

**Buonanotte dell'Ispettore AFW “Going out: bringing the Church to the
Market and Christ to the Prisons”
11 March 2014**

The province of Blessed Artemide Zatti (AFW) is the English-speaking province of West Africa, part of the Region of Africa-Madagascar. The province consists of Nigeria, Ghana, Liberia and Sierra Leone. It is vast and beautiful from the geographical point of view: we have National Parks with tropical forests, beaches with white sands and green seas, savanna and desert areas. Our four countries are rich in natural and human resources: oil, gold, diamonds, cocoa and rubber. Africa is indeed a rich Continent but it has been poorly administered for too many years. In AFW alone there are 200 million people living. According to the latest report of the United Nations, 119 million out of these 200 million are young people under 25! Fertile soil for the Salesian Mission! Certainly, as Fr Valentine De Pablo used to say: “Africa is for Don Bosco and Don Bosco is for Africa”.

AFW is young. Fr Pascual made AFW a province in February 2012 during the Team Visit in Nairobi! In 2004 we had 94 SDBs and in December 2013 we had 160. In 2004 there were 52 local confreres. Today they are 122, practically 80 % of our province are local confreres. Our median age is 33 years. We have 16 novices, 35 post-novices, 18 Practical Trainees and 24 students of Theology. We are happy and grateful to the Lord for this gift. It is a big responsibility from the point of view of formation. Another interesting point is the relatively high number of Salesian brothers: we have 20 at the moment, the majority of African origin. Ghana alone has 3 Salesian Priests and 9 coadjutor brothers, 8 of them with perpetual vows. Our formation houses, following the example of Pope Francis when he was Provincial of the Jesuits in Argentina, pray frequently to Bl. Zatti for Salesian Brother vocations. I do believe that Bl. Zatti has a special love for the AFW Province!

Pope Francis has invited us “to go out, without fear, to serve”; to overcome self-referentiality, to go out to the peripheries of suffering to serve the unloved and the forgotten”. In our fourth Provincial Chapter we decided to take concrete steps in this line: to bring the church to the market and Christ to the prison, where teenagers and young people have been waiting for Don Bosco for such a long time.

I will share with you two beautiful experiences I have had recently. The first one was in Abuja: during the provincial visitation the confrere in charge of the community invited me to go to an open African market to hear confessions and to celebrate Mass at 11.00 a.m., which is the rush hour for business. I believe not many of you have ever experienced the busyness of an African Market. We arrived around 10.00 a.m. I sat on a chair, not expecting anybody to stop business and come for confession. However, to my surprise people started to come and kneel under the tropical sun of Abuja. “Fr, it has been 22 years since I made my last confession...”... The second one: “35 years, I am a Catholic, I saw you and I felt an inner voice to come and confess my sins...”. By then some canopies had been built, a small speaker brought and I started the celebration of Mass...more than 200 people stopped business and celebrated Mass in the market on market day! After the Mass some of them approached me and asked me to bless their shops. The words of Pope Francis resounded then more powerfully in my heart: “do not fear, bring the Church to the streets, to the markets, to the offices, to the stadiums...using a language people can understand”. People are there, waiting for us, like the little African children of the

missionary dream of Don Bosco, telling us: “we have been waiting for you for such a long time.”

The **second experience** was in Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone, a country that suffered a devastating civil war for 30 years. In our fourth Provincial Chapter we decided that the Salesians had to reach out to teenagers and young people in the prisons in Sierra Leone. During my provincial visitation I asked if any steps had been taken to accomplish that objective and I was told “not yet”. I asked them to organize immediately a meeting with the Director General of Sierra Leone Prisons. By 3.00 p.m., three Salesians and one lay person were sitting in front of the Director and his Deputy. The first thing the Director said was: “We know about Don Bosco. We have been waiting for you for a long time”. Again those words of the children in the missionary dream of Don Bosco resounded in my heart. An immediate visit was organized and for the first time in thirty years Salesians entered Pademba prison. It is a prison designed for 300 people, overcrowded with 1876 inmates.

The smell in the cells was strong and sharp. It was an image of hell here on earth. We visited the whole prison. Everything was dilapidated, dirty, abandoned, apart from a chapel built by a Catholic missionary. There was no drinkable water; inmates got only one meal a day, often only plain rice. There was nowhere to wash clothes or to have a shower. I met an 18 year old boy called John Bosco. I said to him joking: “with that name you shouldn’t be here”. I asked him why he was there. He said he was an orphan and that he was roaming the streets one night when the police caught him and brought him directly to the prison without telling anybody. He spent two years of his life in that hell. “He was used as a girl”, he told me. He ate once a day. He had to fan the macho boys the whole night long, against mosquitoes and the heat and other things. He could have been released on bail for only 10,000 Leones, the equivalent of 2 USD but nobody knew he was there.

Today John Bosco is out of Pademba prison living in a house with other teenager boys, former inmates, who are either learning a trade or pursuing studies. Don Bosco changed their lives. They didn’t come to him. Don Bosco went to them offering a helping hand. At the moment Bro. Lothar, the director of Don Bosco Fambul, is sinking a borehole in Pademba Prison, building a water tower, toilets and shower rooms, providing books for the library and a workshop to train inmates. Everything will be directly under the supervision of the Salesians and lay people. Two social workers and two counsellors are already listening to their stories and providing good advice. Every Friday the whole community goes to the Prison to celebrate Mass. They asked the young ones to be altar boys in order to discover those who are minors, to get those who are there for minor offences released on bail and bring them to the Don Bosco shelter. The Salesians tell me that the prisoners sing beautifully. They are happy to sit in benches at least once a week to listen to the Word of God. The Salesians say it is difficult for them to leave the prison to return to the community. They feel united and reaffirmed in their Salesian vocation, now more than ever.

We need new missionary enthusiasm if we want to renew the face of the Salesian Congregation! We have to go out, to accept the challenges of new missionary frontiers¹, to reach out to poor young people, to be more innovative, to leave our places of security and

¹ *Evangelii Gaudium* 27 “I dream of a 'missionary option', that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channelled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation”.

to bring the joy of the Gospel to the young. That is our mission:² by “going out, by evangelizing the peripheries” we are truly becoming what we are called to be, and in that process we find holiness and happiness. Good night.

Fr. Jorge Crisafulli
Provincial AFW

² *Evangelii Gaudium* 80 “In fidelity to the example of the Master, it is vitally important for the Church today to go forth and preach the Gospel to all: to all places, on all occasions, without hesitation, reluctance or fear. The joy of the Gospel is for all people: no one can be excluded...“It is striking that even some who clearly have solid doctrinal and spiritual convictions frequently fall into a lifestyle which leads to an attachment to financial security, or to a desire for power or human glory at all cost, rather than giving their lives to others in mission. Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of missionary enthusiasm!” .