THE MESSAGE OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

Don Ángel Fernández Artime, SDB

THEY STILL GO FORTH

The first Missionary expedition was blessed by the Don Bosco’s tears as he said: “[W]ho knows? This departure [for the missions], this humble beginning may be the seed that will grow into a mighty tree.” That prophecy has come true.

That first one was unforgettable. It was 1875, the Feast of St. Martin of Tours. Though the world did not know, in that little corner of Torino called Valdocco an extraordinary enterprise was just beginning: ten young Salesians were departing for Argentina.

The *Biographical Memoirs* recount this event of epic significance: “As four o'clock was striking and the first notes of the carillon were echoing, a sudden furious noise was heard inside the House, with slamming of doors and windows. A wind had arisen so violent that it threatened to sweep away the Oratory. It may have been pure coincidence, but it is a fact that a similar violent wind broke loose in the very hour when the cornerstone of the church of Mary Help of Christians was laid. It happened once again during the consecration of the same church.”

The Basilica was overflowing with people. “Don Bosco mounted the pulpit as Vespers ended. At sight of him, a profound silence fell over that vast sea of people, all trembling with emotion as they eagerly drank in his every word. Every time he referred directly to the missionaries his voice became choked, the words almost dying away on his lips. He manfully restrained his tears, but his audience wept.

‘But my voice fails me, tears stifle my words. I only say that even though in this moment my soul is saddened at the thought of your departure, my heart is greatly consoled in seeing our Congregation strengthened; in realizing how we, in our insignificance, are yet able at this moment to contribute our little pebble to the mighty edifice of the Church. Yes, go forth bravely, but remember that there is but one Church that is spread over Europe, America, and the whole world and welcomes men of all nations who seek refuge at her maternal bosom. As Salesians, no matter in what remote part of the world you may be, never forget that here in Italy you have a father who loves you in the Lord and a Congregation that thinks of you in every circumstance, provides for your needs and will always welcome you as brothers. Go, then. You will have to face all kinds of trials, hardships, and dangers. Do not be afraid; God is with you; You will go, but you will not go alone because everyone will accompany you… Farewell! Perhaps some of us shall not meet again on this earth.’

Then came the most [moving] moment of the whole ceremony, one which drew tears and sobs in every part of the church and sorely taxed the emotions of the youthful apostles. While the boys’ choir repeated the antiphon *Sit nomen Domini benedictum ex hoc nunc et usque in saeculum[[1]](#footnote-1)*, their beloved father and all the priests present gave the farewell embrace to the missionaries in the sanctuary. In his sermon, Don Bosco had promised he would give the missionaries some written mementos[[2]](#footnote-2) that should be a father's testament to the sons he would perhaps never see again. He had jotted them down in a notebook while on a recent trip by train. He had had copies made, and he gave one to each missionary as he left the altar of Mary Help of Christians.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

**The tree grows**

On September 25 this year, we relived that moment of grace for the 135th time. Today, they go by the names of Oscar, Sébastien, Jean-Marie, Tony, Carlos… There are twenty-five of them, young men, prepared, who show in their eyes and carry in their hearts the understanding and courage of those first missionaries. They are the advance guard of what I requested of the entire Salesian Family for this sessennium: boldness, prophecy, and fidelity.

Don Bosco had made a small prediction: “’In doing this we are entering upon a mighty undertaking, not because we have any pretensions, or because we believe we can convert the whole world in a few days; yet who knows? This departure [for the missions], this humble beginning may be the seed that will grow into a mighty tree. It may be like a tiny grain of millet or of mustard seed that will grow, little by little, and accomplish great things. It may awaken in many hearts a desire to consecrate themselves to God in the Missions, to join forces with us and reinforce our ranks. The extraordinary number of those who asked to be chosen makes me hope that it will.’”[[4]](#footnote-4)

“A missionary. What a name!” This is the testimony of one Salesian who has spent forty years of his life as a missionary: “One elderly person said to me: ‘Do not speak to me of Christ; sit here next to me, I want to smell your odor and if this is His odor, then you can baptize me.’”

The fifth word of counsel that Don Bosco wrote to the missionaries was: “Take special care of the sick, of the children, of the aged, and of the poor.”

We live in a time that must be confronted with a renewed mentality that “knows how to go beyond boundaries.” In a world in which we run the risk of being hemmed in by borders more and more, the prophecy of our lifeconsists of this, too: to show that we know no borders. The one reality that we possess is God, His Gospel, and our mission.

I dream that, in these coming years, to say “Salesians of Don Bosco” means to those who hear our name that we are consecrated persons who are “a little crazy.” Crazy because we love the young, above all the poorest, most abandoned and helpless ones, with a true Salesian heart. This seems to me to be the most beautiful definition today that one can possibly give to Don Bosco’s sons. I am convinced that our Father would want it to be precisely this way.

They still go forth so as to give their life to God—and not just in words. The Congregation has paid the price with its blood. The motto that the martyr Rudolf Lunkenbein had chosen for his ordination to the Priesthood was: "I have come to serve and to give my life.” On his last visit to Germany, in 1974, his mother begged him to be careful because people had warned her about the risks that her son was running. He replied, "Mom, why are you worried? There is nothing more beautiful than dying for God’s cause. That would be my dream.”

I have the firm conviction that our Family must walk towards greater universality, without borders, over the next six years. Nations have boundaries. Our generosity, which sustains our mission, cannot and must not know limits. The prophecy to which we must give witness as a Congregation does not know boundaries.

A missionary once spoke of having celebrated Holy Mass for the indigenous people living in the mountains near Cochabamba, Bolivia. He was a young priest and hardly knew the Quechua language. At the end of Mass, as he was walking towards his house, he felt it had been a fiasco – that he had unable to get any of his message across. Then, an old farmer, poorly dressed, presented himself and thanked the young missionary for having come. “Then he made an incredible move. Before I could open my mouth, the old *campesino* put his hands into the pockets of his cloak and took out two handfuls of multicolored rose petals. He stood up on tiptoe and, using gestures, asked me to help him by lowering my head. Then he dropped the petals on my head; I was speechless. He rummaged in his pockets again and managed to extract two more handfuls of petals. He kept repeating this gesture. His supply of red, pink, and yellow rose petals seemed endless. I just stood there and let it happen, looking at my *huaraches* (leather sandals), wet with my tears and covered with rose petals. When he had finished, he took his leave and I was left alone, with only the fresh fragrance of roses.”

I can tell you from experience that millions of families all over the world are full of gratitude to the Salesians, who have become the "Gospel" in their midst.

May God bless you.

Don Angel

1. “May the Name of the Lord be blessed both now and for ever.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The full list of mementos can be read here. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *The Biographical Memoirs of St. John Bosco.* Volume XI. pp. 357-364. *[https://donboscosalesianportal.org/wp-content/uploads/BM\_11\_en.pdf](https://donboscosalesianportal.org/wp-content/uploads/BM_11_en.pdf%20pp.%20357-362).* Accessed September 14, 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *ibid.* pp. 359-360. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)