

The Heart of Gold of Education

Why devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus is part of the DNA of the Salesian Congregation

A beautiful church that cost Don Bosco much “blood and tears”. He was already worn out by fatigue, and spent his last energies and years building this church requested by the Pope. It is also a place dear to all Salesians for many other reasons.

The golden statue in the bell tower, for example, is a sign of gratitude: it was donated by former students from Argentina to thank the Salesians for coming to their land.

Also because in a letter from 1883, Don Bosco wrote the memorable phrase: “Remember that education is a thing of the heart, and that God alone is its master, and we will not be able to succeed in anything if God does not teach us the skill, and does not put the keys in our hands.” The letter ended: “Pray for me, and always believe in the Sacred Heart of Jesus.”

Because devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus is part of the Salesian DNA.

The feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus encourages us to have a vulnerable heart. Only a heart that can be wounded is able to love. Thus, on this feast, we contemplate the open heart of Jesus to open our hearts to love as well. The heart is the ancestral symbol of love and many artists have painted the wound in Jesus’ heart with gold. The golden radiance of love streams out from the open heart towards us, and the gilding also shows us that our labours and wounds can be transformed into something precious.

Every church named after him and every devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus speaks of the Love of that divine heart, the heart of the Son of God, for each of his sons and daughters.

And it speaks of pain, it speaks of a love of God that is not always reciprocated. Today let me add another aspect. I think it also speaks of the pain of this Lord Jesus in the face of the suffering of many people, the discarding of others, the immigration of others without horizons, the loneliness and violence that many people suffer.



The statue of Jesus in attitude of blessing, standing above the bell tower of the Basilica of the Sacred Heart in Rome

I think it can be said that it speaks of all this, and at the same time it blesses, without a doubt, all that is done for the least, that is, the same thing that Jesus did when he walked the roads of Judea and Galilee.

That is why it is a beautiful sign that the Sacred Heart House is now the headquarters of the Congregation.

So many silver hearts

One of the joyful things that undoubtedly gladdens the “Heart of God himself” is one that I was able to see for myself, namely what is being done at the Salesian Don Bosco Foundation on the islands of Tenerife and Gran Canaria. I was there last week and, among the many things I experienced, I was able to see 140 educators working in the Foundation’s various projects (reception, accommodation, job training and subsequent job placement). And then I met another hundred or so teenagers and young adults who benefit from this Don Bosco service as the least among them. At the end of our precious meeting, they gave me a gift.

I was moved by it, because back in 1849 two young boys, Carlo Gastini and Felice Reviglio, had had the same idea and, in great secrecy, saving on food and jealously guarding their small tips, had managed to buy a gift for Don Bosco’s name day. On St John’s night they had gone to knock on the door of Don Bosco’s room. Think of his wonder and emotion at being

presented with two small silver hearts, accompanied by a few awkward words.

The hearts of young people are always the same, and even today, in the Canary Islands, in a small heart-shaped cardboard box, they placed more than a hundred hearts with the names of Nain, Rocio, Armiche, Mustapha, Xousef, Ainoha, Desiree, Abdjalil, Beatrice and Ibrahim, Yone and Mohamed and a hundred others, simply expressing something that came from the heart; sincere things of great value like these:

- Thank you for making this possible.
- Thank you for the second chance you gave me in life.
- I keep fighting. With you it is easier.
- Thank you for giving me joy again.
- Thank you for helping me to believe that I can do everything I set my mind to.
- Thank you for the food and the home.
- Thank you from the bottom of my heart.
- Thank you for helping me.
- Thank you for this opportunity to grow.
- Thank you for believing in us young people despite our situation...

And hundreds of similar expressions, addressed to Don Bosco and to the educators who in Don Bosco's name are with them every day.

I listened to what they shared with me, I heard some of their stories (many of them full of pain); I saw their looks and their smiles; and I felt very proud to be a Salesian and to belong to such a splendid family of brothers, educators and young people.

I thought, once again, that Don Bosco is more relevant and necessary than ever; and I thought of the educational finesse with which we accompany so many young people with great respect and sensitivity to their dreams.

Together we said a prayer addressed to the God who loves us all, to the God who blesses his sons and daughters. A prayer that made Christians, Muslims and Hindus feel at ease. At that moment, without any doubt, the Spirit of God embraced us all.

I was happy because, just as Don Bosco welcomed his first boys at Valdocco, the same thing is happening today in so many Valdocco's around the world.

When we speak of God's love, for many it is too abstract a concept. In the Sacred Heart of Jesus, God's love for us has become concrete, visible and perceivable. For us God has taken a human heart, in the Heart of Jesus he has opened his heart to us. Thus, through Jesus, we can bring our young people to the heart of God.

The story of the construction of the Church of Mary Help of Christians (3/3)

[*\(continuation from previous article\)*](#)

Always in action

But Providence must also be "sought". And in August Don Bosco wrote again to Count Cibrario, Secretary of the Order of St Maurcie, to remind him that the time had come to honour the second part of the financial commitment he had made two years earlier. From Genoa, fortunately, he received substantial offers from Count Pallavicini and Counts Viancino di Viancino; other offers reached him in September from Countess Callori di Vignale and likewise from other cities, Rome and Florence in particular.

However, a very cold winter soon arrived, with the consequent increase in consumer prices, including bread. Don Bosco went into a liquidity crisis. Between feeding hundreds of mouths and suspending building work, the choice was forced on him. Work on the church therefore stagnated, while debts grew. So,

on 4 December, Don Bosco took pen and paper and wrote to Cavalier Oreglia in Rome: "Collect lots of money, then come back, because we don't know where to get any more. It is true that Our Lady always does her part, but at the end of the year, all the providers ask for money." Great!

9 June 1868: solemn consecration of the Church of Mary Help of Christians

In January 1868 Don Bosco set about completing the interior decoration of the Church of Mary Help of Christians.

At Valdocco the situation was still quite serious. Don Bosco wrote to Cav. Oreglia in Rome: "Here we continue with very intense cold: today it reached 18 degrees below zero; despite the fire in the stove, the ice in my room would not melt. We have delayed rising time for the boys, and as most are still dressed for summer, each puts on two shirts, a jacket, two pairs of breeches, military coats; others keep the blankets over their shoulders throughout the day and look like carnival masquerades."

Fortunately, a week later the cold diminished and the metre of snow began to melt.

Meanwhile, the commemorative medal was being prepared in Rome. Don Bosco, once he had it in hand, had corrections made to the inscription and the thickness halved in order to save money. Even so, the amount of money collected was always less than what was needed. So, the collection for the chapel of St. Anne promoted by the Florentine noblewomen, in particular Countess Virginia Cambray Digny, wife of the Minister of Agriculture, Finance and Commerce, in mid-February, was still one sixth of the total (6000 lira). However, Don Bosco did not despair and invited the Countess to Turin: "I hope that on some occasion you will be able to visit us and see with your own eyes this majestic building, of which it can be said that every brick is an offering made by those now near and now far but always for grace received."

And so it really was. At the beginning of spring, he told the

Cavlier as usual (and he would print it shortly afterwards in the commemorative booklet (*The wonders of the Mother of God invoked under the title of Mary Help of Christians*): “I am swamped with expenses, many things to be settled, all the work to be resumed; do what you can but pray with faith. I think the time is right for those who want grace from Mary! We see one every day.”



Initial altar of the Church of Mary Help of Christians

Preparations for the feast

In mid-March, Archbishop Riccardi fixed the date for consecration of the church for the first fortnight in June. Everything was ready by then: the two bell towers on the façade surmounted by two archangels, the large golden statue on the dome already blessed by the archbishop, the five marble altars with their respective paintings, including the marvellous one of Mary Help of Christians with the child in her arms, surrounded by angels, apostles, evangelists, in a blaze of light and colour.

An exceptional plan for the preparation was then set in motion. First of all, it was a matter of finding the consecrating bishop; then contacting various bishops for the solemn celebrations in the morning and evening of each day of the Octave; then issuing personal invitations to dozens of distinguished benefactors, priests and lay people from all over Italy, many of whom were to be hosted in the house in a worthy manner; finally, it was a matter of preparing hundreds of children both to solemnise the pontifical and liturgical ceremonies with songs, and to participate in academies, games, parades, moments of joy and merriment.

Finally the big day

Three days before 9 June, the boys from the Lanzo boarding school arrived in Valdocco. On Sunday 7 June, *L'Unità*

Cattolica published the programme for the celebrations, and on Monday 8 June the first guests arrived and the arrival of the Duke of Aosta representing the Royal Family was announced. The boys from the Mirabello boarding school also arrived. The singers spent hours rehearsing the new Mass by Maestro De Vecchi and Fr Cagliero's new *Tantum Ergo*, as well as the solemn antiphon *Maria Succurre Miseris* also by Cagliero, which had been inspired by the polyphonic *Tu es Petrus* from the Vatican basilica.

The following morning, 9 June, at 5.30 a.m., passing between a double line of 1,200 festive and singing boys, the archbishop made the triple tour around the church and then with the clergy entered the church to perform the planned consecration ceremonies of the altars behind closed doors. It was only at 10.30 that the church was thrown open to the public, who attended the archbishop's Mass and Don Bosco's following Mass. The archbishop returned in the afternoon for the pontifical vespers, solemnized by the triple choir of singers: 150 tenors and basses at the foot of St Joseph's altar, 200 sopranos and contraltos on the dome, another 100 tenors and basses in the orchestra. Fr Cagliero conducted them, even without seeing them all, through an electric contraption designed for the occasion.



The old sacristy of the Church of Mary Help of Christians

It was a triumph of sacred music, an enchantment, something heavenly. Indescribable was the emotion of those present, who on leaving the church were also able to admire the external illumination of the façade and the dome surmounted by the illuminated statue of Mary Help of Christians.

And Don Bosco? All day surrounded by a crowd of benefactors and friends, moved beyond words, he did nothing but praise Our Lady. An "impossible" dream had come true.

An equally solemn octave

Solemn celebrations alternated morning and evening throughout the octave. They were unforgettable days, the most solemn Valdocco had ever seen. Don Bosco immediately made them widely known through a solid publication "[Remembrance of a solemnity in honour of Mary Help of Christians](#)".

On 17 June some peace returned to Valdocco, the young guests went back to their schools, the devotees to their homes; the church still lacked interior finishing touches, ornaments, furnishings... But the devotion to Mary Help of Christians, which by then had become "Don Bosco's Madonna" quickly spread throughout Piedmont, Italy, Europe and Latin America. Today in the world there are hundreds of churches dedicated to her, thousands of altars, millions of pictures and little images. Don Bosco repeats to everyone today, as he did to Fr Cagliero as he left for the missions in November 1875: "Place all your trust in Jesus Christ in the Blessed Sacrament and in Mary Help of Christians and you will see what miracles are."

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St Paul VI. The most Salesian Pope

Pope Montini knew the Salesians closely, appreciated them, always encouraged and supported them in their educational mission.

Other popes before him, and after him, have shown great signs of affection for the Salesian Society. We recall some of them.

The two Popes at the origin and development of Salesian work

There were two Popes with whom Don Bosco had direct dealings.

First of all, Blessed Pius IX, the Pope whom he supported at tragic times for the Church, whose authority, rights and prestige he defended, so much so that his opponents called him "the Garibaldi of the Vatican". He was reciprocated with numerous affectionate private audiences, many concessions and indulgences. The Pope also supported him financially. During his pontificate, the Salesian Society, its Constitutions, the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (FMA), the Pious Union of Salesian Cooperators, the Mary Help of Christians association were all approved. He appointed himself protector of the Society.

He was succeeded by Pope Leo XIII who in turn accepted to be the first Salesian Cooperator, treated Don Bosco with unusual warmth and granted him the privileges that were now essential for the rapid and prodigious development of the Congregation. He directed the first Apostolic Vicariate entrusted to the Salesians, appointing the first bishop in the person of Bishop Giovanni Cagliero in 1883. In his first audience with Fr Rua after Don Bosco's death, he was generous with advice for the consolidation of the Salesian Society.

The two (future) Popes who sat at Don Bosco's table

St Pius X as a simple canon met with Don Bosco in Turin in 1875, sat at his table and was enrolled among the Salesian Cooperators. He left highly edified. As Bishop and Patriarch of Venice he gave proof of benevolence towards the Salesian Society. In 1907 he signed the decree introducing the apostolic process of Don Bosco and in 1914 for St Dominic Savio as well. In 1908 he appointed Bishop Cagliero as Apostolic Delegate to Central America. He was the first Salesian Cooperator raised to the honour of the altars.

As a young priest in 1883, Pius XI also visited Don Bosco at the Oratory, staying there for two days. He sat at Don Bosco's table and left full of deep and pleasant memories. He spared no means to quickly promote the apostolic process of Don Bosco, wanting to set no less than the date of Easter 1934, the close of the Holy Year, as the date of his canonisation.

Thanks to him Dominic Savio's cause overcame difficulties that seemed insurmountable: in 1933 he signed the decree of the heroicity of his virtues; in 1936 he proclaimed the heroicity of the virtues of St Mary Mazzarello, whom he beatified on 20th November 1938. Other signs of predilection for the Salesian Society were the granting of the Indulgence of Sanctified Work (1922) and the elevation to the purple of Polish Cardinal Augustus Hlond (1927).

The most Salesian pope

If Pius XI was rightly called the "Pope of Don Bosco", perhaps just as rightly the "most Salesian Pope" was Pope St. Paul VI for the knowledge, esteem and affection shown to the Salesian society, without wishing to underestimate other previous or subsequent Popes. Father Giorgio, a journalist, was a great admirer of Don Bosco (not yet Blessed), whose autographed painting he kept in his study, and was often admired by young Giovanni Battista. During his studies in Turin, the young Montini had wavered between choosing the Benedictine life he had known at San Bernardino di Chiari (which later became a Salesian house, it still is today), and Salesian life. A few days after his priestly ordination (Brescia 29 May 1920), he asked the bishop, even before receiving his pastoral destination, if he could choose his own. In that case he would have liked to go with Don Bosco. The bishop decided instead on studies in Rome. But after one Montini who had failed to become a Salesian came another. A few years after that interview, his cousin Luigi (1906-1963) told him of his desire to become a priest too. The future pope, who knew him well, told him that given his lively temperament, Salesian life would be good for him and so he took advice from the famous Salesian Fr Cojazzi. The advice was positive, and upon hearing the news Fr Giovanni was so pleased that his cousin would take his place that he himself accompanied him to the Salesian missionary aspirantate in Ivrea. He would then be a missionary for 17 years in China and later in Brazil until his death. Completing the Salesianity of the Montini family was the

presence, for about ten years, in the Salesian house at Colle Don Bosco of one of Enrico's brothers, Luigi (1905-1973).

There is no need to say how close Bishop Montini was to the Salesians in the various responsibilities he assumed: for example as Substitute at the Secretariat of State or in the very early post-war period in Rome for the nascent Borgo Don Bosco work for the *sciuscià* (shoe-shine boys), then as Archbishop of Milan at the end of the 1950s asking them to take over the Arese *barabitt*, and finally as Pope in supporting the entire Salesian Congregation and Family, erecting among other things the Pontifical Salesian University and the Pontifical Faculty of Educational Sciences at the FMA Auxilium.

He spoke several times of his immense esteem for Salesian work, missionary work in particular, in private audiences given the Rector Major Fr Luigi Ricceri as well as in public audiences. One of the most famous was the private audience granted to the Chapter Members of General Chapter 20 on 20 December 1971. Obviously in many speeches given to the Salesians, of Milan in particular, he demonstrated a profound knowledge of the Salesian charism and its potential.

The story of the construction of the Church of Mary Help of Christians (2/3)

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The Lottery

The authorisation was granted very quickly, so the complex machine of collecting and evaluating the gifts and selling the

tickets was immediately set in motion in Valdocco: everything as indicated in the regulation plan circulated in the press. It was Cav. Federico Oreglia di Santo Stefano, a Salesian Brother, who personally worked to obtain names of prominent people to be included in the Promoters' catalogue, ask for other gifts, and find buyers or "sellers" of lottery tickets. The lottery was, of course, publicised in the city's Catholic press, although only after the closing of the deaf-mute lottery at the beginning of June.

The works continue, as well as expenses and debts

On 4 June the masonry work was already two metres above ground, but on 2 July Don Bosco was forced to resort urgently to a generous benefactor so that the master builder Buzzetti could pay the "workers' salary" (8000 euro). A few days later he again asked another aristocratic benefactor if he could undertake to pay for at least some of the four batches of tiles, planks and laths for the church roof over the course of the year, for a total expenditure of around 16,000 lire (64,000 euro). On 17 July it was the turn of a priest promoter of the lottery to be asked for urgent help in paying "another workers' salary": Don Bosco suggested that he get the money with an immediate bank loan, or rather prepare it for the end of the week when he himself would go to pick it up, or even better, to bring it directly to Valdocco where he could see the church under construction in person. In short, he was navigating by sight and the risk of foundering due to lack of liquidity was renewed every month.

On 10 August, he sent the printed forms to Countess Virginia Cambray Digny, wife of the Mayor of Florence, the new capital of the Kingdom, inviting her to personally promote the lottery. By the end of the month, part of the walls were already at roof level. And shortly before Christmas, she sent 400 tickets to Marquis Angelo Nobile Vitelleschi of Florence with a request to distribute them among known individuals.

The search for donations for the Valdocco lottery and the sale of the tickets would continue over the following years. Don

Bosco's circulars would spread especially to the centre north of the country. Even benefactors in Rome, the pope himself, would play their part. But why would they have committed themselves to selling lottery tickets to build a church that was not their own, moreover in a city that had just ceased to be the capital of the Kingdom (January 1865)?

There could have been many reasons, obviously including winning some nice prize, but certainly one of the most important was of a spiritual nature: to all those who had contributed to building the "Mary's house" on earth, at Valdocco, by means of alms in general or paying for items (windows, stained glass windows, altar, bells, vestments...) Don Bosco in the Virgin Mary's name, had guaranteed a special prize: "fine accommodation", a "room" not just anywhere, but "in paradise".

Our Lady seeks alms for her church

On 15 January 1867, the Prefecture of Turin issued a decree establishing the date for the lottery draw on 1 April. From Valdocco there was a rush to send the remaining tickets throughout Italy, with a request to return the unsold ones by mid-March so that they could be sent elsewhere before the draw.

Don Bosco, who had already been preparing for a second trip to Rome at the end of December 1866 (9 years after the first one), with a stopover in Florence, to try to reach an agreement between State and Church on the appointment of new bishops, took the opportunity to go back over the network of his Florentine and Roman friendships. He managed to sell many bundles of tickets, so much so that his travelling companion, Fr Francesia, urged the shipment of others, because "everyone wants some".



The basilica and the primitive square

If Turin charity, once the city was downgraded from its role as capital of the Kingdom, was in crisis, Florence's, on the other hand, was growing and so played its part with many generous aristocratic women; Bologna was no less worthy, with Marquis Prospero Bevilacqua and Countess Sassatelli. No was Milan lacking, even though it was to the Milanese Rosa Guenzati on 21 March that Don Bosco confided: "The lottery is nearing its end and we still have many tickets."

What was the final economic result of the lottery? About 90,000 lire [328,000 euro], a nice sum, one might say, but it was only a sixth of the money already spent; so much so that on 3 April Don Bosco had to ask a benefactor for an urgent loan of 5,000 lire [18,250 euro] for payment for building materials that could be delayed no further: some expected income had not turned up.

Our Lady intervenes

The following week, while negotiating about the side altars with Countess Virginia Cambray Digny of Florence – she had personally promoted a collection of funds for an altar to be dedicated to St Anne (Our Lady's mother) – Don Bosco informed her of the resumption of work and the hope (which turned out to be in vain) of being able to open the church within the year. He was always counting on the offerings for graces that Our Lady continually granted his donors, and wrote to everyone, to Cambray Digny herself, to Miss Pellico, sister of the famous Silvio, etc. Some of his female benefactors, incredulous, asked him for confirmation and Don Bosco repeated his request.



The Basilica of Mary Help of Christians as Don Bosco built it

The graces increased, their reputation spread and Don Bosco had to restrain himself because, as he wrote on 9 May to Cav. Oreglia di S. Stefano, a Salesian sent to Rome to seek charity: "I cannot write because I am too involved." Indeed, he could not fail to update his alms-giver the following

month: "A gentleman who had his arm healed immediately brought 3,000 lire [€11,000] used to pay part of the previous year's debts... I have never boasted of extraordinary things; I have always said that Our Lady Help of Christians has granted and still grants extraordinary graces to those who in some way contribute to the building of this church. I have always said and I still say: 'the offering will be made when grace is received, not before' [*italics in the original*]". And on 25 July he told Countess Callori about a girl he had taken in who was "mad and furious" and held down by two men; as soon as she was blessed she calmed down and went to confession.

If Our Lady was active, Don Bosco certainly was not standing still either. On 24 May he sent out another circular for the building and furnishing of the chapel of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary: he enclosed a form for the monthly offering, while he asked everyone for a Hail Mary for the donors. On the same day, with remarkable "nerve" he asked Mother Galeffi, Superior of the Oblates at Tor de Specchi in Rome, whether or not the 2000 *scudi* promised some time before for the altar of the Sacred Hearts was part of her renewed willingness to do other things for the church. On 4 July, he thanked Prince Orazio Falconieri di Carpegna of Rome for the gift of a chalice and an offering for the church. He wrote to everyone that the church was progressing and that he was awaiting promised gifts such as altars, bells, balustrades etc. The large offerings therefore came from aristocrats, the princes of the church, but there was no lack of "widow's mites", offerings from simple people: "Last week, in small offerings made for graces received, 3800 francs were recorded" [€12,800].

On 20 February 1867, the *Gazzetta Piemontese* gave the following news: "to the many calamities with which Italy is afflicted – [think of the third war of independence that has just ended], we must now add the reappearance of cholera." It was the beginning of the nightmare that would threaten Italy

for the next twelve months, with tens of thousands of deaths all over the country, including Rome, where the disease also claimed victims among civil and ecclesiastical dignitaries.

Don Bosco's benefactors were worried, but he reassured them: "none of those taking part in the construction of the church in honour of Mary will fall victim to these illnesses, as long as they put their trust in her", he wrote at the beginning of July to the Duchess of Sora.

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Don Bosco to Fr Orione: We will always be friends

Saint Louis Orione: "My most beautiful years were those spent in the Salesian Oratory."

An emotional recollection of the saintly Father Orione.

Who does not know the song *Giù dai colli, un dì lontano con la sola madre accanto* (Down from the hills, one day a long time ago, with just his mother beside him)? Very few, I would say, since it is still sung in dozens of languages in over 100 countries around the world. But I would think that very few would know the comment made by the elderly Fr (St) Louis Orione during the (sung!) mass on 31 January 1940 by the *Orionians* from Tortona at 4.45 a.m. (exactly the time when Don Bosco had died 52 years earlier). Here are his precise words (taken from Orione sources):

"The hymn to Don Bosco that begins with the words *Giù dai colli* was composed and set to music for Don Bosco's Beatification. The explanation of the first stanza is this. On the death of the saint, the government of the time, despite

the fact that all the young people wanted it and all Turin wanted it, did not allow Don Bosco's body to be buried at Mary Help of Christians, and it seemed to be a great favour that his beloved body be buried at Valsalice... a beautiful house! So, the body was taken to Valsalice and there, every year until the Beatification, the Salesian pupils went to visit their Father on the day of Don Bosco's death, to pray. After Don Bosco was beatified, his body was taken to Mary Help of Christians. And the verse you sang *Oggi, o Padre, torni ancora* (Today, Father, you return once more) also recalls this. It celebrates Don Bosco returning among the young again, from Valsalice – which is on a hill beyond the Po – to Turin, which is on the plain."

His memories of that day

Fr Orione continued: "The Lord gave me the grace to be present, in 1929, at that glorious moment, which was a triumph in Turin in celebration, amidst unspeakable joy and enthusiasm, I too was close to the triumphal float. The whole journey was made on foot from Valsalice to the Oratory. And with me, immediately behind it, was a man in a red shirt, a Garibaldino; we were close together, side by side. He was one of the oldest of Don Bosco's first pupils; when he heard that it was Don Bosco's body that was being transported, he too was behind the carriage. And they all sang: 'Don Bosco returns among the young once more.' It was a moment of joy; the young people sang and the people of Turin waved handkerchiefs and threw flowers. We also passed in front of the Royal Palace. I remember that the Prince of Piedmont stood on the balcony, surrounded by generals; the carriage stopped for a moment and he nodded his approval; the Salesian superiors bowed their heads, as if to thank him for that act of homage to Don Bosco. Then the carriage reached Mary Help of Christians. And a few minutes later the Prince also came, surrounded by members of the Royal Household, to pay an act of devotion to the new Blessed."

“My best years”

As a boy, Louis Orione had lived with Don Bosco for three years, from 1886 to 1889. He recalled them forty years later in these moving terms: “My best years were those spent in the Salesian Oratory. Oh, if only I could relive even a few of those days spent at the Oratory when Don Bosco was alive!” He had loved Don Bosco so much that he had been granted, by way of exception, to go to confession to him even when his physical strength was at its lowest. In the last of these conversations (17 December 1887) the holy educator had confided to him: “We will always be friends.”



During the moving of Don Bosco's body from Valsalice to the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians, we see Fr Louis Orione in a white surplice beside the casket

A total friendship, theirs, which is why it is not surprising that shortly afterwards 15-year-old Louis immediately joined the list of boys at Valdocco who offered their lives to the Lord so that their beloved Father's life may be preserved. The Lord did not accept his heroic request, but “reciprocated” his generosity with Don Bosco's first miracle after his death: on contact with his corpse, the index finger of Louis' right hand was reattached and healed. The boy, who was left-handed, had cut it while he was preparing small pieces of bread to be placed on Don Bosco's body which was displayed in the church of St Francis de Sales, to distribute as relics to the many devotees.

Nonetheless, the young man did not become a Salesian: on the contrary, he had the certainty that the Lord was calling him to another vocation, precisely after having “consulted” with Don Bosco before his tomb at Valsalice. And so Providence wanted there to be one less Salesian, but one more religious Family, the Orione Family, which would radiate, in new and original ways, the “imprint” received from Don Bosco: love for

the Blessed Sacrament and the sacraments of confession and communion, devotion to Our Lady and love for the Pope and the Church, the preventive system, apostolic charity towards “poor and abandoned” young people, etc.

And Fr Rua?

Fr Orione’s sincere and deep friendship with Don Bosco then became an equally sincere and deep friendship with Fr Rua, which continued until the latter’s death in 1910. In fact, as soon as he heard of the worsening of his health, Fr Orione immediately ordered a novena and rushed to his bedside. He would later recall this last visit with particular emotion: “When he fell ill, as I was in Messina. I telegraphed Turin to ask if I would still be able to see him alive if I left immediately. I was told yes; I took the train and left for Turin. Fr Rua welcomed me, smiling, and gave me his very special blessing for me and for all those who would come to our House. I assure you it was the blessing of a saint.”

When the news of his death reached him, he sent a telegram to Fr (Blessed) Philip Rinaldi: “a past pupil pupil of the venerable Don Bosco, I join with the Salesians in mourning the death of Fr Rua who was an unforgettable spiritual father to me. We are all praying here. Fr Orione.” The Salesians wanted to bury Fr Rua at Valsalice, next to Don Bosco, but there were difficulties from the city authorities. Immediately with another telegram, on 9 April, Fr Orione offered Fr Rinaldi his help: “If difficulties arise for burying Fr Rua at Valsalice, please telegraph me, I could easily help them.”

It was a great sacrifice for him not to be able to cross Italy from Messina to Turin to attend Fr Rua’s funeral. But now Bosco, Rua, Orione, Rinaldi are all in heaven, side by side in God’s one big family.

The story of the construction of the Church of Mary Help of Christians (1/3)

"Our Lady did it all", we are used to reading in Salesian spiritual literature, to indicate that the Virgin was at the origin of Don Bosco's whole story. If we apply those words to the construction of the Church of Mary Help of Christians, the truth of it is very well documented, always bearing in mind that, alongside heavenly intervention, Don Bosco also played his part, and how!

Launching the idea and first promises of grants (1863)

At the end of January and beginning of February 1863, Don Bosco sent out a lengthy circular about the purpose of a church, dedicated to Mary Help of Christians, which he had in mind to build at Valdocco: it was to serve the masses of young people taken in there and the twenty thousand souls from the surrounding area, with the further possibility of being erected as a parish by the diocesan authority.

Shortly afterwards, on 13 February, he informed Pope Pius IX, not only that the church was a parish church, but that it was already "under construction". He obtained the desired outcome from Rome: at the end of March he received 500 lira. Thanking the Cardinal Secretary of State Antonelli for the grant received, he wrote that "the works... are about to begin". In fact, in May he bought land and timber for the building site and in the summer the excavation work began, which continued until the autumn.

On the eve of the feast of Mary Help of Christians, 23 May, the Ministry of Grace, Justice and Worship, having heard the Mayor, Marquis Emanuele Luserna, declared that it was willing to provide a grant. Don Bosco took the opportunity to make an immediate appeal to the generosity of the first Secretary of the *Ordine Mauriziano* (The Orders of Sts Maurice and Lazaraus)

and the Mayor. He sent a twofold appeal to them on the same date: he asked the former, privately, for as big a grant as possible as possible, reminding him of the commitment he had made on the occasion of his visit to Valdocco; he asked the latter formally, officially, for the same, but dwelling in detail on the church to be built.

Early replies

The appeals made for offerings were followed by replies. The reply on 29 May from the secretary of the Order of St Maurice was negative for the current year, but not for the following year when a grant (amount unspecified) could be budgeted for. The reply from the Ministry on 26 July, however, was positive: 6,000 lire were allocated, but half would be delivered when the foundations were laid at ground level, and the other half when the church was roofed; everything, however, was conditional on the inspection and approval of a special government commission. Finally, on 11 December came the answer, unfortunately negative, from the city council: the municipality's financial contribution was only envisaged for parish churches, and Don Bosco's was not such. Nor, given the fact that the Diocese was a vacant see at that stage, could it easily be granted. Don Bosco then took a few days of reflection and on Christmas Eve reaffirmed his intention to the Mayor to build a large parish church to serve the "densely populated neighbourhood." If there was a failure in providing a grant, he would have to limit himself to a much smaller church. But this new appeal also fell on deaf ears.

1863 thus ended for Don Bosco with little to show for it in real terms, apart from a few general promises. There was cause for discouragement. But if the public authorities were lacking in financial support, Don Bosco thought, Divine Providence would not fail. He had experienced its strong presence some fifteen years earlier, during the construction of the church of St Francis de Sales. He therefore entrusted the engineer, Antonio Spezia, already known to him as an excellent professional, with the task of drawing up the plans for the

new church he had in mind. Among other things, he was to work, once again, free of charge.

The decisive year (1864)

In little more than a month the plans were ready, and at the end of January 1864 they were handed over to the municipal building commission. In the meantime, Don Bosco had asked the management of the State Railways of Upper Italy to transport the stones from Borgone in the lower Susa Valley to Turin free of charge. The favour was quickly granted, but the Building Commission was not so favourable. In mid-March it rejected the drawings that had been delivered due to some “construction irregularity”, inviting the engineer to modify them. Resubmitted on 14 May, they were found to be defective again on 23 May, with a further invitation to take them into account; alternatively, it was suggested that a different design be considered. Don Bosco accepted the first proposal, and on 27 May the revised project was approved and on 2 June the City Council issued the building permit.



First photo of the Church of Mary Help of Christians

Meanwhile Don Bosco had wasted no time. He had asked the Mayor to have the exact alignment of the sunken Via Cottolengo drawn up, in order to be able to raise it at his own expense with material from church excavations. In addition, he had sent out a printed circular throughout central and northern Italy, through some trusted benefactors, in which he presented the pastoral reasons for the new church, its dimensions, and its costs (which actually quadrupled during the course of construction). The appeal, addressed above all to “devotees of Mary”, was accompanied by a registration form for those who wished to indicate in advance the sum they would pay over the three-year period 1864-1866. The circular also indicated the possibility of offering materials for the church or other

items needed for it. In April the announcement was published in the Official Gazette of the Kingdom and in *L'Unità Cattolica*.

The work continued and Don Bosco had to always be there because of the constant requests for changes, especially regarding the demarcation lines on the irregular Via Cottolengo. In September he sent out a new circular to a wider circle of benefactors, modelled on the previous one, but specifying that the work would be finished within three years. He also sent a copy to Princes Tommaso and Eugenio of the House of Savoy and to Mayor Emanuele Luserna di Rorà; however, he only asked them, once again, to collaborate on the project by rectifying Via Cottolengo.

Debts, a lottery and much courage

At the end of January 1865, on the feast of St Francis de Sales when Salesians from various houses were gathered at Valdocco, Don Bosco told them of his intention to start a new lottery to raise funds for the continuation of the work (of excavation) for the church. However, he had to postpone it due to the simultaneous presence in the city of another work on behalf of deaf-mutes. As a result, the work, which would have resumed in the spring after the winter break, had no financial cover. So, Don Bosco urgently asked his friend and confrere from Mornese, Fr Domenico Pestarino, for a loan of 5000 lire (20,000 euro). He did not want to resort to a bank loan in the capital, since interest rates were too high. As if these thorny financial problems were not enough, others arose at the same time with the neighbours, in particular those in the Casa Bellezza. Don Bosco had to pay them compensation so he could deny them passage through the Via della Giardiniera, which then ceased to be a road.

Solemn laying of the foundation stone

The day finally came for the laying of the foundation stone of the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians on 27 April 1865. Three days before, Don Bosco issued the invitations in which

he announced that His Royal Highness Prince Amadeus of Savoy would lay the cornerstone, while the religious function would be presided over by the Bishop of Casale, Bishop Pietro Maria Ferrè. However, the latter passed away at the last minute and the solemn ceremony was celebrated by the Bishop of Susa, Bishop Giovanni Antonio Odone, in the presence of the City Prefect, the Mayor, various City Councillors, benefactors, members of the city nobility and the Lottery Commission. Duke Amedeo's procession was welcomed to the sound of the royal march by the band and the children's choir at Valdocco, and Mirabello students. The city press acted as a sounding board for the festive event and Don Bosco, for his part, grasping its great political-religious significance, extended its historical scope with his own publications.



Mary Help of Christians Square and Church

Three days later, in a long and painful letter to Pope Pius IX about the difficult situation in which the Holy See found itself in in the face of the politics of the Kingdom of Italy, he mentioned the church with its walls already rising from ground level. He asked for a blessing on the ongoing enterprise and for gifts for the lottery he was about to launch. In fact, in mid-May he formally asked the Prefecture of Turin for authorisation, justifying it with the need to pay off the debts of the various oratories in Turin, to provide food, clothing, accommodation and schooling for the 880 or so pupils at Valdocco, and to continue the work on the Church of Mary Help of Christians. Obviously, he undertook to observe all the numerous legal provisions in this regard.

[\(continued\)](#)

Don Bosco's benefactors

Doing good for the young requires not only dedication but also huge material and financial resources. Don Bosco used to say "I trust in Divine Providence without limit, but Providence also wants to be helped by our own immense efforts"; said and done.

Don Bosco gave 20 precious "Reminders" to his departing missionaries, on 11 November 1875. The first was: "Seek souls, but not money, nor honours nor dignity."

Don Bosco himself had to go in search of money all his life, but he wanted his sons not to toil in seeking money, not to worry when they lacked it, not to lose their heads when they found some, but to be ready for every humiliation and sacrifice in the search for what was needed, with full trust in Divine Providence who would never fail them. And he gave them the example.

"The Saint of millions!"

Don Bosco handled large sums of money in his lifetime, collected at the price of enormous sacrifices, humiliating begging, lotteries that were hard to organise, endless wanderings. With this money he gave bread, clothing, lodging and work to many poor boys, bought houses, opened hospices and colleges, built churches, launched great printing and publishing initiatives, launched Salesian missions in America and, finally, already weakened by the aches and pains of old age, he erected the Basilica of the Sacred Heart in Rome, in obedience to the Pope.

Not everyone understood the spirit that animated him, not everyone appreciated his multifaceted activities and the anticlerical press indulged in ridiculous insinuations. On 4 April 1872 the Turin satirical periodical *Il Fischietto* said

Don Bosco had "fabulous funds", while at his death Luigi Pietracqua published a blasphemous sonnet in *Il Birichin* in which he called Don Bosco a cunning man "capable of drawing blood from a turnip" and described him as "the Saint of millions" because he would have counted millions by the handful without earning them through his own sweat.

Those who know the style of poverty in which the Saint lived and died can easily understand how unfair Pietracqua's satire was. Yes, Don Bosco was a skilful steward of the money that the charity of good people brought him, but he never kept anything for himself. The furniture in his little room at Valdocco consisted of an iron bed, a small table, a chair and, later, a sofa, with no curtains on the windows, no carpets, not even a bedside table. In his last illness, tormented by thirst, when they provided him with seltzer water to give him relief. He did not want to drink it, believing it to be an expensive drink. They needed to assure him that it only cost seven cents a bottle. A few days before he died, he ordered Fr Viglietti to look in the pockets of his clothes and give Fr Rua his purse, so that he could die without a penny in his pocket.

Philanthropic Aristocracy

Don Bosco's *Biographical Memoirs* and the *Epistolario* provide a wealth of documentation regarding his benefactors. There we find the names of almost 300 aristocratic families. It is impossible to list them all here.

Certainly, we must not make the mistake of limiting Don Bosco's benefactors to the aristocracy alone. He obtained help and disinterested collaboration from thousands of other people from the ecclesiastical and civil classes, the middle class and ordinary people, starting with the incomparable benefactor who was Mamma Margaret.

But let us look at one aristocrat who distinguished himself in supporting Don Bosco's work, pointing to the simple and delicate and at the same time, courageous

and apostolic attitude that he knew how to keep in order to receive and do good.

In 1866 Don Bosco addressed a letter to Countess Enrichetta Bosco di Ruffino, née Riccardi, who had been in contact with the Valdocco Oratory for years. She was one of the women who met weekly to repair the clothes of the young boarders. Here is the text:

“Worthy Countess,

I cannot go and visit you as I would like to, but I am coming in the person of Jesus Christ hidden beneath these rags which I recommend to you, so that in your charity you may mend them. It is a poor thing in temporal terms, but I hope that it will be a treasure for eternity for you.

God bless you, your labours and all your family, while I have the honour to be able to profess myself with full esteem

Your most obliged servant”.

Fr Bosco Gio. Turin, 16 May 1866



Don Bosco's letter to benefactors

In this letter Don Bosco apologises for not being able to go in person to visit the Countess. In return he sends her a bundle of rags from the Oratory boys to be patched up... *roba grama* (Piedmontese for rubbish) before human beings, but a precious treasure to those who clothe the naked for the love of Christ!

Some have tried to interpret Don Bosco's relations with the rich as ingratiating himself with the wealthy. But there is an authentic evangelical spirit here!

Father Carlo Crespi “apóstol de los pobres”

On 23 March 2023, the Church – after the examination of the theological virtues of Faith, Hope and Charity shown God and neighbour, and the cardinal virtues of Prudence, Justice, Fortitude and Temperance and the other related virtues, practised to a heroic degree –recognised the Servant of God Carlo Crespi Croci, Professed Priest of the Salesian Society of St John Bosco as Venerable.

Like John Bosco a dream marked his life

Going to Cuenca, in the square in front of the shrine of Mary Help of Christians, one’s gaze immediately falls on an interesting and imposing group of sculptures dedicated to an Italian whom the people of Cuenca still remember as the “apóstol de los pobres”. More specifically, it is a monument depicting a priest and a child at his side looking at him with filial affection. This extraordinary man who marked the human, spiritual and cultural rebirth of a people previously brought to its knees by poverty, backwardness and political conflicts is Father Carlo Crespi, a Salesian missionary. Originally from Legnano (Milan), he was born in 1891 as the third of thirteen children, to a wealthy and influential family. From an early age he showed particular intelligence, curiosity and generosity, which he put at the service of his father, a farmer on a local estate, and his mother Luigia, from whom he learnt at a very early age to pray the rosary and to keep the name of Mary always “on his lips”, as one of his former pupils would testify many years later. Like his brother Delfino, also a future missionary, he showed a particular interest in the beauty of creation, an inclination that would come in handy many years later when he found himself in the unexplored forests of Ecuador classifying new plant species. He attended the local school and at the age of twelve had his first

encounter with Salesians at the St Ambrose Institute in Milan. During his college years, following the teachings of St John Bosco, he learnt to put into practice the inseparable combination of joy and work. In this same period a "revelatory dream" marked the first important turning point in his life. He wrote in some notebooks: "The Virgin appeared in a dream and showed me a scene: on one side, the devil who wanted to grab me and drag me; on the other, the Divine Redeemer, with the cross, was showing me another way. I was dressed as a priest and had a beard; I stood on an old pulpit, around me a multitude of people eager to hear my words. The pulpit was not in a church, but in a hut." These were the first steps of the call to Salesian life that grew stronger and stronger. In 1903, he completed his studies at the Salesian high school in Valsalice. He told his father, who was worried about his future, confirming his priestly vocation in the Society of St John Bosco: "You see, father, a vocation is not imposed on you by anyone; it is God who calls; I feel called to become a Salesian." On 8 September 1907 he made his first religious profession, in 1910 his perpetual profession. In 1917 he was ordained a priest. These were the years dedicated to the passionate study of philosophy, theology and the teaching of natural sciences, music and mathematics. At the University of Padua he made an important scientific discovery: the existence of a hitherto unknown microorganism. In 1921 he received a doctorate in natural sciences, specialising in botany, and shortly afterwards a diploma in music.

Missionary in Ecuador

It was 1923 when he left as a missionary and landed in Guayaquil, Ecuador. He reached Quito and finally settled in Cuenca, where he remained until his death. "Bless me in the Lord and pray for me so that I may become a saint, so that I may immolate myself on the altar of pain and sacrifice every moment of my life," he wrote in 1925 to the then Rector Major Fr Philip Rinaldi, manifesting his desire to sacrifice himself completely for the missionary cause. Father Crespi spent the

first six months of 1925 in the forests of the Sucúa-Macas area. He set out to gain an in-depth knowledge of the language, territory, culture and spirituality of the Shuar ethnic group. Using his knowledge in the different areas of culture, he began a revolutionary and innovative work of evangelisation, made up of exchange and mutual enrichment of very different cultures. He was initially greeted with distrust, but Father Carlo brought interesting objects with him such as cloth, ammunition, mirrors, needles, and had the manner of someone who cared. He got to know the indigenous myths and re-presented them in a new interpretation, transformed and enriched by the light of the Catholic faith. Father Carlo soon became a friend, and the Christian message, conveyed with care and respect, was no longer the religion of the foreigner, but something that the people recognised as their own. Father Crespi realised that “only the man who approaches others, not to draw them into his own life, but to help them become ever more fully themselves, can truly be called a father” (Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter ‘Fratelli tutti’, 3 October 2020).

A hundred-year-old child!



The dream dimension marked his life again in 1936 when he fell ill with typhus and, despite the doctors’ predictions, recovered saying: “Around three o’clock in the morning, the door opened and Saint Teresa came in and said to me: *puer centum annorum, infirmitas haec non est ad mortem, longa tibi restat vita* (hundred-year-old child: this illness is not for death, you have a long life left).” Father Carlo was then 45 years old, and would live another 46 years. Now settled for good in Cuenca, the Servant of God brought about a real “*Revolución blanca*”. He set up an unprecedented work of human development, founding several works: the festive oratory, the Orientalist School for the formation of Salesian missionaries, the Cornelio Merchán primary school, the school of arts and

crafts (later the Salesian Technical College), the Quinta Agronomica or the first agricultural institute in the region, the Salesian Theatre, the Gran Casa of the community, the Dominic Savio Orphanage, the Carlo Crespi museum, still famous today for its numerous scientific exhibits. From Italy he brought in means and specialised personnel to invest in his projects.

Using his extraordinary knowledge in science and music, he organised conferences and concerts in embassies, theatres and forged friendships with leading families in Guayaquil and the capital. He established a relaxed relationship with the local government, although the latter was strongly anti-clerical. He obtained free customs clearance and coverage of transport costs to Cuenca for hundreds of crates of materials.

His works quickly became the beating heart of epoch-making social and cultural changes for the benefit of the population, especially the poorest. Father Carlo created new possibilities for life and did so through a project of evangelisation and development that gave the Cuenca population first and foremost autonomy for growth. As St John Paul II authoritatively stated in his 1991 Encyclical Letter *Centesimus annus*, "It is not merely a matter of 'giving from one's surplus', but of helping entire peoples which are presently excluded or marginalized to enter into the sphere of economic and human development."

Cuenca took on the face of a Church capable of inserting the teaching of the Gospel into an experiential model: the teaching of scripture and fundamental work activities (farming, livestock breeding and weaving) became the channel of access for making Jesus known to everyone. In perfect adherence to the teaching of St John Bosco, the Servant of God applied the "preventive system", offering young people in particular a kind of "preventive grace", an advance of trust to give possibilities for change, conversion, growth. Looking to Don Bosco, he knew how to harmonise pedagogy and theology, animating young people with games, films, theatrical

activities, celebrations and not least, catechism. For Father Carli, it was already possible to glimpse future good fathers of families. His exquisitely Eucharistic and Marian spirituality guided him in other exceptional undertakings, such as the organisation of the First Diocesan Eucharistic Congress in Cuenca in 1938 to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the death of St John Bosco. By virtue of its devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, Cuenca was once again confirmed as a Eucharistic City in those years. Immersed in apostolic labours and official business, Father Carlo never forgot his poor. Generations of Cuencans found in him a generous heart, capable of hospitality and fatherliness. In one hand he held a bell to “awaken” some young man in need of correction with a tap on the head; in the other he clutched food and money to donate to his poor. The old and faded cassock, the worn-out shoes, the frugal diet, the special dedication to children and the poor did not go unnoticed in the eyes of the Cuencans. Father Crespi was poor among the poor. The people welcomed him as a chosen Cuencan and begin to call him “Saint Carlo Crespi”. The civil authorities, won over by Father Crespi’s work, responded with numerous honours: he was declared “most illustrious inhabitant of Cuenca in the 20th century”. He received a doctorate *Honoris Causa post mortem* from the Salesian Polytechnic University.

Moved by hope

In 1962, a fire, probably the work of an arsonist, destroyed the Cornelio Merchàn Institute, the fruit of many years’ hard work. Father Carlo Crespi’s certainty that Mary Help of Christians would help him this time too became contagious: the inhabitants of Cuenca regained confidence and participated without hesitation in the reconstruction. A witness will recount years later: “the day after (the fire) Father Crespi was seen with his little bell and his big saucer collecting contributions from the city.”

By now elderly and tired, he was still in the shrine of Mary Help of Christians spreading devotion to the Virgin with the

same enthusiasm as in the past. He heard confessions and counselled endless lines of faithful. When it came to listening to them, schedules, meals and even sleep no longer counted. It was not even uncommon for Father Carlo to get up in the middle of the night to hear the confession of a sick or dying person. People had no doubts: he only looked at his neighbour with God's eyes. He knew how to recognise sin and weakness, without ever being scandalised or crushed by it. He did not judge, but understood, respected, loved. For the Cuencans, his confessional became the place where, in the words of Pope Francis, Father Carlo alleviated the wounds of humanity "with the oil of consolation" and "bandaged them with mercy" (*Misericordiae Vultus*, 2015). And as he healed, he was in turn healed by the experience of mercy received. The programme foretold in his youth by the "revelatory dream" from the Virgin Mary had finally found total fulfilment.

On 30 April 1982, at the age of 90, Father Carlo Crespi, in the silence and seclusion of the Santa Inés Clinic in Cuenca, held the rosary in his hands as his mother had taught him. It was time to close his eyes to this world to open them on eternity. A stream of moved and grieving people attended the funeral. Certain that it was a saint who had died, many flocked to touch his body one last time with some object; they hoped to still receive the protection of the father who had just left them. Even his confessional was stormed to preserve some small part of him.

Thus ended the earthly life of a man who, although aware of the remarkably comfortable life he could have led in his own home, accepted the Salesian call and, as a true imitator of Don Bosco, became a witness to a Church that exhorts one "to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the 'peripheries' in need of the light of the Gospel" (Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013). Father Carlo Crespi's life tells the Christians of yesterday and today how prayer can and must be inserted into the concrete of daily action, stimulating and inspiring it. While remaining totally Salesian

and totally Marian, he was a credible witness of an “evangelising style capable of impacting life” (Pope Francis, Address to Italian Catholic Action, 3 May 2014). To this day, his tomb and monument continue to be perennially adorned with fresh flowers and plaques of thanksgiving. While the reputation for sanctity of this illustrious son of Cuenca shows no sign of diminishing, the completion of the *Positio super virtutibus* marks an important step in the Cause of Beatification. All that remains is to await the wise judgement of the Church with confidence.

Mariafrancesca Oggianu

Collaborator of the Salesian Postulation



Don Bosco in Cambodia

Cooperation between lay people and religious for the education of the youth of Cambodia.

Cambodia is a country in Southeast Asia with over 90% of its population Buddhist and a very small Christian minority.

The presence of the Salesians of Don Bosco in Cambodia dates back to 1991, when the Salesians arrived from Thailand where they were taking care of the technical education of war refugees along the border between the two countries, under the leadership of Salesian Brother Roberto Panetto and Salesian past pupils from Bangkok.

After training some 3,000 young people, the latter, who were about to be repatriated to Cambodia, asked the Salesians to go

with them. The Salesians did not let that invitation fall on deaf ears, realising that that was where God wanted them at that moment, and that those were the young people calling on Don Bosco. The challenges were and are many, in a non-Christian cultural environment and in a very poor society.

On 24 May 1991, feast of Mary Help of Christians, the Salesian presence began in Cambodia, with an orphanage and the Don Bosco technical school in Phnom Penh, officially opened on the feast of Don Bosco, 31 January 1994. In 1992, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians also reached the country and their work offers hope to many poor and abandoned girls in a country where more than half the total population is female and where women are victims of violence, abuse and human trafficking.

The Salesians have established technical institutes and schools in five provinces of the country: Phnom Penh, Kep, Sihanoukville, Battambang and Poipet. The enormous educational and pastoral work is only made possible thanks to the invaluable contribution of the laity. Almost all the staff involved in the Salesian structures are former students who are continuously committed to giving the best to the students in formation. This is a concrete application of shared responsibility and of the many invitations to share the mission.

The Salesians have established an NGO in Cambodia with no religious affiliation. Commonly known as the fathers, brothers and sisters of Don Bosco, they are loved and respected by all. There is a great love and partnership between the Salesians and past pupils in Cambodia, which contributes to the popularity and 100% placement rate of the students over the last ten years, as Fr Arun Charles, an Indian missionary in Cambodia since 2010, recently appointed as coordinator of missionary animation in the East Asia-Oceania region, tells us. The Salesians encourage minors to complete the primary education cycle, through support projects for children, the construction of primary school buildings in poor villages, and

the management of some literacy centres. In Battambang, brick factories retain children to work as labourers, and there Salesian education aims to offer an alternative and hope for a different future.

One of the specialities of the Salesian mission in Cambodia is the hotel school, which provides instruction in hospitality, cooking and hotel management, having a full hotel to enable students to gain practical experience in their field, in addition to workshops and exercises.

The visit of the Rector Major Fr Juan Edmundo Vecchi in 1997, a very important moment of encouragement, focused on the exhortation to build an educative and pastoral community and to put Don Bosco's Preventive System into practice, has remained in their memory.

Don Bosco's missionary gaze continues to to be alive almost 10,000 km from Valdocco, always with and for the young, in the Salesian presences in Phnom Penh, Poipet and Sihanoukville.

Marco Fulgaro

Photo gallery Don Bosco in Cambodia

1 / 18



2 / 18



3 / 18



4 / 18



5 / 18



6 / 18



7 / 18



8 / 18



9 / 18



10 / 18



11 / 18



12 / 18



13 / 18



14 / 18



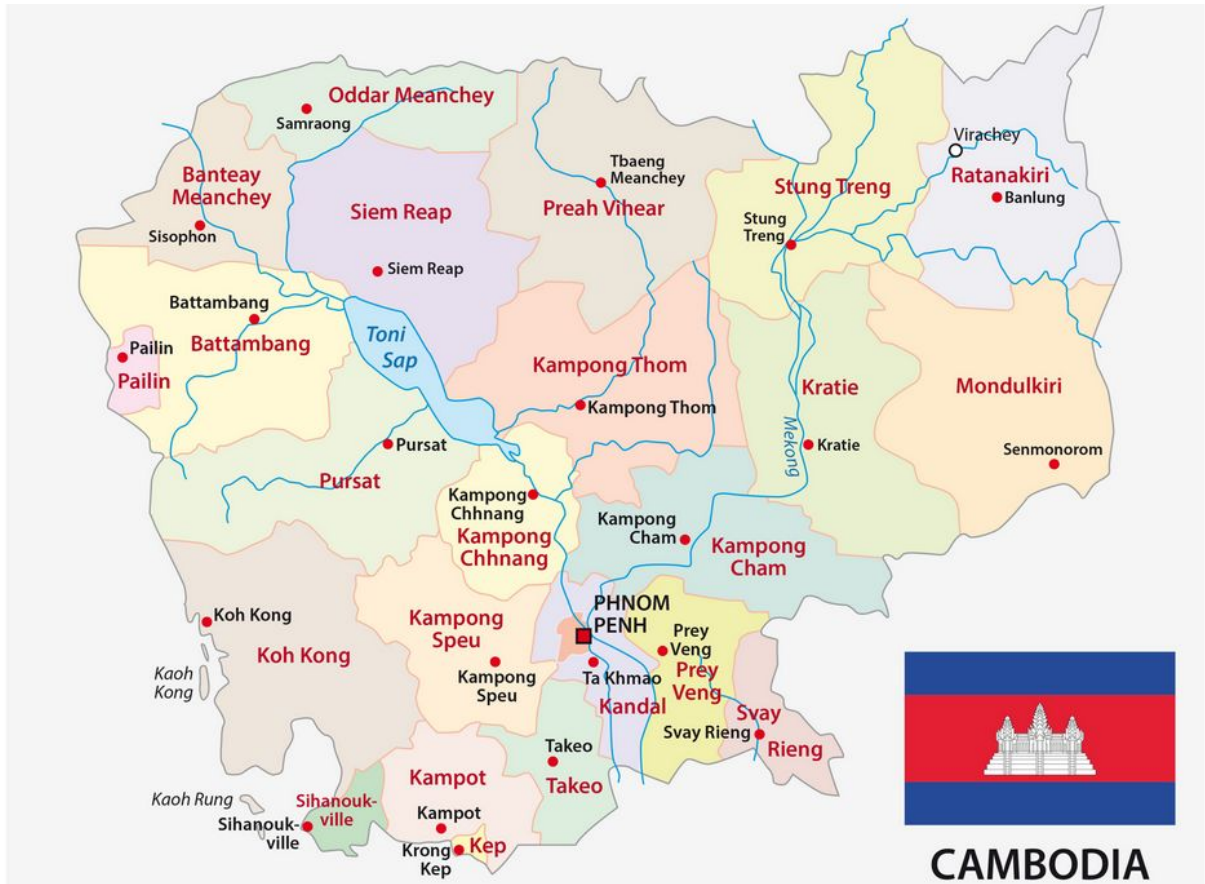
15 / 18



16 / 16



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St Francis de Sales. The Eucharist (6/8)

[\(continuation from previous article\)](#)

THE EUCHARIST IN SAINT FRANCIS DE SALES (6/8)

Francis received his First Communion and Confirmation at the age of about nine. From then on he received Communion every week or at least once a month.

God took possession of his heart and Francis would remain faithful to this friendship that would gradually become the love of his life.

His fidelity to Christian life continued and was strengthened during the ten years in Paris. "He received communion at least once a month, if he could not do so more often." And this for ten years!

Regarding his time in Padua we know that he went to Mass every day and that he received communion once a week. The Eucharist united with prayer became the nourishment of his Christian life and vocation. It is in this profound unity with the Lord that he perceived His will: it is here that the desire to be "all of God" matured.

Francis was ordained a priest on 18 December 1593 and the Eucharist would be at the heart of his days, and his strength for spending himself for others.

Here are some testimonies taken from the Beatification Process:

"It was easy to notice how he kept himself in deep recollection and attention before God: his eyes modestly lowered, his face recollected with a sweetness and serenity so

great that those who observed him carefully were struck and moved by it."

"When he celebrated Holy Mass he was completely different from how he usually was: a serene face, without distraction and, at the moment of communion, those who saw him were deeply impressed by his devotion."

St Vincent de Paul adds:

"When I repeated his words to myself, I felt such an admiration for him that I was led to see in him the man who best reproduced the Son of God living on earth."

We already know of his departure in 1594 as a missionary to the Chablais.

He spent his first months in the shelter of the Allinges fortress. Visiting what remains of this fortress, one is impressed by the chapel which has remained intact: small, dark, cold, made of stone. Here Francis celebrated the Eucharist every morning at around four o'clock and paused in prayer before going down to Thonon with a heart full of charity and mercy, drawn from the divine sacrament.

Francis treated people with respect, indeed with compassion, and "Some wished to make themselves feared; but he desired only to be loved, and to enter men's hearts through the doorway of affection" (J.P. Camus).

It is the Eucharist that sustained his initial struggles: he did not respond to insults, provocations, lynching; he related to everyone with warmth.

His first sermon as a sub-deacon had been on the subject of the Eucharist and it would certainly serve him well in the Chablais, because "this august sacrament" would be his warhorse: in the sermons he gave in the church of St Hippolytus, he would often address this subject and expound the Catholic point of view with clarity and passion.

The following testimony, addressed to his friend A. Favre, tells of the quality and ardour of his preaching on such an important subject:

"Yesterday M. d'Avully and the elders of the city, as they are called, came openly to my preaching, because they had heard that I was to speak about the august sacrament of the altar. They had such a desire to hear from me the exposition of what Catholics believe and their proofs concerning this mystery that, not having dared to come publicly, for fear of seeming to be ignoring the law they had imposed on themselves, they listened to me from a place where they could not be seen."

Little by little, the Body of the Lord infused his pastor's heart with gentleness, meekness, goodness, so that even his preacher's voice was affected: a calm and benevolent tone, never aggressive or polemical!

"I am convinced that he who preaches with love, preaches sufficiently against heretics, even if he does not say a single word or argue with them."

More eloquent than any treatise is this experience that took place on 25 May 1595.

At three in the morning, while engrossed in deep meditation on the most holy and august sacrament of the Eucharist, he felt moved to rapture by the Holy Spirit in an abundance of sweetness... and since his heart was overwhelmed by such delight, he was finally forced to throw himself to the ground and exclaim: "Lord, hold back the waves of your grace; withdraw them from me because I can no longer bear the greatness of your sweetness, which forces me to prostrate myself."

In 1596, after more than two years of catechesis, he decided to celebrate the three Christmas Masses. They were celebrated amidst general enthusiasm and emotion. Francis was happy! This midnight Mass on Christmas 1596 was one of the high points of his life. In this Mass was the Church, the Catholic Church re-established in its living foundation.

The Council of Trent had advocated the practice of the **Forty Hour Devotion**, which consisted of the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament for three consecutive days by the entire Christian community.

At the beginning of September 1597, they took place in Annemasse, on the outskirts of Geneva, in the presence of the bishop, Francis and other collaborators, with **much greater fruit than hoped for**. They were intense days of prayer, processions, sermons, masses. Over forty parishes participated with an incredible number of people.

Given this success, the following year they were held in Thonon. It was a feast lasting several days that exceeded all expectations. Everything ended late at night, with the last sermon given by Francis. He preached on the Eucharist.

Many scholars of the life and works of the saint maintain that only his great love for the Eucharist can explain the 'miracle' of the Chablais, that is, how this young priest was able to bring the entire vast region back to the Church in just four years.

And this love lasted all his life, until the end. In the last meeting he had in Lyons with his Daughters, the Visitandines, by then near to death, he spoke to them about confession and communion.

What was the Eucharist for our saint? It was first and foremost:

The heart of his day, which meant he lived in intimate communion with God

"I have not yet told you about the sun of the spiritual exercises: the most holy and supreme Sacrifice and Sacrament of the Mass, the centre of the Christian religion, the heart of devotion, the soul of piety."

It was the confident handing over of his life to God whom he asks for strength to continue his mission with humility and

charity.

"If the world asks you why you receive communion so often, answer that it is to learn to love God, to purify you from your imperfections, to free you from your miseries, to find strength in your weaknesses and consolation in your afflictions. Two kinds of people must receive communion often: the perfect, because being well-disposed they would do wrong not to approach the fountain and source of perfection; and the imperfect in order to strive for perfection. The strong not to weaken and the weak to strengthen themselves. The sick to seek healing and the healthy not to become sick."

The Eucharist creates a profound unity in Francis with so many people

"This sacrament not only unites us to Jesus Christ, but also to our neighbour, with those who partake of the same food and makes us one with them. And one of the main fruits is mutual charity and gentleness of heart towards one another since we belong to the same Lord and in Him we are united heart to heart with one another."

It is a gradual transformation in Jesus

"Those who have good bodily digestion feel a strengthening for the whole body, because of the general distribution that is made of the food. So, My daughter, those who have good spiritual digestion feel that Jesus Christ, who is their food, spreads and communicates to all parts of their soul and body. They have Jesus Christ in their brain, in their heart, in their chest, in their eyes, in their hands, in their ears, in their feet. But what does this Saviour do everywhere? He straightens everything, purifies everything, mortifies everything, enlivens everything. He loves in the heart, understands in the brain, breathes in the chest, sees in the eyes, speaks in the tongue, and so on: he does everything in everyone and then we live, not we, but it is Jesus Christ who lives in us.

It also transforms the days and nights, so that 'Nights are

days when God is in our hearts and days become nights when He is not.'”

[\(continued\)](#)