

Don Bosco and his date of birth

The archives speak of 16 August: but there is a curious and affectionate interpretation.

The archive data

The Register of Baptisms at the Parish of Sant'Andrea in Castelnuovo d'Asti puts it clearly in the parish priest Fr Sismondo's Latin. Here is the English translation:

"17 August 1815. – Bosco Giovanni Melchiorre, son of Francesco Luigi and Margherita Occhiena Bosco, born yesterday evening and this evening solemnly baptised by the Very Reverend Fr Giuseppe Festa, assistant parish priest. The godparents were Occhiena Melchiorre of Capriglio and Bosco Maddalena, widow of the late Secondo Occhiena, of Castelnuovo.

Giuseppe Sismondo, Parish Priest and Vicar Forane."

So, according to the official Baptismal Act, Don Bosco was born on the evening of 16 August 1815. Yet Don Bosco states in his "Memoirs".

"I was born on the day dedicated to Mary Assumed into Heaven in 1815 in Murialdo, near Castelnuovo d'Asti."

The difference seems obvious, even though Don Bosco did not write that he was born on 15 August, but simply "on the day dedicated to Mary Assumed into Heaven".

Until Don Bosco's death, the "day dedicated to Mary Assumed into Heaven" was always interpreted according to its most obvious meaning, namely, "15 August", without Don Bosco making any remark about it.

This is what we read in the Salesian Bulletin, January 1879, as well as in *Don Bosco and the Salesian Society* published by Du Boys in Paris in 1884, and indeed on the parchment placed in Don Bosco's casket on 2 February 1888 and also signed by Fr Rua.

Soon after Don Bosco's death, however, the Salesians felt the

urgency to gather all possible evidence about him in view of the Process of Beatification and Canonisation. It was in this climate of research that a Salesian from Castelnuovo d'Asti, Fr Secondo Marchisio, went to Castelnuovo d'Asti, with the intention of questioning the older people from Becchi, Castelnuovo and Moncucco on what they remembered of Don Bosco's youth. After about three months of work, Fr Marchisio returned to Turin in October 1888 with a wealth of testimonies. Among other things, he had also made a point of consulting the parish archives at Castelnuovo where he had seen the baptismal record that indicated 16 August, and not 15, as Don Bosco's date of birth.

It is therefore natural to wonder whether Don Bosco or his parish priest made a mistake, or whether the relatives had swapped dates, as sometimes happened, or whether, as some speculate, Don Bosco deliberately adjusted the date to make his birth fall on Assumption Day. To answer these questions, we should first recall the folk understanding of the time.

The Madonna of August in the people's calendar

In our Piedmontese villages, and elsewhere, people used to indicate public holidays with the name of a saint, a feast, a festival, an event, rather than a date.

The first day of January was simply called "the day of the strenna" (*él dì dla strenna*), the last days of that month "the days of the blackbird" (*ij dì dla merla*), and so on. 3 February was the day of the blessing of the throat; 6 June, in Turin, the day of the miracle; 23-24, the feast of St John; 8 September, Our Lady of September, and so on.

There was not as much concern then as there is today about calendar dates. Dates of birth, baptism and death could only be found in the parish registers, which, until 1866, were the only existing registers of births, and, moreover, until 1838, written only in Latin.

In this situation, one can understand how the three days of the August bank holiday, 14-15-16, were simply referred to as "the Madonna of August" (*La Madòna d'agost*).

The Feast of the Assumption was one of the most important and most heartfelt festivities of the year, and devotion to the Madonna of August was among the most deeply rooted and celebrated throughout Piedmont. Suffice it to think that the cathedrals in Asti, Ivrea, Novara, Saluzzo and Tortona are all dedicated to Our Lady of the Assumption and that, even today, throughout the Piedmontese dioceses, no fewer than 201 parish churches are dedicated to Our Lady of the Assumption. To name but a few, we mention the parish of Arignano, Lauriano, Marentino, Riva presso Chieri and Villafranca d'Asti among the villages closest to Castelnuovo. And it is worth mentioning that the diocese of Acqui has 9 parishes dedicated to the Assumption: Alba has 10, Alessandria 9, Aosta 5, Asti 4, Biella 9, Casale 9, Cuneo 4, Fossano 3, Ivrea 12, Mondovì 18, Novara 34, Pinerolo 6, Saluzzo 12, Susa 7, Turin 16, Vercelli 18, Tortona 28, 16 of which are in Piedmontese territory.

As one can therefore imagine, the feast of Our Lady in August was celebrated solemnly everywhere with processions and festivals lasting a minimum of three days. Even today in Castelnuovo Don Bosco, the Feast of the Assumption (*èl dì dla Madòna* – note the similarity with Don Bosco's words, *the day dedicated to Mary Assumed into Heaven*) is celebrated with great solemnity. After a devout novena of prayer, everyone flocks to Our Lady of the Castle for the procession, authorities and townspeople alike. Eight days of merriment follow with jousts and floats in the square. Needless to say, the feast of St Roch, on 16 August, is not considered a feast in itself, but practically merged with that of the Assumption.

The date of Don Bosco's birth

It is only by considering these customs and devotions that one can come to understand the date of Don Bosco's birth. Mamma Margaret must have always told her son John: "You were born on Our Lady of August." We obviously have no written record of this, but those who know the environment and the language cannot really imagine any other expression on her lips. And

when in 1873, on the orders of Pius IX, Don Bosco was finally about to compile his "Memoirs", Italianising his mother's Piedmontese expression (*a la Madòna d'agost*) with one of the many snippets of dialect so frequent in his writing, he wrote: "I was born on the day dedicated to Mary Assumed into Heaven in 1815."

Fr Eugenio Ceria, Don Bosco's biographer, as a good Piedmontese, gives the phrase the interpretation we have made our own: "It is worth remembering that in Piedmont, regarding something that happened a little before or a little after 15 August, it is often said, without too much detail, that it happened on The Madonna of August, and everyone easily sees how it was."



Don Bosco's birth certificate

Fr Michele Molineris, an attentive collector of local customs, is of the same opinion, while Fr Teresio Bosco puts forward a new possible interpretation: "His mother had told him many times: 'You were born on Our Lady's day', and Don Bosco, throughout his life, said that he was born on 15 August 1815, the feast of the Assumption. Did he never go and consult the parish register where it is written that he was born on 16 August? A mistake by his mother? A distraction by the parish priest? Probably neither. In those days, parish priests demanded of the faithful that they bring newborns for baptism within the first twenty-four hours. Many fathers, in order not to risk the life of the child, would bring the child to him a few days later, and in order not to provoke the parish priest's wrath, they would postpone the day of the birth. This is what happened to Giuseppe Verdi, a contemporary of Don Bosco, and to many others. And the children believed the mothers more than the registers."

The writer of this article knows that he was born on 27 August; yet the registry documents assign him the 28th as his

day of birth. So he will not be the first to deny the possibility of Fr Teresio's hypothesis that Don Bosco may really have been born on the 15th.

What is unacceptable, however, is the hypothesis that it was a trick by Don Bosco, so that by manipulating the date of his birth, he could construct a legend for himself, a sort of exemplary biography that would have the hero's birth on the 15th of August, the exact day of the Assumption, as the first act of Providence in his regard.

Don Bosco was undoubtedly a very skilful storyteller who knew how to colour and amplify details to arouse interest, amazement or hilarity in his young listeners, or round up the figures to open purse strings and make people reflect on the unstoppable development of his work, but he was not an inveterate liar, nor was he naive. Who can imagine him so clueless as to be unaware that sooner or later the true date of his birth would be known?

It should rather be clear to those who know the Saint of the Becchi that he was not fixated on the chronological meaning of dates but on their religious one. For him, human history, even his personal history, was sacred history, providential history of salvation. He saw a divine plan in his own life, and he wanted his people to remember it for their encouragement.

To sum up

We can therefore summarise and conclude by saying that the date of 16 August provided by the parish register is, most probably, the correct one; but it cannot be completely excluded that Don Bosco was in fact born on the 15th.

Be that as it may, Don Bosco knew he was born "on the Madonna of August" and was happy about it.

The two dates of the 15th and 16th were not, in the popular understanding of the time, substantially separate. They were a single festivity, the Assumption. One could therefore speak in both cases of a "day dedicated to Mary Assumed into Heaven".

We are not aware of Don Bosco expressly speaking of "15 August", but it is possible, all the more so since it cannot

be excluded, that he believed that date to be correct. Certainly this is what his followers believed before his death, interpreting statements: "I was born on the Madonna of August" in its narrowest sense (not forgetting that most people spoke with Don Bosco, in private conversation, in Piedmontese).

His saintly mother Margaret had also told him when he entered the seminary: "When you came into the world, I consecrated you to the Blessed Virgin Mary; when you began your studies, I recommended to you devotion to this Mother of ours. Now I say to you, be completely hers: love those of your companions who have devotion to Mary; and, if you become a priest, always preach and promote devotion to Mary." And so Don Bosco did throughout his life.

On a cold winter morning, 31 January 1888, Don Bosco closed his earthly pilgrimage at Valdocco to the sounds of the Hail Mary. It would be the end of a long and tiring journey he had embarked on on a hot summer evening of the "Madonna of August" at the Colle dei Becchi.

WYD as a synodal experience of Church renewal

Interrupting the life of a city is always an extraordinary act. Filling the streets with young people from all corners of the world is a moving memory. A World Youth Day is this and much more.

The organisation of a WYD requires so many hours of work, putting all kinds of resources at the disposal of young people. If it bears spiritual fruit in proportion to the effort, it will have been worth it, all for an educational,

communicative and evangelising reason: the objective of an event like this is to make Jesus Christ known to a large number of young people, and to succeed in making them understand that following Him is a sure way to find happiness.

It is to young people that we must look with particular fondness these days and discover the secret of a surprising phenomenon: a “silent revolution” is taking place in the world of youth, whose biggest stage is the World Youth Days. Young people who raise questions among Christians and are not afraid to show themselves as such, young people who do not want to be intimidated let alone deceived, young people who bring enthusiasm and passion to bring about change.

These meetings continue to surprise both inside and outside the Church. And they are a snapshot of a youth that is very different from the one proposed by some, thirsting for values, searching for the deeper meaning of life, with a desire for a different world than the one we found when we arrived.

Today, a significant percentage of WYD participants come from very different family, social and cultural backgrounds. Many of these young pilgrims have no Christian reference points in their own contexts. In this sense, the lives of many of them resemble surfing: they cannot expect to change the wave, but they adapt to it to direct the board where they want it to go. These radiant faces of the Church wake up every day with the desire to be better followers of Jesus among their family, friends and acquaintances.

Young people have the strength to give their best, but they need to know that this commitment is doable, they need the complicity of adults, they need to believe that this struggle is neither sterile nor doomed to failure. For this reason, the days are a way for young people to experience synodality, the particular style that characterises the life and mission of the Church. Belonging to their local church community implies belonging to a much larger and universal community. A

community in which we need everyone, young and old, to ‘take charge of the world’.

For this, it is necessary to cultivate certain attitudes for this new synodal spirituality. WYD allows us to:

- share the small stories of others, experiencing the courage to speak freely and bring to the table deep conversations that come from within;
- learn to grow together with others and appreciate how we are adding to each other, even if at different “speeds” (styles, ages, visions, cultures, gifts, charisms and ministries in the Church);
- to take care of the “community green spaces” for our relationship with God, to take care of our connection with the source of life, with the One who takes care of us, to root our trust and our hopes in Him, to unload our worries on Him, to be able to “take charge” of the mission He leaves in our hands;
- to accept and welcome our fragility, which connects us to the fragility of our world and mother Earth;
- to be a voice that joins with many others to denounce the excesses that are currently being committed against the Planet and to take common actions that contribute to the emergence of a more responsible and ecological citizenship;
- to reorient pastoral processes together from a more open and inclusive perspective, making us ready to “go out to meet” all young people where they are, and to make visible and real the desire to be a “Church on the move” that reaches out to believers and non-believers alike, and to become a travelling companion for those who want or need it.

In short, a synodal Church that fosters a change of heart and mind that enables us to approach our mission in JESUS WAY. An invitation to feel within us the touch and gaze of Jesus that always makes us new.

Official WYD 2023 website: <https://www.lisboa2023.org>

WYD 2023 saltisani website: <https://wyddonbosco23.pt>

Tibidabo Salesian house

Located on the highest peak of the Collserola mountains, offering a beautiful view of Barcelona, the Tibidabo Salesian House has a special history, linked to Don Bosco's visit to Spain in 1886.

The name of the hill, "Tibidabo", derives from the Latin *Tibidabo*, which means "I will give you", and is derived from some verses of Holy Scripture: "... *et dixit illi haec tibi omnia dabo si cadens adoraveris me*", "... and he said to him: All these things I will give you if you will fall down and worship me" (Matthew 4:9). This sentence is uttered by the devil to Jesus from a great height, showing him the kingdoms of the earth, trying to tempt him with the riches of this world.

The old name of the Barcelona hill was *Puig de l'Àliga* (Eagle Hill). The new name "Tibidabo", like other biblical names (Valley of Hebron, Mount Carmel, etc.), was given by some religious people who lived in the area. The choice of this new name was made because of the majestic view it offers over the city of Barcelona, from a height that gives one the feeling of dominating everything.

During his trip to Spain, on the afternoon of 5 May 1886, Don Bosco went to the basilica of Our Lady of Mercy, patron saint of the city of Barcelona, to thank her for the favours he had received during his visit to the city and for the Salesian work he had begun in Sarrià. There, some gentlemen from the Conferences of St Vincent de Paul approached him, gave him the ownership of a piece of land at the top of Tibidabo and asked him to build a shrine to the Sacred Heart of Jesus there. They asked him this favour "to keep firm and indestructible the religion that you have preached to us with such zeal and

example and which is the inheritance of our fathers.”

Don Bosco's reaction was spontaneous: “I am overwhelmed by this fresh, unexpected proof you give me of your piety and faith. Thank you, but you must realize that in this, you are the tools of Divine Providence. As I was leaving Turin to come to Spain, I was thinking to myself, now that the Church of the Sacred Heart in Rome is almost completed, I must look for some other way to honor the Sacred Heart and promote devotion to it. An interior voice bade me to be calm, assuring me that here I would be able to gratify this vow. That voice kept repeating to me, ‘*Tibi dabo, tibi dabo!*’ Yes, gentlemen, you are the tools of Divine Providence. With your help, a shrine dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus will soon rise upon that mount. Everyone will find there an opportunity to receive the holy sacraments, and your charity and faith – of which you have given me so many beautiful proofs – will be remembered forever.” ([MB](#) XVIII,114).

On 3 July of the same year, 1886, the now Venerable Dorothea de Chopitea, promoter of Salesian work in Barcelona and facilitator of Don Bosco's visit to the city, financed the construction of a small chapel dedicated to the Sacred Heart on the same hill.

The church's construction project was significantly delayed, mainly due to the appearance of a new project to build an astronomical observatory on top of Tibidabo, which was eventually built on a nearby hill (Fabra Observatory).

In 1902, the foundation stone of the church was laid and in 1911 the crypt of the current Tibidabo sanctuary was opened in the presence of the then Rector Major, Fr Paul Albera. A few days after the opening, the latter was named the “Expiatory and National Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus” in accordance with a decision taken at the 22nd International Eucharistic Congress held in Madrid at the end of June 1911. The work was completed in 1961 with the erection of the statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, seventy-five years after John

Bosco's visit to Barcelona. On 29 October 1961, the church received the title of minor basilica, granted by Pope John XXIII.

Today, the church continues to attract large numbers of pilgrims and visitors from all over the world. It warmly welcomes all those who come to the Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, for whatever reason, giving them the opportunity to receive the message of the Gospel and to approach the sacraments, especially the Eucharist and Reconciliation. It is at the same time a parish entrusted to the Salesians, even though it has few permanent parishioners. For those who have come with the intention of spending some time in prayer, it also makes available the materials offered by the Pope's World Prayer Network, of which the church is a member.

Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament is continued during the day, and the practice of adoration at night is encouraged.

And to those who wish to make a retreat, accommodation and food are provided within the Salesian structure.

A work dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus desired by Providence through St John Bosco, which continues its mission through history.

Fr Joan Codina i Giol, sdb
Director Tibibabo

Photo gallery Salesian House in Tibidabo



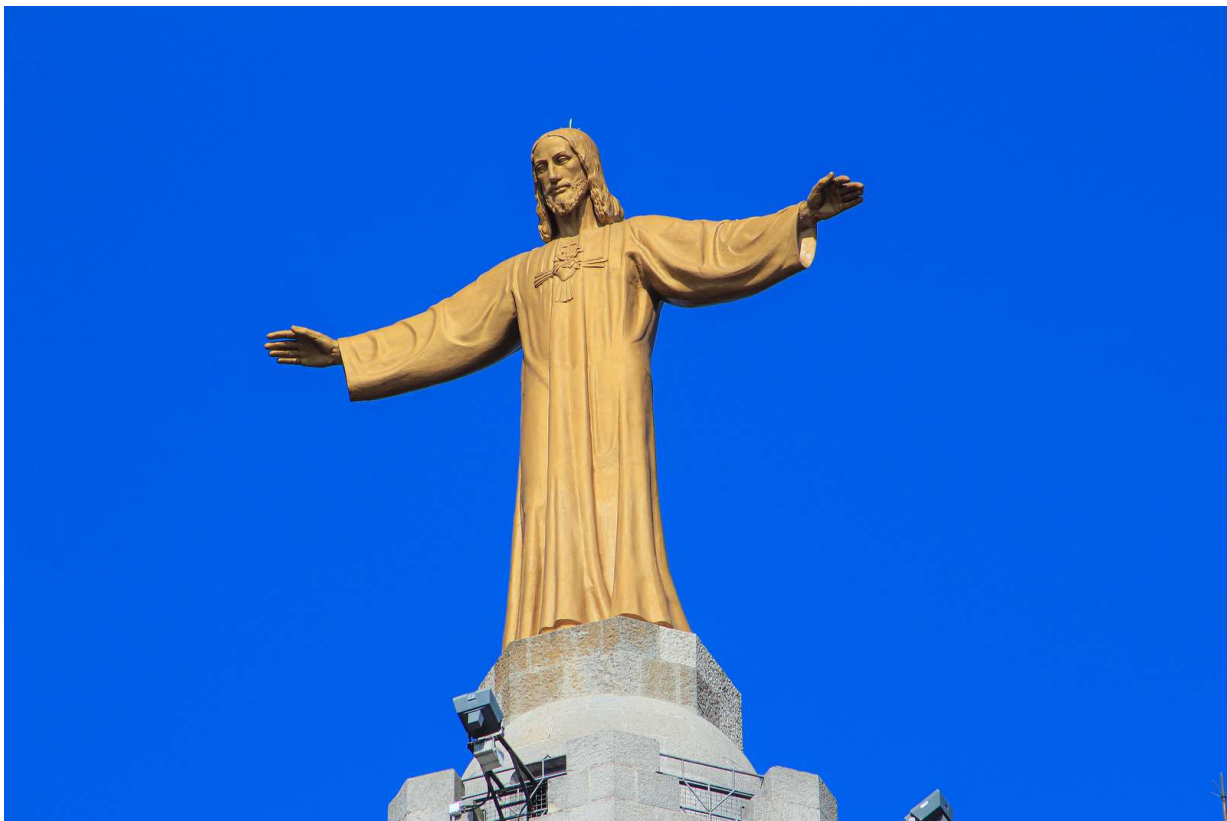
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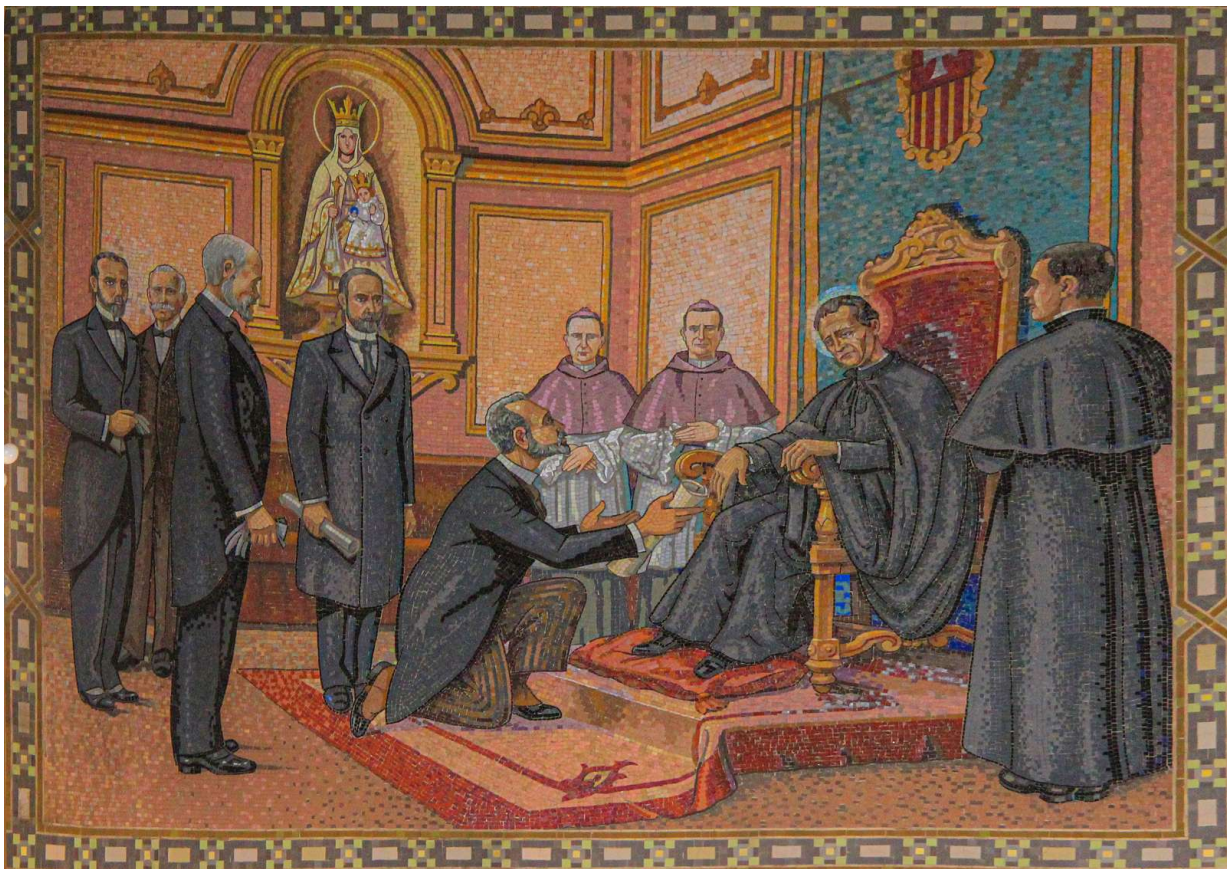
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