

EN Giovedì' salesiano novembre 2025

PEM [Missionary Spirituality Project] pilgrimage

We are at the Missionary Spirituality Center in Buenos Aires, under the gaze of the Virgin Help of Christians of Mornese, brought by the first missionaries at the request of Don Costamagna.

We are beginning the second year of preparation for the 150th anniversary of the first missionary expedition. This year, we have accompanied our Salesian brothers on their anniversary, which heralded our own. We all hold in our hearts the joy and emotion of the very recent canonization of Sister Maria Troncatti, which has rekindled the fire of mission even more in each of us.

Among the many initiatives preparing us for this 150th anniversary, the Institute will offer us the opportunity to participate virtually in the PEM [Missionary Spirituality Project] next year in 2026. This way, we can all experience walking in the footsteps of the first missionaries, discovering the places where they carried out their mission, listening to their stories, dreaming their dreams, and allowing the Spirit to open us to the new horizons of the Kingdom with an ever-burning fire.

Many of you will have heard of this Institute initiative, in which many FMA—including Sr. Ciri Hernández and Sr. Alaíde Deretti, Councilors for the Missions Sector—and some lay women have participated in person and with genuine enthusiasm over the last three six-year periods. Now, thanks to technology, we will all have the opportunity to participate!

But how did the PEM [Missionary Spirituality Project] come about?

It was born from an inspiration, a true prophetic dream of Mother Antonia Colombo when, in the context of the 125th anniversary of the first missionary expedition, the celebration of world gratitude was held in the south of Chile and Argentina. Even though the first FMA arrived in Montevideo, Sister Rosalba Perotti, then Vicar General, announced on January 30, 2002: "The city of Punta Arenas, in the southern lands, will be the symbolic reference of the great missionary odyssey". Mother General in her circular letter of March (840) wrote "One of the ways to celebrate [this anniversary] is to undertake together a journey of memory in search of **the secret** of our first Sisters sent to mission lands." She added, "I too will retrace some of the steps marked by the adventurous journeys of our first Sisters, on an itinerary that will take me, in April, to Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego. These will be symbolic stops to give thanks, encouragement, and together continue to dream dreams that, taking us back to our charismatic origins, relaunch us toward new horizons."

At the end of the celebration, Mother, deeply moved by the experience, felt moved to invite the entire Institute to "come and see," to "touch with their own hands" a reality that must have been much more difficult for the first FMA. Thus, at the GC XXI, Mother proposed to the Chapter Assembly the creation of the Missionary Spirituality Project, which was immediately accepted. Without further ado, the Project was entrusted to the Missions Sector and its concrete implementation to CICSAL.

A few months later, as the leadership team pondered the what, the how, the challenges posed by the climate, the vast distances, the need to better understand those places and their history... and took the first steps, Mother Antonia's encouraging words arrived:

"Go forward with enthusiasm and in communion. The idea comes from the Holy Spirit, and He will show the next steps. The important thing is to ensure the quality of the proposals and the purpose: to rekindle in today's FMA the conditions that nourish the ardor of the *Da mihi animas caetera tolle*." And she concluded: "I accompany you with keen interest." (email reply, March 24, 2004)

For this reason, today we continue to move forward, confident that the Spirit will continue to guide us and Mother Antonia will accompany us with the same lively interest.

The clear **objective** of the PEM [Missionary Spirituality Project], therefore, from the beginning was to rekindle the missionary fire of the origins within the FMA communities and the educating communities, drawing on the lived experience of those first generous and courageous Sisters.

We all remember the words of our Constitutions, which in Article 75 tell us: "The missionary dimension—an essential element of the identity of the Institute and the expression of its universality—has

been part of our history since the beginning," and we want to continue to be driven by the "strong missionary characteristic" that Don Bosco impressed upon the Institute (Constitution Article 1).

Therefore, the PEM [Missionary Spirituality Project] aims to offer every FMA the opportunity to deepen her formation, drawing on the missionary experience and spirituality of the origins, the simple and self-sacrificing life of the first Sisters, but also on some of the realities of the Institute's missionary presence today. This is inspired in part by different criteria, enlightened by a renewed theology of mission, but rooted in the same cornerstone: Jesus, missionary of the Father. This same experience remains open, certainly, to the members of the Salesian Family, to the lay men and women who share our life and mission, and even to young people.

May Mother Mazzarello, who wrote to Father Cagliero in December 1876: " Oh, what joy it would be if the Lord really did give us the grace of calling us to America!" (L 9,4), help us to make ourselves available to the Spirit so that He may rekindle within us the missionary fire, the fire of *Da mihi animas*.

What are the itineraries traveled so far and those to be traveled next year?

Up to now, the itineraries have been designed considering geography and the first mission sites that became centers of outreach for subsequent foundations and the first outline of future provinces. In the Southern Cone of America, three itineraries were organized from the beginning: the "Río de la Plata"; Northern Patagonia (the Apostolic Vicariate entrusted to Bishop Cagliero); and Southern Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego (the Apostolic Prefecture of Bishop Fagnano). In 2019, the first missions in Brazil were added, and next year we will have the news of the arrival of the FMA in Paraguay.

1. The "Río de la Plata," named after the great river on which the cities where the first expeditions landed, are located: Montevideo-Villa Colón (December 1877), after a temporary landing on the island of Flores due to a quarantine; Buenos Aires (January 1879)—which became the seat of the "first provincial," Sr. Maddalena Martini—and the surroundings of these cities, especially Las Piedras in Uruguay and La Boca in Buenos Aires (1879).

We also visit the sites of the first SDB landing (1875), with the first courtyard, the first SDB parish in the world, and the Valdocco of America in the Almagro neighborhood, where they later welcomed the FMA in a humble place they called "the ranchito" or "the hut of Bethlehem." Soon, however, they were able to live in a house of their own and pray in the first sanctuary built in honor of Mary Help of Christians in America.

In these places, in addition to that of Sr. Maddalena Martini, the names of Sr. Angela Vallese, Teresina Mazzarello, the Borgna sisters (Giovanna and Emilia), Vittoria Cantù, Ottavia Bussolino, Teresa Gedda, Giuseppina Vergniaud, Giuseppina Pacotto, Angela Cassulo, and many others become familiar. And the Salesians, Father Giovanni Cagliero, Father Bodrato from Mornesino, Father Giacomo Costamagna, Father Luigi Lasagna...

2. The second itinerary takes the missionaries to their dream of Patagonia. The previous year, on a reconnaissance trip to the area, Father Costamagna had written with great emotion on May 24, 1879: "Don Bosco, we're here!!" The visit focused on the houses of Carmen de Patagones (1880) and Viedma (1884), on both banks of the Negro River, right on the frontiers of the indigenous territory. Viedma would be designated the seat of the vast Apostolic Vicariate of Bishop Cagliero.

From that center, the mission houses would multiply along the Negro River towards the west (Pringles, Conesa, Roca) and, near the sea, towards the north (Bahía Blanca, Fortín Mercedes) and south (Trelew, Rawson), penetrating ever deeper into the Patagonian territory inhabited by indigenous peoples, a few Argentines and emigrants. This land was marked by the footsteps of armies seeking to liberate the territory from the indigenous peoples who lived there. From Chile, crossing the Andes mountain range in 1899, the FMA arrived in Junín de los Andes, where the sanctity of Laura Vicuña flourished.

Here too, we find FMA of great apostolic courage and spirit of sacrifice, such as Sr. Angela Vallese, Giovanna Borgna, Angela Cassulo, Marie Magdeleine, Giuseppina Torta, Josefa Picardo, Isidora Braga, Teresa Michetti, Rosina Bosco, Don Bosco's great-grandniece, and many, many more... Brave Salesians who alternated their stays in the villages with long itinerant visits to the tribes of the interior of the Patagonian steppe, such as, in addition to Bishop Cagliari, and for a while also Bishop Fagnano, we find Domenico Milanese, who would baptize the young Zeffirino Namuncurà, now blessed. And then Bernardo Vacchina, Pietro Bonacina, Evasio Garrone... Here too, Artemide Zatti, the saintly nurse, would arrive later.

3. The third itinerary reaches the southernmost tip of Chilean and Argentine Patagonia and, after the Strait of Magellan, Tierra del Fuego. This is the territory of the Apostolic Prefecture entrusted by the Holy See to Bishop Giuseppe Fagnano. The SDB arrived in 1887 and the FMA in 1888. The first expedition was led by the pioneer Sister Angela Vallese, who was returning to America after visiting Don Bosco, who was near death, with the indigenous girl Luisa Peña. She came with four other FMA Sisters: Sisters Luisa Ruffino, Rosa Massobrio, Arcangela Marmo, and Luisa Nicola. They arrived in Punta Arenas, somewhat of a "capital of the South" at the time, and a few years later they were already in two missions on Dawson Island in the middle of the Strait, and in the Candelaria mission in Argentina's Tierra del Fuego (1895), a steppe near the sea where there was still no village, only the passage of the indigenous people to whom they were going to give their lives. They were also in Porvenir, in the Chilean part of Tierra del Fuego. There were also some small settlements on the shores of the Atlantic Ocean: Río Gallegos, Puerto Santa Cruz, and further away, the Malvinas Islands.

To the names mentioned above, many others can be added: Filomena Michetti, Antonietta Tapparello, Virginia Di Florio, Rosa Gutiérrez, María Ussher, and many, many others, from Italy, but also vocations born in Uruguay, Chile, Argentina... The first missions were immediately fruitful with vocations.

Father to all was Bishop Fagnano, the "Good Captain," as the natives called him. We remember many deserving SDBs of the early days, such as Giuseppe Maria Beauvoir, Maggiorino Borgatello, Giovanni Bernabé, Mario Migone... and then many equally heroic Salesian Coadjutor Brothers.

4. The fourth itinerary took us to Brazil, around the first houses founded in the state of São Paulo, where the SDBs were already present. The FMA arrived from Uruguay in 1892 and, until 1908, when the Institute's first Provinces were established and remained united with the Uruguayan Vice Province. They speak to us of the fruitfulness of the first missionaries who arrived in Montevideo and of the new vocations from those nations.

They took root in the Paraíba River valley, a region blessed by the presence of Our Lady of Aparecida and other manifestations of popular faith, first in Guaratinguetá, thanks to the generous mediation of the priest Bishop Joao Filippo, then to Lorena and Pindamonhangaba. The group of first missionaries (10 FMA and 2 novices) was led by Sister Teresa Rinaldi, vice-visitor.

Three years later, while they were on their way to found the communities of Ouro Preto and Ponte Nova in the state of Minas Gerais, and the Salesians that of Cachoeira do Campo, on November 5, 1895, these lands were bathed in the blood of Bishop Lasagna, his secretary, Sister Teresa Rinaldi, three other FMA, and a laywoman, in the terrible train crash at Juiz de Fora. A few days later, arriving in Montevideo to visit the houses in America, Mother Daghero was able to offer the Sisters consolation and hope. Schools and oratories multiplied among the poorest girls, the numerous emigrants to the state of São Paulo, then to Minas Gerais, Mato Grosso, and Río de Janeiro, and then to all of Brazil. Hospitals called "Santa Casa" and missions among the indigenous people were also accepted... The grain of wheat that fell in that land bore immense fruit...

5. We will finally have, for the first time, the itinerary of the missions in Paraguay, which began in 1900. It will be a surprise!

Our 2026 missionary adventure aims to be a historical-spiritual, apostolic, and fraternal experience, a journey together along new paths that help us renew those we travel every day.

We believe that in our missionary history the unique story of salvation is fulfilled, in which God called the missionaries of yesterday to participate and calls us to participate as well, and in which we ourselves are evangelized.

We believe that in this history, the Word of God resounded for the missionaries of yesterday and will resonate for us too, so we want to conduct a *lectio divina* of our missionary history.

We will have moments of *lectio*, that is, moments to get to know the missionaries, to better understand their stories, their context, the challenges they encountered, to get to know the "holy land" where God has led each one, to look at them with the eyes of yesterday, in order not to betray the Word the Sisters heard and understand their way of living it, but also to learn about the stories of today.

We will have spaces for *meditation* and reflection, allowing the Word Incarnate in the "particular world" of each mission to fall into the silence of our hearts, facilitating a new form of listening that can illuminate our lives today.

There will be moments of *prayer*, of personal and shared prayer, to respond to the message we have heard, to ask for help, to intercede in the face of the many difficult situations of our present.

We will be invited to *contemplate* the action of the Spirit, Who was already present in the various mission fields as He is present today in every reality, of the Word Who grows, of an Easter Pasch that is still fulfilled amid the passion and victory of love.

We will have spaces for collaboration and fraternal sharing, all missionaries from all over the world! The universal Church, the Universal Institute of Mary Help of Christians, Don Bosco and Maria Mazzarello. Together we will rekindle a great fire, because this is precisely the time to shake off the ashes, pile on the wood, and rekindle the fire.

Don Bosco and Maria Mazzarello, who would have liked to accompany their missionary sons and daughters to distant America, will come with us and help us continue to dream the dreams of the Kingdom.

We're waiting for you all!