly, driven by questions. Here, the connection is more logical, and the different articulations of the discourse are better indicated. The preacher explains Scripture, comments on it through the Fathers and theologians, but it is a rather meditative explanation capable of nourishing the mental prayer of the religious. Like every meditation, it includes considerations, affections, and resolutions. Indeed, all his speech revolved around an essential question, "Do you want to become a good daughter of the Visitation?"

### **Personal accompaniment**

Lastly, there was personal contact with each Sister. Francis had a long experience as a confessor and spiritual director of individuals. It was necessary to take into account, it is quite evident, the "variety of spirits", temperaments, particular situations, and progress in perfection. In the memoirs of Marie-Adrienne Fichet, there is an episode that shows the way of doing of the Bishop of Geneva, "Monsignor, your Excellency, would you be so kind as to assign to each of us a virtue to individually commit to practicing?" Perhaps it was a pious stratagem invented by the superior. The founder replied, "Mother, gladly, we must start with you". The Sisters withdrew, and the bishop called them one by one and, while strolling, secretly threw a "challenge" to each. During the subsequent recreation, all evidently became aware of the challenge he had confided to each in particular. To Mother Chantal, he had recommended

“indifference and loving the will of God”; to Jacqueline Favre, “the presence of God”; to Charlotte de Bréchar, “resignation to the will of God”. The challenges directed at the other religious concerned, one after another, modesty and tranquillity, love for one’s condition, mortification of the senses, affability, inner humility, outer humility, detachment from parents and the world, and mortification of passions. To the Visitation Sisters tempted to consider perfection as a garment to be put on, he humorously reminded them of their personal responsibility:

*You would like me to teach you a way of perfection that is already beautifully ready-made, so that there would be nothing to do but put it on, as you would with a dress, and thus you would find yourselves perfect without effort, that is, you would like me to present you with a perfection that is already packaged [...]. Certainly, if this were in my power, I would be the most perfect man in the world; indeed, if I could give perfection to others without doing anything, I assure you that I would take it for myself first.*

How to reconcile in a community the necessary unity, or rather uniformity, with the diversity of the people and temperaments that compose it? The founder wrote in this regard to the superior of the Visitation of Lyon, “If one finds some soul or even some novice who feels too much repugnance to submit to those exercises that are indicated, and if this repugnance does not arise from a whim, from presumption, from arrogance, or melancholic tendencies, it will be up to the Novice Mistress to lead them by another way, although this is useful for the ordinary (formation journey), as experience shows”. As always, obedience and freedom should not be opposed to one another. Strength and sweetness must also characterise the way in which the superiors of the Visitation should “mould” the souls. Indeed, he tells them, it is “with your hands” that God “moulds souls, using either the hammer, or the chisel, or the brush, in order to shape them



all to His liking". The superiors must have "hearts of solid, steadfast, and constant fathers, without neglecting the tenderness of mothers who make sweets desirable to children, following the divine order that governs everything with a very gentle strength and a very strong gentleness". The Novice Mistresses deserved to have particular attention from the founder because "on the good formation and direction of the novices depend the life and good health of the congregation". "How to form future Visitation Sisters when one is far from the founders?", the Novice Mistress in Lyon asked. Francis replied, "Say what you have seen, teach what you have heard in Annecy. Here! This little plant is very small and has deep roots; but the branch that separates from it will undoubtedly perish, dry up, and be good for nothing but to be cut and thrown into the fire".

### **A manual of perfection**

In 1616, Saint Francis de Sales published the *Treatise on the Love of God*, a book "made to help the already devout soul to progress in its project". As is easy to see, *Teotimo* proposes a sublime doctrine on the love of God, which has earned its author the title of "doctor of charity", but it does so with a marked pedagogical sense. The author wants to accompany along the path of the highest love a person called *Teotimo*, a symbolic name that designates "the human spirit that desires to progress in holy love", that is, in the love of God. *Teotimo* reveals itself as the "manual" of the "school of perfection" that Francis de Sales intended to create. Implicitly, it reveals the idea of the necessity of ongoing formation, illustrated by him through this image drawn from the plant world, "Do we not see, from experience, that plants and fruits do not have a proper growth and maturation unless they bear their grains and seeds that serve for the reproduction of plants and trees of the same species? Virtues never have the right dimension and sufficiency unless they produce in us the desire to make progress. In short, we must imitate this curious animal that is the crocodile, 'Very small

at birth, it never ceases to grow as long as it is alive'." In the face of the decline and sometimes scandalous conduct of numerous monasteries and abbeys, Francis de Sales traced a demanding but amiable path. In reference to the reformed orders, where a severity and austerity reigned that drove a good number of people away from religious life, the founder of the Visitation Sisters had the profound insight to concentrate the essence of religious life simply in the pursuit of the perfection of charity. With the necessary adaptations, this "pedagogy which reached its peak", and was born in contact with the Visitation, would largely transcend the walls of its first monastery and captivate other "apprentices" of perfection.

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## **Andrew Beltrami virtuous profile (2/2)**

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### **3. Story of a soul**

#### **3.1. Loving and suffering**

Fr Barberis sketches Beltrami's life parable very well, interpreting it as the mysterious and transforming action of grace at work "through the main conditions of Salesian life, so that he might be a general model of pupil, cleric, teacher, university student, priest, writer and sick person; a model in every virtue, in patience as in charity, in love of penance as in zeal." And it is interesting that Fr Barberis himself, introducing the second part of his biography dealing with Fr Beltrami's virtues, states: "The life of our Fr Beltrami could be said to be the story of a soul rather

than the story of a person. It is all intrinsic; and I do my utmost to make the dear reader penetrate that soul, so that he may admire its heavenly charisms." The reference to "The Story of a Soul" is not accidental, not only because Fr Beltrami was a contemporary of Saint Therese of Lisieux, but we can say that they are truly brother and sister in the spirit that animated them. The apostolic zeal for salvation is most authentic and fruitful in those who have experienced salvation and, having found themselves saved by grace, live their lives as a pure gift of love for their brothers and sisters, so that they too may be reached by the redemptive love of Jesus. "The whole life, in truth, of our Fr Andrew could be summed up in two words, which are his motto: Loving and suffering – Love and Sorrow. The most tender, the most ardent, and, I would also say, the most zealous love possible for that good in which all good is concentrated. The most vivid, the most acute, the most penetrating sorrow for his sins, and the contemplation of that supreme good which lowered itself to the folly, to the pains and death of the Cross for us. Hence the feverish eagerness for suffering: the more it abounded, the more he felt desire for it. Hence also the taste, the ineffable delight in suffering, which is the secret of the saints, and one of the most sublime marvels of the Church of Jesus Christ."

"And as in the Sacred Heart of Jesus, burning with flames and crowned with thorns, both these affections of love and sorrow find such abundant pasture, and so admirably proportioned to them, so, from the first instant in which he knew this devotion, until the last of his life, his heart was like a vase of elect aromas that always burned before that divine heart, and handed down the perfume of incense and myrrh, of love and sorrow." "To obtain from the Heart of Jesus the longed-for grace of living long years to suffer and atone for my sins. Not die but live to suffer, while always subject to God's will. Only thus will I be able to satisfy this thirst. It is so beautiful, so sweet to suffer when God helps and gives us patience to do so!" These texts are a summary of

Fr Beltrami's victim spirituality, which in the perspective of devotion to the Sacred Heart, so dear to 19th century spirituality and to Don Bosco himself, overcomes any sorrowful interpretation or even worse a kind of spiritualistic masochism. It was in fact also thanks to Fr Beltrami that Fr Rua officially consecrated the Salesian Congregation to the Sacred Heart of Jesus on the final night of the 19th century.

### 3.2. In the footsteps of Saint Therese of Lisieux

The brevity of his years of life was made up for by the surprising richness of the witness of a virtuous life, which in a short time expressed an intense spiritual fervour and a singular striving for gospel perfection. It is not insignificant that the Venerable Beltrami died exactly three months after the death of Saint Therese of the Child Jesus, who was proclaimed a Doctor of the Church by John Paul II for the outstanding Divine Love that distinguished her. Through "The Story of a Soul" emerges the inner biography of a life moulded by the Spirit in the garden of Carmel, that blossomed with fruits of holiness and apostolic fruitfulness for the universal Church, so much so that in 1927 she was proclaimed Patroness of the Missions by Pius XI. Fr Beltrami also died of tuberculosis like St Therese, but in the outpourings of blood that quickly brought them to the end, both did not see so much the wasting away of a body and the waning of strength, but grasped a particular vocation to live in communion with Jesus Christ, which assimilated them to his sacrifice of love for the good of their brothers and sisters. On 9 June 1895, on the Feast of the Most Holy Trinity, St Therese of the Child Jesus offered herself as a holocaust and victim to God's merciful Love. On 3 April of the following year, on the night between Holy Thursday and Good Friday, she had a first manifestation of the illness that would lead to her death. Teresa received it as a mysterious visit from the divine Bridegroom. At the same time she entered the trial of faith, which would last until her death. As her health deteriorated, she was transferred to the infirmary from 8 July 1897. Her sisters and

other religious picked up her words, while the pains and trials, endured with patience, intensified until culminating in her death on the afternoon of 30th September 1897. "I am not dying; I am entering life," she had written to her spiritual brother, Fr Bellière. Her final words "My God, I love you" were the seal of her existence.

Until the end of his life, Fr Beltrami too would be faithful to his offering of himself as a victim, as he wrote a few days before his death to his novice director: "I always pray and offer myself as a victim for the Congregation, for all the Superiors and confreres and especially for these novitiate houses, which contain the hopes of our pious Society."

#### **4. Victim Spirituality**

Fr Beltrami also relates a sublime degree of charity to this victim spirituality: "No one has greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends" (Jn 15:13). This does not only mean the extreme, supreme gesture of the physical gift of one's life for another, but the individual's entire life oriented towards the good of another. He felt called to this vocation: "There are many," he added, "even among us Salesians, who work a lot and do great good; but there are not so many who really love to suffer, and want to suffer a lot for the Lord: I want to be one of these." Precisely because it is not something coveted by most, consequently it is not understood either. But this is nothing new. Even Jesus when he spoke to the disciples about his Passover, about his ascent to Jerusalem, met with incomprehension, and Peter himself turned him away from it. At the supreme hour his "friends" betrayed him, denied him and abandoned him. Yet the work of redemption was and is only accomplished through the mystery of the cross and the offering that Jesus makes of himself to the Father as a victim of atonement, uniting to his sacrifice all those who accept a share in his sufferings for the salvation of their brothers and sisters. The truth of Beltrami's offering lies in the

fruitfulness offered by his holy life. In fact he gave efficacy to his words by supporting his confreres in their vocation in particular, urging them to accept the trials of life with a spirit of sacrifice in fidelity to the Salesian vocation. Don Bosco in the first Constitutions presented the Salesian as one who "is ready to endure heat and cold, thirst and hunger, toil and contempt, whenever it is a matter of the glory of God and the salvation of souls."

The same illness led Fr Beltrami both to increasingly severe tuberculosis and forced isolation, which left his perceptive and intellectual faculties intact, indeed almost refining them with the blade of pain. Only the grace of faith allowed him to embrace that condition that day by day, assimilated him more and more to the crucified Christ and that a statue of *Ecce homo*, with its shocking and repugnant realism, which he wanted in his room, constantly reminded him of. Faith was the rule of his life, the key to understanding people and different situations. "By the light of faith he considered his own sufferings as graces from God, and together with the anniversary of his religious profession and priestly ordination, he celebrated the anniversary of the beginning of his serious illness, which he believed had begun on 20 February 1891. On this occasion he heartily recited the *Te Deum* for having been allowed by the Lord to suffer for him. He meditated and cultivated a lively devotion to the Passion of Christ and to Jesus Crucified: "Great devotion, which can be said to have informed the entire life of the servant of God... This was the almost continuous subject of his meditations. He always had a crucifix before his eyes and mostly in his hands... which he enthusiastically kissed from time to time."

After his death, a purse was found hanging around his neck with the crucifix and the medal of Mary Help of Christians, containing some papers: prayers in memory of his ordination; a map on which the five continents were drawn, to remind the Lord always of the missionaries scattered throughout the world; and some prayers with which he formally made himself a victim to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, especially

for the dying, for the souls in purgatory, for the prosperity of the Congregation and the Church. These prayers, in which the prevailing thought echoed Paul's plea "*Opto ego ipse anathema esse a Christo pro fratribus meis*", were signed by him in his own blood and approved by his Rector Fr Luigi Piscetta on 15 November 1895.

## **5. Is Fr Beltrami relevant today?**

The question, not an idle one, was already posed by the young confreres at the International Theological Studentate in the Crocetta, Turin in 1948, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the death of the Venerable Fr Beltrami, when they organised a commemorative day. From the very first lines of the booklet that collected the speeches given on that occasion, one wonders what Beltrami's testimony had to do with Salesian life, a life of apostolate and action. Well, after recalling how he was exemplary in the years in which he was able to throw himself into apostolic work, "he was also Salesian in accepting sorrow when it seemed to crush a career and a future so brilliantly and fruitfully undertaken. Because it was there that Fr Andrew revealed a depth of Salesian feeling and a wealth of dedication that before, in work could be taken for youthful daring, an impulse to act, a wealth of gifts, something normal, ordinary. The extraordinary begins, or rather, reveals itself in and through illness. Fr Andrew, set apart, now forever excluded from teaching, from the fraternal life of collaboration with his confreres and from Don Bosco's great enterprise, felt he was set on a new, solitary path, one that was perhaps repugnant to his confreres; certainly repugnant to human nature, all the more so to his own nature which was so rich and exuberant! Fr Beltrami accepted this path and set out on it with a Salesian spirit: in a Salesian way."

We are struck by the claim that Fr Beltrami somehow began a new path in the wake traced by Don Bosco, a special call to illuminate the deep core of the Salesian vocation and the real energy that is pastoral charity: "We

need to have what he had in his heart, what he experienced profoundly in his innermost being. Without that inner wealth our action would be in vain; Fr Beltrami could reproach us for our vain life, saying with Paul: "*nos quasi morientes, et ecce: vivimus!*" He himself was aware that he had started out on a new path, as his brother Giuseppe testified: "Halfway through the lesson he tried to convince me of the need to follow his way, and not thinking like him, I opposed it, and he suffered because of this." This suffering lived in faith was truly fruitful apostolically and vocationally: "It was a manifestation of the new and original Salesian concept which he desired and implemented, one of physical and moral, active, productive pain, even materially so, for the salvation of souls."

It must also be said that, either due to a certain somewhat pietistic spiritual climate, or perhaps more unconsciously so as not to be provoked too much by his testimony, over time a certain interpretation took root that gradually led to this being forgotten, also due to the major changes that took place. An expression of this process are, for example, paintings of him which those who knew him, like Father Eugenio Ceria, did not really like, because they remembered him as jovial, with an open appearance that inspired confidence and trust in those who approached him. Fr Ceria also recalls that already during his years in Foglizzo, Fr Beltrami lived an intense interior life, a profound union with God nourished by meditation and Eucharistic communion, to such an extent that even in the middle of winter, in freezing temperatures, he did not wear a greatcoat and kept his window open, so that he was called a "polar bear".

### **5.1. Witness of union with God**

This spirit of sacrifice matured into profound union with God: "His prayer consisted of being continually in the presence of God, keeping his eyes fixed on the Tabernacle and seeking with the Lord through constant brief prayers and affectionate aspirations. His meditation could be said to be



continuous...it was so much a part of him that he did not notice what was happening around him, and I heard him tell me in confidence that he generally came to understand the mysteries he was meditating on so well that he seemed to see them as if they were appearing before his eyes." This union signified and was realised in a special way in the celebration of the Eucharist, when all the pains and coughs ceased as if by magic, translated into perfect conformity to God's will, especially by accepting suffering: "He considered the apostolate of suffering and affliction to be no less fruitful than that of the more active life; and while others would have said that those not so brief years were sufficiently occupied in suffering, he sanctified suffering by offering it to the Lord and conforming to the divine will so generally that he was not only resigned to it, but content with it."

The request made by the Venerable himself to the Lord is of considerable value, as can be seen from several letters and in particular the one to his first Rector in Lanzo, Fr Giuseppe Scappini, written just over a month before his death: "Do not be distressed, my sweetest father in Jesus Christ, by my illness; on the contrary, rejoice in the Lord. I myself asked the Good Lord for it, to have the opportunity to expiate my sins in this world, where Purgatory is done with merit. Truly, I did not ask for this illness, for I had no idea of it, but I asked for much to suffer, and the Lord has granted me this. May he be blessed for ever. And help me always to bear the Cross with joy. Believe me, in the midst of my sorrows, I am happy with a full and accomplished happiness, so that I laugh when they offer me condolences and wishes for my recovery."

## **5.2. Knowing how to suffer**

"Knowing how to suffer": for one's own sanctification, for expiation and for the apostolate. He celebrated the anniversary of his own illness: "20 February is the anniversary of my illness: and I celebrate it, as of a day blessed by God; a blessed day, full of joy, among the most

beautiful days of my life.” Perhaps Fr Beltrami’s testimony confirms Don Bosco’s words that “there is only one Beltrami”, as if to indicate the originality of the holiness of this son of his in having experienced and made visible the secret core of Salesian apostolic holiness. Fr Beltrami expresses the need for the Salesian mission not to fall into the trap of an activism and outward action that in time would lead to the fatal destiny of death, but to preserve and cultivate the secret core that expresses both depth and breadth of horizon. The translations in practice of this care of interiority and spiritual depth are fidelity to the life of prayer, serious and competent preparation for one’s mission, especially for the priestly ministry, fighting against negligence and culpable ignorance; the responsible use of time.

More profoundly, Fr Beltrami’s testimony tells us that one does not live off past glories or achievements, but that every confrere and every generation must make the gift received bear fruit and know how to pass it on in a faithful and creative form to future generations. The interruption of this virtuous chain will be a source of damage and ruin. Knowing how to suffer is a secret that gives fruitfulness to every apostolic enterprise. Fr Beltrami’s spirit of offering of himself as a victim is admirably associated with his priestly ministry, for which he prepared himself with great responsibility and which he lived in the form of a unique communion with Christ immolated for the salvation of his brothers and sisters: in the struggle and mortification against the passions of the flesh; in the renunciation of the ideals of an active apostolate he had always desired; in the insatiable thirst for suffering; in the aspiration to offer himself as a victim for the salvation of his brothers and sisters. For example, for the Congregation in addition to prayer and the *nominatim* offering for several confreres (holding the Year Book of the Congregation in his hands), houses and missions, he asked for the grace of perseverance and zeal, the preservation of the spirit of Don Bosco and his educational method. One of the books written about him

significantly bears the title *La passiflora serafica*, meaning “passionfruit flower”, a name given to it by the Jesuit missionaries in 1610, due to the similarity of some parts of the plant with the religious symbols of Christ’s passion: the tendrils being the whip with which he was scourged; the three styles the nails; the stamens the hammer; the sepals the crown of thorns. Fr Nazareno Camilleri, a deeply spiritual soul, says authoritatively: “Fr Beltrami seems to us to eminently represent, today, the divine yearning for ‘the sanctification of suffering’ for the social, apostolic and missionary fruitfulness, through the heroic enthusiasm of the Cross, of Christ’s Redemption in the midst of humanity.”

### **5.3 Passing the baton**

In Valsalice, Fr Andrew was an example to all: a young cleric, Louis Variara, chose him as a model of life: he became a priest and Salesian missionary in Colombia and inspired by Fr Beltrami, founded, the Congregation of the Daughters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. Born in Viarigi (Asti) in 1875, Louis Variara was taken to Valdocco in Turin by his father when he was 11 years old. He entered the novitiate on 17 August 1891 and completed it by taking perpetual vows. Afterwards he moved to Valsalice, near Turin to study philosophy. There he met the Venerable Andrew Beltrami. Fr Variara was to take inspiration from him when he later proposed “victim consecration” to his Daughters of the Sacred Hearts in Agua de Dios (Colombia).

*End*

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# St Francis de Sales, personal companion

‘My spirit always accompanies yours,’ wrote Francis de Sales one day to Jeanne de Chantal, at a time when she felt assailed by darkness and temptations. He added: ‘Walk therefore, my dear Daughter, and advance in bad weather and during the night. Be courageous, my dear Daughter; with God’s help, we shall do much.’ Accompaniment, spiritual direction, guidance of souls, direction of conscience, spiritual assistance: these are more or less synonymous terms, as they designate this particular form of education and formation exercised in the spiritual sphere of the individual conscience.

## Formation of a future companion

The formation he received as a young man had prepared Francis de Sales to become a spiritual director in turn. As a student of the Jesuits in Paris he most likely had a spiritual father whose name we do not know. In Padua, Antonio Possevino had been his director; with this famous Jesuit Francis would later rejoice at having been one of his ‘spiritual sons’. During his tormented path to the clerical state, his confidant and support was Amé Bouvard, a priest friend of the family, who then prepared him for ordination.

At the beginning of his episcopate, he entrusted the care of his spiritual life to Father Fourier, rector of the Jesuits in Chambéry, ‘a great, erudite and devout religious’, with whom he established ‘a very special friendship’ and who was very close to him ‘with his advice and warnings’. For several years, he went to confession regularly to the cathedral penitentiary, whom he called ‘dear brother and perfect friend’.

His stay in Paris in 1602 profoundly influenced the development of his gifts as a director of souls. Sent by

the bishop to negotiate some diocesan affairs at court, he had little diplomatic success, but this prolonged visit to the French capital allowed him to establish contacts with the spiritual elite who came together around Madam Acarie, an exceptional woman, mystic and hostess at the same time. He became her confessor, observed her ecstasies and listened to her without question. 'Oh! what a mistake I made,' he would later say, 'for not having taken sufficient advantage of her most holy company! She did indeed open her soul to me freely; but the extreme respect I had for her meant that I did not dare to inform myself of the slightest thing.'

### **A, insistent activity 'that reassures and heartens'**

Helping each individual, personally accompanying them, advising them, possibly correcting their mistakes, encouraging them, all this requires time, patience and a constant effort of discernment. The author of the *Introduction to the Devout Life* speaks from experience when he states in the preface:

I grant that the guidance of individual souls is a labour, but it is a labour full of consolation, even as that of harvesters and grape-gatherers, who are never so well pleased as when most heavily laden. It is a labour which refreshes and invigorates the heart by the comfort which it brings to those who bear it.

We know this important area of his formative work especially from his correspondence, but it should be pointed out that spiritual direction is not only done in writing. Personal meetings and individual confessions are part of it, although one must distinguish them properly. In 1603, he met the Duke of Bellegarde, a great figure in the kingdom and a great sinner, who a few years later asked him to guide him on the path to conversion. The Lenten series that he preached in Dijon the following year was a turning point in his 'career' as a spiritual director, because he met Jeanne Frémyot, widow of the Baron de Chantal.

From 1605 onwards, the systematic visitation of his vast diocese brought him into contact with an endless number of people of all circumstances, mainly peasants and mountain people, most of whom were illiterate and left us no correspondence. Preaching Lent at Annecy in 1607, he found a twenty-one year old lady, 'but all gold', named Louise Du Chastel, who had married the bishop's cousin, Henri de Charmoisy. The letters of spiritual direction that Francis sent to Madame de Charmoisy would serve as basic material for the drafting of his future work, the *Introduction to the Devout Life*.

Preaching in Grenoble in 1616, 1617 and 1618 brought him a considerable number of daughters and spiritual sons who, having heard him speak, would seek closer contact. New women followed him on his last trip to Paris in 1618-1619, where he was part of the Savoy delegation that was negotiating the marriage of the Prince of Piedmont, Victor Amadeus, to Christine of France, sister of Louis XIII. After the princely wedding, Christine chose him as her confessor and 'great chaplain'.

### **The director is father, brother, friend**

When addressing the people he directed, Francis de Sales made abundant use, according to the custom of the time, of titles taken from family and social life, such as *father, mother, brother, sister, son, daughter, uncle, aunt, niece, godfather, godmother, or servant*. The title of father signified authority and at the same time love and confidence. The father 'assists' his son and daughter with advice using wisdom, prudence and charity. As a spiritual father, the director is the one who in certain cases says: I do! Francis de Sales knew how to use such language, but only in very special circumstances, as when he ordered the baroness not to avoid meeting with her husband's murderer:

You asked me how I wanted you to behave in the meeting with the one who killed your lord husband. I answer in order. It is

not necessary for you to seek the date and occasion yourself. However, if this arises I want you to welcome it with a gentle, kind and compassionate heart.

He once wrote to a distressed woman: 'I command you in the name of God', but it was to remove her scruples. His authority was always humble, good, even tender; his role with regard to the people he directed, he specified in the preface to the *Introduction*, consisted of a special 'assistance', a term that appears twice in this context. The intimacy that was established between him and the Duke of Bellegarde was such that Francis de Sales was able to respond to the duke's request, hesitatingly using the epithets 'my son' or 'monsignor my son', knowing full well that the duke was older than him. The pedagogical implication of spiritual direction is underlined by another significant image. After recalling the tiger's swift race to save her cub, moved by the power of natural love, he goes on to say:

And how much more willingly will a paternal heart care for a soul that it has found full of desire for holy perfection, carrying it on its breast, like a mother her child, without feeling the weight of the dear burden.

With regard to the people he directed, women and men, Francis de Sales also acted like a brother, and it is in this capacity that he often presented himself to the people who had recourse to him. Antoine Favre was constantly called 'my brother'. At first he addressed the Baroness de Chantal as '*madame*' (lady), but later he switched to 'sister', 'this name, which is the one by which the apostles and the first Christians used to express their mutual love'. A brother does not command, he gives advice and practices fraternal correction.

But what best characterises the Salesian style is the friendly and reciprocal atmosphere that united the director and the directee. As André Ravier said so well, 'there is no true spiritual direction if there is no

friendship, that is, exchange, communication, mutual influence'. It is not surprising that Francis de Sales loved his referents with a love that he witnessed to them in a thousand ways; it is surprising, instead, that he desired to be equally loved by them. With Jeanne de Chantal, the reciprocity became so intense as to sometimes turn 'mine' and 'yours' into 'ours': 'It is not possible for me to distinguish *mine* and *yours* in what concerns us is *ours*'.

### **Obedience to the director, but in an atmosphere of confidence and freedom**

Obedience to the spiritual director is a guarantee against excesses, illusions and missteps made more often than not for one's own sake; it maintains a prudent and wise attitude. The author of the *Introduction* considered it necessary and beneficial, without resorting to it; 'humble obedience, so much recommended and so much practised by all the ancient devotees', is part of a tradition. Francis de Sales recommended it to the Baroness de Chantal with regard to her first director, but indicating the way to live it:

I greatly commend the religious respect you feel for your director, and I urge you to preserve it with great care; but I must also say one more word to you. This respect must undoubtedly induce you to persevere in the holy conduct to which you have so happily adapted yourself, but it must by no means impede or stifle the just liberty which the Spirit of God gives to whomever he possesses.

In any case, the director must possess three indispensable qualities: 'He must be full of charity, knowledge and prudence: if one of these three is lacking, there is danger' (*I I 4*). This does not seem to be the case with Mme de Chantal's first director. According to her biographer, Mother de Chaugy, he 'bound her to his direction' warning her never to think of changing it; they were 'inappropriate ties that kept her soul trapped, cooped up and without freedom'. When, after meeting Francis de Sales, she



wanted to change her director, she was plunged into a sea of scruples. To reassure her, he showed her another way:

Here is the general rule of our obedience, written in very large letters: YOU MUST DO EVERYTHING OUT OF LOVE, AND NOTHING BY CONSTRAINT; YOU MUST LOVE OBEDIENCE MORE THAN YOU FEAR DISOBEDIENCE. I leave you the spirit of freedom: not the one that excludes obedience, for then one would have to speak of the freedom of the flesh, but the one that excludes compulsion, scruple and haste.

The Salesian way is founded on the respect and obedience due to the director, without any doubt, but above all on confidence: 'Have the greatest confidence in him, together with sacred reverence, so that reverence does not diminish confidence and confidence does not impede reverence; trust him with the respect of a daughter towards her father, respect him with the confidence of a daughter towards her mother'. Confidence inspires simplicity and freedom, which foster communication between two people, especially when the one being directed is a fearful young novice:

I will tell you, in the first place, that you must not use words of ceremony or apology in my regard, for, by God's will, I feel for you all the affection you could desire, and I would not know how to forbid myself to feel it. I love your spirit deeply, because I think God wills it, and I love it tenderly, because I see you still weak and too young. Write to me, therefore, with all confidence and freedom, and ask all that seems useful for your good. And let this be said once and for all.

How should one write to the Bishop of Geneva? 'Write to me freely, sincerely, simply,' he said to one of the souls he directed. 'On this point, I have nothing more to say, except that you must not put *Monsignor* on the letter either alone or accompanied by other words: it is enough for you to put *Sir*, and you know why. I am a man without ceremony, and I

love and honour you with all my heart.' This refrain returns frequently at the beginning of a new epistolary relationship. Affection, when it is sincere and especially when it has the good fortune to be reciprocated, authorises freedom and utmost frankness. 'Write to me whenever you feel like it,' he said to another woman, 'with full confidence and without ceremony; for this is how one should behave in this sort of friendship.' He told one of his correspondents: 'Do not ask me to excuse you for writing well or badly, because you owe me no ceremony other than that of loving me. This means speaking "heart to heart".' The love of God as well as the love of our neighbour makes us go on "in a good way, without a lot of fuss" because, as he put it, 'true love does not need a method'. The key to this is love, for 'love makes lovers equal', that is, love works a transformation in the people one loves, making them equal, similar and on the same level.

### **'Every flower requires special care'.**

While the goal of spiritual direction is the same for everyone, namely the perfection of the Christian life, people are not all the same, and it belongs to the skill of the director to know how to indicate the appropriate path for each person to reach the common goal. A man of his time, aware that social stratifications were a reality, Francis de Sales knew well the difference between the gentleman, the artisan, the valet, the prince, the widow, the girl and the married woman. Each, in fact, should produce fruit 'according to his qualification and profession'. But the sense of belonging to a particular social group went well, in him, with the consideration of the peculiarities of the individual: one must 'adapt the practice of devotion to the strengths, activities and duties of each one in particular'. He also believed that 'the means to achieve perfection are different according to the diversity of vocations'.

The diversity of temperaments is a fact which must be taken into account. One can detect in Francis de Sales a 'psychological flair' that predates modern discoveries. The

perception of the unique characteristics of each person is very pronounced in him and is the reason why each subject deserves special attention from the spiritual father: 'In a garden, each herb and each flower requires special care. Like a father or mother with their children, he adapts to the individuality, temperament, and particular situations of each individual. To this person, impatient with himself, disappointed because he is not progressing as he would like, he recommends self-love; to this other, attracted by the religious life but endowed with a strong individuality, he advises a lifestyle that takes into account these two tendencies; to a third, wavering between exaltation and depression, he suggests peace of heart through the struggle against distressing imaginations. To a woman in despair because of her husband's 'spendthrift and frivolous' character, the director will have to advise 'the right means and moderation' and the means to overcome her impatience. Another, a woman with a head on her neck, with an 'all in one piece' character, full of anxieties and trials, will need 'holy sweetness and tranquillity'. Still another is distressed by the thought of death and often depressed: her director inspires her with courage. There are souls who have a thousand desires for perfection; it is necessary to calm their impatience, the fruit of their self-love. The famous Angélique Arnauld, abbess of Port-Royal, wanted to reform her monastery with rigidity: he needed to recommend flexibility and humility to her.

As for the Duke de Bellegarde, who had meddled in all the political and amorous intrigues of the court, the bishop encouraged him to acquire 'a masculine, courageous, invariable devotion to serve as a mirror to many, exalting the truth of heavenly love, worthy of reparation for past faults'. In 1613 he drew up a *Reminder for making a good confession*, containing eight general 'warnings', a detailed description 'of sins against the ten commandments', an 'examination concerning capital sins', 'sins committed against the precepts of the Church', a 'means of discerning mortal sin from venial

sin', and finally 'means of turning the great away from the sin of the flesh'.

### **Regressive method**

The art of direction of conscience very often requires the director to take a step back and leave the initiative to the recipient, or to God, especially when it comes to making choices that require a demanding decision. 'Do not take my words too literally,' he wrote to Baroness de Chantal, 'I do not want them to be an imposition on you, but that you retain the freedom to do what you think best. He wrote, for example, to a woman who was very attached to 'vanities':

When you left, it came into my mind to tell you that you should renounce musk and perfumes, but I restrained myself, in order to follow my system, which is gentle and seeks to await those movements which, little by little, the exercises of piety tend to arouse in souls who consecrate themselves entirely to divine Goodness. My spirit, in fact, is extremely friendly to simplicity; and the billhook with which it is customary to cut off useless suckers, I habitually leave in God's hand.

The director is not a despot, but one who 'guides our actions with his warnings and counsels', as he says at the beginning of the *Introduction*. He refrains from commanding when he writes to Madame de Chantal: 'These are good and suitable counsels for you, but not commands'. She would also say, at his canonisation process, that she sometimes regretted that she was not guided enough with commands. In fact, the role of the director is defined by the following response of Socrates to a disciple: 'I will therefore take care to return you to yourself better than you are'. As he always declared to Madame de Chantal, Francis had 'devoted himself', put himself at the 'service' of the 'most holy Christian freedom'. He fought for freedom:

You will see that I speak the truth and that I fight for a good cause when I defend the holy and lovable freedom of the spirit, which, as you know, I honour in a very special way, provided it is true and free from dissipation and libertinism, which are nothing but a mask of freedom.

In 1616, during a retreat, Francis de Sales had the mother of Chantal do an exercise of 'undressing', to reduce her to 'the lovely and holy purity and nakedness of children'. The time had come for her to take the step towards the 'autonomy' of the directee. He urged her, among other things, not to 'take any nurse' and not to keep telling him – he specified – 'that I will always be her nurse', and, in short, to be willing to renounce Francis' spiritual direction. God alone suffices: 'Have no other arms to carry you but God's, no other breasts on which to rest but His and Providence. [...] Think no more of the friendship or unity that God has established between us'. For Madame de Chantal the lesson is harsh: 'My God! My true Father, whom you have cut deeply with your razor! Can I remain in this state of mind for long'? She now sees herself 'stripped and naked of all that was most precious to her'. Francis also confesses: 'And yes, I too find myself naked, thanks to Him who died naked to teach us to live naked'. Spiritual direction reaches its peak here. After such an experience, spiritual letters would become rarer and affection would be more restrained in favour of a wholly spiritual unity.

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**Andrew      Beltrami      virtuous**

# profile (1/2)

The Venerable Fr Andrea Beltrami (1870-1897) is an emblematic expression of a constitutive dimension not only of the Salesian charism, but of Christianity: the self-offering and victim dimension, which in Salesian terms embodies the demands of “caetera tolle”. A testimony that stands out both for its uniqueness or for reasons partly linked to the past or handed down through popular understandings, has been far less visible in the Salesian world. The fact remains that the Christian message intrinsically presents aspects that are incompatible with the world, and if ignored they risk making the gospel message itself and, specifically, the Salesian charism, unprotected in its charismatic roots of a spirit of sacrifice, hard work, and apostolic renunciation. The testimony of Father Andrew Beltrami is paradigmatic of a whole strand of Salesian holiness that, starting with the three candidates for sainthood, Fr Andrew Beltrami, Blessed Augustus Czarторыski, Blessed Louis Variara, continues over time with other family figures such as Blessed Eusebia Palomino, Blessed Alexandrina Maria da Costa, Blessed Laura Vicuña, without forgetting the numerous host of martyrs.

## 1. Radical understanding of the gospel

### 1.1 Radical in vocational choice

Andrew Beltrami was born in Omegna (Novara), on the shores of Lake Orta, on 24 June 1870. He received a profoundly Christian upbringing in his family, which was then developed at the Salesian college in Lanzo, where he entered in October 1883. Here his vocation came to maturity. At Lanzo, one day, he had the great good fortune to meet Don Bosco. Fascinated by him, a question arose within him: “Why couldn’t I be like him? Why not spend my life too for the formation and salvation of the young?” In 1885, Don Bosco told him: “Andrew, you too will become a Salesian!” In 1886 he received the

clerical habit from Don Bosco at Foglizzo and on 29 October 1886 he began his novitiate year with one resolve: "I want to become a saint". This was not formal resolution, but became a reason for his life. Especially Fr Eugenio Bianchi, his novice master, in his report to Don Bosco, described him as perfect in every virtue. Such a radical approach right from the novitiate was expressed in obedience to superiors, in the exercise of charity towards his companions, in religious observance that he was described as being the "Rule personified". On 2 October 1887, at Valsalice (Turin) Don Bosco received his religious vows: he had become a Salesian and immediately undertook studies to prepare for the priesthood.

The firmness and determination in his response to the Lord's call was very striking, a sign of the value he attributed to his vocation: "The grace of vocation was for me a unique, invincible, irresistible, efficacious grace. The Lord had put into my heart a firm persuasion, an intimate conviction that the only way that suited me was to become a Salesian; it was a voice of command that admitted no reply, that removed every obstacle that I would not have been able to resist even if I had wanted to, and therefore I would have overcome a thousand difficulties, even if it had been to pass over the body of my father and mother, as Chantal did when she passed over the body of her son." These expressions are very strong and perhaps not very pleasing to our palate; they are like the prelude to a vocational story lived so radically that is not easy to understand, let alone accept.

## **1.2. Radical in his journey of formation**

An interesting and revealing aspect of prudential action is the capacity to let oneself be advised and corrected, and in turn become capable of correction and advice: "I throw myself like a child into your arms, abandoning myself entirely to your direction. May you lead me along the path of perfection, I am resolved with the grace of God, to overcome any difficulty, to make any effort to follow

your advice" is what he told his spiritual director Fr Giulio Barberis. In the exercise of teaching and assistance "he always spoke calmly and serenely... first he carefully read the regulations of the same offices... the rules and regulations on assistance and on the way of teaching... he soon acquired a knowledge of each of his pupils, of their individual needs, then he became all things to all and to each of them". In fraternal correction, he was inspired by Christian principles and intervened by weighing his words well and expressing his thoughts clearly.

It was during this period that Andrew made the acquaintance of the Polish prince Augustus Czartoryski, who had recently entered the Congregation, and with whom he became close friends: they studied foreign languages together and helped each other climb to the summit of holiness. When Augustus fell ill, the superiors begged Andrew to stay close to him and help him. They spent their summer holidays together in the Salesian institutes in Lanzo, Penango d'Asti and Alassio. Augustus, who had meanwhile reached the priesthood, was Andrew's guardian angel, teacher and heroic example of holiness. Fr Augustus passed away in 1893 and Fr Andrew would say of him: "I looked after a saint". When Fr Beltrami in turn fell ill with the same disease, one of the probable causes was the time he had spent with his sick friend.

### **1.3. Radical in trial**

His illness began in a brutal way on 20 February 1891 when, following a very strenuous journey and during days of harsh winter weather, the first symptoms of an illness appeared that would undermine his health and lead him to his grave. If the causes include schooling and contact with Prince Czartoryski who was suffering from the same disease, both the ascetic effort and the offering of self as a victim are worth mentioning. His fellow citizen and novitiate companion Giulio Cane testifies to this struggle with the old man within him: "I was always convinced that the servant of God suffered the



most serious blow to his health from the violent and constant way in which he forced himself to renounce all his own will in order to make himself, I would say, a slave to the will of the Superior, in whom he saw God's will. Only those who were able to know the servant of God in the years of his adolescence and youth, with his impulsive, ardent spirit, when he was almost rebellious to all restraint, and who know how the Beltrami Manera people hold tenaciously to their own opinions, can form a clear idea of the effort the Servant of God had to impose on himself to master himself. From the conversations I had with the Servant of God, I came to this conviction: wary of being able to master himself by degrees in his character, from the very first months of his novitiate, he had the intention of radically renouncing his will, his tendencies, his aspirations. All this he achieved with constant vigilance over himself so as never to fail in his purpose. It is impossible that such an internal struggle did not contribute, more than the labours of study and teaching, to undermining the health of the Servant of God." Truly the young Beltrami took the words of the Gospel literally: "The kingdom of heaven suffers violence and the violent take it by force" (Mt 11:12).

He lived his suffering with inner joy: "The Lord wants me to be a priest and a victim: what could be more beautiful?" His day began with Holy Mass, in which he united his suffering to the Sacrifice of Jesus present on the altar. Meditation became contemplation. Ordained a priest by Bishop Cagliero, he gave himself entirely to contemplation and the apostolate of the pen. With an all-out tenacity of will, and a vehement desire for holiness, he consumed his life in pain and unceasing work. "The mission God entrusts to me is to pray and to suffer," he said. "I am content and happy and I always celebrate. Neither dying nor healing, but living to suffer: in suffering I have found true contentment," was his motto. But his truest vocation was prayer and suffering: to be a sacrificial victim with the divine Victim who is Jesus. This is revealed in his luminous and ardent writings: "It is also

beautiful in the darkness, when everyone is resting, to keep company with Jesus, in the flickering light of the lamp before the Tabernacle. One knows then the infinite greatness of his love." "I ask God for long years of life to suffer and atone, to make reparation. I am content and always rejoice because I can do it. Neither die nor heal, but live to suffer. In suffering lies my joy, suffering offered with Jesus on the cross." "I offer myself as a victim with Him, for the sanctification of priests, for the people of the whole world."

## **2. The secret**

In his fundamental text for understanding the story of Fr Andrew Beltrami, Fr Giulio Barberis aligns the holiness of the young Salesian with Don Bosco, apostle of abandoned youth. Barberis speaks of Fr Beltrami as "shining like a distinguished star... who shed so much light as good example and encouraged us to good by his virtues!" It is therefore a matter of grasping what an exemplary life this is and to what extent it is an encouragement to those who look upon it. Fr Barberis' testimony becomes even more cogent and he states boldly: "I have been in the Pious Salesian Society for over 50 years; I have been the Director of Novices for over 25 years: how many holy confreres have I known, how many good young men have passed under me in that time! How many chosen flowers the Lord was pleased to transplant into the Salesian garden in Paradise! And yet, if I have to express myself fully, although I do not intend to make comparisons, my conviction is that no one has surpassed our dearest Fr Andrew in virtue and holiness." And in the process he said. "I am convinced that it is an extraordinary grace that God wanted to bestow on the Congregation founded by the incomparable Don Bosco, so that by seeking to imitate him, we may achieve in the Church the goal that the venerable Don Bosco had in founding it." This attestation, shared by many, is based both on an in-depth knowledge of the saints' lives and on a familiarity with Fr Beltrami over more than ten years.

At a superficial glance, Beltrami's light of

holiness would seem at odds with Don Bosco's holiness of which it is supposed to be a reflection, but a careful reading allows one to grasp a secret warp upon which authentic Salesian spirituality is woven. It is that hidden invisible part which is nevertheless the backbone of the spiritual and apostolic nature of Don Bosco and his disciples. The tension of the *Da mihi animas* is nourished by the asceticism of the *caetera tolle*; the front of the mysterious character in the famous dream of the ten diamonds, with its gems of faith, hope, charity, work and temperance, demands that the back corresponds to those of obedience, poverty, reward, chastity and fasting. Fr Beltrami's short life is packed with a message that represents the gospel leaven that ferments all pastoral and educational activity typical of the Salesian mission, and without which apostolic activity is destined to exhaust itself in sterile and inconclusive activism. "Fr Beltrami's life, spent entirely hidden in God, entirely in prayer, in suffering, in humiliation, in sacrifice, entirely in hidden but constant work, in heroic charity, although restricted to a small circle given his circumstances, all in all seems so admirable to me as to make one say: faith has always worked wonders, it works wonders even today, as it certainly will work wonders as long as the world lasts."

It is a total and unconditional handing over of oneself to God's plan that motivates the authentic radical nature of gospel discipleship, that is to say, of what lies at the basis of a life lived as a generous response to a call. The spirit with which Fr Beltrami lived his life is well expressed by this testimony reported by one of his companions who, while commiserating with him over his illness, was interrupted by Beltrami in these terms: "Leave it," he said, "God knows what he is doing; it is up to each one to accept his place and in that to be a true Salesian. You other healthy people work, we sick people suffer and pray", so convinced was he that he was a true imitator of Don Bosco.

Of course it is not easy to grasp such a secret, such a precious pearl. It was not easy for Fr Barberis, who

knew him seriously for ten years as spiritual director; it was not easy for the Salesian tradition, which gradually marginalised this figure; nor is it easy for us today and for an entire cultural and anthropological context that tends to marginalise the Christian message, especially in its core of redemptive work that passes through the scandal of humiliation, passion and the cross. "Describing the unique virtues of a man who always lived locked up in a religious house, and, in his most important years, in a small room, without even being able to go down the stairs because of his illness, of a man of such humility that he carefully got rid of all the documents that could have made his virtues known, and who sought to avoid any shadow of his piety from leaking out; of one who proclaimed himself a great sinner by mentioning his innumerable sins, whereas he had always been held up as the best in whatever school and college he had presented himself, is not only something difficult, but almost impossible." The difficulty in grasping this virtuous profile depends on the fact that such virtues were neither conspicuous nor supported by particular external facts to attract attention or arouse admiration.

[\(continued\)](#)

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## **Third missionary dream: air travel (1885)**

*Don Bosco's dream on the eve of the missionaries' departure for America is an event rich in spiritual and symbolic significance in the history of the Salesian Congregation. During that night between 31 January and 1 February, Don Bosco had a prophetic vision emphasising the importance of piety,*

*apostolic zeal, and total trust in divine providence for the success of the mission. This episode not only encouraged the missionaries but also strengthened Don Bosco's conviction about the need to expand their work beyond the Italian borders, bringing education, support, and hope to the younger generations in distant lands.*

Meanwhile, the eve of Bishop Cagliero's departure had arrived. All that day, the idea that Bishop John Cagliero and the others going so far away, and the knowledge of the absolute impossibility that he could accompany them to the place of embarkation as he had done on other occasions, and even that it might even be impossible to say goodbye to them in the church of Mary Help of Christians, caused Don Bosco a great deal of emotion which, at times, left him depressed and certainly exhausted.

On the night of January 31st, Don Bosco had a dream just like the one he had had about the Missions in 1883. He told Father John Baptist Lemoyne about it, who immediately wrote it down:

"I thought that I was accompanying the missionaries on their journey. We talked briefly before setting out from the Oratory. They were gathered around me and asked for advice. I think I said to them, **'Neither with science, nor good health, nor riches, but with zeal and piety you'll be able to do a great deal of good to promote God's glory and the salvation of souls.'**

"We had been at the oratory only a little while before, and then without knowing how we had gone there or by what means, we found ourselves in America almost immediately. At the end of the journey, I found myself alone in the heart of an immense prairie located between Chile and Argentina. All my dear missionaries had scattered here and there over the infinite expanse. I wondered as I looked at them why they seemed so few to me. After all the Salesians I had sent to America on several expeditions, I had expected to see a greater number of missionaries. But then I remembered that it

only seemed as if there were so few of them, because they were scattered in so many different places, like seeds that have to be transplanted for cultivation and multiplication.

“I saw a great many long, long roads in that prairie and a number of houses scattered along the routes. These roads were not like the roads we have here, nor were the houses like the ones we know in this part of the world. They were mysterious, I might say – spiritual houses. There were vehicles, means of transportation, moving along the roads, and as they moved, they assumed a thousand fantastic different forms and aspects, all of them wonderful and magnificent, so that I could not define or describe a single one of them. I looked with wonder and saw that when these vehicles were driven near to any group of dwellings, villages, or cities, they soared into the air, so that anyone traveling in them would see the roofs of the houses beneath them although these houses were very tall. Many of them were below the level of the roads that had run along the ground level through the wasteland, but suddenly became airborne as they reached inhabited areas, almost creating a magic bridge. From the bridges, one could see the people living in the houses, people in the playgrounds and streets, or on their farms in the countryside, busily working.

“Each of these roads led to one of our missions. At the far end of one very long road which came from the direction of Chile, I saw a house [*All the topographic indications prior to and after this would seem to indicate the house at Fort Mercedes on the left bank of the Colorado River*] where there were many Salesians engaged in scientific pursuits, practices of piety, and various trades, crafts and agricultural activities. To the south lay Patagonia. In the opposite direction, I could see in one single glance all our houses in the Argentine Republic. I could also see Paysandu, Las Piedras and Villa Colon in Uruguay. I could see the School of Niteroy in Brazil and a number of other schools scattered in the various provinces of that same empire. Finally to the west, another long, long road that crossed rivers, seas and lakes leading to unknown lands. I also saw Salesians there, too. I

looked very carefully and noticed only two of them.

"Just then, a man of noble, handsome appearance appeared at my side. He was pale and stout, so closely shaven that he seemed beardless although he was a grown man. He was dressed in white, wearing some kind of cloak of rose-colored material, interwoven with golden threads. He was altogether resplendent. I recognized him as my interpreter."

"'Where are we?' I asked, pointing to this territory."

"'We are in Mesopotamia,' my interpreter said."

"'In Mesopotamia?' I echoed, 'but this is Patagonia.'"

"'I tell you that this is Mesopotamia,' the other said."

"'And yet ... and yet ... I cannot believe it.'"

"'That is what it is. This is Me-so-po-ta-mia,' the interpreter repeated, spelling it out so that it might well be impressed on my mind.'"

"'Why do I see only so few Salesians here?'"

"'What is not there now, it will be in the future,' the interpreter said."

"I was standing motionless in the prairie, scanning all those interminable roads, and contemplating quite clearly, but inexplicably, all the places the Salesians were then and were going to be later. How many magnificent things did I not see! I saw each individual school. I saw as if they were all concentrated in one place, all the past, present and future of our missions. Since I saw all of it as a whole in one single glance, it is extremely difficult, indeed altogether impossible, for me to give you even the most vague idea of what it was that I saw. What I saw in that prairie of Chile, Paraguay, Brazil, and the Argentine Republic, would in itself require an immense volume, just to give a few overall pieces of information about it.

"In that immense plain, I also saw all the savages who lived scattered in that territory of the Pacific, down to the gulf of Ancud, the strait of Magellan, Cape Horn, the Diego Islands, and the Malvinas. All this was a harvest awaiting the reaping by the Salesians. I saw that as of now, the Salesians were only sowing, but that those coming after them would reap.

Men and women will swell our ranks and become preachers. Their children who, so now it seems, cannot possibly be won over to our faith will themselves become evangelizers of their parents and friends. The Salesians will succeed in everything with humility, work, and temperance.

"All that I saw in that moment and later concerned all the Salesians: regular settlements in those territories; their miraculous expansion; and the conversion of many natives and many Europeans settled there. Europe will stream into South America. European trade began to decline from the very moment that Europeans began stripping their churches, and it has continued to decline more and more ever since. Hence, workers and their families, driven by their own poverty, will go and seek their fortune in those new hospitable lands.

"Once I saw the area assigned to us by Our Lord as well as the glorious future of the Salesian Congregation, I had the impression that I was setting out on a journey again, this time on my way back to Italy. I was carried at an extremely rapid pace along a strange road, which was at a very high level, and in an instant, I found myself above the Oratory. The whole of Turin was beneath my feet and the houses, palaces and towers looked like so many low huts to me, for I was so high up. Squares, streets, gardens, avenues, railways, and the walls of the city to the countryside and adjacent hills, the cities, the towns of the Turin Province, and the gigantic chain of the Alps all covered with snow lay spread out beneath my gaze like a stupendous panorama. I saw the boys down below in the Oratory and they looked like so many little mice. But there was an immense number of them; priests, clerics, students, and master craftsmen were evident everywhere. A good many of them were setting out in procession while others were coming in to fill the ranks where the others had gone forth.

"It was one constant procession.

"They all went thronging to the immense prairie between Chile and Argentina to which I myself had now returned in the twinkling of an eye. I stood watching them. One young priest who looked like our Father Joseph Pavia, though he was not,



came toward me.

"With his affable manner, courteous speech, candid appearance and boyish complexion, he said, 'Behold! These are the souls and the territories assigned to the sons of St. Francis of Sales.'"

"I was amazed by such an immense multitude, all gathered there, but it disappeared in an instant and I could barely detect the direction they had all taken in the far distance.

"I must point out that as I relate it, my dream is described only in the summarized form, and that it is impossible to specify the exact chronological order of all the magnificent sights that appeared before me and of all the secondary features. My spirit is incapable, my memory forgetful, my words inadequate. Apart from the mystery in which everything I saw was shrouded, the scenes before me alternated. At times, they were interlocked and repeated according to the variations of amalgamation, division or departure of the missionaries, and the way in which the people they have been called upon to convert to the faith gathered around them or moved away from them. I repeat: I could see the past, the present and the future of the missions with all their phases, hazards, triumphs, defeats or momentary disappointments concentrated as in one single whole; in a word, all the things that will be connected with the Apostolate. At the time, I could understand everything quite plainly, but now it is impossible to unravel these intricate mysteries, ideas and people one from another. It would be like trying to cram into one single narrative and sum up in one sole instance or fact the whole panorama of the firmament, relating the motion, splendor and properties of all the stars with their individual laws and reciprocal aspects; one star by itself would supply enough material for the concentration and study of the most formidable brain. I again must point out that here it is a question of things having no connection with material things.

"Now resuming my narrative, I repeat that I stood bewildered as I saw this great multitude disappear. At that moment, Bishop John Cagliero stood beside me. A few missionaries were

at some short distance away. Many others stood around me with a fair number of Salesian cooperators. Among them I saw Bishop Espinosa, Dr. Torrero, Dr. Caranza and the Vicar General of Chile. [*Perhaps thus alludes to Bishop Domingo Cruz, Capitular Vicar of the diocese of Concepcion.*] Then my usual interpreter came over to me, talking with Bishop John Cagliero and a number of others, and we tried to ascertain whether all this had meaning.

"Most kindly my interpreter said, 'Listen and you will see.'"

"At that same moment, the whole immense plain turned into a big hall. I cannot describe exactly how it looked in its splendor and richness. The only thing I can say is that if anybody tried to describe it, he would not be able to withstand its splendor, not even with his imagination. It was so immense that it escaped the eye, nor could one see where its sidewalls were; no one could have estimated its height. The roof ended with immense arches, very wide and magnificent, and no one could see what supported them. There were neither columns nor pillars. It rather looked as if the cupola of this immense hall was made of the finest candid linen, something like tapestry. The same applies to the floor.

"There was neither illumination, nor the sun, moon, or stars, though there was a general brilliance distributed evenly everywhere. The very candor of the linen blazed and made everything visible and beautiful so that one could see every ornament, every window, every entrance and exit. There was a most beautiful fragrance all around formed by a mixture of the loveliest aromas.

"Just at that moment, I became aware of something phenomenal.

"There were many tables of extraordinary length arranged in every direction, but all converging towards one focal point. They were covered with refined tablecloths, and on them were crystal bowls in which many various kinds of flowers were arranged handsomely.

"The first thing that struck the attention of Bishop John Cagliero was that there are tables here, but no food.

"Indeed, there was no food and nothing to drink visible on

them, nor were there any dishes, goblets or any other receptacle in which one might place food.

"Then my friend the interpreter spoke, 'Those who come here, *neque sitient, neque esurient amplius*' (they will never thirst or feel hungry anymore).

"As he said this, people began to stream in, all clothed in white with a simple ribbon of rose hue embroidered with golden threads around the neck and shoulders. The first to enter were small in number, only a few together in small groups.

"As soon as they entered, they went to sit at a table set for them and sang, 'Hurrah!'"

"Behind them, other more numerous groups advanced singing 'Triumph!' Then a great variety of people began to appear: old and young; men and women of all ages; of different colors, appearances, and attitude, and one could hear canticles on every side. They sang, 'Hurrah!'"

"Those already seated sang 'Long live!' and those entering sang 'Triumph!' Each group that entered represented yet another nation or section of a nation which will be converted by our missionaries."

"I glanced at those infinitely long tables and saw that there were many of our nuns and confreres sitting there and singing, but they did not have anything to show that they were priests, clerics or nuns for all of them wore the same white robe and rose-colored ribbon. But my wonder grew when I saw men of rough appearances dressed the same as the others who sang 'Long live! Triumph!'"

"Just then, our interpreter said, 'The foreigners, the savages who drank the milk of the divine word from those who educated them, have become heralds of the word of God.'"

"I also saw many boys of strange and rough appearance in the crowds and I asked, 'Who are these boys whose skin is so rough that it looks like that of a toad, and yet at the same time it is beautiful and of a resplendent color?'"

"The interpreter replied, 'They are the children of Cam who have not relinquished the heritage of Levi. They will strengthen the ranks of the armies defending the kingdom of

God that has appeared in our midst at last. Their number was small, but the children of their children have made it larger. Now listen and you will see, but you will not be able to understand the mysteries placed before you.' These boys belonged to Patagonia and to the southern part of Africa.

"Just then, there were so many people streaming into this amazing hall that every seat seemed taken. The seats and benches did not have any specific form, but assumed whatever shape the individual wanted. The seating was satisfactory to everyone.

"Just as everyone was shouting '*Hurrah!*' and '*Triumph!*' on all sides, an immense crowd appeared to join the others, and sang, '*Hallelujah, glory, triumph!*' When it looked as if the hall were entirely full and no one could have counted all the thousands of people present, there was a profound silence, and then the multitude began singing in different choirs:

"The first choir sang, '*Appropinquavit in nos regnum Dei: laetentur Coeli et exultet terra. Dominus regnavit super nos. Alleluia*' (The kingdom of God has come among us. Let the heavens and the earth rejoice. The Lord has reigned over us).

"The second choir sang, '*Vincerunt et ipse Dominus dabit edere de ligno vitae et non esurient in aeternum. Alleluia*' (They won and the Lord Himself shall give them food from the tree of life and they shall never go hungry).

"A third choir sang, '*Laudate Dominum omnes gentes, laudate eum omnes populi*' (Praise the Lord all you nations, praise Him all you peoples).

"While they were alternately singing these hymns, a profound silence suddenly fell once more. Then one heard voices from high up and far away. No one could possibly describe the harmony of this new canticle. *Solo Deo honor et gloria in saecula saeculorum* (To God alone honor and glory forever).

"Other voices still higher up and further away replied to these other voices, '*Semper gratiarum actio illi qui erat, est, et venturus est. Illi eucharistia, illi soli onor sempiternus*' (Forever thanks to Him who was, is, and will come. To Him alone thanksgiving and honor).

"These choirs seemed to descend from their high level and draw nearer to us. I also noticed Louis Colle among the singers. Everyone else in the hall also began to sing, joining in, blending voices, sounding like an exceptional musical instrument with sounds with an infinite resonance. The music seemed to have a thousand different high notes simultaneously and a thousand degrees of range which all blended into one single vocal harmony. The high voices of those singing soared so high that one could never have believed it. The voices of the singers in the hall were sonorous, fully rounded and so deep that one could not believe that either. All together they formed one single chorus, one sole harmony, but both the high notes and the low were so fine and beautiful and penetrated so deeply through all the senses and were absorbed by them that one forgot his very existence, and I fell on my knees at the feet of Bishop John Cagliero and exclaimed, 'Oh, Cagliero! We are in Paradise.'"

"Bishop John Cagliero took me by the hand and answered, 'This is not Paradise, but only a pale image of what Paradise really will be.'"

"Meanwhile, the voices of the two magnificent choirs continued singing in unison in indescribable harmony: '*Soli Deo honor et gloria, et triumphus alleluia, in aeternum in aeternum!*'"

"Here I quite forgot myself and I no longer know what happened to me. I found it difficult to rise from my bed next morning, and as soon as I came to my senses, I went to celebrate Holy Mass.

"The main thought which was impressed on me after this dream was to warn Bishop John Cagliero and all my beloved missionaries of something of the greatest importance regarding the future of our missions: all the efforts of both the Salesians and the Sisters of Mary Help of Christians should concentrate on cultivating vocations for the priesthood and religious life."

(BM XVII, 273-280)

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# Missionaries 2024

On Sunday 29 September, at 12:30 p.m. (UTC+2),  
at the basilica of Mary Help of Christians in Valdocco, 27  
Salesians of Don  
Bosco and 8 Daughters of Mary Help of Christians will receive  
the missionary  
crucifix, renewing their apostolic generosity in favour of so  
many young people  
throughout the world.

As is the case every year, on the last Sunday of September,  
Don Bosco's  
missionary heart is renewed through the availability of the  
Salesians of Don  
Bosco and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians sent as  
missionaries ad  
gentes.  
So much time has passed since that 11 November 1875, the day  
on which a  
fundamental step was taken: the first group of Salesian  
missionaries headed for  
Argentina began the transformation of the Salesians into a  
worldwide  
congregation, now spread over 138 countries. Two years later,  
the FMA also  
crossed the ocean, beginning the work of spreading beyond the  
Italian borders.

As we approach the 150th anniversary of the first missionary  
expedition, we can  
take a closer look at the preparation of the Salesian new  
missionaries, which is  
developed in the 'Germoglio' course organised by the Missions

Sector

team and coordinated by Fr Reginaldo Cordeiro. The course runs for five weeks, immediately before the missionary expedition. In prayer, in listening to testimonies, in sharing experiences, in personal reflection and in joyful coexistence with the other course participants, the new missionaries are helped to verify, deepen and, at times, discover the profound reasons for their going on mission.

Obviously, the discernment of a missionary vocation begins much earlier.

Traditionally, on 18 December, the day of the founding of the Salesian

Congregation, the Rector Major issues a missionary appeal indicating the

missionary priorities to be addressed. In response to the appeal, many Salesians

write their availability, after listening to God's will, helped by their

spiritual guide and the director of their community, following the guidelines

of the Missions Sector. A profound re-reading of one's own life and a careful

journey of discernment are required for the missionary vocation *ad gentes*,

*ad exteros*, *ad vitam* to mature. The missionary, in fact,

leaves for a lifelong project, with the prospect of inculturation in a

different country and incardination in a new Province, in a context that will

become 'home', despite the many challenges and difficulties.

On the other hand, it is important that there is a well-structured missionary

project in the Provinces, which allows the arriving missionary to be accompanied, to fit in and to serve in the best possible way.

The Germoglio Course begins in Rome, with an introductory core, which aims to provide departing missionaries with the basic skills and attitudes necessary for a successful completion of the course. The motivations for the missionary choice are addressed, in a gradual journey of awareness and purification. Each missionary is invited to draw up a personal missionary life project, highlighting the essential elements and the steps to be taken to respond adequately to God's call. Then an introduction to Italian culture and a meeting on 'emotional literacy', fundamental for the experience of living to the full in a context different from one's own, and a session on missionary animation and Salesian missionary voluntary work. All this in a community context, where informal moments are precious and participation in community moments of prayer is vital, in a Pentecost style where languages and cultures mix for the enrichment of all. In these days, a pilgrimage to the places of Christian faith helps to retrace the roots of one's own faith, together with the closeness to the universal Church, also manifested in participation in a papal audience. This year, on 28 August, the pope showed closeness to missionaries, reminding them in a brief conversation during a group photo of the



figure of St Artemides

Zatti, together with the beauty and importance of the vocation of Salesian brothers.

The second part of the course moves to Colle Don Bosco, Don Bosco's birthplace, where we get to the heart of the experience by going deep into the preparation

from an anthropological, theological/missiological and Salesian charismatic

point of view. Preparing oneself for the inevitable culture shock, being aware

of the importance and effort of getting to know a new culture and a new

language, and being open to intercultural dialogue, knowing that one will have

to face conflicts and misunderstandings, are fundamental elements for living a

true, human and full experience. Some missiological fundamentals help to

understand what the mission is for the Church, and notions on First

Announcement and integral evangelisation complete the perspective of the

missionary. Finally, the typically Salesian characteristics, starting with some

historical notes and then focusing on the present situation, discernment and

Salesian spirituality.

The group of missionaries then has the opportunity to visit Don Bosco's places,

in a week of spiritual exercises on the move, in which they can face up to the

saint of youth and entrust their missionary dream to him.

The experience continues with a pilgrimage to Mornese, where the missionary

charism in the female version of St Mary Domenica Mazzarello is presented, together with the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. The last few days are spent in Valdocco, where the itinerary around Don Bosco's places is completed and preparation for the 'yes' to the missionary call is completed. A conversation with the Rector Major (his Vicar in this case) and the Mother General closes the programme before Sunday, when the missionary crucifixes are handed over to the departed during the 12:30 mass.

If we look at who the Salesians of the 155th missionary expedition are, we immediately notice how the paradigm shift is evident: all Provinces, and all countries, can be recipients and senders at the same time. The missionaries are no longer only Italian, as was the case at the beginning, or European, but come from the five continents, in particular from Asia (11 missionaries, from the two regions of South Asia and East Asia-Oceania) and Africa (8 missionaries), while the Mediterranean region will welcome the largest number of missionaries in this expedition. For some years now, the Missions Sector has been preparing a map to graphically help visualise the distribution of new missionaries around the world (you can download it [here](#)). This year there are five priests, two brothers, one deacon and 19 Salesian students. Joining them are a few missionaries from past expeditions, who were unable to attend

the preparation  
course.

Below is a detailed list of the new missionaries:

Donatien Martial Balezou, from Central African Rep. (ATE) to  
Brazil – Belo

Horizonte (BBH);

Guy Roger Mutombo, from Congo Dem. Rep. (ACC) to Italy (IME);

Henri Mufele Ngandwini, from Congo Dem. Rep. (ACC) to Italy  
(EMI);

Brother Alain Josaphat Mutima Balekage, from the Rep. Dem. of  
Congo (AFC) to

Uruguay (URU);

Clovis Muhindo Tsongo, from Rep. Dem. of Congo (AFC) to Brazil  
(BPA);

Confiance Kakule Kataliko, from Congo Dem. Rep. (AFC) to  
Uruguay (URU);

Fr Ephrem Kisenga Mwangwa, from the Democratic Republic of  
Congo (AFC) to

Taiwan (CIN);

Ernest Kirunda Menya, from Uganda (AGL) to Romania (INE);

Éric Umurundi Ndayicariye, from Burundi (AGL) to Mongolia  
(KOR);

Daniel Armando Nuñez, from El Salvador (CAM) to North Africa  
(CNA);

Marko Dropuljić, from Croatia (CRO) to Mongolia (KOR);

Krešo Maria Gabričević, from Croatia (CRO) to Papua New Guinea  
– Solomon

Islands (PGS);

Rafael Gašpar, from Croatia (CRO) to Brazil (BBH);

Fr Marijan Zovak, from Croatia (CRO) to the Dominican Republic  
(ANT);

Fr Enrico Bituin Mercado, from the Philippines (FIN) to  
Southern Africa (AFM);

Alan Andrew Manuel, from India (INB) to North Africa (CNA);

Fr Joseph Reddy Vanga, from India (INH) to Papua New Guinea –  
Solomon Islands

(PGS);

Fr Hubard Thyrniang, from India (INS) to North West Africa (AON);

Fr Albert Tron Mawa, from India (INS) to Sri Lanka (LKC);

Eruthaya Valan Arockiaraj, from India (INT) to Congo (ACC);

Herimamponona Dorisse Angelot Rakotonirina, from Madagascar (MDG) to

Albania/Kosovo/Montenegro (AKM);

Brother Mouzinho Domingos Joaquim Mouzinho, from Mozambique (MOZ) to

Albania/Kosovo/Montenegro (AKM);

Nelson Alves Cabral, from East Timor (TLS) to the Democratic Republic of Congo

(AFC);

Elisio Ilidio Guterres Dos Santos, from East Timor (TLS) to Romania (INE);

Francisco Armindo Viana, from East Timor (TLS) to Congo (ACC);

Tuân Anh Joseph Vũ, from Vietnam (VIE) to Chile (CIL);

Trong Hữu Francis Đ, from Vietnam (VIE) to Chile (CIL).

These are the SDB members of the 155th Salesian missionary expedition, while the FMA will have its 147th expedition.

The Daughters of Mary Help of Christians new missionaries are:

Sr Cecilia Gayo, from Uruguay;

Sr Maria Goretti Tran Thi Hong Loan, from Vietnam;

Sr Sagma Beronica, from India, Province of Shillong;

Sr Serah Njeri Ndung'u, from the East Africa Province, sent to South Sudan;

Sr Lai Marie Pham Thi, from Vietnam;

Sr Maria Bosco Tran Thi Huyen, from Vietnam;

Sr Philina Kholar, from India, Shillong Province, sent to Italy (Sicily);

Sr Catherine Ramírez Sánchez, from Chile.

Most of them still do not know their missionary destination, which will be

communicated after the formation course.

This year, a group belonging to the Community of the Mission of Don Bosco (CMB), a group of the Salesian Family led by Deacon Guido Pedroni, will also receive the missionary cross together with the Salesians and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

Let us pray that this varied vocational availability bears fruit throughout the world!

*Marco Fulgaro*

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## **Spreading Don Bosco's missionary spirit**

*We are approaching the celebration of the 150th anniversary of the First Salesian Missionary Expedition (1875-2025). The missionary dimension of the Salesian Society is part of its 'DNA'. It was so desired by Don Bosco from the very beginning, and today the Congregation is in 136 countries. This initial impetus continues today and is supported by the Missions Sector. Let us briefly present their activities and organisation.*

Although Don Bosco never set out for distant lands as a missionary *ad gentes*, he always had a missionary heart and an ardent desire to share the Salesian charism in order to reach all the borders of the world and contribute to the salvation of the young.

This has been possible thanks to the availability of so many Salesians sent on missionary expeditions (at the end of September this year the 155th will be celebrated) who, working with locals and lay people, have allowed the Salesian charism to be spread and inculturated. Compared to the first 'pioneers', today the figure of the missionary must respond to different challenges, and the missionary paradigm has been updated to be an effective vehicle of evangelisation in today's world. First of all, as Fr Alfred Maravilla, General Councillor for the Missions, reminds us (in 2021 he wrote a letter, "[The Salesian missionary vocation](#)"), missions no longer respond to geographical criteria as they once did, and today's missionaries come from and are sent to the five continents, so there is no longer a clear separation between "mission lands" and other Salesian presences. Furthermore, there is the very important distinction between the [Salesian missionary vocation](#), i.e. the call that some Salesians receive to be sent for a lifetime in another place as missionaries, and the missionary spirit, typical of all Salesians and of all members of an educative-pastoral community, which manifests itself in the oratorian heart and in the drive for the evangelisation of the young.

The task of promoting the missionary spirit and keeping it alive in the Salesians and the laity is entrusted above all to the "[Provincial Delegates for Missionary Animation](#)" (DIAM), i.e. those Salesians, or lay people, who receive from the Inspector, the Salesian superior of the province in question, the task of taking care of missionary animation. The DIAM has a very important role, he is the "missionary sentinel" who, through his sensitivity and experience, is committed to spreading missionary culture at various levels (see [Salesian Missionary Animation. Handbook of the Provincial Delegate, Rome, 2019](#)).

The DIAM triggers missionary sensitivity in all the communities of the Province and works in synergy with the

leaders of the other areas to testify to the importance of this dimension, common to every Christian. On a practical level, it organises a number of initiatives, promotes prayer for the missions on the 11th of the month, in memory of the first missionary expedition on 11th November 1875, promotes "Salesian Mission Day" in the Province every year, disseminates the materials prepared by the Congregation on missionary themes, such as the "Cagliero11" bulletin or the "CaglieroLife" video. Salesian Mission Day, which has been recurring since 1988, is a beautiful occasion to stop and reflect and relaunch missionary animation. It does not necessarily have to be a day, it can be an itinerary of several days, and it does not have a fixed date, so that everyone can choose the best time of the year that suits the rhythm and calendar of the Province. Each year a common theme is chosen and some animation materials are prepared as food for thought and activities, which can be adapted and modified. This year the theme is "builders of dialogue", while in 2025 the focus will be on the 150th anniversary of the first missionary expedition according to the three verbs "Give Thanks, Rethink, Relaunch". "[Cagliero11](#)", on the other hand, is a simple missionary animation bulletin, created in 2009 and published every month, two pages containing missionary reflections, interviews, news, curiosities and the monthly prayer that is proposed. "CaglieroLife" is a one-minute video based on the missionary prayer of the month (in turn based on the monthly intention proposed by the Pope), that helps to reflect on the theme. These are all tools that enable DIAM to carry out its task of promoting the missionary spirit well, in line with today's times.

The DIAM collaborates or coordinates the Salesian Missionary Volunteer Service, that is, youth experiences of solidarity and free service in a community other than one's own for a continuous period of time (in summer, for several months, a year...), motivated by faith, with a missionary style and according to the pedagogy and spirituality of Don Bosco (*The Volunteer Service in the Salesian Mission. Identity and*

*Orientations of Salesian Missionary Volunteering*, Rome, 2019).

This year, in March, a first meeting of MissionVolunteering coordinators was held in Rome, attended by about fifty participants, including lay people and Salesians, under the guidance of a mixed team that took care of the organisation. Among the salient points that came out of the meeting, which was very rich especially in terms of sharing experiences, were the exploration of the identity of the Salesian missionary volunteer, the training of volunteers and coordinators, collaboration between lay and religious, accompaniment at all levels, and networking. A new symbolic cross was presented, which can be used by all volunteers in the various experiences around the world, and the draft of a new website, which will serve as a data and networking platform.

The DIAM also visits the communities of the province and accompanies them from a missionary point of view, taking care especially of Salesians who are seeing if they are called to become missionaries *ad gentes*.

Obviously, all this work cannot be done by a single person. Teamwork and project mentality are important. Each Province has a missionary animation commission made up of Salesians, lay people and young people, which formulates proposals, creative suggestions and coordinates activities. It also draws up the provincial missionary animation project, to be presented to the Provincial, which is the compass to be followed with objectives, timetables, resources and concrete steps. In this way, improvisation is avoided and action is taken following a structured and strategic plan on the basis of the broader Salesian Educative and Pastoral Plan (SEPP), promoting a shared vision of missionary animation. In the Province times for ongoing formation, reflection and discussion are organised, and a missionary culture is promoted at various levels. These structures that have been created over time enable more effective animation and coordination, with a view to always giving the best for the good of the



young.

Another important aspect is the sharing between DIAMs from different countries and provinces. Each Region (there are seven: America South Cone, Interamerica, Central-Northern Europe, Mediterranean, Africa – Madagascar, East Asia – Oceania and South Asia) meet regularly, in person once a year and on-line about every three months, to pool their riches, share challenges and work out a regional path. The on-line meetings, which began a few years ago, allow greater knowledge of the DIAMs and the contexts in which they operate, continuous quality updating, and a fruitful exchange that enriches everyone. In each Region there is a coordinator who convenes the meetings, promotes the regional journey and moderates the common processes, together with the Salesian contact person of the central team of the Sector for the Missions, who represents the General Councillor for the Missions, bringing ideas, insights and suggestions to the group.

This great commitment, tiring but very useful and full of true joy, is one of the pieces that joins the many pieces of the Salesian mosaic, and ensures that Don Bosco's dream can continue today.

*Marco Fulgaro*

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## **A great collaborator of Don Bosco: Fr Antonio Sala**

*An important but practically unknown figure in the history of the early years of the Salesian Congregation, he spent his entire Salesian life dealing with financial matters. Dynamic*

*and enterprising, he was a great administrator in the modern sense. We owe many works that are the current pride of the Congregation to his far-sighted and foresighted vision. But above all his love for Don Bosco was intense.*

### **Childhood and youth**

He was born on 29 January 1836 in the Brianza area of Lecco, in Monticello di Olgiate Molgora, diocese of Milan. His father Pietro and his brother, who ran a spinning mill, had married two sisters. They were both very religious families with one son a priest (the Salesian Antonio and his cousin Federico, a theologian and future Auxiliary Bishop in Milan) and one son who was a religious: Ambrogio, Antonio's brother, a Salesian for a few years, and Sister Maria Serafina, Federico's sister, a cloistered religious in Bergamo. Having completed his primary schooling, and a strong and robust teenager, Antonio immediately set to work in the family. As a leader at the parish oratory, he showed an aptitude for priestly life, with his ability to attract boys, organise their entertainment, and take them to church services. Returning from military service in the Austro-Hungarian army, he took responsibility for running the family business, where he revealed excellent administrative skills and great practical sense. When his mother died, young Antonio grew in the desire to become a priest. The parish priest Fr Nava took this on board and wrote to Don Bosco in early 1863, praising the young man's gifts of nature and grace and asking him to accept him at Valdocco. After Don Bosco's immediately positive reply, Fr Nava thanked him and assured him that the very grateful 26-year-old Antonio would arrive at Valdocco as soon as possible. The very generous parish priest undertook to pay in advance for five years, not just the "very modest" school fees requested by Don Bosco, but in the event of his death he would give furniture, silver cutlery and valuables in his possession as collateral.

### **Student-worker and priest-educator**

Arriving in Turin on 5 March 1863 Sala began his secondary

school studies. He was at ease at Valdocco, and as a “son of Mary” [late vocation] he not only made up for the school years he had missed, but, easy-going and practical in business affairs, in his free time he helped the sickly bursar Fr Alasonatti, lent a hand to those who worked to keep the house supplied, went to the market himself and assisted in the first construction works on the Church of Mary Help of Christians. The experience would serve him well for the various Salesian churches and buildings he would personally supervise over the following decades.

On 22 May 1869 Fr Sala was ordained priest, having been at the Lanzo house for four years.

### **Economer at Valdocco (1869-1880)**

Even before the end of the school year, on 3 July 1869 Don Bosco asked him confidentially if he would be willing to move to Valdocco for some time because there was an absolute need for a house economer, since the Economer General, Fr Savio, was overworked. Fr Sala accepted and went down to Valdocco. He would stay there for 26 years, until his death.

There he was able to deepen his hasty theological studies by attending moral lessons at the Convitto for three years: they would be very useful to him in the pastoral ministry he would carry out for many years as ordinary confessor in the Church of Mary Help of Christians, chaplain of the Good Shepherd Institute, extraordinary confessor for the Artigianelli college, and later also spiritual assistant to the St Joseph's women's workshops at the Barolo refuge.

At the meeting of the Superior Council on 11 December 1869 Fr Savio was confirmed as Economer General, but Fr Sala also received many votes, and was formally elected economer at the Oratory Chapter the following January. He was to carry out a formidable economic and administrative activity within the mega work of Valdocco, with several hundred young people, divided between students, artisans, oratorians, clerics, with many classrooms, courtyards, workshops, refectories, dormitories, halls, the Church of Mary Help of Christians,

chapels; to this must be added lotteries, buildings, general maintenance, tax problems, notaries... He was not without difficult moments, so much so that on 27 January 1870 from Florence Don Bosco invited Fr Rua to encourage him.

In January 1873, having started a small lottery with the first prize being a precious copy of Raphael's Madonna di Foligno, Don Bosco entrusted him with the sale of the tickets, planned especially in Lombardy. Fr Sala travelled particularly through the provinces of Milan, Como and Varese, where he could offer written material with requests for donations to the most conspicuous families, whom he felt were close to him in some way and who were perhaps already in contact with Don Bosco. He sent out many of these, but many others were returned to him, so he went looking for other benefactors as far as Rome. One of the first Salesians, Fr Sala performed many other humble services, including the classic assistance in the courtyard and in the workshops and some teaching of young brothers. In 1876 in Rome, he took care of housing both the Salesians destined for the new foundations in Albano, Ariccia and Magliano, and the missionaries who had come to receive a mandate from the Pope. On 17 December 1876 he attended the meetings of the Superior Council for the first time: he would do so for almost 20 years. In 1878 he made inspections in Mornese and Chieri to provide for the necessary adaptation of the FMA houses. In October he did the same for the Salesians at Randazzo in Sicily and then at Este and Mogliano Veneto. He did the same for more than fifteen years. Don Bosco trusted him and he returned the trust right up to his deathbed, indeed even afterwards, as we shall see.

The General Chapter in 1880 elected Fr Sala Economer General, but he also remained Economer at Valdocco for another three years. He immediately set to work.

In April 1881 he had the work on the Church of the Sacred Heart and the Salesian residence resumed in Rome. Then he became interested in the new building in Mogliano Veneto and examined the project for an extensive renovation of the house

in La Navarra (France). At the beginning of April the following year he was back in Mestre to negotiate with the benefactress Astori and to make an inspection of the agricultural school being built at Mogliano; in November he accompanied the first four Salesians there. On 8 July 1883 he signed the specifications for the construction work of the Hospice of St John the Evangelist in Turin and in the autumn he had the rooms of the printing house at Valdocco tidied up, including the director's office, decorating it with curtains on the windows, "deserving" a kindly rebuke from Don Bosco for such "superfluous refinements". In mid-January 1884, for the National Exhibition of Science and Technology in Turin, it was decided to install the complex machine (purchased for the Salesian paper mill in Mathi), which churned out bound books from rags. It was a tough task for Fr Sala to get properly trained Salesian pupils to operate it. It was a resounding success with the public and Don Bosco allowed himself to refuse any prize other than first prize. Shortly afterwards Fr Sala went to Rome to accelerate the work at Sacred Heart so that at the beginning of May Don Bosco could lay the foundation stone of the Hospice, together with Count Colle (who would bring with him an offering of no less than 50,000 lira).

Obviously Fr Sala attended the meetings of the General Council to give his enlightened opinion especially on matters he was interested in: acceptance of works, foundation of a house in Paris, specifications for the one in Lucca, replacement of an old oven with a new one from Vienna at a favourable price, adoption of a "guest house" for the female staff at Valdocco, estimates for lighting costs for the houses in Vienna, Nice and Milan. On 12 September he presented the draft of the official coat of arms of the Salesian Congregation, which, once discussed and corrected, was approved by the Council. At the same meeting he was charged with resolving the dispute over the land in Chieri and the strip of municipal land in Turin used for the Church of Mary Help of Christians, but already compensated for by an exchange. Numerous meetings

followed in September and October with the occasional presence of Fr Sala. On 9 December he dealt with the economic problems of various houses, including those in Sampierdarena, Naples and Schio.

### **The three years from 1885-1887**

For the whole of the following year (1885) he was interested in the house at Faenza for which he “deserved” another fatherly reprimand from Don Bosco for excessive expenditure on the foundations. In April he attended a survey carried out at the College in Lanzo by order of the Civil Court of Turin. On 22 June he presented and had approved the plan to raise the FMA house in Nice by one storey. For the house to be erected in Trent he ensured the availability of adequate local economic resources, confident of the collaboration of the Municipality, but put on alert by Don Bosco who, ever vigilant, reminded him that often “the Municipalities promise then forget”. On 20 September 1885 Fr Sala reported to the Council about the land for the Salesian cemetery that could be purchased for 14,000 lire. He was authorised to try to lower the price and see that the project presented was accomplished. There followed two more years of General Council meetings, of trips to help houses in difficulty due to building, administrative and economic problems. Meanwhile he had been re-elected Economer General (September 1886; he would be re-elected again six years later) and was preparing everything for the solemn consecration of the Church of the Sacred Heart in Rome (14 May). There, a few months later, at the express invitation of the Pope, a new Procurator and a new Parish Priest were appointed to replace Fr F. Dalmazzo, and Fr Sala had a thousand headaches to unravel the tangled skein of an unsustainable economic-financial situation.

### **With Don Bosco as he lay dying (January 1888)**

Urgently summoned from Rome on 30 December, he was already at Don Bosco's bedside on New Year's morning. For the whole month he alternated with the young secretary Viglietti in assisting

the sick man.

When Don Bosco died on 31 January, the same evening the General Council “promised the Lord that if Our Lady gives us the grace of being able to bury Don Bosco under the Church of Mary Help of Christians or at least in our house in Valsalice it would begin work on the decoration of his church this year or at least as soon as possible.” The formal request made by Fr Sala to the city authorities was rejected. He then appealed to Rome and the Prime Minister, F. Crispi, mindful of the help given him by Don Bosco when he was an exile in Turin, granted the burial outside the city at the Salesian College at Valsalice. In the meantime Don Bosco’s body was beside Fr Sala’s room. On the evening of 4 February he was transported to Valsalice. In the tiny procession up the hill Fr Sala wept: he had lost the dearest person he still had on earth. For another six years, however, he would continue to carry out with great competence the arduous field of work that Don Bosco had first entrusted to him. On 21 May 1895 he would join him in heaven, struck down by a heart attack.

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## **The Dream of the Elephant (1863)**

*Unable to give the strenna to his pupils on the last day of the year, having returned from Borgo Cornalense on the 4th, Sunday, Don Bosco had promised to give it to them on the evening of the feast of Epiphany. It was 6 January 1863 and all the young people, artisans and students, gathered in the same parlour, anxiously awaited the strenna. After prayers, he mounted the platform and addressed them:*

Tonight I should give you the *strenna*. Every year around Christmas, I regularly beg God to suggest a *strenna* that may benefit you all. In view of your increased number, I doubled my prayers this year.

The last day of the year [Wednesday] came and went, and so did Thursday and Friday, but nothing came to me. On Friday night [January 2] I went to bed exhausted, but could not fall asleep. The next morning I got up, worn out and almost half dead, but I did not feel upset over it. Rather, I was elated, knowing from past experience that a very bad night is usually a forewarning that Our Lord is about to reveal something to me. That day I went on with my work at Bargo Cornalese; the next day by [early] evening I arrived back here. After hearing confessions, I went to bed. Tired from my work at Bargo and from not sleeping the night before, I soon dozed off. Now began the dream which will give you your *strenna*.

My dear boys, I dreamed that it was a feast day afternoon and that you were all busy playing, while I was in my room with Professor [Thomas] Vallauri discussing literature and religion. Suddenly there was a knock at my door. I rose quickly and opened it. My mother – dead now for six years – was standing there. Breathlessly she gasped,

“Come and see! Come and see!”

“What happened?” I asked.

“Come! Come!” she replied.

I dashed to the balcony. Down in the playground, surrounded by a crowd of boys, stood an enormous elephant.

“How did this happen?” I exclaimed. “Let’s go down!” Tonight I should give you the *strenna*.

Professor Vallauri and I looked at each other in surprise and alarm and then raced downstairs.

As was only natural, many of you had run up to the elephant. It seemed meek and tame. Playfully it lumbered about, nuzzling the boys with its trunk and cleverly obeying their orders, as though it had been born and raised at the Oratory. Very many of you kept following it about and petting it, but not all. In fact, most of you were scared and fled from it to safety.



Finally, you hid in the church. I, too, tried to get in through the side door which which opens into the playground, but as I passed Our Lady's statue beside the drinking fountain and touched the hem of Her mantle for protection, She raised Her right arm.

Vallauri did likewise on the other side of the statue, and the Virgin raised Her left arm. I was amazed, not knowing what to think of such an extraordinary thing.

When the bell rang for church services, you all trooped in. I followed and saw the elephant standing at the rear by the main entrance.

After Vespers and the sermon, I went to the altar, assisted by Father Alasonatti and Father Savio, to give Benediction. At that solemn moment when you all deeply bowed to adore the Blessed Sacrament, the elephant-still standing at the end of the middle aisle-knelt down too, but with its back to the altar.

Once services were over, I tried to dash out to the playground and see what would happen, but I was detained by someone. A while later, I went out the side door which opens into the porticoes and saw you at your usual games. The elephant too had come out of the church and had idled over to the second playground where the new wing is under construction. Mark this well, because this is precisely the place where the grisly scene I am going to describe occurred.

At that moment, at the far end of the playground I saw a banner followed processionally by boys. It bore in huge letters the inscription *Sancta Maria, succurre miseris!* [Holy Mary, help Your forlorn children!] To everybody's surprise, that monstrous beast, once so tame, suddenly ran amuck. Trumpeting furiously, it lunged forward, seized the nearest boys with its trunk, hurled them into the air or flung them to the ground, and then trampled them underfoot. Though horribly mauled, the victims were still alive. Everybody ran for dear life. Screams and shouts and pleas for help rose from the wounded.

Worse – would you believe it? – some boys spared by the

elephant, rather than aid their wounded companions, joined the monstrous brute to find new victims.

As all this was happening (I was standing by the second arch of the portico, near the drinking fountain) the little statue that you see there ( and he pointed to the statue of the Blessed Virgin) became alive and grew to life-size. Then, as Our Lady raised Her arms, Her mantle spread open to display magnificently embroidered inscriptions. Unbelievably it stretched far and wide to shelter all those who gathered beneath it. The best boys were the first to run to it for safety. Seeing that many were in no hurry to run to Her, Our Lady called aloud, *Venite ad Me omnes!* [Come all to Me!] Her call was heeded, and as the crowd of boys under the mantle increased, so did the mantle spread wider. However, a few youngsters kept running about and were wounded before they could reach safety. Flushed and breathless, the Blessed Virgin continued to plead, but fewer and fewer were the boys who ran to Her. The elephant, meanwhile, continued its slaughter, aided by several lads who dashed about, wielding one sword or two and preventing their companions from running to Mary. The elephant never even touched these helpers.

Meanwhile, prompted by the Blessed Virgin, some boys left the safety of Her mantle in quick sorties to rescue some victims. No sooner did the wounded get beneath Our Lady's mantle than they were instantly cured. Again and again several of those brave boys, armed with cudgels, went out and, risking their lives, shielded the victims from the elephant and its accomplices until nearly all were rescued.

The playground was now deserted, except for a few youngsters lying about almost dead. At one end by the portico, a crowd of boys stood safe under the Virgin's mantle. At the other stood the elephant with some ten or twelve lads who had helped it wreak such havoc and who still insolently brandished swords.

Suddenly rearing up on its hind legs, the elephant changed into a horrible, long-homed specter and cast a black net over its wretched accomplices. Then, as the beast roared, a thick cloud of smoke enveloped them, and the earth suddenly gaped

beneath them and swallowed them up.

I looked for my mother and Professor Vallauri to speak to them but could not spot them anywhere. Then I turned to look at the inscriptions on Mary's mantle and noticed that several were actual quotations or adaptations of Scriptural texts. I read a few of them:

*Qui elucidant Me vitam aeternam habebunt.* They that explain Me, shall have life everlasting. [Sir. 24, 31]

*Qui Me invenerit, inveniet vitam.* He who finds Me, finds life. [Prov. 8, 35]

*Si quis est parvulus, veniat ad Me.* Whoever is a little one, let him come to Me. [Prov. 9, 4]

*Refugium peccatorum.* Refuge of sinners.

*Salus credentium.* Salvation of believers.

*Plena omnis pietatis, mansuetudinis et misericordiae.* Full of piety, meekness and mercy.

*Beati qui custodiunt vias Meas.* Blessed are they that keep My ways. [Ps. 8, 32]

All was quiet now. After a brief silence, the Virgin, seemingly exhausted by so much pleading, soothingly comforted and heartened the boys and, quoting the inscription I had inscribed at the base of the niche, *Qui elucidant Me, vitam aeternam habebunt*, She went on: "ou heeded My call and were spared the slaughter wrought by the devil on your companions. Do you want to know what caused their ruin? *Sunt colloquia prava*: Foul talk and foul deeds. You also saw your companions wielding swords. They are those who seek your eternal damnation by enticing you from Me, just as they did with many schoolmates of yours."

"But *quos [Deus] diutius exspectat durius damnat*: Those for whom God keeps waiting, He punishes more severely. The infernal demon enmeshed and dragged them to eternal perdition. Now, go in peace, but remember My words: 'Flee from companions who befriended Satan, avoid foul conversation, have boundless trust in Me. My mantle will always be your safe refuge.'"

Our Lady then vanished; only our beloved statuette remained. My deceased mother reappeared. Again the banner with the

inscription *Sancta Maria, succurre miseris* was unfurled. Marching processionally behind, the boys sang *Lodate Maria, o lingue fedeli*. [Praise Mary, ye faithful tongues.] Shortly afterward, the singing waned and the whole scene faded away. I awoke in a sweat. Such was my dream.

My sons, now it's up to you to draw your own *strenna*. Examine your conscience. You'll know if you were safe under Mary's mantle, or if the elephant flung you into the air, or if you were wielding a sword. I can only repeat what the Virgin said: *Venite ad Me omnes*. Turn to Her; call on Her in any danger. I can assure you that your prayers will be heard. Those who were so badly mauled by the elephant are to learn to avoid foul talk and bad companions; those who strive to entice their companions from Mary must either change their ways or leave this house immediately. If anyone wants to know the role he played, let him come to my room and I'll tell him. But I repeat: Satan's accomplices must either mend their ways or go! Good night!

Don Bosco had spoken with such fervor and emotion that for a whole week afterward the boys kept discussing that dream and would not leave him in peace. Every morning they crowded his confessional; every afternoon they pestered him to find out what part they had played in that mysterious dream.

That this was no dream but a vision, Don Bosco had himself indirectly admitted when he had said: "I regularly beg God to suggest... A very bad night is usually a forewarning that Our Lord is about to reveal something to me." Furthermore, he forbade anyone to make light of what he had narrated.

But there is more. On this occasion he made a list of the wounded and of those who wielded one or two swords. He gave it to Celestine Durando, instructing him to watch them. The cleric handed this list over to us, and it is still in our possession. The wounded were thirteen-probably those who had not been rescued and sheltered beneath Our Lady's mantle. Seventeen lads wielded one sword; only three had two.

Scattered marginal notes next to a boy's name indicate an amendment of life. Also, we must bear in mind that the dream, as we shall see, referred also to the future.

That it mirrored the true state of things was admitted by the boys themselves. "I had no idea that Don Bosco knew me so well," one of them stated. "He revealed my spiritual condition and my temptations so exactly that I could find nothing to add."

Two other boys were told that they were wielding swords.

"It's quite true," each admitted. "I knew it all along." They mended their ways.

One afternoon, while talking of this dream and remarking that some boys had already left the Oratory and others would soon follow lest they harm their companions, he came to mention his own "wizardry," as he called it. In this connection he told the following incident:

Some time ago, a boy wrote home and falsely accused priests and superiors of this house of grave wrongdoings. Fearing that Don Bosco might see his letter, he held on to it till he could secretly mail it. That same day, right after dinner, I sent for him. In my room I told him of his misdeed and asked why he had told such lies. Brazenly he denied everything. I let him talk and then, word for word, I repeated the contents of the letter to him. Embarrassed and frightened, he knelt at my feet in tears. "Was my letter intercepted?" he asked.

"No," I replied. "Your family has probably received it by now, and it's up to you to put matters right."

The boys around him asked how he had found that out. "Oh, it's my wizardry," he answered with a laugh. This wizardry and his dream, which revealed not only the boys' present spiritual condition but their future as well, must have been one and the same thing. Many years later, a boy who had been quite close to Father Rua wrote him a long letter, giving his full name and Turin address. We report it here:

Dear Father Rua:

Turin, February 25, 1891

... Among other things I recall a vision of Don Bosco in 1863, when I was at the Oratory. He saw the future of all the boarders. He himself told us about it after night prayers. It was the dream about the elephant. (After describing the dream, he went on:) At the end, Don Bosco told us, "If you want to know what part you played, come to my room and I will tell you.

I too went. "You," he told me, "were one of those trailing after the elephant both before and after church services. Naturally you became a victim. The elephant flung you high into the air with its trunk. When you tumbled down, you were so badly hurt that you could not make it to safety, though you tried hard. A companion of yours, a priest, unrecognized by you, grabbed your arm and dragged you under the Madonna's mantle."

This was not a dream, as Don Bosco called it, but a genuine revelation of my future which Our Lord made to His servant during my second year at the Oratory, when I was a model of conduct and piety.

Yet Don Bosco saw me in that condition.

When the summer vacation of 1863 came around, I went home because of health and I did not return to the Oratory. I was then thirteen.

The following year, my father apprenticed me to a shoemaker, and two years later (1866) I went to France to complete my training. There I associated with anticlericals, gradually stopped going to church and the sacraments, began to read irreligious books, and even grew to loathe and hate the Catholic faith. Two years later I returned to Italy but kept reading impious books, drawing further and further away from the true Church.

Yet all this time I constantly prayed to God in the name of Jesus to enlighten me and lead me to the true faith. This

struggle lasted thirteen years. I strove continually to raise myself up, but I was wounded.

I had fallen prey to the elephant and was powerless.

Toward the end of 1878, during a mission which drew great crowds, I went to hear those good preachers. I was delighted by the incontestable truths they expounded. The very last sermon was on the Blessed Sacrament, about which I still had grave doubts. (In fact I no longer believed in the real or even spiritual presence of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament.) The preacher presented the truth so clearly and so convincingly that, touched by God's grace, I decided to go to confession and place myself under the Blessed Virgin's mantle. Since then I have never ceased to thank God and Our Blessed Mother for this grace.

Please note that, as Don Bosco had seen in his dream, I later found out that the missionary had been a schoolmate of mine at the Oratory.

Dominic N ...

P.S. Should you see fit to publish this letter, I also authorize you to edit it, short of substantial changes, because what I wrote is genuinely true. I kiss your hand respectfully, dear Father Rua, and by this act I intend to pay homage to our beloved Don Bosco.

Certainly, this dream must also have enlightened Don Bosco in appraising priestly and religious vocations and the applicants' inclinations to good so well displayed by those brave boys who had confronted the elephant and his accomplices, had wrested their wounded companions from their clutches, and had carried them to safety under the Madonna's mantle. He therefore continued to accept applicants to the Salesian Society and to admit to triennial vows those who had satisfactorily completed their probationary period. The mere fact that he accepted them will

be their imperishable honor. Some did not take vows or left after their expiration, but nearly all, as diocesan priests or

as public school teachers, persevered in their mission of saving and educating the young. Their names are recorded in the minutes of three chapter meetings of the Salesian Society. (BMVII, 212-219)

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## **Interview with Nelson Javier MORENO RUIZ, Provincial of Chile**

*Fr Nelson is 57 years old and was born in the city of Concepción on 11 September 1965. He met the Salesians at the Salesian College in Concepción, where he was a student and was involved in youth groups and pastoral activities.*

*His parents Fabriciano Moreno and María Mercedes Ruiz currently live in the city of Concepción.*

*He did all his initial formation in the city of Santiago. He made his perpetual profession on 8 August 1992 in Santiago (La Florida). He was ordained a priest on 6 August 1994 in Santiago. His first years as a priest were spent in the Salesian presence at Colegio San José de Punta Arenas and at the Salesian school in Concepción, where he worked in pastoral ministry. From 2001 to 2006 he was rector in Puerto Natales and from 2006 to 2012 rector in Puerto Montt.*

*From 2012 to 2017 he was provincial economer and rector of the provincial house. In 2018 he was rector of the Salesian house in Gratitude Nacional in the city centre of Santiago and from 2019 rector in Puerto Montt, where he is currently located.*

*Fr Moreno Ruiz succeeds Fr Carlo Lira Airola, who completed his six-year term in January 2024.*

**Can you present yourself?**



I am a Salesian happy with life, who in the Salesian religious vocation has found the presence of God in the young people, whom I serve and accompany as a educator and pastor.

I am Father Nelson Moreno Ruiz, Provincial of the Chilean Province. I was called to this service of animation by the Rector Major Cardinal Ángel Fernández Artime, taking up this responsibility in January this year.

I got to know the Salesians at a young age, when I entered the Salesian school in the city of Concepción, which is the first work in our country, where the missionaries sent by Don Bosco arrived from Argentina to Chile in 1887.

In this Salesian school environment, I grew up around the educative and pastoral proposal offered by the school; sports meetings, missionary activities and many social service activities, all of which had an echo in my life as a young man; it was also important to see and meet Salesians in the school yard, and with these experiences my vocation developed and over time I felt called to follow in Don Bosco's footsteps as a Salesian.

My family consists of my parents, now elderly – my father Fabriciano aged 93 and my mother aged 83 – my four brothers, the three boys who studied at the Salesian school, and my older sister, who often had the task of looking after us. We are a relatively small family, completed by four grandchildren, who are now young professionals.

As a Salesian, I made my first religious profession on 31 January 1987, then I was a religious for 37 years and was ordained a priest on 6 August 1994. In my religious life, I had the opportunity to animate some communities as director of works, as well as serving as provincial economist before becoming provincial.

I consider that one of my characteristics is to be attentive to rendering good service wherever the Lord wants it, so I spent time preparing and studying for the mission. After graduating from high school at the Salesian school in Concepción, I entered the Congregation where I studied Philosophy, then obtained a Licentiate in Theology at the

Pontifical Catholic University of Chile, a Degree in Religious Education and a Licentiate in Education in School Management at the Raúl Silva Henríquez Catholic University; later, I obtained a Master's Degree in Educational Management from the University of Concepción in Chile, a Master's Degree in Quality and Excellence in Education from the University of Santiago de Compostela in Spain, and a Doctorate in Educational Sciences from the University of Seville, Spain. And now, with humility and simplicity, I serve my Province, the confreres and animation of the works.

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

As a child, along with my brothers and friends, I had a very normal and happy childhood. I loved sport, I played football regularly in a local club and this led me to dream of taking up sport in the future. What I liked most was sharing and having friends, and this was what sport offered me.

When I entered school and joined the various pastoral activities, I realised that I also enjoyed teaching the children and young people I had contact with in these pastoral activities. The educational and pedagogical theme made a lot of sense to me and became part of my life project, as I saw it as a dream that was possible to realise.

These concerns mingled with my inclination to study something related to the area of health; this motivation was very present, since some in my family were engaged in professions in this area.

I see that the common thread of these inclinations that I have felt from childhood to adolescence were always oriented towards working with people, being of service to them, serving them, teaching them, accompanying them.

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

My vocational story, without a doubt, begins in my family, I come from a home where the faith was lived, through devotion to St Sebastian and St Rita of Cascia, and it was my parents who inculcated the faith in us, allowing us to receive the

sacrament of baptism and confirmation. My vocation began at home, in a very simple way, with a sense of God perceived naturally and without any great religious practices, but with a deep sense of gratitude to God in everyday life.

At the Salesian school in Concepción, I discovered a new world, because it was a huge and prestigious school in the city. When I arrived, I immediately felt welcomed and motivated to participate in the proposals it had for its students, especially the pastoral activities, in which I was gradually involved, as well as sport, which was an important part of my life at that age.

When I was studying at Salesian school, I was very interested in all the pastoral activities, and in my last year of primary school, I had the opportunity to participate as a monitor in the 'Summer Camps – Villa Feliz', where I discovered that I could be useful and give something to the poorest children; from then on, I made a commitment to continue on this path of service, which gave a lot of meaning to my adolescent concerns.

It was in the youth groups that my vocation to religious life became more clearly defined, I became part of the sacramental ministry, as a Confirmation monk, where I reaffirmed my call to serve.

All this pastoral life gave me the opportunity to meet and share with the Salesians who, with their witness and closeness, presented me with a vocational proposal that caught my attention, as they were beautiful testimonies of a service close to young people. This was already the seed of my religious vocation, which gave me the impetus to decide to enter the Congregation, the beginning of the vocational journey in the call the Lord made to me, where I have been a Salesian priest for 30 years, accompanied by the motto I chose for my priestly ordination: 'Lord, you know everything, you know that I love you' (Jn 21:17),

**Why Salesian?**

Why Salesian? Because it was in a school of the Congregation where I studied, where I grew up, where my convictions, my certainties and my life project were formed.

With the Salesians, through pastoral activities, I got to know the mission of the Church more deeply, all this environment gave full meaning to my life, confirming that the charism of joy, youth and education, was the path that the Lord presented to me, in which I actively participated, because it responded to my concerns and desires, and made me happy; there was no possibility of another answer, because the Salesians were what covered everything I was looking for and desired, and that I had known since my childhood.

During my formation, I had contacts with other congregations and charisms, which helped me to confirm, even more, that Salesian spirituality was my style, what covered the meaning of what I wanted to do; the life of Don Bosco, work with young people, pastoral work, everything, the fruit of the experience I had with them, where I was formed, where I served and where my vocation was formed and consolidated.

The Lord gave me the gift of getting to know Don Bosco and Salesian spirituality, it was the proposal he invited me to follow and I accepted it, I consecrated my life here, and today I feel that my vocation as a Salesian makes me all that I am.

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

Once I made the decision to take the step of joining the Salesians, I told my family, especially my parents. They were surprised, and it was my mother who first understood, supported and accompanied me, inviting me to take this step.

My father, worried, asked me if I was really sure, if it was what I really wanted, what made me happy and if it was my path; to all these questions I answered yes. He confirmed that if it was what I wanted and was willing to see if it was really my future, and made it clear that I could always count on them and not to forget that I would always have my home, in case it was not my path, and told me that I could count on all

his support.

Hearing my parents' support so clearly was very nice, it gave me a lot of joy and serenity, since I was starting out on a path without being sure that it was really the path for a young person.

My siblings were also surprised, because I had a very natural life, tied to sports, with friends, but when they were sure that I really wanted to follow the Lord's call, they supported me.

I always felt very accompanied and supported by my parents and brothers, which gave me a lot of serenity to start the formation process; to this day, I count on them, I know they accompany me with love made prayer.

### **What are the most urgent local and youth needs?**

In Chile today, the population up to 17 years of age is 4,259,115, 24% of the country's total population. And we Salesians are particularly dedicated to the formal education of this segment of the population. We have 22 schools, where children and young people from 4 to 19 years old study, with a total of 31,000 students being educated in our schools. Today, it is the largest school network in the country offering this service to young people.

In addition, there is a University which serves some 7,000 students, and the Don Bosco Foundation, which is dedicated to taking in and accompanying street children, the most vulnerable segment among them, and serves more than 7,000 children and young people.

The most urgent need that our young people experience and suffer is that they are highly exposed to alcohol and drug consumption, as well as the indiscriminate use of technology. This, together with the loneliness they experience due to the disintegration of their families, often leads them to suffer from 'mental health' situations, depression, anxiety, panic attacks and the like.

This reality prompts us to try to accompany them in their search for meaning, emotional well-being and emotional

stability, all basic needs of human beings, especially those who are developing and growing. We also try to provide them with Christian values, so that step by step they commit to living their faith in youth communities and the Chilean Church, as well as providing them with the education they need to integrate into society.

Young people are Don Bosco's favourite portion and we owe it to them to provide them with education and tools so that they can become 'good Christians and honest citizens'.

### **What are the most significant works in your area?**

The Chilean Province has a varied range of works: parishes, youth pastoral centres, reception centres, schools and universities. But the pastoral proposal has focused fundamentally on formal education in schools, which provide education from pre-school age – 4 years of age – to secondary education – 19 years of age.

Chilean education provides training both to prepare young people to enter higher education, universities, and to provide technical vocational education, where students graduate with a technical diploma in a career of their choice.

We can say that vocational technical education is one of the most significant jobs we have, because it is a real promotion of young people, allowing them to enter the world of work with a technical diploma, which, although it is true that it is not everything, makes it easier for them to work with their families, and often finances their continuation in higher education.

I would also like to emphasise the work we do in the Fundación don Bosco, which takes care of children on the street who do not have or do not have a family, working with them to contain, rehabilitate, promote and socially integrate them, creating – as Don Bosco did – evangelised children and young people with values.

### **Do you communicate through magazines, blogs, Facebook or other media?**

Social media today are very important and of great help in reaching many young people and adults. I regularly communicate with the Salesian Family through the Salesian Bulletin, the Agorà blog, the official websites of the Province, the website and Instagram.

### **What are the most important areas?**

Of the mission that I have to carry out today in the Province, I believe that the most important thing is to accompany and animate the lives of my confreres, especially those with whom I work and share responsibility for the Province as councillors, and the confreres who have the responsibility of animating and accompanying the confreres as rectors of communities and works. In short, the priority is to accompany my Salesian confreres.

In the same way, the task of animating the life of the Salesian Family seems relevant to me, an important task, animating in fidelity to the charism, all those who are part of it; consecrated Salesians, Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, Salesian Cooperators, Volunteers of Don Bosco, Association of Mary Help of Christians and others.

We cannot fail to mention as a relevant task, that of animating the lives of young people, through youth pastoral work, associations and the various groups that can exist under the Salesian charism, giving an important place among these, to the pastoral work for vocations, and to those young people who feel the desire to respond to the Lord's call in our Congregation.

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

Faced with a society thirsting for meaning it seems to me that we Salesians are called to respond to these quests and to give meaning to what we do, to give meaning to life, especially for the young.

We have a fundamental task, which is to educate the young, and those who educate them and work with them must certainly be bearers of dreams and hope.

The world is constantly being built, and it is up to us Salesians to contribute, with our lives, our actions and our mission, to its construction, through the education of today's young people, so that, knowing that they are loved, valuable, capable and bringing out the best in them, they can give meaning to their lives and be builders of hope in their families and in society.

### **Do you have a message for the Salesian Family?**

The message that I can share with the entire Salesian Family, first of all, is that we are custodians and bearers of a gift, a gift that God gives to the Church, which is the Salesian charism, a gift and a task for each of us.

This year, the Cardinal and Rector Major of the Congregation, Ángel Fernández Artime, invites us to dream, in imitation of our father Don Bosco, a dreamer father. Don Bosco dreamed of things that seemed impossible, but his great trust in Mary Help of Christians and his persevering and tenacious work led him to realise his dreams. We too, worthy sons of this father, are called to dream and to add young people to these dreams, which are nothing more than desiring a better world for them, where they can fit in, building a society that is more amiable and more sensitive to human and Christian values. Together with them, we want to contribute and become good Christians and upright citizens, feeling deeply loved by God.