

Goodnight by the Provincial of CRO
The "Youth for youth" Project
31st March 2014

Dear Confreres,

I take this occasion to greet you all and invite you to thank God for the 100 years of Salesian presence in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Our arrival and growth went very well from 1913 until the Second World War. After that a good part of central and eastern Europe fell under the dictatorship of communist ideology, which immediately lined up against religion, and especially against the Roman Catholic Church. Our works were taken off us, and we here chased into the sacristies of the churches left to give the appearance of freedom of religion. But the Lord had his way. He sent vocations into a situation that was barely liveable. We grew day by day until the fall of the Berlin Wall, when we had our first democratic elections in 1990. In Croatia too there were rays of a brighter future in every field especially the religious field. Once again we could freely hear the confessions of the faithful without fear or obstacles and not only this, but we could also get out of the sacristies-catacombs and carry out our educational and pastoral activity. But I should also note that the Salesians in Croatia even under the communist system, since the foundation of an autonomous Salesian Province in the Seventies undertook some initiatives of an educational kind with altar servers.

As part of parish pastoral work they succeeded in setting up summer camps for them, where around 500 boys would come together. I came as an altar server myself to these camps, and this was my first contact with the Salesians. Up until the 1980s this work expanded to include secondary school youngsters. The first organised group as such arrived at Rijeka in 1989. Then there was the war with Serbia which was fighting all the ex-Yugoslavia countries. 1/3 of Croatia was under Serbian occupation. In that almost desperate situation, the Youth Ministry delegate, Fr Josip Stanic and his team organised the first youth meeting for our Salesian parishes. Given all the dangers of the situation and all the fear they were still able to organise it. Almost 290 young people turned up at Rijeka, and the meeting went over two days. Encouraged by the positive effect of this event they organised and carried out the first school for young leaders and this began in April 1994.

Leadership formation lasted two years. Eight weekend meetings were organised. 65 young leaders came to the first school with the Salesians. As a result of this school various groups grew in the parishes: prayer, charitable groups, sports, music, theatre, leisure. Working conditions were difficult and restricted. On the one hand there was a lack of suitable space and on the other, some Salesians who were accustomed to working alone saw these things as a "bother". They did not know how to be part of the current pastoral scene. But these problems of change of mentality were overcome. From an attitude of "what do I do with them" we shifted to "I need so many leaders for so many new projects". The leadership school improved over the years. But there was still lacking a good connection at local level since accompaniment of the young was missing, and for this we had to work on the Salesians themselves. Things went on this way then till 2001. That year Fr Josip Krpić urged on by the young people themselves and by the Salesian Cooperators began forming leaders outside Salesian contexts. In 2002 a pilot programme in Požega Diocese began.

In 2003 the Croatian Episcopal Conference (HBK) took up this project in its own right, calling it "Youth for youth". The chief players though were the Salesians, Salesian Sisters,

Salesian Cooperators and the Salesian Youth Movement, in other words the Salesian Family. The first year there were 5 dioceses who asked for this project “Youth for youth” in their diocese. A year later another three. After 5 years the Bosnia and Herzegovina Episcopal Conference took it up. Today it is in nearly all dioceses, in fact some are now able to run it on their own, while others still need help from the national youth ministry office. We need to add that the members of this office in the HBK are the leaders from those early days, today all Salesian Cooperators.

We have had special support from the Bishop responsible for youth in the Episcopal Conference. This office, as well as accompaniment of youth, has also seen to organising the national youth gathering every two years. In recent years this has usually attracted around 20,000 young people. At the level of the Croatian Province, since 2009 the project has been split in two: first year for so-called pre-leadership, and the second year for leaders. Materials have also been prepared which are suitable for the pre-leadership and leadership formation at local level.

Here in summary are the results of this project:

1. The first to benefit are the young people themselves. Until today the leadership school has been attended by 800 young people from our communities and a further 3000 have come through the national Office.
2. At the beginning the programme was run by the Salesians, but today you could say it is a SF project.
3. Thanks to this project there is a good number of young people who have discovered their vocation. The dioceses have already ordained priests from the project while others have entered male and female religious Congregations. There are 8 young Salesians in our province from it, including 2 already ordained priests. There are about 20 Salesian Cooperators from it.
4. There is a growing awareness of belonging to the Salesian Youth Movement.
5. There are also around twenty catechists in our parishes, but we lack information on how many there are in the dioceses.
6. The spiritual dimension is notable.: sacramental life for the young has grown (confession and communion), devotion to Mary through the rosary said together from 1 May till 31 October in Salesian communities, prayer groups (adoration), vigils (during the visit by the relic of Don Bosco: of 16 days duration, there were vigils on 10 evenings).
7. Involvement in weekend oratories and summer camps, sports and leisure groups. Each year: Don Bosco Festival – new hymns about Don Bosco and the life of the young come out on a CD.
8. Various kinds of volunteer activity: school, parish, charitable efforts ...
9. In the mass media field we have carried out a study to produce video and audio materials in view of new evangelisation via Internet. We have also made a mobile app called New Eva for new evangelisation.
10. There are planned pilgrimages to places of Salesian spirituality: Colle don Bosco, Turin – Valdocco, Chieri, Mondonio, Mornese.

I conclude by thanking you for your attention and ask you for a prayer so that the “Youth for youth” project continues and brings good results. Good night!

Fr Pejo Orkić
Provincial CRO