

Don Bosco with his Salesians

If Don Bosco happily joked with his boys to see them cheerful and serene, he also revealed in jest with his Salesians the esteem he had for them, the desire to see them form one big family with him, poor yes, but trusting in Divine Providence, united in faith and charity.

Don Bosco's fiefdoms

In 1830 Margaret Occhiena, widow of Francis Bosco, made the division of the property inherited from her husband between her stepson Anthony and her two sons Joseph and John. It consisted, among other things, of eight plots of land comprising meadows, fields and vineyards. We know nothing precise about the criteria followed by Mamma Margaret in dividing her father's inheritance between the three of them. However, among the plots of land there was a vineyard near the Becchi (at Bric dei Pin), a field at Valcapone (or Valcappone) and another at Bacajan (or Bacaiau). In any case, these three lands constitute the "fiefdoms" as Don Bosco jokingly termed his property.

The Becchi, as we all know, is the lowly hamlet where Don Bosco was born; Valcappone (or Valcapone) was a site to the east of the Colle under the Serra di Capriglio but down in the valley in the area known as Sbaruau (= bogeyman), because it was thickly wooded with a few huts hidden among the branches that served as a place of storage for launderers and as a refuge for brigands. Bacajan (or Bacaiau) was a field east of the Colle between the Valcapone and Morialdo plots. Here are Don Bosco's "fiefdoms"!

The Biographical Memoirs say that for some time Don Bosco had conferred noble titles on his lay collaborators. So there was the Count of the Becchi, the Marquis of Valcappone, the Baron of Bacaiau, the three lands that Don Bosco must have known to be part of his inheritance. "For some time now he had been in the habit of jestingly conferring titles of nobility such as

"Count of Becchi" or "Marquis of Valcappone" on his senior lay co-workers, particularly [Joseph] Rossi, [Charles] Gastini, [Peter] Enria, [Andrew] Pelazza, and [Joseph] Buzzetti, not only within the Oratory but also outside, especially when traveling with any of them during the summer months" (BM VIII, 101).

Among these "noble" Salesians, we know for sure, that the Count of the Becchi (or of the Bricco del Pino) was Giuseppe Rossi, the first lay Salesian, or "Coadjutor" who loved Don Bosco like a most affectionate son and was faithful to him for ever.

Once Don Bosco went to the Porta Nuova station with Joseph Rossi, who was carrying Don Bosco's suitcase. As usual, he arrived as the train was about to leave and all the coaches were full. The windows were either closed or had passengers blocking the view to convey the impression that there were no vacant seats in their compartments. Turning to Rossi, Don Bosco rather loudly remarked, "My dear Count, I regret inconveniencing you. You shouldn't be carrying my suitcase." "Forget it. I feel honoured to be of service to you." At hearing this, the passengers closest to them exchanged surprised looks.

"Don Bosco!" they immediately shouted. "We have two seats here. Please come in!"

"But I wouldn't want to trouble you!" Don Bosco replied.

"Never mind! It's a pleasure to have you. We have plenty of room!"

And so the "Count of the Becchi" was able to get on the train with Don Bosco and the suitcase.

The pumps and a shack

Don Bosco lived and died poor. For food he was content with very little. Even a glass of wine was already too much for him, and he systematically watered it down.

"Often he forgot to drink, taken up by quite different thoughts, and his table companions would have to pour wine into his glass. If the wine was good, he then would instantly

reach for water to dilute it and 'make it even better,' as he would say. With a smile he would add, 'I've renounced the world and the devil, but not the pumps.' He drank only one glass at each meal." (BM IV, 134).

Even for accommodation we know how he lived. On 12 September 1873 the General Conference of the Salesians was held to re-elect an Economer and three Councillors. On that occasion Don Bosco spoke memorable and prophetic words on the development of the Congregation. Then when he came to speak about the Superior Chapter, which by now seemed to need a suitable residence, he said, amidst universal hilarity: "Were it possible (he went on in a humorous vein) I would like to set up a shed in the middle of the playground for the chapter members so they could be isolated from all other mortals. But since they are still entitled to live on this earth, they may choose to reside in whatever house it may seem best." (BM X, 464).

Otis, botis, pija tutis

Don Bosco also had a mysterious answer for a cleric or a student who asked him how he could know the future and guess so many secrets.

"I'll tell you,' he would reply. "The key to everything is Otis, Batis, Pia, Tutis. Do you know what that means?"

"No, Father!"

"Pay attention. It's Greek." And slowly he would repeat: "O-tis, Bo-tis, Pi-a, Tu-tis. Is it clear now?"

"No!"

"I know those words are hard to understand. That's why I never reveal their meaning. No one knows it and no one ever will because it would not be wise for me to reveal it. It is the big secret to all my wonders. With this magic formula I can read consciences and solve any mystery. Let's see how smart you are. See if you can make something out of it!" He would then repeat the four words while placing his forefinger successively on the questioner's forehead, nose, chin, and chest, ending with an unexpected little tap on the cheek. The

boy or cleric would laugh and, while kissing Don Bosco's hand, still insist, "But, Father, at least translate those words." "I could, but you still wouldn't understand." And then playfully he would add in Piedmontese dialect, "When they give you a beating, take it like a man!" This conclusion would set them all laughing heartily. (BM VI, 236-237). And he meant that in order to become a saint, one must accept all the sufferings that life has in store for us.

Protector of tinsmiths

Every year the young boarders went on an outing to Monsieur Olive's villa, the generous cooperator already known to us. On this occasion, the father and mother waited on the superiors while their children waited on their pupils. They also organized a lottery, giving a number to everyone of the superiors and boys so that everyone won something. In this way, the Olive family made a gift of their coach to the Oratory of St. Leo. This outing occurred during Don Bosco's visit to Marseille in 1884, and an amusing incident occurred. While the boys were playing in the gardens, a servant came running up to Madame Olive, greatly agitated.

"Madame, the pot where the soup is cooking for the boys is leaking badly and there is no way to stop it. We will have to go without soup." The mistress of the house, who had immense faith in Don Bosco, had a sudden idea. She summoned all the boys and told them, "Listen, if you want to have some soup, kneel down here and say a Pater, Ave, and Gloria to Don Bosco, so that he may resolder the soup pot."

The boys obeyed and instantly the pot stopped leaking. This is an historical event, and when Don Bosco heard it, he laughed heartily, saying, "From this day on, people will say that Don Bosco is the patron of tinsmiths." (BM XVII, 36-37).

The festive oratory at Valdocco

In 1935, following the canonisation of Don Bosco in 1934, the Salesians took care to collect testimonies about him. A certain Pietro Pons, who as a boy had attended the festive oratory in Valdocco for about ten years (from 1871 to 1882), and who had also attended two years of primary school (with classrooms under the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians) on 8 November gave a beautiful testimony of those years. We excerpt some passages from it, almost all unpublished.

The figure of Don Bosco

He was the centre of attraction for the whole Oratory. This is how our former Oratorian Pietro Pons remembers him at the end of the 1970s: "He no longer had vigour, but he was always calm and smiling. He had two eyes that pierced and penetrated the mind. He would appear among us: he was a joy for everyone. D. Rua, D. Lazzero were at his side as if they had the Lord in their midst. D. Barberis and all the boys were running towards him, surrounding him, some walking beside him, some backwards, facing him. It was a fortune, a coveted privilege to be able to be close to him, to talk to him. He strolled along talking, and looking at everyone with those two eyes that turned every which way, electrifying hearts with joy."

Among the episodes that have stuck in his mind 60 years later, he recalls two in particular: "One day... he appeared alone at the front door of the sanctuary. Then a flock of boys rushed to run him over like a gust of wind. But he held the umbrella in his hand. It had handle and a shaft as thick as that of the peasants. He raised it and, using it like a sword, juggled it to repel that affectionate assault, on the right, to the left, to open up a passage. He pointed it at one, then off to the side, but in the meantime the others approached from the other side. So the game, the joke continued, bringing joy to hearts,

eager to see the good Father return from his journey. He looked like a village priest of the good-natured kind."

Games and teatrino

A Salesian oratory without games is unthinkable. The elderly former pupil recalls: "the courtyard was occupied by a building, the church of Mary Help and at the end of a low wall... a sort of hut rested on the left corner, where there was always someone to watch over those who entered... As soon as you entered the playground on the right, there was a swing with only one seat, then the parallel bars and the fixed bar for the older children, who enjoyed doing their spins and somersaults, and also the trapeze, and the single flying step, which were, however, near the sacristies beyond St Joseph's chapel. And again: "This courtyard was of a beautiful length and lent itself very well to speed races starting from the side of the church and returning there on the way back. Barra rotta, sack races and a game called pignatte were also played. The latter games were announced on the previous Sunday. So was the greasy pole but the pole was planted with the thin end at the bottom so that it would be more difficult to climb. There were lotteries, and the ticket was paid for with a penny or two. Inside the house was a small library kept in a cupboard."

As well as games there was the famous teatrino "little theatre" where genuine dramas such as "The Crusader's Son" were performed, Don Cagliero's romanze were sung, and musicals such as the Cobbler were presented by the legendary Carlo Gastini [a brilliant past pupil leader]. The play, attended free of charge by the parents, was held in the hall under the nave of the church of Mary Help, but the former oratory boy also recalls that "once it was performed at the Moretta house" [today's parish church near the square]. Poor people lived there in the most squalid poverty. In the cellars that can be seen under the balcony there was a poor mother who would carry her son Charles outside at midday. She had to carry him on her shoulders to sunbathe."

Religious services and formation meetings

At the festive oratory there was no lack of religious services on Sunday mornings: Holy Mass with Holy Communion, prayers of the good Christian; followed in the afternoon by recreation, catechism, and Don Giulio Barberis' sermon. By now an old man, "Don Bosco never came to say Mass or to preach, but only to visit and stay with the boys during recreation... The catechists and assistants had their pupils with them in church during the services and taught them catechism. A little lesson was given to everyone. The lesson was required to be memorised every Sunday and then also an explanation." The solemn feasts ended with a procession and a snack for all: "On leaving church after mass there was breakfast. A young man on the right outside the door would give us a loaf of bread, another on the left would put two slices of salami on it with a fork." Those boys were content with little, but they were delighted. When the boarders joined the oratorians for the singing of vespers, their voices could be heard in Via Milano and Via Corte d'appello!

Formation group meetings were also held at the festive oratory. In the house near the church of St Francis, there was "a small, low room that could hold about twenty people...In the room there was a small table for the lecturer, there were benches for the meetings and conferences for the older boys in general, and a meeting of the St Aloysius sodality, almost every Sunday."

Who were the Oratorians?

Of his 200 or so companions – but their number diminished in the winter due to the return of seasonal workers to their families – our sprightly old man recalled that many were from Biella "almost all 'bic', that is, they carried the wooden bucket full of lime and the wicker basket full of bricks to the bricklayers at the buildings." Others were "apprentice bricklayers, mechanics, tinsmiths." Poor apprentices: they worked from morning to night every day and only on Sundays could they afford a bit of recreation "at Don Bosco's" (as his

oratory was called): “We played Asino vola, under the direction of the then Br Milanese [a future priest who was a great missionary in Patagonia]. Br Ponzano, later a priest, was a gym teacher. He made us do free exercises, with sticks, on the equipment.”

Pietro Pons’ memories are much broader, as rich in distant suggestions as they are pervaded by a shadow of nostalgia; they wait to be known in full. We hope to do so soon.

Don Bosco’s devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus

Don Bosco’s devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus originated from the revelations to Saint Margaret Mary Alacoque in the monastery of Paray-le-Monial: Christ, showing his pierced Heart crowned with thorns, asked for a feast of reparation on the Friday after the Octave of Corpus Christi. Despite opposition, the cult spread because that Heart, the seat of divine love, recalls the charity manifested on the cross and in the Eucharist. Don Bosco invites young people to honour it constantly, especially in the month of June, by reciting the Crown and performing acts of reparation that obtain copious indulgences and the twelve promises of peace, mercy, and holiness.

Devotion to the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, which is growing every day, listen dear young people, to how it originated. There lived in France, in the monastery of the Visitation in Paray-le-Monial, a humble virgin named Margaret Alacoque, dear to God for her great purity. One day, while she was standing before the Blessed Sacrament to adore the blessed Jesus, she saw her Heavenly Spouse in the act of uncovering

his breast and showing her his Most Sacred Heart, radiant with flames, surrounded by thorns, pierced by a wound, and surmounted by a cross. At the same time, she heard Him complain of the monstrous ingratitude of men and ordered her to work to ensure that on the Friday after the Octave of *Corpus Christi*, special worship would be given to His Divine Heart in reparation for the offences He receives in the Most Holy Eucharist. The pious virgin, filled with confusion, explained to Jesus how unfit she was for such a great undertaking, but she was comforted by the Lord to continue her work, and the feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus was established despite the fierce opposition of her adversaries.

There are many reasons for this devotion: 1) Because Jesus Christ offered us His Sacred Heart as the seat of His affections; 2) Because it is a symbol of the immense charity He showed especially by allowing His Most Sacred Heart to be wounded by a lance; 3) Because from this Heart the faithful are moved to meditate on the sufferings of Jesus Christ and to profess their gratitude to Him.

Let us therefore constantly honour this Divine Heart, which, for the many and great benefits it has already bestowed upon us and will bestow upon us, well deserves all our most humble and loving veneration.

Month of June

Those who consecrate the entire month of June to the honour of the Sacred Heart of Jesus with some daily prayer or devout act will gain seven years of indulgence for each day and a Plenary indulgence at the end of the month.

Chaplet to the Sacred Heart of Jesus

Intend to recite this Crown to the Divine Heart of Jesus Christ to make reparation for the outrages He receives in the Most Holy Eucharist from infidels, heretics, and bad Christians. Say it alone or with other people gathered together, if possible before an image of the Divine Heart or before the Blessed Sacrament:

V. Deus, in adiutorium meum intende (O God, come to my aid).

R. Domine ad adjuvandum me festina (Lord, make haste to help me).

Glory be to the Father, etc.

1. O most lovable Heart of my Jesus, I humbly adore your sweet kindness, which you show in a special way in the Divine Sacrament to souls who are still sinners. I am sorry to see you so ungratefully repaid, and I intend to make up for the many offences you receive in the Most Holy Eucharist from heretics, infidels, and bad Christians.

Our Father, Hail Mary, and Glory be.

2. O most humble Heart of my Sacramental Jesus, I adore your profound humility in the Divine Eucharist, hiding yourself for our love under the species of bread and wine. I beg you, my Jesus, to instil this beautiful virtue in my heart; meanwhile, I will endeavour to make reparation for the many offences you receive in the Most Holy Sacrament from heretics, infidels, and bad Christians.

Our Father, Hail Mary, and Glory be.

3. O Heart of my Jesus, so eager to suffer, I adore those desires so ardent to encounter your most painful Passion and to subject yourself to those wrongs foreseen by you in the Blessed Sacrament. Ah, my Jesus! I truly intend to make reparation with my very life; I would like to prevent those offences which you unfortunately receive in the Most Holy Eucharist from heretics, infidels, and bad Christians.

Our Father, Hail Mary, and Glory be.

4. O most patient Heart of my Jesus, I humbly venerate your invincible patience in enduring so many pains on the Cross and so many abuses in the Divine Eucharist for love of me. O my dear Jesus! Since I cannot wash with my blood those places where you were so mistreated in both Mysteries, I promise you, O my Supreme Good, to use every means to make reparation to

your Divine Heart for the many outrages you receive in the Most Holy Eucharist from heretics, infidels, and bad Christians.

Our Father, Hail Mary, and Glory be.

5. O Heart of my Jesus, most loving of our souls in the admirable institution of the Most Holy Eucharist, I humbly adore that immense love which you bear us in giving us your Divine Body and Divine Blood as our nourishment. What heart is there that should not be consumed at the sight of such immense charity? O my good Jesus, give me abundant tears to weep and make reparation for the many offences you receive in the Most Holy Sacrament from heretics, infidels, and bad Christians.

Our Father, Hail Mary, and Glory be.

6. O Heart of my Jesus, thirsting for our salvation, I humbly venerate that most ardent love which prompted you to perform the ineffable Sacrifice of the Cross, renewing it every day on the Altars in the Holy Mass. Is it possible that the human heart, filled with gratitude, should not burn with such love? Yes, alas, my God; but for the future I promise to do all I can to make reparation for the many outrages you receive in this Mystery of love from heretics, infidels and bad Christians.

Our Father, Hail Mary, and Glory be.

Whoever recites even the above 6 *Our Fathers, Hail Marys, and Glory's* before the Blessed Sacrament, the last *Our Father, Hail Mary, and Glory be*, being said according to the intention of the Supreme Pontiff, will gain 300 days of Indulgence each time.

**Promises made by Jesus Christ
to Blessed Margaret Alacoque for the devotees of his Divine Heart**

I will give them all the graces necessary in their state of life.

I will make peace reign in their families.

I will console them in all their afflictions.

I will be their safe refuge in life, but especially at the hour of death.

I will fill every undertaking with blessings.

Sinners will find in my Heart the source and infinite ocean of mercy.

Lukewarm souls will become fervent.

Fervent souls will quickly rise to great perfection.

I will bless the house where the image of my Sacred Heart is exposed and honoured.

I will give priests the gift of moving the most hardened hearts.

The names of those who propagate this devotion will be written in my Heart and will never be erased.

Act of reparation against blasphemies.

God be blessed.

Blessed be His Holy Name.

Blessed be Jesus Christ, true God and true Man.

Blessed be the Name of Jesus.

Blessed be Jesus in the Most Holy Sacrament of the Altar.

Blessed be His Most Loving Heart.

Blessed be the great Mother of God, Mary Most Holy.

Blessed be the Name of Mary, Virgin and Mother.

Blessed be her Holy and Immaculate Conception.

Blessed be God in His Angels and in His Saints.

An indulgence of *one year* is granted for each time: and *Plenary* to those who recite it for a month, on the day they make Holy Confession and Communion.

Offered to the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus before His Holy Image

I, NN., to be grateful to You and to make reparation for my infidelities, I give You my heart and consecrate myself entirely to You, my beloved Jesus, and with your help I resolve never to sin again.

Pope Pius VII granted one hundred days of indulgence once a day, reciting it with a contrite heart, and a plenary indulgence once a month to those who recite it every day.

Prayer to the Most Sacred Heart of Mary

God save you, Most August Queen of Peace, Mother of God; through the Most Sacred Heart of your Son Jesus, Prince of Peace, may His wrath be appeased and may He reign over us in peace. Remember, O Most Pious Virgin Mary, that it has never been heard in the world that anyone who implores your favours has been rejected or abandoned by you. Encouraged by this confidence, I present myself to you: do not despise my prayers, O Mother of the Eternal Word, but hear them favourably and grant them, O Clement, O Pious, O Sweet Virgin Mary.

Pius IX granted an indulgence of 300 days each time this prayer is recited devoutly, and a plenary indulgence once a month to those who recite it every day.

O Jesus, burning with love,
I never wanted to offend You;
O my sweet and good Jesus,
I never want to offend You again.

Sacred Heart of Mary,
Save my soul.
Sacred Heart of my Jesus,
Make me love you more and more.

To you I give my heart,

Mother of my Jesus – Mother of love.

(Source: *'Il Giovane Provveduto'* (The Young Provided for') the practice of his duties in the exercises of Christian piety for the recitation of the Office of the b. Virgin of vespers all year round and the office of the dead with the addition of a choice of sacred lauds, *pel Priest John Bosco, 101a edition, Turin, 1885, Salesian Printing and Bookstore, S. Benigno Canavese – S. Per d'Arena – Lucca – Nizza Marittima – Marsiglia – Montevideo – Buenos-Aires'*, pp. 119-124 [Published Works, pp. 247-253])

Photo: Gilded bronze statue of the Sacred Heart on the bell tower of the Basilica of the Sacred Heart in Rome, a gift from former Salesian students of Argentina. Erected in 1931, it was crafted in Milan by Riccardo Politi based on a design by sculptor Enrico Cattaneo of Turin.

Don Bosco and the Sacred Heart. Protect, atone, love

In 1886, on the eve of the consecration of the new Basilica of the Sacred Heart in the centre of Rome, the 'Salesian Bulletin' wanted to prepare its readers – co-workers, benefactors, young people, families – for a vital encounter with 'the pierced Heart that continues to love'. For a whole year, the magazine presented the Salesian world with a veritable 'rosary' of meditations: each issue linked an aspect of devotion to a pastoral, educational or social urgency that Don Bosco – already exhausted but still lucid – considered strategic for the future of the Church and Italian

society. Almost 140 years later, that series remains a small treatise on the spirituality of the heart, written in simple but ardent tones, capable of combining contemplation and practice. Here we present a unified reading of that monthly journey, showing how Salesian intuition still speaks to us today.

February – The guard of honour: in vigil over wounded Love

The new liturgical year opens in the *Bulletin* with a surprising invitation: not only to adore Jesus, present in the tabernacle, but to ‘keep watch over Him’ – a freely chosen hour in which every Christian, without interrupting their daily activities, becomes a loving sentinel who consoles the Heart pierced by the indifference of the carnal. The idea, which originated in Paray-le-Monial and flourished in many dioceses, became an educational programme: to transform time into a space for reparation; to teach young people that fidelity comes from small, constant acts; to make the day a widespread liturgy. The related vow – to donate the proceeds from the *Manual of the Guard of Honour* to the construction of the Roman Basilica – reveals the Salesian logic: contemplation that immediately translates into bricks and mortar, because true prayer (literally) builds the house of God.

March – Creative charity: the Salesian stamp

In his great conference on 8 May 1884, Cardinal Parocchi summarised the Salesian mission in one word: ‘charity’. The *Bulletin* takes up that discourse to remind us that the Church conquers the world more with gestures of love than with theoretical disputes. Don Bosco did not establish elite schools but simple hospices. He did not take children out of their environment just to protect them, but to return them to society as solid citizens. It is charity ‘according to the needs of the century’: a response to materialism not with controversy, but with works that show the power of the Gospel. Hence the urgency of a large sanctuary dedicated to the Heart

of Jesus, to make an outstanding visible sign of the love that educates and transforms in the heart of Rome.

April – Eucharist: ‘masterpiece of the Heart of Jesus’

Nothing, for Don Bosco, is more urgent than bringing Christians back to frequent Communion. The *Bulletin* reminds us that ‘there is no Catholicism without Our Lady and without the Eucharist’. The Eucharistic table is the ‘genesis of Christian society’: from there fraternity, justice, and purity are born. If faith languishes, the desire for the living Bread must be rekindled. It is no coincidence that St. Francis de Sales entrusted the Visitation Sisters with the mission of guarding the Eucharistic Heart. Devotion to the Sacred Heart is not an abstract sentiment, but a concrete path that leads to the tabernacle and from there pours out into the streets. And it is once again the Roman construction site that serves as a test. Every lira offered for the basilica becomes a ‘spiritual brick’ that consecrates Italy to the Heart that gives itself.

May – The Heart of Jesus shines in the Heart of Mary

The Marian month leads the *Bulletin* to intertwine the two great devotions. There is a profound communion between the two Hearts, symbolised by the biblical image of the ‘mirror’. The Immaculate Heart of Mary reflects the light of the Divine Heart, making it bearable to human eyes. Those who dare not look at the Sun, look at its light reflected in the Mother. Latria for the Heart of Jesus, ‘hyperdulia’ for that of Mary: a distinction that avoids the misunderstandings of the Jansenist polemicists of yesterday and today. The *Bulletin* refutes the accusations of idolatry and invites the faithful to a balanced love, where contemplation and mission feed each other. Mary introduces us to her Son and her Son leads us to His Mother. In view of the consecration of the new temple, it asks that the two invocations that stand out on the hills of Rome and Turin be united: Sacred Heart of Jesus and Mary Help of Christians.

June – Supernatural consolations: love at work in history

Two hundred years after the first public consecration to the Sacred Heart (Paray-le-Monial, 1686), the *Bulletin* affirms that the devotion responds to the illness of the times: 'the cooling of charity due to an excess of iniquity'. The Heart of Jesus – Creator, Redeemer, Glorifier – is presented as the centre of all history: from creation to the Church; from the Eucharist to eschatology. Those who adore that Heart, enter into a dynamism that transforms culture and politics. This is why Pope Leo XIII asked everyone to contribute to the Roman shrine: a monument of reparation but also a 'bulwark' against the 'impure flood' of modern error. It is an appeal that sounds timely: without ardent charity, society falls apart.

July – Humility: the physiognomy of Christ and of Christians

The summer meditation chooses the most neglected virtue: humility, 'a gem transplanted by the hand of God into the garden of the Church.' Don Bosco, spiritual son of St. Francis de Sales, knows that humility is the door to other virtues and the seal of every true apostolate. Those who serve young people without seeking visibility make present, 'Jesus' hidden life for thirty years.' The *Bulletin* unmask pride disguised as false modesty and invites us to cultivate a double humility: of the intellect, which opens itself to mystery; and of the will, which obeys recognised truth. Devotion to the Sacred Heart is not sentimentality. It is a school of humble thinking and concrete action, capable of building social peace because it removes the poison of pride from the heart.

August – Meekness: the strength that disarms

After humility comes meekness: a virtue that is not weakness but self-control, 'the lion that produces honey', says the text, referring to the enigma of Samson. The Heart of Jesus appears meek in welcoming sinners, firm in defending the temple. Readers are invited to imitate this twofold movement: gentleness towards people, firmness against error. St. Francis de Sales returns as a model. With a calm tone, he poured out rivers of charity in turbulent Geneva, converting more hearts

than harsh polemics would have won over. In a century that 'sins by being heartless,' building the sanctuary of the Sacred Heart means erecting a training ground for social meekness—an evangelical response to the contempt and verbal violence that already poisoned public debate at that time.

September – Poverty and the social question: the Heart that reconciles rich and poor

The rumblings of social conflict, warns the *Bulletin*, threaten to 'smash the civil edifice to pieces.' We are in the midst of the 'labour question'. Socialists are stirring up the masses, capital is concentrated. Don Bosco does not deny the legitimacy of honest wealth, but he reminds us that true revolution begins in the heart. The Heart of Jesus proclaimed the poor blessed and He experienced poverty firsthand. The remedy lies in evangelical solidarity nourished by prayer and generosity. Until the Roman Basilica is completed, writes the newspaper, the visible sign of reconciliation will be missing. In the following decades, the social doctrine of the Church will develop these insights, but the seed is already here. Charity is not almsgiving; it is justice that comes from a transformed heart.

October – Childhood: sacrament of hope

'Woe to those who scandalise one of these little ones.' On the lips of Jesus, the invitation becomes a warning. The *Bulletin* recalls the horrors of the pagan world against children and shows how Christianity changed history by entrusting a central place to children. For Don Bosco, education is a religious act; the treasure of the future Church is preserved in schools and oratories. Jesus' blessing of the children, reproduced on the front pages of the newspaper, is a manifestation of the Heart that "closes itself like a father's" and announces the Salesian vocation: to make youth a "sacrament" that makes God present in the city. Schools, colleges, and workshops are not optional: they are the concrete way of honouring the Heart of Jesus alive in

young people.

November – Triumphs of the Church: humility conquers death

The liturgy commemorates the saints and the dead. The *Bulletin* meditates on the 'gentle triumph' of Jesus entering Jerusalem. The image becomes the key to understanding Church history. Successes and persecutions alternate, but the Church, like the Master, always rises again. Readers are invited not to let themselves be paralysed by pessimism. The shadows of the moment (anticlerical laws, reduction of orders, Masonic propaganda) do not cancel out the dynamism of the Gospel. The Basilica of the Sacred Heart, built amid hostility and poverty, will be the tangible sign that, 'the stone with the seals has been turned over'. Collaborating in its construction means betting on God's future.

December – Beatitude of sorrow: the Cross welcomed by the heart

The year ends with the most paradoxical of the beatitudes: 'Blessed are those who mourn'. Pain, scandalous to pagan reason, becomes in the Heart of Jesus a path to redemption and fruitfulness. The *Bulletin* sees in this logic, the key to understanding the contemporary crisis. Societies based on entertainment at all costs produce injustice and despair. Accepted in union with Christ, however, pain transforms hearts, strengthens character, stimulates solidarity, and frees us from fear. Even the stones of the sanctuary are 'tears transformed into hope'; small offerings, sometimes the fruit of hidden sacrifices, which will build a place from which, the newspaper promises, 'torrents of chaste delights will rain down.

A prophetic legacy

In the monthly montage of the *Salesian Bulletin* of 1886, the pedagogy of crescendo is striking. It starts with the little hour of watch and ends with the consecration of pain; from the individual faithful to the national building site; from the turreted tabernacle of the oratory to the ramparts of the

Esquiline Hill. It is a journey that intertwines three main axes:

Contemplation – The Heart of Jesus is first and foremost a mystery to be adored: vigil, Eucharist, reparation.

Formation – Every virtue (humility, meekness, poverty) is proposed as a social medicine, capable of healing collective wounds.

Construction – Spirituality becomes architecture: the basilica is not an ornament, but a laboratory of Christian citizenship. Without forcing it, we can recognise here the pre-announcement of themes that the Church would develop throughout the 20th century: the apostolate of the laity, social doctrine, the centrality of the Eucharist in the mission, the protection of minors, and the pastoral care of those who suffer. Don Bosco and his collaborators recognised the signs of the times and responded with the language of the heart.

On 14 May 1887, when Leo XIII consecrated the Basilica of the Sacred Heart through his vicar Cardinal Lucido Maria Parocchi, Don Bosco—too weak to ascend the altar—watched hidden among the faithful. At that moment, all the words of the 1886 *Bulletin* became living stone: the guard of honour, educative charity, the Eucharist as the centre of the world, the tenderness of Mary, reconciling poverty, the blessedness of suffering. Today, those pages call for new breath. It is up to us, consecrated or lay, young or old, to continue the vigil, to build sites of hope, to learn the geography of the heart. The programme remains the same, simple and bold: **to guard, to atone, to love.**

In the photo: Painting of the Sacred Heart, located on the main altar of the Basilica of the Sacred Heart in Rome. The work was commissioned by Don Bosco and entrusted to the painter Francesco de Rohden (Rome, 15 February 1817 – 28 December 1903).

Don Bosco and Eucharistic processions

A little-known but important aspect of St John Bosco's charism is Eucharistic processions. For the Saint of young people, the Eucharist was not only a personal devotion but also a pedagogical tool and public witness. In a Turin undergoing transformation, Don Bosco saw processions as an opportunity to strengthen the faith of young people and proclaim Christ in the streets. The Salesian experience, which has continued throughout the world, shows how faith can be embodied in culture and respond to social challenges. Even today, when lived with authenticity and openness, these processions can become prophetic signs of faith.

When we speak of St. John Bosco (1815-1888), we immediately think of his popular oratories, his passion for educating young people, and the Salesian family born of his charism. Less well known, but no less decisive, is the role that Eucharistic devotion – and in particular Eucharistic processions – played in his work. For Don Bosco, the Eucharist was not only the heart of his inner life; it was also a powerful pedagogical tool and a public sign of social renewal in a Turin undergoing rapid industrial transformation. Retracing the link between the saint of young people and the processions with the Blessed Sacrament means entering a pastoral workshop where liturgy, catechesis, civic education, and human promotion are intertwined in an original and, at times, surprising way.

Eucharistic processions in the context of the 19th century

To understand Don Bosco, it is necessary to remember that the 19th century in Italy was marked by intense debate on the

public role of religion. After the Napoleonic era and the Risorgimento, religious demonstrations in the streets were no longer a given. In many regions, a liberal State was emerging that viewed any public expression of Catholicism with suspicion, fearing mass gatherings or 'reactionary' resurgence. Eucharistic processions, however, retained a powerful symbolic force. They recalled Christ's lordship over all reality and, at the same time, brought to the fore a popular Church, visible and embodied in the neighbourhoods. Against this backdrop stood the stubbornness of Don Bosco, who never gave up accompanying his boys in witnessing their faith outside the walls of the oratory, whether on the avenues of Valdocco or in the surrounding countryside.

From his formative years at the seminary in Chieri, John Bosco developed a 'missionary' sensitivity to the Eucharist. The chronicles tell us that he often stopped in the chapel after lessons and spent a long time in prayer before the tabernacle. In his Memoirs of the Oratory, he himself acknowledges that he learned from his spiritual director, Fr. Cafasso, the value of 'becoming bread' for others. Contemplating Jesus giving himself in the Eucharist meant for him, learning the logic of gratuitous love. This line runs through his entire life, "Keep Jesus in the sacrament and Mary Help of Christians as your friends," he would repeat to young people, pointing to frequent Communion and silent adoration as the pillars of a path of lay and daily holiness.

The Valdocco oratory and the first internal processions

In the early 1840s, the Turin oratory did not yet have a proper church. Celebrations took place in wooden huts or in adapted courtyards. Don Bosco, however, did not give up organising small internal processions, almost 'dress rehearsals' for what would become a regular practice. The boys carried candles and banners, sang Marian hymns and, at the end, gathered around a makeshift altar for the Eucharistic benediction. These first attempts had an eminently pedagogical

function, to accustom young people to devout but joyful participation, combining discipline and spontaneity. In working-class Turin, where poverty often led to violence, marching in an orderly fashion with a red handkerchief around one's neck was already a sign of going against the tide. It showed that faith could teach respect for oneself and others.

Don Bosco knew well that a procession cannot be improvised. It requires signs, songs, and gestures that speak to the heart even before they speak to the mind. For this reason, he personally took care of explaining the symbols. The canopy became the image of the tent of meeting, a sign of the divine presence accompanying the people on their journey. The flowers scattered along the route recalled the beauty of the Christian virtues that must adorn the soul. The street lamps, indispensable for evening outings, alluded to the light of faith that illuminates the darkness of sin. Each element was the subject of a small 'sermon' in the refectory or during recreation, so that the logistical preparation was intertwined with systematic catechesis. The result? For the boys, the procession was not a ritual duty but an occasion for celebration full of meaning.

One of the most characteristic aspects of Salesian processions was the presence of a band formed by the students themselves. Don Bosco considered music an antidote to idleness and, at the same time, a powerful tool for evangelisation. "A cheerful march performed well," he wrote, "attracts people like a magnet attracts iron." The band preceded the Blessed Sacrament, alternating sacred pieces with popular tunes adapted with religious lyrics. This 'dialogue' between faith and popular culture reduced the distance between passers-by and created an aura of shared celebration around the procession. Many secular chroniclers testified to having been 'intrigued' by that group of young, disciplined musicians, so different from the military or philharmonic bands of the time.

Processions as a response to social crises

Nineteenth-century Turin experienced cholera epidemics (1854 and 1865), strikes, famines, and anti-clerical tensions. Don Bosco often reacted by proposing extraordinary processions of reparation or supplication. During the cholera epidemic of 1854, he led young people through the most affected streets, reciting litanies for the sick aloud and distributing bread and medicine. It was at that juncture that he made his promise – which he later kept – to build the church of Mary Help of Christians. “If Our Lady saves my boys, I will raise a temple to her.” The civil authorities, initially opposed to religious processions for fear of contagion, had to recognise the effectiveness of the Salesian assistance network, which was spiritually nourished by the processions themselves. The Eucharist, brought to the sick, thus became a tangible sign of Christian compassion.

Contrary to certain devotional models confined to sacristies, Don Bosco’s processions claimed a right of citizenship for the faith in the public space. It was not a question of ‘occupying’ the streets, but of restoring them to their community vocation. Passing under balconies, crossing squares and porticoes meant remembering that the city is not only a place of economic exchange or political confrontation, but also of fraternal encounter. This is why Don Bosco insisted on impeccable order: brushed cloaks, clean shoes, regular rows. He wanted the image of the procession to communicate beauty and dignity, persuading even the most sceptical observers that the Christian proposal elevated the person.

The Salesian legacy of processions

After Don Bosco’s death, his spiritual sons spread the practice of Eucharistic processions throughout the world: from agricultural schools in Emilia to missions in Patagonia, from Asian colleges to the working-class neighbourhoods of Brussels. What mattered was not to slavishly duplicate a Piedmontese ritual, but to transmit its pedagogical core: youth protagonism, symbolic catechesis, openness to the

surrounding society. Thus, in Latin America, the Salesians included traditional dances at the beginning of the procession. In India, they adopted flower carpets in accordance with local art; in sub-Saharan Africa, they alternated Gregorian chants with tribal polyphonic rhythms. The Eucharist became a bridge between cultures, realising Don Bosco's dream of "making all peoples one family."

From a theological point of view, Don Bosco's processions embody a strong vision of the real presence of Christ. Taking the Blessed Sacrament 'outside' means proclaiming that the Word did not become flesh to remain locked up, but to "pitch his tent among us" (cf. Jn 1:14). This presence demands to be proclaimed in understandable forms, without being reduced to an intimate gesture. In Don Bosco, the centripetal dynamic of adoration (gathering hearts around the Host) generates a centrifugal dynamic: young people, nourished at the altar, feel sent forth to serve. Micro-commitments spring from the procession: assisting a sick companion, pacifying a quarrel, studying with greater diligence. The Eucharist is prolonged in the 'invisible processions' of daily charity.

Today, in secularised or multi-religious contexts, Eucharistic processions can raise questions. Are they still communicative? Do they risk appearing like nostalgic folklore? Don Bosco's experience suggests that the key lies in the quality of relationships rather than in the quantity of incense or vestments. A procession that involves families, explains symbols, integrates contemporary artistic languages, and above all connects with concrete gestures of solidarity, maintains a surprising prophetic power. The recent Synod on Young People (2018) repeatedly recalled the importance of "going out" and "showing faith with our flesh." The Salesian tradition, with its itinerant liturgy, offers a tried and tested paradigm of the "Church going forth."

For Don Bosco, Eucharistic processions were not simply liturgical traditions, but true educative, spiritual, and

social acts. They represented a synthesis of lived faith, an educating community, and public witness. Through them, Don Bosco formed young people capable of adoring, respecting, serving, and witnessing.

Today, in a fragmented and distracted world, re-proposing the value of Eucharistic processions in the light of the Salesian charism can be an effective way to rediscover the meaning of what is essential: Christ present among His people, who walk with Him, adore Him, serve Him, and proclaim Him.

In an age that seeks authenticity, visibility, and relationships, the Eucharistic procession – if lived according to the spirit of Don Bosco – can be a powerful sign of hope and renewal.

Photo: Shutterstock

Don Bosco promoter of “divine mercy”

As a very young priest, Don Bosco published a booklet, in tiny format, entitled “Exercise of Devotion to God’s Mercy”.

It all began with the Marchioness Barolo

The Marchioness Giulia Colbert di Barolo (1785-1864), declared Venerable by Pope Francis on 12 May 2015, personally cultivated a special devotion to divine mercy, so she had the custom of a week of meditations and prayers on the subject introduced to the religious and educational communities she founded near Valdocco. But she was not satisfied. She wanted this practice to spread elsewhere, especially in parishes, among the people. She sought the consent of the Holy See, which not only granted it, but also

granted various indulgences for this devotional practice. At this point, it was a question of making a publication suitable for the purpose.

We are now in the summer of 1846, when Don Bosco, having overcome the serious crisis of exhaustion that had brought him to the brink of the grave, had withdrawn to spend time with Mamma Margaret at the Becchi to convalesce and had by then “resigned” from his much appreciated service as chaplain to one of the Barolo works, to the great displeasure of the Marchioness herself. But “his young people” called him to the newly rented Pinardi house.

At this point the famous patriot Silvio Pellico, secretary-librarian to the Marchioness and an admirer and friend of Don Bosco, who had set some of his poems to music, intervened. The Salesian memoirs tell us that Pellico, with a certain boldness, proposed to the Marchioness that she commission Don Bosco to do the publication she was interested in. What did the Marchioness do? She accepted, albeit not too enthusiastically. Who knows? Perhaps she wanted to put him to the test. And Don Bosco, too, accepted.

A theme close to his heart

The theme of God’s mercy was among his spiritual interests, those on which he had been formed in the seminary in Chieri and especially at the Turin *Convitto*. Only two years earlier he had finished attending the lessons of his fellow countryman Saint Joseph Cafasso, just four years older than him, but his spiritual director, whose sermons he followed at retreats for priests, but also the formator for half a dozen other founders, some even saints. Well then, Cafasso, although a child of the religious culture of his time – made up of prescriptions and “doing good to escape divine punishment and deserve Paradise” – did not miss an opportunity in both his teaching and preaching to speak of God’s mercy. And how could he not do so when he was constantly devoted to the Sacrament of Penance and to assisting those condemned to death? All the more so since such indulgent devotion at the time was a

pastoral reaction against the rigours of Jansenism that supported the predestination of those who were saved.

So, Don Bosco, as soon as he returned from the country at the beginning of November, set to work, following the pious practices approved by Rome and spread throughout Piedmont. With the help of a few texts that he could easily find in the Convitto library which he knew well, at the end of the year he published at his own expense a small booklet of 111 pages, tiny format, entitled "[Exercise of devotion to God's Mercy](#)". He immediately gave it to the girls, women and Sisters at the Barolo foundations. It is not documented, but logic and gratitude would have it that he also made a gift of it to the Marchioness Barolo, the promoter of the project: but the same logic and gratitude would have it that the Marchioness did not let herself be outdone in generosity, sending him, perhaps anonymously as on other occasions, a contribution of her own to the expenses.

There is no space here to present the "classic" contents of Don Bosco's booklet of meditations and prayers; we would just like to point out that its basic principle is: "everyone must invoke God's Mercy for himself and for all people, because 'we are all sinners' [...] all in need of forgiveness and grace [...] all called to eternal salvation."

Significant, then, is the fact that at the conclusion of each day of the week Don Bosco, by way of "devotional exercises", assigns a practice of piety: invite others to intervene, forgive those who have offended us, make an immediate mortification to obtain mercy from God for all sinners, give some alms or replace them with the recitation of prayers etc. On the last day, the practice is replaced by a nice invitation, perhaps even alluding the Marchioness Barolo, to say "at least one *Hail Mary* for the person who has promoted this devotion!"

Educational practice

But beyond the writings with edifying and formative purposes, one can ask how Don Bosco in fact educated

his youngsters to trust in divine mercy. The answer is not difficult and could be documented in many ways. We will limit ourselves to three vital experiences lived at Valdocco: the sacraments of Confession and Communion and his figure of a "father full of goodness and love".

Confession

Don Bosco initiated hundreds of young people from Valdocco into adult Christian life. But by what means? Two in particular: Confession and Communion.

Don Bosco, as we know, is one of the great apostles of Confession, and this is first of all because he exercised this ministry to the full, as did, for that matter, his teacher and spiritual director Cafasso mentioned above, and the much admired figure of his almost contemporary the saintly Curé d'Ars (1876-1859). If the latter's life, as has been written, "was spent in the confessional" and if Cafasso was able to offer many hours of the day ("the necessary time") to listen in confession to "bishops, priests, religious, eminent laymen and simple people who flocked to him", Don Bosco could not do the same because of the many occupations in which he was immersed. Nevertheless, he made himself available in the confessional for the young people (and the Salesians) every day that religious services were celebrated at Valdocco or in Salesian houses, or on special occasions.

He had begun to do this as soon as he had finished "learning to be a priest" at the Convitto (1841-1844), when on Sundays he would gather the young men in the wandering oratory over two years, when he went to hear confessions at the Consolata or in the Piedmontese parishes to which he was invited, or when he took advantage of carriage or train journeys to hear confessions from coachmen or passengers. He never stopped doing this until the very end, and when asked not to tire himself out with confessions, he replied that by now it was the only thing he could do for his young people. And what was his sorrow when, due to bureaucratic reasons and misunderstandings, his confession licence was not renewed by

the archbishop! The testimonies about Don Bosco as a confessor are innumerable and, in fact, the famous photograph depicting him in the act of confessing a young boy surrounded by so many others waiting to do so, must have pleased the saint himself, who was maybe behind the idea. It still remains a significant and indelible icon of his figure in the collective imagination.

But beyond his experience as a confessor, Don Bosco was a tireless promoter of the sacrament of Reconciliation. He spoke of its necessity, its importance, the usefulness of receiving it frequently. He pointed out the dangers of a celebration lacking the necessary conditions, and illustrated the classic ways of approaching it fruitfully. He did this through lectures, good nights, witty mottos and little words in the ear, circular letters to the young people at the colleges, personal letters, and by recounting numerous dreams focusing on confession, either well or badly done. In accordance with his intelligent catechetical practice, he told them episodes of conversions of great sinners, and also his own personal experiences in this regard.

Don Bosco, who knew the youthful soul in depth, used love and gratitude to God, whom he presented in his infinite goodness, generosity and mercy in order to lead all young people to sincere repentance. Instead, to shake the coldest and most hardened hearts, he described the likely punishments of sin and impressed them with vivid descriptions of divine judgement and Hell. Even in these cases, however, not satisfied with urging the boys to be sorry for their sins, he tried to bring them to the need for divine mercy, an important provision to anticipate their forgiveness even before sacramental confession. Don Bosco, as usual, did not enter into doctrinal matters. He was only interested in a sincere confession, which therapeutically heals the wound of the past, recomposes the spiritual fabric of the present for a future of a "life of grace".

Don Bosco believed in sin, believed in serious sin, believed in hell and spoke of their existence to readers

and listeners. But he was also convinced that God is mercy in person, which is why he has given us the sacrament of Reconciliation. And so he insisted on the conditions for receiving it well, and above all on the confessor as “father” and “doctor” and not so much as “doctor and judge”: “The confessor knows how much greater than your faults is the mercy of God who grants you forgiveness through his intervention” ([Life of Michael Magone](#), pp. 24-25).

According to Salesian memoirs, he often suggested to his youngsters to invoke divine mercy, not to be discouraged after sin, but to return to confession without fear, trusting in the goodness of the Lord and then making firm resolutions for good.

As an “educator in the youth field” Don Bosco felt the need to insist less on *ex opere operato* and more on *ex opere operantis*, that is, on the dispositions of the penitent. At Valdocco everyone felt invited to make a good confession, all felt the risk of bad confessions and the importance of making a good confession; many of them then felt they were living in a land blessed by the Lord. It was not for nothing that divine mercy had caused a deceased young man to wake up after the funeral shroud had been pulled away so that he could confess his sins (to Don Bosco).

In short, the sacrament of confession, well explained in its specific features and frequently celebrated, was perhaps the most effective means by which the Piedmontese saint led his young people to trust in God’s immense mercy.

Communion

But Communion, the second pillar of Don Bosco’s religious pedagogy, also served its purpose.

Don Bosco is certainly one of the greatest promoters of the sacramental practice of frequent Communion. His doctrine, modelled on the Counter-Reformation way of thinking, gave importance to Communion rather than to the liturgical celebration of the Eucharist, even if there was an evolution in its frequency. In the first twenty years of his

priestly life, in the wake of St. Alphonsus, but also of the Council of Trent and before that of Tertullian and St Augustine, he suggested weekly Communion, or several times a week or even daily depending on the perfection of the dispositions corresponding to the graces of the sacrament. Dominic Savio, who at Valdocco had begun to go to confession and communion every fortnight, then went on to receive it every week, then three times a week, finally, after a year of intense spiritual growth, every day, obviously always following the advice of his confessor, Don Bosco himself.

Later, in the second half of the 1860s, on the basis of his pedagogical experiences and a strong theological current in favour of frequent Communion, which saw the French Bishop de Ségur and the prior of Genoa Fr Giuseppe Frassinetti as leaders, Don Bosco moved on to inviting his young men to receive Communion more often, convinced that it allowed decisive steps in the spiritual life and favoured their growth in the love of God. And in the case of the impossibility of daily Sacramental Communion, he suggested spiritual Communion, perhaps during a visit to the Blessed Sacrament, so much appreciated by St Alphonsus. However, the important thing was to keep the conscience in a state to be able to receive Communion every day: the decision was in a way up to the confessor.

For Don Bosco, every Communion worthily received – the prescribed fasting, state of grace, willingness to detach oneself from sin, a beautiful thanksgiving afterwards – cancels daily faults, strengthens the soul to avoid them in the future, increases confidence in God and in his infinite goodness and mercy; moreover, it is a source of grace to succeed in school and in life, it is help in bearing sufferings and overcoming temptations.

Don Bosco believes that Communion is a necessity for the “good” to keep themselves as such and for the “bad” to become “good”. It is for those who want to become saints, not for the saints, like medicine is given to the sick. Obviously, he knows that its reception alone is not a sure indication of

goodness, as there are those who receive it very lukewarmly and out of habit, especially since the very superficiality of young people often does not allow them to understand the full importance of what they are doing.

With Communion then, one can implore from the Lord particular graces for oneself and for others. Don Bosco's letters are full of requests to his young men to pray and receive Communion according to his intention, so that the Lord may grant him good success in the "affairs" of every order in which he finds himself immersed. And he did the same with all his correspondents, who were invited to approach this sacrament to obtain the graces requested, while he would do the same in the celebration of Holy Mass.

Don Bosco cared so much that his boys grew up nourished by the sacraments, but he also wanted the utmost respect for their freedom. And he left precise instructions to his educators in his treatise on the Preventive System: "Never force young people to attend the holy sacraments but only encourage them, and give them the comfort of taking advantage of them."

At the same time, however, he remained adamant in his conviction that the sacraments are of paramount importance. He wrote peremptorily: "Say what you will about the various systems of education, but I find no sure basis except in the frequency of Confession and Communion" ([The Young Shepherd Boy from the Alps, the Life of Francis Besucco from Argentera](#), 1864. p. 100).

Fatherliness and mercy

God's mercy, at work particularly at the time of the sacraments of Confession and Communion, then found its external expression not only in a Don Bosco "father confessor", but also "father, brother, friend" of the young men in ordinary everyday life. With some exaggeration it could be said that their confidence in Don Bosco was such that many of them hardly made a distinction between Don Bosco "confessor" and Don Bosco "friend" and "brother"; others could

sometimes exchange the sacramental accusation with the sincere effusions of a son towards his father; on the other hand Don Bosco's knowledge of the young was such that with sober questions he inspired them with extreme confidence and not infrequently knew how to make the accusation in their place.

The figure of God the father, merciful and provident, who throughout history has shown his goodness from Adam onwards towards men, righteous or sinners, but all in need of help and the object of paternal care, and in any case all called to salvation in Jesus Christ, is thus modulated and reflected in the goodness of Don Bosco "Father of his young people", who only wants their good, who does not abandon them, always ready to understand them, pity them, forgive them. For many of them, orphans, poor and abandoned, accustomed from an early age to hard daily work, the object of very modest manifestations of tenderness, children of an era in which what prevailed was decisive submission and absolute obedience to any constituted authority, Don Bosco was perhaps the caress never experienced by a father, the "tenderness" of which Pope Francis speaks.

His letter to the young men of the Mirabello house at the end of 1864 is still moving: "Those voices, those cheers, that kissing and shaking hands, that cordial smile, that talking to each other about the soul, that encouraging each other to do good are things that embalm my heart, and for that reason I cannot think about them without feeling moved to tears. I will tell you [...] that you are the apple of my eye" (*Epistolario* II edited by F. Motto II, letter no. 792).

Even more moving is his letter to the young men of Lanzo on 3 January 1876: "Let me tell you and let no-one take offence, you are all thieves; I say it and I repeat it – you have stolen everything from me. When I was at Lanzo, you enchanted me with your benevolence and loving kindness, you bound the faculties of my mind with your pity; I was still left with this poor heart, whose affections you had already stolen from me entirely. Now your letter signed by 200 friendly and dearest hands have taken possession of this whole

heart of mine, and nothing remains except a lively desire to love you in the Lord, to do you good and save the souls of all of you" (Epistolario III, letter no. 1389).

The loving kindness with which he treated and wanted the Salesians to treat the boys had a divine foundation. He affirmed this by quoting an expression from St. Paul: 'Charity is benign and patient; it suffers all things, but hopes all things, and sustains all troubles'.

Loving kindness was therefore a sign of mercy and divine love that escaped sentimentalism and forms of sensuality because of the theological charity that was its source. Don Bosco communicated this love to individual boys and also to groups of them: "That I bear you much affection, I don't need to tell you, I have given you clear proof of it. That you love me, I do not need to tell you, because you have constantly shown it to me. But on what is this mutual affection of ours founded? [...] So the good of our souls is the foundation of our affection" (Epistolary II, no. 1148). Love of God, the theological *primum*, is thus the foundation of the pedagogical *primum*.

Loving-kindness was also the translation of divine love into truly human love, made up of right sensitivity, amiable cordiality, benevolent and patient affection tending to deep communion of the heart. In short, the effective and affective love that is experienced in a privileged form in the relationship between the educand and the educator, when gestures of friendship and forgiveness on the part of the educator induce the young person, by virtue of the love that guides the educator, to open up to confidence, to feel supported in his effort to surpass himself and to commit himself, to give consent and to adhere in depth to the values that the educator lives personally and proposes to him. The young person understands that this relationship reconstructs and restructures him as a man. The most arduous undertaking of the Preventive System is precisely that of winning the young person's heart, of enjoying his esteem, his trust, of making him a friend. If a young person does not love the educator, he

can do very little of the young person and for the young person.

Works of mercy

We could now continue with the works of mercy, which the Catechism distinguishes between corporal and spiritual works, setting out two groups of seven. It would not be difficult to document both how Don Bosco lived, practised and encouraged the practice of these works of mercy and how by his “being and working” he in fact constituted a sign and visible witness, in deeds and words, of God’s love for mankind. Due to space limitations, we limit ourselves to indicating the possibility of research. It remains, however, that today they seem to be abandoned also because of the false opposition between mercy and justice, as if mercy were not a typical way of expressing that love which, as such, can never contradict justice.

Social inclusion according to Don Bosco

Don Bosco’s far-sighted proposal for the ‘unaccompanied minors’ of Rome.

The history of the church of the Sacred Heart in Rome, now a basilica, is quite well known, and it is much frequented by people hurrying through the adjacent Termini station. A history fraught with problems and difficulties of all kinds for Don Bosco while the church was under construction (1880-1887), but also a source of joy and satisfaction once it was completed (1887). Less well known, however, is the story of the origin of the “house of charity capable of

accommodating at least 500 youngsters" that Don Bosco wanted to build next to the church. A work, an extremely relevant reflection for today... from 140 years ago! Don Bosco himself presented it to us in the January 1884 issue of the *Salesian Bulletin*: "Today there are hundreds and thousands of poor children wandering the streets and squares of Rome, their faith and morals at risk. As already pointed out on other occasions, many young people, either alone or with their families, come to this city not only from various parts of Italy, but also from other nations, in the hope of finding work and money; but disappointed in their expectation they soon fall into misery and the risk of doing badly, and consequently of ending up in prison."

Analysing the condition of young people in the "eternal city" was not difficult: the worrying situation of "street kids", whether Italian or not, was there for all to see, for the civil and ecclesiastical authorities, for the Roman citizens and the multitude of "buzzurri" and foreigners who had arrived in the city once it had been declared capital of the Kingdom of Italy (1871). The difficulty stemmed from not knowing what solution to propose and whether there was the ability to implement it once identified.

Don Bosco, not always well liked in the city because of his Piedmontese origin, proposed his solution to the Cooperators: "The aim of the Hospice of the Sacred Heart of Jesus would be to take in poor and abandoned youngsters from any city in Italy or any other country in the world, to educate them in knowledge and religion, to instruct them in some art or trade, and so remove them from the prison cell, give them back to their families and to civil society as good Christians, upright citizens capable of earning an honourable livelihood through their own labours."

Ahead of the times

Reception, education, training for work, integration and social inclusion: but is this not the prior objective of all youth policies in favour of immigrants today? Don Bosco had

experience in this regard on his side: for 30 years at Valdocco they took in youngsters from various parts of Italy, for some years in Salesian houses in France there were children of Italian and other immigrants, since 1875 in Buenos Aires the Salesians had the spiritual care of Italian immigrants from various regions of Italy (decades later they would also take an interest in Jorge Mario Bergoglio, the future Pope Francis, the son of Piedmontese immigrants).

The religious dimension

Naturally, Don Bosco was interested above all in the salvation of the soul of the young, which required the profession of the Catholic faith: *Extra ecclesia nulla salus*, as they used to say. And in fact he wrote: "Others then from the city and foreigners, because of their poverty, are exposed daily to the risk of falling into the hands of the Protestants, who have, so to speak, invaded the city of St. Peter, and especially intend to ambush poor and needy youngsters. Under the guise of providing them with food and clothing for their bodies, they spread the poison of error and unbelief to their souls."

This explains how, in his educational project in Rome (we would prefer to call it his "global compact on education"), Don Bosco does not neglect faith. A path of true integration into a "new" civil society cannot exclude the religious dimension of the population. Papal support came in handy: an extra stimulus "for people who love religion and society": "This Hospice is very dear to the heart of the Holy Father Leo XIII. While with apostolic zeal he strives to spread faith and morality in every part of the world, he leaves no stone unturned on behalf of the children most exposed to danger. This Hospice should therefore be dear to the hearts of all people who love religion and society; it should be especially dear to the hearts of our Cooperators, to whom in a special way the Vicar of Jesus Christ entrusted the noble task of the Hospice itself and of the attached Church."

Finally, in his appeal to the generosity of benefactors for the construction of the Hospice, Don Bosco could not fail to

make explicit reference to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, to whom the adjoining church was dedicated: “We can also believe for certain that this Hospice will be well pleasing to the Heart of Jesus... In the nearby Church the divine Heart will be the refuge of adults, and in the adjoining Hospice he will show himself to be the loving friend, the tender father of the children. He will have a group of 500 children in Rome every day to divinely crown him, pray to him, sing hosannas to him, ask his holy blessing.”

New times, new peripheries

The Salesian hospice, built as a school of arts and crafts and an oratory on the outskirts of the city – which at the time began in Piazza della Repubblica – later became absorbed by the building expansion of the city itself. The first school for poor boys and orphans was moved to a new suburb in 1930 and was replaced in successive stages by various types of other schools (elementary, middle, high school). It also gave hospitality for a time to Salesian students attending the Gregorian University and some faculties of the Salesian Athenaeum. It always remained a parish and oratory as well as the headquarters of the Roman Province. For a long time it housed some national offices and is now the headquarters of the Salesian Congregation: structures that have animated and still animate Salesian houses that have mostly come into being and grown on the outskirts of hundreds of cities, or on the “geographical and existential peripheries” of the world, as Pope Francis put it. Just like the Sacred Heart in Rome, which still preserves a small sign of Don Bosco’s great “dream”: it offers assistance to non-EU immigrants and with the Youth Centre’s “Talent Bank” provides food, clothing and basic necessities to the homeless at Termini station.

The Vicar of the Rector Major. Don Stefano Martoglio

We have the joy of announcing that Don Stefano Martoglio has been re-elected as Vicar of the Rector Major.

The chapter members elected him today with an absolute majority and from the first ballot.

We wish Don Stefano a fruitful apostolate and assure him of our prayers.

Rectors Major of the Salesian Congregation

The Salesian Congregation, founded in 1859 by Saint John Bosco, has had at its head a superior general called, since the time of Don Bosco, Rector Major. The figure of the Rector Major is central to the leadership of the congregation, serving as a spiritual guide and center of unity not only for the Salesians but also for the entire Salesian Family. Each Rector Major has contributed uniquely to the Salesian mission, addressing the challenges of their time and promoting the education and spiritual life of young people. Let's briefly summarize the Major Rectors and the challenges they have faced.

Saint John Bosco (1859-1888)

Saint John Bosco, founder of the Salesian Congregation, embodied distinctive qualities that shaped the identity and mission of the order. His deep faith and trust in Divine Providence made him a charismatic leader, capable of inspiring

and guiding with vision and determination. His tireless dedication to the education of young people, especially the most needy, manifested itself through the innovative Preventive System, based on reason, religion, and loving-kindness. Don Bosco promoted a family atmosphere in Salesian houses, fostering sincere and fraternal relationships. His organizational skills and entrepreneurial spirit led to the creation of numerous educational works. His missionary openness pushed the Congregation beyond Italian borders, spreading the Salesian charism throughout the world. His humility and simplicity made him close to everyone, earning the trust and affection of collaborators and young people.

Saint John Bosco faced many difficulties. He had to overcome the misunderstanding and hostility of civil and ecclesiastical authorities, who often distrusted his educational method and rapid growth. He faced serious economic difficulties in supporting the Salesian works, often relying only on Providence. Managing difficult young people and training reliable collaborators was an arduous task. Furthermore, his health, worn down by intense work and constant worries, was a constant limitation. Despite everything, he faced every trial with unwavering faith, paternal love for young people, and tireless determination, carrying out the mission with hope.

1. Blessed Michele Rua (1888-1910)

The ministry of Rector Major of Blessed Michele Rua is characterized by fidelity to the charism of Don Bosco, institutional consolidation, and missionary expansion. He was appointed by Don Bosco as his successor by order of Pope Leo XIII, in the audience of 24.10.1884. After the Pope's confirmation on 24.09.1885, Don Bosco made his choice public before the Superior Chapter.

Some characteristics of his rectorship:

- he acted as a “living rule” of the preventive system, maintaining the educational spirit of Don Bosco through formation, catechesis, and spiritual direction; he was a continuator of the founder;

- he directed the exponentially growing Congregation, managing hundreds of houses and thousands of religious, with pastoral visits around the world despite health problems;
- he faced slander and crises (such as the scandal of 1907) defending the Salesian image;
- he promoted the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and the Cooperators, strengthening the tripartite structure desired by Don Bosco;
- under his leadership, the Salesians grew from 773 to 4,000 members, and the houses from 64 to 341, extending into 30 nations.

2. Don Paolo Albera (1910-1921)

The ministry of Rector Major of Don Paolo Albera is distinguished by fidelity to the charism of Don Bosco and global missionary expansion. Elected in General Chapter 11.

Some characteristics of his rectorship:

- he maintained the preventive system intact, promoting the spiritual formation of young Salesians and the dissemination of the Salesian Bulletin as an instrument of evangelization;
- he faced the challenges of the First World War, with Salesians mobilized (over 2,000 called to arms, 80 of them died in the war) and houses transformed into hospitals or barracks, maintaining cohesion in the Congregation; this conflict caused the suspension of the planned General Chapter and interrupted many educational and pastoral activities;
- he faced the consequences of this war which generated an increase in poverty and the number of orphans, requiring an extraordinary commitment to welcome and support these young people in Salesian houses;
- he opened new frontiers in Africa, Asia, and America, sending 501 missionaries in nine *ad gentes* expeditions and founding works in Congo, China, and India.

3. Blessed Filippo Rinaldi (1922-1931)

The ministry of Rector Major of Blessed Filippo Rinaldi is characterized by fidelity to the charism of Don Bosco,

missionary expansion, and spiritual innovation. Elected in General Chapter 12.

Some characteristics of his rectorship:

- he maintained the preventive system intact, promoting the interior formation of the Salesians;
- he sent over 1,800 Salesians around the world, founded missionary institutes and magazines, opening new frontiers in Africa, Asia, and America;
- he established the association of Past Pupils and the first Salesian secular institute (Volunteers of Don Bosco), adapting the spirit of Don Bosco to the needs of the early twentieth century;
- he revived the interior life of the Congregation, exhorting to “unlimited confidence” in Mary Help of Christians, a central legacy of the Salesian charism;
- he emphasized the importance of spiritual formation and assistance to emigrants, promoting welfare works and associations among workers;
- during his rectorship, members grew from 4,788 to 8,836 and houses from 404 to 644, highlighting his organizational skills and missionary zeal.

4. Don Pietro Ricaldone (1932-1951)

The ministry of Rector Major of Don Pietro Ricaldone is characterized by institutional consolidation, commitment during the Second World War, and collaboration with civil authorities. Elected in General Chapter 14.

Some characteristics of his rectorship:

- he strengthened Salesian houses and training centers, founded the Salesian Pontifical University (1940), and oversaw the canonization of Don Bosco (1934) and Mother Mazzarello (1951);
- he faced the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) which represented one of the main difficulties, with persecutions that severely affected Salesian works in the country;
- subsequently, he faced the Second World War (1939-1945) which caused further suffering: many Salesians were deported

or deprived of their freedom, and communications between the General House in Turin and the communities scattered around the world were interrupted; furthermore, the advent of totalitarian regimes in Eastern Europe led to the suppression of several Salesian works;

- during the war, he opened Salesian structures to displaced persons, Jews, and partisans, mediating for the release of prisoners and protecting those in danger;
- he promoted Salesian spirituality through editorial works (e.g., *Corona patrum salesiana*) and initiatives in favor of marginalized young people.

5. Don Renato Ziggiotti (1952-1965)

The ministry of Rector Major of Don Renato Ziggiotti (1952-1965) is characterized by global expansion, fidelity to the charism, and conciliar commitment. Elected in General Chapter 17.

Some characteristics of his rectorship:

- he was the first Rector Major not to have personally known Don Bosco and to renounce the office before his death, demonstrating great humility;
- during his mandate, the Salesians grew from 16,900 to over 22,000 members, with 73 provinces and almost 1,400 houses worldwide;
- he promoted the construction of the Basilica of Saint John Bosco in Rome and the sanctuary on Colle dei Becchi (Colle Don Bosco), in addition to the transfer of the Salesian Pontifical Athenaeum to the capital;
- he was the first Rector Major to actively participate in the first three sessions of the Second Vatican Council, anticipating the renewal of the Congregation and the involvement of the laity;
- he accomplished an unprecedented feat: he visited almost all the Salesian houses and Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, dialoguing with thousands of confreres, despite logistical difficulties.

6. Don Luigi Ricceri (1965-1977)

The ministry of Rector Major of Don Luigi Ricceri is characterized by conciliar renewal, organizational centralization, and fidelity to the Salesian charism. Elected in General Chapter 19.

Some characteristics of his rectorship:

- post-conciliar adaptation: he guided the Congregation in the implementation of the indications of the Second Vatican Council, promoting the Special General Chapter (1966) for the renewal of the Constitutions and the permanent formation of the Salesians;
- he transferred the General Directorate from Valdocco to Rome, separating it from the “Mother House” to better integrate it into the ecclesial context;
- the revision of the Constitutions and Regulations was a complex task, aimed at ensuring adaptation to the new ecclesial directives without losing the original identity;
- he strengthened the role of the Cooperators and Past Pupils, reinforcing collaboration between the different branches of the Salesian Family.

7. Don Egidio Viganò (1977-1995)

The ministry of Rector Major of Don Egidio Viganò is characterized by fidelity to the Salesian charism, conciliar commitment, and global missionary expansion. Elected in General Chapter 21.

Some characteristics of his rectorship:

- his participation as an expert in the Second Vatican Council significantly influenced his work, promoting the updating of the Salesian Constitutions in line with the conciliar directives and guiding the Congregation in the implementation of the indications of the Second Vatican Council;
- he actively collaborated with Pope Saint John Paul II, becoming his personal confessor, and participated in 6 synods of bishops (1980-1994), strengthening the link between the Congregation and the universal Church;
- deeply linked to Latin American culture (where he spent 32

years), he expanded the Salesian presence in the Third World, with a focus on social justice and intercultural dialogue;

- he was the first rector major elected for three consecutive terms (with papal dispensation);
- he strengthened the role of the Cooperators and Past Pupils, promoting collaboration between the different branches of the Salesian Family;
- he strengthened devotion to Mary Help of Christians, recognizing the Association of Devotees of Mary Help of Christians as an integral part of the Salesian Family;
- his dedication to scientific research and interdisciplinary dialogue led him to be considered the “second founder” of the Salesian Pontifical University;
- under his leadership, the Congregation launched the “Africa Project,” expanding the Salesian presence in the African continent, which bore much fruit.

8. Don Juan Edmundo Vecchi (1996-2002)

The ministry of Rector Major of Don Juan Edmundo Vecchi is distinguished by fidelity to the Salesian charism, commitment to formation, and openness to the challenges of the post-Council. Elected in General Chapter 24.

Some characteristics of his rectorship:

- he is the first non-Italian Rector Major: son of Italian immigrants in Argentina, he represented a generational and geographical change in the leadership of the Congregation, opening up to a more global perspective;
- he promoted the permanent formation of the Salesians, emphasizing the importance of spirituality and professional preparation to respond to the needs of young people;
- he promoted a renewed attention to the education of young people, emphasizing the importance of integral formation and personal accompaniment;
- through the Circular Letters, he exhorted to live holiness in everyday life, linking it to youth service and the testimony of Don Bosco;
- during his illness, he continued to witness faith and

dedication, offering profound reflections on the experience of suffering and old age in Salesian life.

9. Don Pascual Chávez Villanueva (2002-2014)

The ministry of Rector Major of Don Pascual Chávez Villanueva is distinguished by fidelity to the Salesian charism, commitment to formation, and commitment to the challenges of globalization and ecclesial transformations. Elected in General Chapter 25.

Some characteristics of his rectorship:

- he promoted renewed attention to the Salesian community as an evangelizing subject, with priority given to spiritual formation and the inculturation of the charism in regional contexts;
- he relaunched the commitment to the most vulnerable young people, inheriting the approach of Don Bosco, with particular attention to frontier oratories and social peripheries;
- he oversaw the permanent formation of the Salesians, developing theological and pedagogical studies linked to the spirituality of Don Bosco, preparing for the bicentenary of his birth;
- he led the Congregation with an organizational and dialogical approach, involving the different regions and promoting collaboration between Salesian study centers;
- he promoted greater collaboration with the laity, encouraging co-responsibility in the Salesian mission and addressing internal resistance to change.

10. Don Ángel Fernández Artime (2014-2024)

The ministry of Don Ángel Fernández Artime is distinguished by fidelity to the Salesian charism and to the papacy. Elected in General Chapter 27.

Some characteristics of his rectorship:

- he led the Congregation with an inclusive approach, visiting 120 countries and promoting the adaptation of the Salesian charism to different cultural realities, while maintaining a strong link with the roots of Don Bosco;

- he strengthened the commitment to the most vulnerable young people in the peripheries, inheriting the approach of Don Bosco;
- he faced the challenges of globalization and ecclesial transformations, promoting collaboration between study centers and renewing the instruments of governance of the Congregation;
- he promoted greater collaboration with the laity, encouraging co-responsibility in the educational and pastoral mission;
- he had to face the COVID-19 pandemic which required adaptations in educational and assistance works to continue serving young people and communities in difficulty;
- he had to face the management of human and material resources in a period of vocational crisis and demographic changes;
- he moved the General House from the Pisana to the work founded by Don Bosco, Sacro Cuore of Rome;
- his commitment culminated in his appointment as Cardinal (2023) and Pro-Prefect of the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life (2025), marking a recognition of his influence in the universal Church.

The Major Rectors of the Salesian Congregation have played a fundamental role in the growth and development of the congregation. Each of them has brought their own unique contribution, addressing the challenges of their time and keeping the charism of Saint John Bosco alive. Their legacy continues to inspire future generations of Salesians and young people around the world, ensuring that Don Bosco's educational mission remains relevant and vital in the contemporary context.

We also present below a statistic of these rectorships.

<i>Rector Major</i>	<i>Born on</i>	<i>Beginning of Rector Major mandate</i>	<i>Elected at ... years</i>	<i>End of Rector Major mandate</i>	<i>Rector Major for...</i>	<i>Lived for... years</i>
BOSCO Giovanni	16.08.1815	18.12.1859	44	31.01.1888 (†)	28 years and 1 month	72
RUA Michele	09.06.1837	31.01.1888	50	06.04.1910 (†)	22 years and 2 months	72
ALBERA Paolo	06.06.1845	16.08.1910	65	29.10.1921 (†)	11 years and 2 months	76
RINALDI Filippo	28.05.1856	24.04.1922	65	05.12.1931 (†)	9 years and 7 months	75
RICALDONE Pietro	27.07.1870	17.05.1932	61	25.11.1951 (†)	19 years and 6 months	81
ZIGGIOTTI Renato	09.10.1892	01.08.1952	59	27.04.1965 († 19.04.1983)	12 years and 8 months	90
RICCERI Luigi	08.05.1901	27.04.1965	63	15.12.1977 († 14.06.1989)	12 years and 7 months	88
VIGANO Egidio	29.06.1920	15.12.1977	57	23.06.1995 (†)	17 years and 6 months	74

VECCHI Juan Edmundo	23.06.1931	20.03.1996	64	23.01.2002 (†)	5 years and 10 months	70
VILLANUEVA Pasqual Chavez	20.12.1947	03.04.2002	54	25.03.2014	11 years and 11 months	76
ARTIME Angel Fernandez	21.08.1960	25.03.2014	53	31.07.2024	10 years and 4 months	64

Don Bosco and music

For the education of his youngsters Don Bosco made much use of music. Even as a boy he loved singing. As he had a beautiful voice, Mr Giovanni Roberto, head cantor of the parish, taught him Gregorian chant. Within a few months, John was able to join the orchestra and perform musical parts with excellent results. At the same time, he began to practise playing a spinet which was a plucked string instrument with a keyboard, and also the violin (BM I, 173).

As a priest in Turin, he acted as music teacher to his first oratory boys, gradually forming real choirs that attracted the sympathy of the listeners with their singing.

After the opening of the hospice, he started a school of Gregorian chant and, in time, also took his young singers to churches in the city and outside Turin to perform their repertoire.

He composed hymns such as the one to the Infant Jesus, *'Ah, let us sing in the sound of jubilation...'*. He also initiated some of his disciples into the study of music, among

them Fr John Cagliero, who later became famous for his musical creations, earning the esteem of experts. In 1855 Don Bosco organised the first instrumental band at the Oratory.

He did not, however, get ahead of the good Don Bosco! Already in the 1860s he included a chapter on evening music classes in one of his Regulations in which he said, among other things:

'From every student musician a formal promise is demanded not to go and sing or play in public theatres, nor in any other entertainment in which Religion and morality could be compromised' (MB VII, 855).

Children's music

To a French religious who had founded a festive Oratory and asked him if it was appropriate to teach music to boys, he replied: *'An Oratory without music is like a body without a soul!'* (BM V, 222).

Don Bosco spoke French quite well albeit with a certain freedom of grammar and expression. One of his replies concerning the boys' music was famous in this regard. Father L. Mendre of Marseilles, parish priest of St Joseph's parish, was very fond of him. One day, he sat beside him during entertainment in the Oratory of St Leo. The little musicians would occasionally play a flat note or two. The abbot, who knew a lot about music, winced each time. Don Bosco whispered into his ear in his French: *"Monsieur Mendre, la musique de les enfants elle s'écoute avec le coeur et non avec les oreilles"* (Father Mendre, children's music is listened to with the heart and not with the ears). The priest later recalled that occasion countless times, revealing Don Bosco's wisdom and goodness (BM XV, 58 n.3).

All this does not mean, however, that Don Bosco put music before discipline in the Oratory. He was always amiable but did not easily overlook failures of obedience. For some years he had allowed the young band members to go for a walk and a country lunch on the feast of St Cecilia. But in 1859, due to incidents, he began to prohibit such

entertainment. The youngsters did not protest openly, but half of them, urged on by a leader who had promised them to obtain permission from Don Bosco, and hoping for impunity, decided to leave the Oratory anyway and organise a lunch of their own accord before the Feast of St Cecilia. They had taken this decision thinking that Don Bosco would not notice and would not take action. So they went, in the last days of October, to lunch at a nearby inn. After lunch they wandered around the town again and in the evening they returned to dine at the same place, returning to Valdocco half-drunk late at night. Only Mr Buzzetti, invited at the last moment, refused to join them and warned Don Bosco. The latter calmly declared the band disbanded and ordered Buzzetti to collect and lock up all the instruments and think of new pupils to start instrumental music. The next morning, he sent for all the unruly musicians one by one, telling each of them that they had forced him to be very strict. Then he sent them back to their relatives or guardians, recommending some more needy to city workshops. Only one of the mischievous boys was later accepted because Fr Rua assured Don Bosco that he was a naive boy who had allowed himself to be deceived by his companions. And Don Bosco kept him on probation for some time!

But with sorrows one must not forget consolations. 9 June 1868 was a memorable date in Don Bosco's life and in the history of the Congregation. The new Church of Mary Help of Christians, which he had built with immense sacrifices, was finally consecrated. Those who were present at the solemn celebrations were deeply moved. An overflowing crowd packed Don Bosco's beautiful church. The Archbishop of Turin, Archbishop Riccardi, performed the solemn rite of consecration. At the evening service the following day, during Solemn Vespers, the Valdocco choir intoned the grand antiphon set to music by Fr Cagliero: *Sancta Maria succurre miseris*. The crowd of faithful was thrilled. Three mighty choirs had performed it perfectly. One hundred and fifty tenors and basses sang in the nave near the altar of St Joseph, two hundred sopranos and contraltos stood high up along the

railing under the dome, a third choir, made up of another hundred tenors and basses, stood on the orchestra that then overlooked the back of the church. The three choirs, connected by an electric device, maintained synchrony at the Maestro's command. The biographer, present at the performance, later wrote:

“The harmony of all three choirs singing in unison cast a spell over the entire congregation. As the voices blended together, the listeners felt that they had been immersed into a sea of voices which rose from all directions. During the singing, Canon John Baptist Anfossi was kneeling behind the main altar with Don Bosco. As far as he could remember, he had never seen or heard Don Bosco stir or say anything while at prayer. On this occasion, however, Don Bosco looked at him with moist eyes full of joy and whispered, ‘Dear Anfossi, doesn't it feel like being in heaven?’
(*BM IX*, 128).