

# Salesians in Azerbaijan, sowers of hope

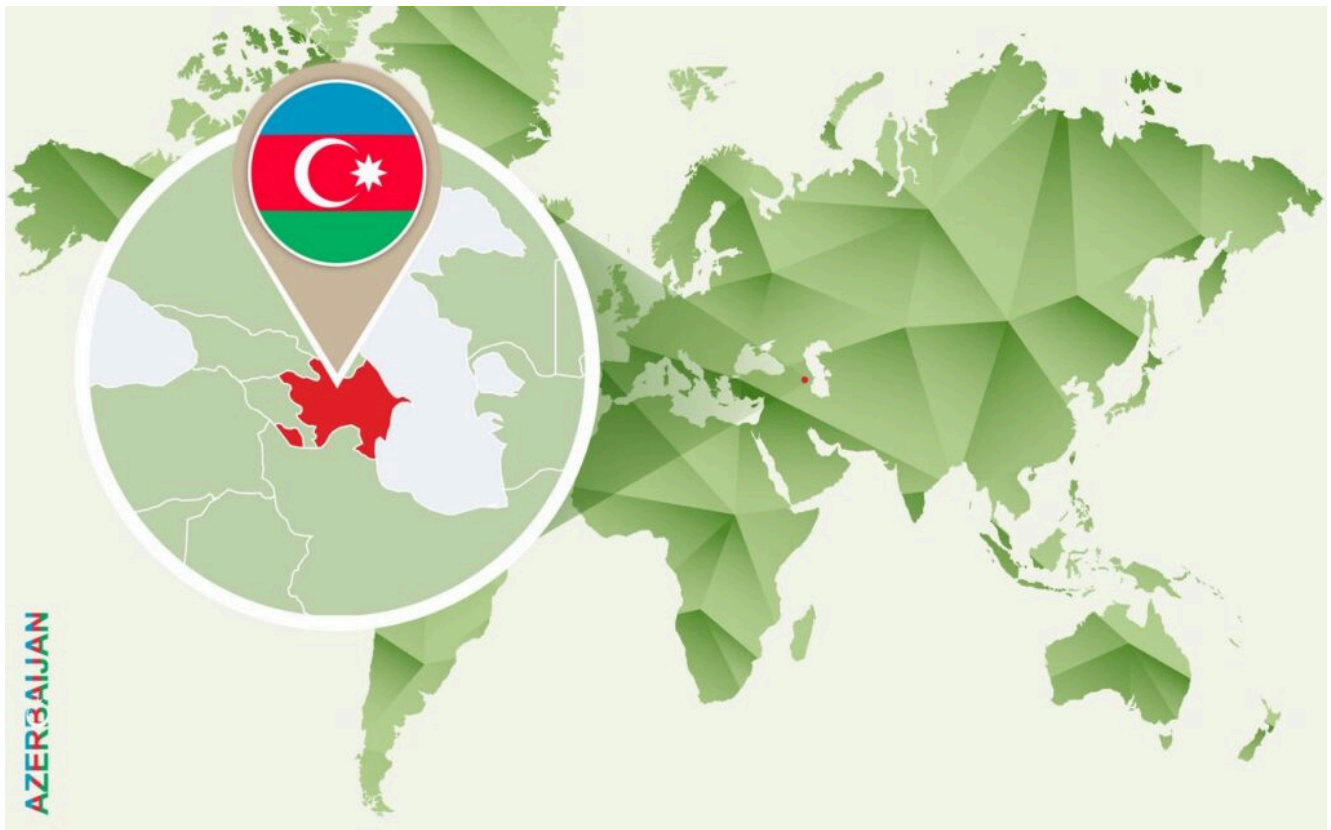
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*The story of a young man expressing gratitude for the work of the only Salesian community in Azerbaijan, a reference point for many young people in the capital.*

Azerbaijan (officially the Republic of Azerbaijan), is a country located in the Transcaucasus region, bordering the Caspian Sea to the east, Russia to the north, Georgia and Armenia to the west and Iran to the south. It is home to a population of around 10 million who speak the Azerbaijani language, which belongs to the Turkic language family. The country's main wealth is oil and gas. It became independent in 1918 and was the first secular democratic state with a Muslim majority. Its independence lasted only two years, however, as it was incorporated into the newly formed Soviet Union in 1920. With the fall of the Soviet Empire, it regained independence in 1991. During this period, the Nagorno Karabakh region, inhabited mainly by Armenians, declared its independence under the name of the Artsakh Republic, an event that led to several wars. It reappeared in the international news after the recent attack by Azerbaijan on 19 September 2023, which led to the suppression of the aforementioned republic and the exodus of almost all Armenian inhabitants from this region to Armenia.

The presence of Christians in this region is mentioned as far back as the first centuries after Christ. In the 4th century, the Caucasian king Urnayr officially declared Christianity the state religion and it remained so until the 8th century when, following a war, Islam imposed itself. Today, the majority religion is Shia-dominated Islam, and Christians of all denominations account for 2.6% of the population.

The presence of Catholics in the country dates back to 1882 when a parish was founded; in 1915, a church was built in the capital Baku, demolished by the Soviet communists in 1931, dissolving the community and arresting the parish priest, who died a year later in a forced labour camp.



Following the fall of Communism, the Catholic community of Baku was reconstituted in 1997, and after a visit to Azerbaijan by Pope Saint John Paul II in 2002, land was obtained for the construction of a new church, consecrated to the Immaculate Conception and inaugurated on 29 April 2007.

The Salesian presence in Azerbaijan was opened in the Jubilee year 2000, in the capital Baku, the largest city in the country, with a population of more than 2 million.

The rector of the Salesian house in Baku, Fr Martin Bonkáló, tells us that the Salesian mission is embodied in different and ever new contexts, as a response to the challenges and needs of youth. The echoes of Don Bosco can also be heard in Azerbaijan, in Central Asia, a country with a Muslim majority, which experienced the Soviet regime in the last century.

Seven Salesians live and work in this house, including five priests and two brothers belonging to the Slovak Province (SLK), who take care of St Mary's parish and the Maryam Education Centre. This is a work for the integral development of young people: evangelisation, catechesis, education and social aid.

Throughout the country, Catholics are a small flock professing their faith with

courage and hope. The work of the Salesians is therefore based on witnessing to God's love in various forms. Relationships with the people are open, clear and friendly: this favours the flourishing of educational action.



Young people are like any other young people in the world, with their fears and talents. Their greatest challenge is to receive a good education to earn a living. Young people seek an educational environment and people who are capable on a professional and human level, who know how to communicate the path to follow in order to seek the meaning of life.

The Salesians are committed to looking to the future, to enrich their presence in the country, to make it more international, and to remain faithful to the charism transmitted by Don Bosco, with joy and enthusiasm.



Shamil, a former pupil of the Salesian centre in Baku, recounts: “I came into contact with the Maryam centre in 2012 and that encounter proved to be fundamental for the rest of my life. At that time, I had done my military service and was finishing my education at a computer college. I needed to grow professionally, but at the same time I badly needed friends in the real world! I arrived in Baku from the province and met a friend of mine on the street who told me about the Maryam Centre. So we went together to visit it and from there a beautiful chapter in my life began. From the first day, I found myself in a different world, not easy to explain, I say in my heart that it is an island. It became for me an island of humanity, in the modern world often interested in using people, and not really caring about them.

Without me even realising it, the programme at the youth centre had started and I was part of a team. Someone was playing volleyball, someone table tennis, a group of boys were strumming guitars.... Later, we sat in the refectory and everyone was given a chance to share a word to express their opinion on the day

gone by, their impressions or new ideas. I was a rather shy guy, yet I happily started talking about the day's events and general topics without any difficulty or restraint. Among the many courses at the centre, I decided to start with the Photoshop graphics course and the English language course. When I then had to leave my job for health reasons, I also lost a roof over my head. The solution was to work at the centre as a guard, with certain duties and responsibilities. I was on probation for a month and I am happy that I did not let anyone down and that I found a new home. When Fr Stefan started developing the Cisco Academy computer network project at the centre in 2014, my career path as a network engineer began. During the same period, I was able to learn three domestic trades: welding, electricity and plumbing. In 2016, I became an official Cisco instructor and have now been working as a network engineer for six years. This job has allowed me and my family to get back on our feet after years of very precarious living. In addition to my job, I teach courses on computer networks, became an animator and help organise summer camps for children. I can only be grateful to Don Bosco for everything he has given me in life”.

There are so many stories of young people like Shamil, who have managed to turn their lives around thanks to the work of the Salesians in Baku, and we hope that this work can prosper and continue to be fruitful.

Marco Fulgaro