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SEDE CENTRALE SALESIANA
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Il Consigliere Generale per le Missioni

4 April 2021
Easter Sunday
Prot. 21/0155

The Salesian Missionary Vocation *Reflections, processes and operational guidelines*

The Rector Major, Fr Ángel Fernández Artime, has invited the whole Congregation to respond with missionary courage and generosity to requests for new presences in the poorest contexts, strengthening our involvement among refugees and opening new places for mission.¹ In fact, “we all share responsibility for the evangelising and missionary work of the Salesians of Don Bosco throughout the world”.²

This presentation has the threefold purpose of *motivating* the confreres to respond to the missionary invitation of the current successor of Don Bosco, *improving* the processes of discernment, formation and integration and *harmonising* earlier operational guidelines that are still relevant in our context today.

Part 1. Rethinking the Missions Today

Today we find ourselves in a different context to that of the missionary projects that spread the Congregation to the Americas (1875), Asia (1906) and Africa (1980). New perspectives and new questions have led to new missiological reflections. A renewed vision on the Salesian Missions is needed.

1. Missionary Vocation and the Salesian charism

THE MISSIONS

The Trinity is the source of the Church’s existence and missionary nature. Moreover, the concept of communion lies at the heart of the Church’s self-understanding.³ *Mission* and *communion*, then, are essential for an adequate understanding of the mystery of the Church. Therefore, every local church, including ones recently founded, in as much as it is a member of a communion of churches, shares responsibility for helping the other local churches in a variety of needs it should be noted that Vatican II had already emphasised the fact that missionary activity must also extend to churches that have existed “founded long since” but which “are in a certain state of regression or weakness”.⁴

We collaborate with the Church in fulfilling its mission to evangelise (*Mt 28:19-20*).⁵ Proclaiming the Gospel, especially to the young, is our primary missionary task.⁶ Our initiatives for human advancement, motivated by a deep faith, are an Initial Proclamation. We value the ‘rays of Truth’ in cultures and other religions. In contexts where we cannot even mention the name of Jesus, we proclaim him through the testimony of our personal and community life.⁷ Having clear intentions to

¹ Cf. A. FERNÁNDEZ, “Closing address to GC28”, in *ACG* 433, p.150.

² A. FERNÁNDEZ, “Missionary Appeal 2021” (8 December 2020).

³ Cf. SYNOD OF BISHOPS, II Extraordinary Assembly (1985), *Relatio finalis*, II, C), 1.

⁴ *Ad Gentes* no.19.

⁵ Cf. *Ad Gentes* no.2; PAUL VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975), no.14.

⁶ Cf. A. FERNÁNDEZ, “Rector Major’s Guidelines for the Salesian Congregation”, in *ACG* 433, p.22.

⁷ Cf. FRANCIS, Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* (2020), no. 277.

foster Initial Proclamation can help us overcome the danger of being seen as social services providers or social workers rather than witnesses to the primacy of God and proclaimers of the Gospel.⁸

Certainly, there are still peoples or sociocultural contexts today where Christ is not known. In many countries, especially in urban centres, even in our own suburb, there are those who do not know Jesus, those who, having come to know him, have abandoned him, or those who live their faith as something cultural. So, the missions are to be found wherever there is a need to proclaim the Gospel. Today 'the missions' cannot be understood merely in geographical terms, as movement towards 'mission lands' like once upon a time, but are also to be understood in sociological, cultural terms and even in terms of our presence in the digital continent. Today, missionaries come from the five continents and are sent to the five continents. This multi-directional movement of missionaries is already happening in many dioceses and congregations. For us Salesians it was 'Project Europe' which brought us face to face with this change of missionary paradigm, which still requires many confreres to undertake a journey of conversion of mind and heart in order to appropriate it.

AN ESSENTIAL FEATURE OF THE SALESIAN CHARISM

Fr Eugene Ceria said that "Don Bosco's missionary idea grew in him. At first it was an inner voice calling him to take the Gospel to unbelieving countries; later it was a flame of zeal, kindled by the desire to extend the activities of his sons to that field as well."⁹ Instead, Fr Paul Albera summed up Don Bosco's missionary spirit this way: "The missions were the favourite subject of his discourses, and he knew how to instil in hearts such a keen desire to become missionaries that it seemed the most natural thing in the world ... for Don Bosco the second aim of his Congregation had to be that of the missions and nothing kept him from embracing it in all its breadth".¹⁰ We are not just talking about a personal interest but a real *charisma foundationis* that our founder passed on to his Salesians and to the entire Salesian Family.¹¹

Therefore, GC19 stated that "the Salesian Congregation ... revives the ideal of Don Bosco, who wished that the work of the missions to be a permanent preoccupation of the Congregation, to the extent of being part of its nature and end".¹² "The mind and heart of the Founder", Fr Viganò wrote, "and the uninterrupted tradition in our Family, are an open confirmation of the fact that the missionary dimension is an 'essential feature' of our charism".¹³ The current Rector Major says that "the missionary dimension is part of our identity".¹⁴ Besides, it is the missions that drive the Congregation forward to free us from "paralysing inertia", giving rise to "beautiful dreams that come true".¹⁵

THE SALESIAN MISSIONARY SPIRIT

As Salesians, we are, everywhere, true missionaries of the young and youth is our mission land.¹⁶ We Salesians all live Don Bosco's missionary spirit as the heart of pastoral charity, which manifests itself in the 'oratorian heart', fervour, drive and the capacity for intercultural and inter-religious dialogue. It is the passion for evangelisation, especially of young people, and the willingness to be sent wherever there is a need, expressed in the '*ci vado io*' ('I'll go there') that Fr Albert Caviglia considered as being the 'Salesian motto'. In short, the missionary spirit – summed up in the '*Da mihi animas*' – is typical of every Salesian, because its roots are in the Salesian charism itself. It is this missionary spirit that makes us live the Salesian consecrated life "permanently in a state of mission".¹⁷

The summer missionary experience for the young confreres, for the formators and for the teachers of the study centres, as well as the experience in the international formation communities, fosters openness of mind, intercultural and inter-religious relations and, ultimately, the Salesian missionary

⁸ Cf. P. CHÁVEZ "Address at the opening of GC27", in GC27 p. 82; no.38.

⁹ E. CERIA, *Annali della Società Salesiana*, I (SDB: Torino, 1888) p. 24.

¹⁰ P. ALBERA, "The Oratories- The Missions - Vocations" (13 May 1913) no.13, in *Lettere Circolari di Don Paolo Albera ai Salesiani* (SDB: Turin, 1922) p. 133.

¹¹ Cf. L. RICCERI, "The Missions, the Way to Renewal", in ACS 267, p.13; *Charter of the Charismatic Identity of the Salesian Family of Don Bosco* (SDB: Rome, 2012), no. 16.

¹² CG 19, p. 178.

¹³ E. VIGANÒ, "Pope's Appeal for the Missions", in AGC 336, p. 11.

¹⁴ A. FERNÁNDEZ, "Belonging more to God, more to the Confreres, more to the Young", in ACG 419, p. 22.

¹⁵ A. FERNÁNDEZ, "Guidelines", p. 47.

¹⁶ Cf. L. RICCERI, "Missionaries of Youth", in ASC 279, p. 6; GC22, no.13.

¹⁷ Cf. FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013) no. 25; J.E. VECCHI, "Our Missionary Obligation in view of the Year 2000", in AGC 362, p. 6-8; F. CEREDA, "Encouraging International Communities (GC27 75.5)", in AGC 429, p. 44-46.

spirit.¹⁸ The missionary prayer every eleventh of the month, the yearly *Salesian Mission Day* and other missionary animation initiatives help keep the missionary spirit alive in every community and Province. It is the same missionary spirit that makes every Salesian community available to welcome and accompany the new missionaries arriving in their own Province.

THE SALESIAN MISSIONARY VOCATION

The fact that the entire Church is missionary does not exclude there being missionaries *ad gentes* and *for life* by vocation. Similarly, there are some Salesians who feel called, with *total availability* for being sent out of their own cultural setting or country to any part of the world whatsoever (*ad exteros*) to cooperate *zealously* and *boldly* in the new frontiers of our mission of evangelisation, or where the Church is not yet fully established (*ad gentes*). It is a radical and complete gift of self which, by its very nature, implies total availability without any time limits (*ad vitam*).¹⁹

Through the Sacrament of Baptism, all Christians are part of the people of God and share in the mission of the Church. Our religious profession is a unique and fruitful deepening of our baptismal consecration in view of our particular mission in the Church.²⁰ Hence the Salesian missionary vocation as a call from the Lord, within our common Salesian vocation.²¹ Therefore, the Salesian missionary vocation, as an essential feature of Don Bosco's charism (C. 30), is a more radical expression of pastoral charity. It is a gift from the Lord, one that needs to be invoked in prayer, awakened in the confreres, verified in their discernment and accompanied in their growth. The Salesian missions are part of the one Salesian mission. Therefore, the Salesian missionary does not belong to an *élite* group of privileged confreres. He is someone who wants to express in a more generous and radical way the common Salesian vocation of all the confreres.

The current Rector Major reiterated several times that no Provincial can hinder a confrere who has made a journey of discernment of his own missionary vocation with the help of his Rector, spiritual guide and the Provincial himself, just because of a lack of personnel, or because the Province needs him. The missionary send-off in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians in Valdocco is a gesture with which the Congregation renews, in front of Mary Help of Christians, its missionary commitment.

THE SALESIAN MISSIONARY

The Salesian missionary is definitively assigned to a Province or Delegation (C. 159), not only to respond to the need for personnel but, above all, to contribute to intercultural dialogue, to the inculturation of the faith and the charism and to trigger processes that can generate new local vocations. The missionary is not only the one who gives, but above all the one who receives; not only does he teach, but above all he learns from the people he serves, who are not only passive recipients of his efforts. As a mediator, the missionary keeps nothing for himself but takes care to keep alive his ardour for holiness through the 'grace of unity', spending himself generously, even until he is consumed.²²

The missionary is integrated within the local church, and in the life and educative and pastoral plan of the Province, enriching them with his personal gifts, apostolic zeal and missionary sensitivity. Inculturation is a slow process that can never be fully realised. Therefore, the missionary is open to being enriched by the local culture, while continuing to deepen his understanding of it in the light of the Christian faith and the Salesian charism. Each missionary is committed to collaborating with the laity, missionary volunteers and other members of the Salesian Family by promoting a true exchange of gifts and values, according to the specific vocations and forms of life of each group.²³ In old age, he continues his missionary work by sharing his friendship and wisdom, with prayer and by the example of his life. The missionary devotes himself to the people entrusted to him until his last breath: burial in his mission land seals this love.

The presence of missionaries in the Province strengthens inculturation: local confreres have a perception of their own culture that missionaries do not possess, while missionaries offer some

¹⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

¹⁹ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (1990), no. 32, 65; E. VIGANÒ, "Pope's Appeal", p. 33.

²⁰ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consacrata* (1996), nos. 30-31, 71, 78.

²¹ Cf. *Ad Gentes* no.23; *Redemptoris Missio*, n. 65.

²² Cf. *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 284; *Redemptoris Missio*, n. 90.

²³ Cf. *Charter of the Charismatic Identity*, no. 10, 19.

perspectives of the culture not perceived by local confreres. In fact, a Province made up only of confreres of the same culture risks being less sensitive to the challenge of interculturality and less able to see beyond the confines of its own cultural world. Thanks to missionaries, today the charism of Don Bosco is present and inculturated in 134 countries. In fact, the missionary commitment of the Congregation also contributes in a decisive way to the global redistribution of confreres required by GC27.²⁴

THE MISSIONARY PROJECT IN THE PROVINCE AND THE CONGREGATION

In his programme for the six-year period, the Rector Major has continued to invite every Province to open its own missionary project.²⁵ This does not exclude missionary generosity for the whole Congregation's missionary project. In fact, the Province cannot be generous with regard to the Congregational missionary project if it is not seriously concerned with a Provincial missionary project. And indeed, the missionary commitment within the Province is a credible sign and stimulus for the missionary commitment of the Congregation, and vice versa. Each influences the other, stimulates it and helps it.²⁶ It is the missionary impetus of the Congregation that invigorates faith, gives new vocational enthusiasm and revitalises the charismatic identity of the confreres both in the Province that sends and in the Province that receives missionaries. In addition, it frees us "from the dangers of a middle-class lifestyle, spiritual superficiality and genericism" and is "leading us forward into the future with hope".²⁷

THE MISSIONS INTEREST ALL SALESIANS

GC20 already insisted that "the missions are of interest to the whole Congregation; therefore, all the confreres are involved in them in different ways".²⁸ Don Bosco's tenth successor has stressed that now is the time for generosity in the whole Congregation, thus inviting confreres to a greater availability for the Congregation's missionary projects.²⁹ The Provincials share in this solicitude of the Rector Major through their missionary concern for the whole Congregation. Every Salesian Province, whether rich or poor in personnel or resources, shares responsibility for the missionary projects of the whole Congregation. Therefore, there are no longer Provinces that are only 'recipients' or 'senders' or 'missionary Provinces'. All the Provinces send and receive missionaries. This missionary reciprocity makes us available for the mutual sharing of means, personnel and spiritual assistance. Elderly and sick confreres also provide valuable support with their prayers and sacrifices. Meanwhile, the contribution that the Mission Offices at the congregational and provincial level (R. 24) and Salesian NGOs makes the beginning and growth of many missionary projects in all continents possible.

Part II. Processes and Operational Guidelines

These processes and operational guidelines follow in the light of these missiological and charismatic reflections:

2. Discernment of the Missionary Vocation

The missionary vocation needs careful discernment. This is a gradual and progressive process that is carried out with the help of the spiritual guide, the Rector and the formation team. The criteria and the process of discerning a missionary vocation are clearly explained in the brief document on *Missionary Formation of the Salesians of Don Bosco*.³⁰ However, some elements need to be emphasised here.

In the different phases of initial formation, all those being formed are encouraged to keep the missionary spirit alive as an essential element of our charism, through the contents to be emphasised, the attitudes to be cultivated and the experiences to be promoted in each formation phase.³¹ They are formed to be available and to keep an eye open on the life of the Church and the Congregation by making missionary projects known. "It is the responsibility of the Provincials, Provincial Delegates for Missionary Animation and formators to encourage discernment of the life-long missionary vocation,

²⁴ Cf. GC27, 75.5; E. VIGANÒ, "Pope's Appeal", p. 11; F. CEREDA, "Encouraging International Communities", p. 46-48.

²⁵ Cf. A. FERNANDEZ, "Guidelines", p. 48.

²⁶ Cf. *Redemptoris Missio*, no. 34.

²⁷ E. VIGANÒ, "Pope's Appeal", p.12.

²⁸ GC20, no. 480.

²⁹ Cf. A. FERNANDEZ, "Guidelines", p.45-48.

³⁰ Cf. Mission and Formation Departments, *Missionary Formation of the Salesians of Don Bosco* (SDB: Rome, 2014), p. 27-34.

³¹ Cf. *Missionary Formation*, p.13-21.

especially in young confreres.”³² Those who show interest in becoming missionaries are more closely accompanied, so they can embark on a good discernment path.

The post-novitiate is the formation phase where charismatic identity is deepened. Therefore, it is the most suitable phase of formation for serious missionary discernment. The experience of recent years shows that it is the formation phase where there is the most lively and generous missionary availability among those in formation.

There is no age limit for leaving as a missionary. After consulting his Rector and his spiritual guide, the confrere can write to the Rector Major presenting his missionary availability. However, our many years of experience show that intercultural and inter-religious dialogue, inculturation and language learning are easier at a young age.

Depending on the case, in order to better discern one’s missionary vocation, the Provincial, in dialogue with the General Councillor for the Missions, may send the candidate as a post-novice missionary for a year of practical training in a missionary work in his own Province, or in another one. During this year, the candidate may write to the Rector Major presenting his missionary availability.

The distinctive Salesian missionary cross is given during the send-off ceremony by the Rector Major only to those who offer themselves to be missionaries, generally in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians in Valdocco. Their names are written in the official register at the Missions Sector.

3. The Selection and Sending of Missionaries

From the first missionary expedition (1875) until the Special General Chapter (1971), Salesian missionaries were chosen and sent out as follows:

- The candidates, convinced of their missionary vocation, presented their application directly to the Rector Major.
- The Prefect General (later the General Councillor for the Missions) took direct charge of the discernment, destination and sending of the candidates. The vast majority left from among the missionary aspirantates in Europe (Ivrea, Cumiana, Astudillo, Shrigley, Coat-an-Doc’h, etc.) to begin their novitiate in the missions together with the local novices.
- The European missionaries left Europe for the ‘mission lands’ in different continents. The vast majority received their Missionary Cross in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians in Turin.

With this method of direct intervention by the Rector Major through the General Councillor for the Missions, confreres of different nationalities were sent to a nation, thus encouraging the internationalisation of missionary communities.

When Fr Egidio Viganò launched ‘Project Africa’ in 1980 as a project involving all Provinces, another way of discerning, choosing and sending out missionaries was also initiated:

- A good number of confreres presented their missionary desire to their Provincial (in writing or orally) . At times he suggested and encouraged the choice, in a dialogue of obedience.
- The Provincial himself chose and sent the missionaries to their mission territory (especially to Africa and to the new frontiers of Asia, America and Oceania). Some were sent ‘*ad tempus*’, others with a permanent and definitive commitment.
- Normally the departing missionaries received the Missionary Cross in a provincial or local community celebration.
- There was always the choice of available candidates, who sent their personal letter to the Rector Major, who intervened directly, through the General Councillor for the Missions.³³

This method fostered a rapid expansion of Provincial missionary projects and stimulated a new missionary enthusiasm in almost all the Provinces. On the other hand, the number of missionaries serving the missionary projects of the Congregation diminished considerably, as did the international face of our missionary communities.

Since Fr Pascual Chávez launched ‘Project Europe’ in 2008 a more collegial approach began, which has been consolidated in the present process of discerning, choosing and sending missionaries:

³² F. CEREDA, “Encouraging International Communities”, p. 50.

³³ Cf. L. ODORICO, “Candidates for the Salesian Missions”, in *AGC* 337, p. 55-56.

- a. The Rector Major writes a missionary appeal to all the confreres on 18 December (anniversary of the founding of the Congregation) where he lists the missionary priorities for the year.
- b. The confrere writes a letter directly to the Rector Major presenting his missionary availability.
- c. On receiving the letter, the Rector Major forwards it to the General Councillor for the Missions.
- d. The General Councillor for the Missions begins or continues the dialogue with the candidate.
- e. The General Councillor for the Missions dialogues with the candidate's Provincial asking him and his Council for a written opinion to verify the candidate's suitability. If the candidate is in initial formation, the written opinion of the Rector and the House Council is required.
- f. Having received the favourable opinion of the Provincial and his Council (and of the Rector/Director and the House Councillor) the General Councillor for the Missions makes a study with the Rector Major on the needs, the missionary priorities for the year and the possible destinations.
- g. The General Councillor for the Missions puts a proposal to the General Council regarding the destinations of the members of the next missionary expedition.
- h. It is appropriate that there be a farewell ceremony in the Province for the missionary confrere. During the Eucharistic celebration the Superior blesses the departing confrere and makes another significant farewell gesture. The handing over of the missionary cross is reserved to the Rector Major alone at the time of the missionary send-off.
- i. The missionary candidate arrives in Rome for the five-week Orientation Course in preparation for his missionary posting. During the course, having heard the candidate personally, the General Councillor for the Missions concludes the discernment for the new missionary's final destination.

After the ceremony of handing over the Missionary Cross, the missionary returns to his Province of origin where he prepares his documents and waits for his visa. If he is able to obtain a visa in Italy, he will be temporarily assigned to a Salesian house, pending the migration procedures, with the prior consent of the Provincial concerned.

The missionary's Provincial of origin is asked to give the departing missionary who is awaiting migration procedures, the possibility of beginning his study of the language of his destination, according to local possibilities.

For missionaries who leave as practical trainees, time spent exclusively studying the language or waiting for migration procedures is not considered as being part of their practical training.³⁴

4. The request for Missionaries

As an expression of his fatherly concern for the whole Congregation, the Rector Major sends missionaries to the Provinces that need them. On the other hand, a Provincial may ask the Rector Major to send missionaries to his own Province according to the following procedure:

- a. The Provincial, with the consent of his Council, presents a concrete missionary project to the Rector Major. The Rector Major, with his Council, will evaluate it. The approval of the project will be the condition for sending missionaries to that Province. Without this prior condition, the sending of missionaries will not be possible.
- b. Once the Rector Major accepts the request, the Provincial will dialogue with the General Councillor for the Missions regarding:
 - the profile of the new missionary or missionaries;
 - nationalities who find it easy to enter the country or to obtain a visa;
 - documents to be presented by the missionaries in order to obtain a residence or missionary visa.
 - the *Reception and Integration Plan*³⁵ for the new missionaries, indicating the following in particular:
 - A formal language course of at least six months, which can be extended if the new missionary needs it;
 - A specific confrere to accompany new arrivals;
 - How to provide for the spiritual needs (confessions, spiritual direction) of the new missionary:

³⁴ Cf. *Missionary Formation*, p. 32.

³⁵ The elements of this plan are specified in the brief document on *Missionary Formation*, pp. 31-32.

- The gradual process of introducing the new missionary into the receiving Province;
- c. The Provincial Secretary of the missionary's Province of origin sends the personal documents necessary for the provincial archives to the Provincial Secretary of the missionary's new Province;
- d. After five years, the missionary, with the help of the Provincial, evaluates his missionary experience, in particular his integration within the life and activities of the Province, his cultural integration, and his apostolic zeal and missionary commitment.³⁶
- e. The General Councillor for the Missions, or his collaborators, verify the accompaniment of the new missionaries at an appropriate time.

The Salesian goes on mission to remain there. Exceptionally, if a missionary, for serious reasons, needs to return to his Province of origin, he must write, explaining his reasons, to the Rector Major, who, after hearing the opinions of the two Provincials concerned, shall give his consent or otherwise.³⁷

5. The 'Missionary Experience'

In the Congregation the confreres can offer to work temporarily in another Province, or to respond to a specific or urgent need.³⁸ This is a positive experience for many Provinces. In the light of our current reflection, missionary availability and commitment cannot be limited in time. Thus, it is no longer appropriate to speak of *missionaries ad tempus* (temporary) but of *missionary experience*. For some confreres this missionary experience may be an opportunity to discern and mature their missionary vocation. In this case, they will present their total availability to the Rector Major for the missionary projects of the Congregation. However, the following guidelines must be stressed here:

- a. The Provincial who sends a confrere for a missionary experience signs a temporary transfer agreement with the receiving Provincial specifying the duration of the service and the duties and responsibilities of both Provinces towards the confrere. A copy of the agreement is sent to the General Councillor for the Missions, the General Councillor of the Region and the Secretary General.³⁹
- b. This transfer may be for three or five years and may be renewed.⁴⁰
- c. The missionary experience may not last longer than a total period of ten years, after which the confrere shall return definitively to his Province of origin. If he wishes to belong definitively to the Province where he has had his missionary experience, he must write to the Rector Major, who, after hearing the opinions of the two Provincials concerned, shall express his consent or otherwise.

Conclusion

"Missionary generosity has been one of the reasons for the good health and expansion of the Congregation during its first century and a half of life."⁴¹ Let us respond with courageous generosity to the missionary appeal of the current successor of Don Bosco!

These reflections, processes and operational guidelines were approved by the Rector Major and his Council at their meeting on 29 March 2021. They enter into force on 24 May 2021.


Fr Alfred Maravilla, SDB
 General Councillor for the Missions



³⁶ Cf. *Missionary Formation*, p.32.

³⁷ Cf. S. MARTOGLIO, "Transfer of Confreres", no.1.b/1, in *AGC* 436.

³⁸ *GC19*, p. 180: *GC19* gave the confreres the possibility of serving in the missions "for at least five years, provided they are considered suitable".

³⁹ Cf. S. MARTOGLIO, "Transfer of Confreres", no. 1.b/2; no. 3.

⁴⁰ Cf. F. CEREDA, "Encouraging International Communities", p. 47.

⁴¹ J.E. VECCHI, "Our Missionary Obligation", p. 35.