

Salesian House of Castel Gandolfo

Amidst the green hills of the Castelli Romani and the tranquil waters of Lake Albano lies a place where history, nature, and spirituality converge in a unique way: Castel Gandolfo. In this setting rich in imperial memory, Christian faith, and scenic beauty, the Salesian presence stands as a steadfast point of welcome, education, and pastoral life. The Salesian House, with its parish, educational, and cultural activities, continues the mission of St. John Bosco, offering believers and visitors an experience of a living and open Church, immersed in an environment that invites contemplation and fraternity. It is a community that, for nearly a century, has walked in service of the Gospel at the very heart of Catholic tradition.

A place blessed by history and nature

Castel Gandolfo is a jewel of the Castelli Romani, located about 25 km from Rome, nestled in the natural beauty of the Alban Hills and overlooking the picturesque Lake Albano. At an altitude of about 426 metres, this place stands out for its mild and welcoming climate, a microclimate that seems prepared by Providence to receive those seeking rest, beauty, and silence.

Even in Roman times, this territory was part of the *Albanum Caesaris*, an ancient imperial estate frequented by emperors since the time of Augustus. However, it was Emperor Tiberius who first resided here permanently, while later Domitian built a splendid villa, the remains of which can still be seen in the papal gardens. The Christian history of the place began with Constantine's donation to the Church of Albano, a gesture that symbolically marked the transition from imperial glory to the light of the Gospel.

The name Castel Gandolfo derives from the Latin *Castrum Gandulphi*, the castle built by the Gandolfi family in the 12th century. When in 1596 the castle passed to the Holy See, it became the summer residence of the Popes, and the bond between this place and the ministry of the Successor of Peter became deep and lasting.

The Vatican Observatory: contemplating the heavens, praising the Creator

Of particular spiritual significance is the Vatican Observatory, founded by Pope Leo XIII in 1891 and relocated in the 1930s to Castel Gandolfo due to Rome's light pollution. It testifies to how even science, when directed towards truth, leads to praising the Creator.

Over the years, the Observatory has contributed to major astronomical projects such as the *Carte du Ciel* and the discovery of numerous celestial objects.

With further deterioration of observing conditions even in the Castelli Romani, in the 1980s scientific activity shifted primarily to the Mount Graham Observatory in Arizona (USA), where the *Vatican Observatory Research Group* continues astrophysical research. Castel Gandolfo, however, remains an important centre of study. Since 1986, it has hosted the *Vatican Observatory Summer School* every two years, dedicated to astronomy students and graduates from around the world. The Observatory also organises specialist conferences, public outreach events, meteorite exhibitions, and presentations of historical and artistic materials on astronomical themes, all in a spirit of research, dialogue, and contemplation of the mystery of creation.

A church at the heart of the city and of the faith

In the 17th century, Pope Alexander VII entrusted Gian Lorenzo Bernini with the construction of a palatine chapel for the employees of the Pontifical Villas. The project, initially conceived in honour of St. Nicholas of Bari, was ultimately

dedicated to St Thomas of Villanova, an Augustinian canonised in 1658. The church was consecrated in 1661 and entrusted to the Augustinians, who administered it until 1929. With the signing of the Lateran Treaty, Pope Pius XI entrusted the same Augustinians with the pastoral care of the new Pontifical Parish of St. Anne in the Vatican, while the Church of St. Thomas of Villanova was later entrusted to the Salesians.

The architectural beauty of this church, a product of Baroque genius, serves faith and the encounter between God and man. Today, numerous weddings, baptisms, and liturgies are celebrated here, attracting faithful from all over the world.

The Salesian house

The Salesians have been present in Castel Gandolfo since 1929. In those years, the village experienced significant demographic and tourist development, further enhanced by the beginning of papal celebrations in the Church of St. Thomas of Villanova. Every year, on the Solemnity of the Assumption, the Pope celebrated Holy Mass in the pontifical parish, a tradition begun by St. John XXIII on 15 August 1959, when he walked out of the Pontifical Palace to celebrate the Eucharist among the people. This custom continued until the pontificate of Pope Francis, who discontinued summer stays in Castel Gandolfo. In 2016, the entire complex of the Pontifical Villas was transformed into a museum and opened to the public.

The Salesian house was part of the Roman Province and, from 2009 to 2021, of the Central Italy Salesian Circumscription. Since 2021, it has been under the direct responsibility of the Central Office, with a Director and community appointed by the Rector Major. Currently, the Salesians present come from various nations (Brazil, India, Italy, Poland) and are active in the parish, chaplaincies, and oratory.

The pastoral spaces, though belonging to the Vatican City State and thus considered extraterritorial, are part of the Diocese of Albano, in whose pastoral life the Salesians

actively participate. They are involved in diocesan adult catechesis, teaching at the diocesan theological school, and in the Presbyteral Council as representatives of consecrated life.

In addition to the parish of St. Thomas of Villanova, the Salesians also manage two other churches: Mary Help of Christians (also called “St. Paul,” after the name of the neighbourhood) and Madonna del Lago, desired by St. Paul VI. Both were built between the 1960s and 1970s to meet the pastoral needs of the growing population.

The parish church designed by Bernini is now a destination for numerous weddings and baptisms celebrated by faithful from around the world. Every year, with the necessary permissions, dozens, sometimes hundreds, of celebrations take place here. The parish priest, in addition to leading the parish community, is also chaplain of the Pontifical Villas and provides spiritual accompaniment to Vatican employees working there.

The oratory, currently run by laypeople, sees the direct involvement of the Salesians, especially in catechesis. On weekends, feast days, and during summer activities like Estate Ragazzi, Salesian students residing in Rome also collaborate, offering valuable support. At the Church of Mary Help of Christians, there is also an active theatre, with parish groups organising performances—a place of encounter, culture, and evangelisation.

Pastoral life and traditions

Pastoral life is marked by the main feasts of the year: St John Bosco in January, Mary Help of Christians in May with a procession in the St. Paul neighbourhood, the feast of the Madonna del Lago—and thus the Feast of the Lake—on the last Saturday of August, with the statue carried in procession on a boat across the lake. This latter celebration is increasingly involving neighbouring communities, attracting many participants, including motorcyclists, with whom moments of

encounter have been initiated.

On the first Saturday of September, the patronal feast of Castel Gandolfo is celebrated in honour of St. Sebastian, with a large town procession. Devotion to St. Sebastian dates back to 1867, when the town was spared from an epidemic that severely affected nearby villages. Although the liturgical memorial falls on 20 January, the local feast is celebrated in September, both in memory of the protection received and for practical and climatic reasons.

On 8 September, the patron of the church, St. Thomas of Villanova, is celebrated, coinciding with the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. On this occasion, the feast of families is also held, aimed at couples who married in Bernini's church. They are invited to return for a communal celebration, a procession, and a shared meal. The initiative has been well received and is becoming a lasting tradition.

A curiosity: the letterbox

Next to the entrance of the Salesian house is a post-box, known as the "Mailbox of Correspondence," considered the oldest still in use. It dates back to 1820, twenty years before the introduction of the world's first postage stamp, the famous *Penny Black* (1840). It is an official mailbox of the Italian Post Office still in operation, but also a symbolic invitation to communication, dialogue, and opening one's heart. The return of Pope Leo XIV to his summer residence will surely increase its use.

Castel Gandolfo remains a place where the Creator speaks through the beauty of creation, the proclaimed Word, and the witness of a Salesian community that, in the simplicity of Don Bosco's style, continues to offer welcome, education, liturgy, and fraternity, reminding those who approach these lands in search of peace and serenity that true peace and serenity are found only in God and His grace.

Visit to the Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Rome (also in 3D)

The Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Rome is a prominent church for the city, located in the Castro Pretorio district, on Via Marsala, across the street from Termini Station. It serves as both a parish church and a cardinal title, with the Central Headquarters of the Salesian Congregation adjacent to it. Its patronal feast is celebrated on the solemnity of the Sacred Heart. Its proximity to Termini makes it a visible landmark for those arriving in the city, with the gilded statue on the bell tower standing out on the horizon as a symbol of blessing for residents and travellers alike.

Origins and History

The idea of building a church dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus dates back to Pope Pius IX, who laid the first stone in 1870 for a building initially intended to honour St Joseph. However, by 1871, the pontiff decided to dedicate the new church to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. It was the second major church dedicated to the Sacred Heart after the one in Lisbon, Portugal, begun in 1779 and consecrated in 1789, and predating the famous *Sacré-Cœur* in Montmartre, Paris, France, which was started in 1875 and consecrated in 1919.

Construction began under difficult circumstances: with Rome's annexation to the Kingdom of Italy (1870), work halted due to lack of funds. It was only through the intervention of St John Bosco, at the Pope's invitation, that construction definitively resumed in 1880, thanks to his tireless efforts to collect donations across Europe and gather resources for

the building's completion. The architect commissioned was Francesco Vespignani, then "Architect of the Sacred Palaces" under Leo XIII, who saw the project through. The consecration took place on 14 May 1887, marking the end of the first construction phase.

From its inception, the church has served a parish function: the parish of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Castro Pretorio was established on 2 February 1879 by the vicarial decree "*Postremis hisce temporibus*". Later, Pope Benedict XV elevated it to the dignity of a minor basilica on 11 February 1921, with the apostolic letter "*Pia societas*". More recently, on 5 February 1965, Pope Paul VI established the cardinal title of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Castro Pretorio. Among its titular cardinals are Maximilien de Fürstenberg (1967–1988), Giovanni Saldarini (1991–2011), and Giuseppe Versaldi (from 2012 to the present). The cardinal title strengthens the basilica's ties to the papal Curia, helping to maintain focus on the importance of devotion to the Sacred Heart and Salesian spirituality.

Architecture

The façade is in the Neo-Renaissance style, with sober lines and balanced proportions typical of Renaissance revival in late 19th-century ecclesiastical architecture. The bell tower, conceived in Vespignani's original design, remained incomplete until 1931, when the imposing gilded statue of the Sacred Heart blessing was placed atop it, donated by Salesian alumni in Argentina. Visible from afar, it serves as an identifying feature of the basilica and a symbol of welcome for those arriving in Rome via the nearby railway station.

The interior follows a Latin cross plan with three naves, separated by eight columns and two grey granite pillars supporting round arches, and includes a transept and central dome. The central nave and side aisles are covered with coffered ceilings, decorated with lacunae in the central

register. The proportions are harmonious. The central nave's width of approximately 14 metres and length of 70 metres create a solemn spaciousness, while the granite columns, with their pronounced veining, lend an air of solid grandeur.

The central dome, visible from the interior with its frescoes and lacunae, draws in natural light through base windows and adds verticality to the liturgical space. The side chapels house paintings by the Roman artist Andrea Cherubini, featuring devotional scenes in keeping with the dedication to the Sacred Heart.

Beyond Cherubini's paintings, the basilica preserves various sacred artworks: wooden or marble statues depicting the Virgin Mary, patron saints of the Salesian Congregation, and charismatic figures like St John Bosco.

The Rooms of St John Bosco in Rome

A site of great historical and devotional value is the "Little Rooms of Don Bosco" at the rear of the basilica, where St John Bosco stayed during nine of his twenty visits to Rome. Originally two separate rooms—a study and a bedroom with a portable altar—they were later combined to accommodate pilgrims and prayer groups, forming a living memorial to the founder of the Salesians. Personal items and relics recalling miracles attributed to the saint during that period are preserved here. This space was recently renovated and continues to attract pilgrims, inspiring reflection on Bosco's spirituality and dedication to young people.

The basilica and adjacent buildings are owned by the Salesian Congregation, which has made it one of its key centres in Rome. Since Don Bosco's time, the building next to the church housed the Salesian community and later became home to schools, oratories, and youth services. Today, alongside liturgical activities, the complex hosts significant work with migrants and disadvantaged youth. Since 2017, it has also served as the Central Headquarters of the Salesian Congregation's governance.

Devotion to the Sacred Heart and Liturgical Celebrations

The dedication to the Sacred Heart of Jesus translates into specific devotional practices. The liturgical feast of the Sacred Heart, celebrated on the Friday following the octave of Corpus Christi, is observed with solemnity in the basilica, featuring novenas, Eucharistic celebrations, Eucharistic adoration, and processions. Popular piety surrounding the Sacred Heart—widespread since the 19th century with its approval by Pius IX and Leo XIII—finds a focal point here in Rome, drawing the faithful for prayers of reparation, entrustment, and thanksgiving.

For the 2025 Jubilee, the Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Jesus has been granted the privilege of a plenary indulgence, like all other churches on the *Iter Europaeum*.

We recall that to celebrate the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the European Union and the Holy See (1970–2020), a project was undertaken by the Delegation of the European Union to the Holy See and the 28 Embassies of individual member States accredited to the Holy See. This project consisted of a liturgical and cultural itinerary in which each Country designated a church or basilica in Rome with which it had a special historical, artistic, or pilgrim hospitality connection. The primary goal was twofold: on one hand, to foster mutual understanding among European citizens and encourage reflection on shared Christian roots; on the other, to offer pilgrims and visitors a means of discovering lesser-known or particularly meaningful religious spaces, highlighting the Church's connections with all of Europe. Broadening the perspective, the initiative was later revived as part of the jubilee routes linked to the Rome 2025 Jubilee, under the Latin name "*Iter Europaeum*," incorporating the itinerary among the official pilgrim paths of the Holy City. The *Iter Europaeum* includes stops at 28 churches and basilicas in Rome, each "adopted" by an EU member State. The Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Jesus was "adopted" by [Luxembourg](#). The

churches of the *Iter Europaeum* can be viewed [HERE](#).

Visiting the Basilica

The Basilica can be visited in person or virtually.

For a 3D virtual tour, click [HERE](#).

For a guided virtual tour, follow these links:

1. [Introduction](#)
2. [History](#)
3. [Façade](#)
4. [Bell Tower](#)
5. [Central Nave](#)
6. [Inner Façade Wall](#)
7. [Floor](#)
8. [Columns](#)
9. [Central Nave Walls](#)
10. [Ceiling 1](#)
11. [Ceiling 2](#)
12. [Transept](#)
13. [Stained Glass Transept](#)
14. [High Altar](#)
15. [Presbytery](#)
16. [Dome](#)
17. [Don Bosco Choir](#)
18. [Side Naves](#)
19. [Confessionals](#)
20. [Right Side Nave Altars](#)
21. [Side Nave Frescoes](#)
22. [Left Nave Small Domes](#)
23. [Baptistery](#)
24. [Left Side Nave Altars](#)
25. [Left Nave Small Dome Frescoes](#)
26. [Sacristy](#)
27. [Don Bosco's "Little Rooms" \(previous version\)](#)
28. [Don Bosco Museum \(previous version\)](#)

The Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Castro Pretorio is an example of Neo-Renaissance architecture tied to historical events marked by crises and revivals. The combination of artistic, architectural, and historical elements—from granite columns to painted decorations, from the famed bell tower statue to Don Bosco's Little Rooms—makes this site a destination for spiritual and cultural pilgrimage. Its location near Termini Station renders it a welcoming symbol for those arriving in Rome, while pastoral work for the young continues to embody the spirit of St. John Bosco: a heart open to service, formation, and lived spirituality. A must-visit.

The New Headquarters of the Salesians. Rome, Sacro Cuore (Sacred Heart)

Today, the original vocation of the Sacred Heart House sees a new beginning. Tradition and innovation continue to characterise the past, present, and future of this significant work.

So often did Don Bosco desire to come to Rome to open a Salesian house. From his first trip in 1858, his goal was to be present in the Eternal City with an educational presence. He came to Rome twenty times, and only on his last trip in 1887 was he able to realise his dream by opening the Sacred Heart house in Castro Pretorio.

The Salesian Work is located in the Esquiline district, established in 1875, after the breach of Porta Pia and the Savoy's need to build the ministries of the Kingdom of Italy in the new capital. The district, also called Umbertino,

has Piedmontese architecture. All the streets are named after battles or events related to the Savoy state. In this place that recalls Turin, there had to be a Temple, which was also a parish, built by a Piedmontese, Don Giovanni Bosco. Don Bosco did not choose the name of the Church, but it was the will of Leo XIII to revive a devotion, more relevant than ever, to the Heart of Jesus.

Today, the Sacred Heart House is completely renovated to meet the needs of the Salesian Central Headquarters. From the time of its foundation to the present day, the house has undergone several transformations. The Work began as a Parish and International Temple for the spread of devotion to the Sacred Heart. From the beginning, Don Bosco's declared goal was to build a home next door to accommodate up to 500 poor children. Fr. Rua completed the Work and opened workshops for artisans (arts and crafts school). In the following years, the middle school and classical high school were opened. For some years, it was also the seat of the university (Pontifical Salesian Athenaeum) and a training house for Salesians who studied at Roman universities and were involved in the school and oratory (among these students there was Fr. Quadrio). It was also the headquarters of the Roman Province first and of the Circumscription of Central Italy from 2008. Since 2017, due to the move from Via della Pisana, it has become the Salesian Central Headquarters. Renovation began in 2022 to adapt the spaces to the function of the Rector Major's house. Don Bosco, Fr. Rua, Cardinal Cagliero (his apartment was located on the first floor of Via Marsala), Zeffirino Namuncurà, Monsignor Versiglia, Artemide Zatti, all the Rectors Major successors of Don Bosco, and Saint John Paul II, Saint Teresa of Calcutta, and Pope Francis have lived or passed through this house. Among the directors of the house, Monsignor Giuseppe Cognata served (during his rectorship, in 1930, the statue of the Sacred Heart was placed on the bell tower).

Thanks to the Sacred Heart, the Salesian charism has spread to various neighbourhoods of Rome. In fact, all the

other Salesian presences in Rome have been an offshoot of this house: Testaccio, Pio XI, Borgo Ragazzi Don Bosco, Don Bosco Cinecittà, Gerini, the Pontifical Salesian University.

Crossroads of Hospitality

From the beginning, there have been two determining characteristics of the Sacred Heart House:

1) *Catholicity*, in that opening a house in Rome has always meant for the founders of religious orders a closeness to the Pope and a broadening of horizons at a universal level. In the first conference to the Salesian Cooperators at the monastery of Tor De' Specchi in Rome in 1874, Don Bosco stated that the Salesians would spread throughout the world and that helping their works meant living the most authentic Catholic spirit;

2) *attention towards poor young people*: the location near the station, a crossroads of arrivals and departures, a place where the poorest have always gathered, is inscribed in the history of the Sacred Heart.

In the beginning, the House took in poor children to teach them a trade, and later, the oratory gathered the children of the neighbourhood. After the war, the shoeshine boys (boys who shined shoes for people leaving the station) were gathered and cared for first in this house and then moved to Borgo Ragazzi Don Bosco. During the mid-1980s, with the first immigration to Italy, young immigrants were hosted in collaboration with the nascent Caritas. In the 1990s, a Day Centre gathered children as an alternative to prison and taught them the basics of reading and writing and a trade. Since 2009, an integration project between young refugees and young Italians has seen many initiatives of welcome and evangelisation flourish. The Sacred Heart House has also been the headquarters of the National Centre of Salesian Works of Italy for about 30 years.

The New Beginning

Today, the original vocation of the Sacred Heart

House sees a new beginning. Tradition and innovation continue to characterise the past, present, and future of this significant work.

First of all, the presence of the Rector Major with his council and of the confreres who take care of the global dimension indicates the continuum of Catholicity. It is a vocation to welcome many Salesians who come from all over the world and find in the Sacred Heart House a place to feel at home, experience fraternity and meet with Don Bosco's successor. At the same time, it is the place from which the Rector Major animates and governs the Congregation, tracing the lines to be faithful to Don Bosco in the present.

Secondly, there is the presence of a significant Salesian place where Don Bosco wrote the letter from Rome and understood the dream of the nine years. Inside the house there will be the Don Bosco House Museum of Rome, which, distributed on three floors, will tell the story of the Saint's presence in the eternal city. The centrality of education as a "thing of the heart" in his Preventive System, the relationship with the Popes who loved Don Bosco and whom he first loved and served, the Sacred Heart as a place of expansion of the charism throughout the world, the difficult path of approval of the Constitutions, the understanding of the dream of the nine years and his last educational breath in writing the letter from Rome are the thematic elements that, in an immersive multimedia form, will be revealed to those who visit the Museum.

Thirdly, the devotion to the Sacred Heart represents the centre of the charism. Don Bosco, even before receiving the invitation to build the Church of the Sacred Heart, had oriented young people towards this devotion. In *The Companion of Youth* there are prayers and practices of piety addressed to the Heart of Christ. However, with the acceptance of the proposal of Leo XIII he becomes a true apostle of the Sacred Heart. He spares no effort to seek money for the Church. The attention to the smallest details infuses his thought and devotion to the Sacred Heart into the

architectural and artistic choices of the Basilica. To support the construction of the Church and the house, he founded the **Pious Work of the Sacred Heart of Jesus**, the last of the five foundations created by Don Bosco throughout his life together with the Salesians, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, the Salesian Cooperators, the Association of Devotees of Mary Help of Christians. It was erected for the perpetual celebration of six daily masses in the Church of the Sacred Heart in Rome. All the members, living and deceased, participate through the prayer offered and the good works performed by the Salesians and young people in all their houses.

The vision of the Church that derives from the foundation of the Pious Work is that of a “living body” composed of the living and the dead in communion with each other through the Sacrifice of Jesus, renewed daily in the Eucharistic celebration in service of the poorest young people. The desire of the Heart of Jesus is that all may be one (*ut unum sint*) as He and the Father. The Pious Work connects, through prayer and offerings, the benefactors, living and deceased, the Salesians of the whole world and the young people who live at the Sacred Heart. Only through communion, which has its source in the Eucharist, can benefactors, Salesians and young people contribute to building the Church, to making it shine in its missionary face. The Pious Work also has the task of promoting, spreading, deepening devotion to the Sacred Heart throughout the world and renewing it according to the times and the feeling of the Church.

The central station for evangelising

Finally, attention to poor young people is manifested in the missionary will to reach the young people of all Rome through the Youth Centre open on Via Marsala, right at the exit of Termini station where about 300,000 people pass every day. A place that is home for the many Italian and foreign young people, who visit or live in Rome and are

thirsty, sometimes unconsciously, for God. Moreover, various poor people, marked by the fatigue of life, have always crowded around Termini station. It is another open door on Via Marsala, in addition to that of the Youth Centre and the Basilica, that expresses the desire to respond to the needs of these people with the Heart of Christ. In fact, the glory of His face shines in them.

Don Bosco's prophecy about the Sacred Heart House of April 5, 1880, accompanies and guides the realisation of what has been told:

But Don Bosco looked further into the future. Our own Bishop John Marenco recalled a mysterious remark he made which we should not let time obliterate. On the very day he accepted that burdensome assignment, Don Bosco asked him:

– Do you know why we accepted that house in Rome?

– No, he answered.

– Listen, then. We agreed because one day, when there will be another Pope and he shall be the right one, we shall set up our headquarters there to evangelise the Roman countryside. It will be no less important a task than that of evangelising Patagonia. Then will the Salesians be acknowledged and their glory shine forth! (BM XIV, 474)

don Francesco Marcoccio

Salesians in Ukraine (video)

The Salesian Vice-Province of Mary Help of Christians of the Byzantine Rite (UKR) has reshaped its educational-pastoral mission since the beginning of the Russian invasion in 2022. Amidst air raid sirens, makeshift shelters, and schools in

basements, the Salesians have become a tangible presence: they host displaced people, distribute aid, provide spiritual accompaniment to soldiers and civilians, transformed a house into a reception centre, and run the "Mariapolis" modular campus, where they serve a thousand meals daily and organize oratory and sports activities, even founding the first Ukrainian Amputee Football team. The personal testimony of a confrere reveals the wounds, hopes, and prayers of those who have lost everything but continue to believe that, after this long national Way of the Cross, the Easter of peace will dawn for Ukraine.

The Pastoral Work of the Vice-Province of Mary Help of Christians of the Byzantine Rite (UKR) During the War

Our pastoral work had to change when the war began. Our educational-pastoral activities had to adapt to a completely different reality, often marked by the incessant sound of sirens announcing the danger of missile attacks and bombings. Every time the alarm sounds, we are forced to interrupt activities and go down with the young people into underground shelters or bunkers. In some schools, lessons are held directly in the basements to ensure greater safety for the students.

From the very beginning, we immediately set about helping and assisting the suffering population. We opened our houses to welcome displaced people, organized the collection and distribution of humanitarian aid: with our boys and young people, we prepare thousands of packages with food, clothing, and everything necessary to send to needy people in territories near the fighting or in the combat zones themselves. Furthermore, some of our Salesian confreres serve as chaplains in the combat zones. There, they provide spiritual support to young soldiers, but also bring humanitarian aid to people who have remained in villages under constant bombardment, helping some of them move to a safer place. One deacon confrere who was in the trenches suffered

damage to his health and lost his ankle. When, some years ago, I read an article in the Italian Salesian Bulletin about Salesians in the trenches during the First or Second World War, I never thought this would happen in this modern era in my own country. I was once struck by the words of a very young Ukrainian soldier who, quoting a historian and eminent officer, defender, and fighter for our people's independence, said: *"We fight defending our independence not because we hate those before us, but because we love those behind us."*

During this period, we also transformed one of our Salesian Houses into a reception centre for displaced people.

To support the physical, mental, psychological, and social rehabilitation of young people who lost limbs in the war, we created an Amputee Football team, the first team of its kind in Ukraine.

Since the beginning of the invasion in 2022, we made available to the Lviv City Council a plot of our land, intended for the construction of a Salesian school, to build a modular campus for internally displaced persons: "Mariapolis," where we Salesians operate in collaboration with the Centre of the City Council's Social Department. We provide welfare support and spiritual accompaniment, making the environment more welcoming. Supported by aid from our Congregation, various organizations including VIS and Don Bosco Missions, various mission offices and other charitable foundations, and even state agencies from other countries, we were able to set up the campus kitchen with its respective staff, allowing us to offer lunch every day for about 1,000 people. Furthermore, thanks to their help, we can organize various Salesian-style activities for the 240 children and young people present on the campus.

A Small Experience and a Humble Personal Testimony

I would like to share my small experience and testimony here.. I truly thank the Lord who, through my Provincial, called me

to this particular service. For three years, I have been working in the campus that hosts about 1,000 internally displaced persons. From the beginning, I have been alongside people who lost everything in an instant, except their dignity. Their homes are destroyed and looted; the savings and possessions painstakingly accumulated over years of life have vanished. Many have lost much more, and more precious things: their loved ones, killed before their eyes by missiles or mines. Some of the people on campus had to live for months in the basements of collapsed buildings, feeding on whatever little they could find, even if expired. They drank water from radiators and boiled potato peels to feed themselves. Then, at the first opportunity, they fled or were evacuated without knowing where to go, with no certainty about what awaited them. Moreover, some saw their cities, like Mariupol, razed to the ground. In fact, in honour of this beautiful city of Mary, we Salesians named the campus for the displaced "Mariapolis," entrusting this place and its inhabitants to the Virgin Mary. And She, like a mother, stands by everyone in these times of trial. In the campus, I set up a chapel dedicated to Her, where there is an icon painted by a lady from the campus, originally from the tormented city of Kharkiv. The chapel has become a place of encounter with God and with oneself for all residents, regardless of their Christian faith denomination.

Being with them, loving them, welcoming them, listening to them, consoling them, encouraging them, praying for them and with them, and supporting them in whatever way I can – these are the moments that make up my service, which has now become my life during this period. It is a true school of life, of spirituality, where I learn so much by being close to their suffering. Almost all of them hope that the war will end soon and peace will come, so they can return home. But for many, that dream is now unattainable: their homes no longer exist. So, as best I can, I try to offer them some anchor of hope, helping them to encounter the One who abandons no one, who is close in the sufferings and difficulties of life.

Sometimes they ask me to prepare them for Reconciliation: with God, with themselves, with the harsh reality they are forced to live. Other times, I help them with more concrete needs: medicine, clothes, diapers, hospital visits. I also do administrative work alongside my three lay colleagues. Every day, at 5:00 PM, we pray for peace, and a small group has learned to recite the Rosary, praying it daily.

As a Salesian, I try to be attentive to the needs of the young people. From the beginning, with the help of animators, we created an oratory within the campus. We also have activities, trips, and mountain camps during the summer. Furthermore, one of the commitments I carry forward is overseeing the canteen, to ensure that none of the residents on campus go without a hot meal.

Among the campus inhabitants is little Maksym, who wakes up in the middle of the night, terrified by any loud noise. Maria, a mother who lost everything, including her husband, smiles at her children every day so as not to burden them with her suffering. Then there is Petro, 25 years old, who was at home with his girlfriend when a Russian drone dropped a bomb. The explosion amputated both his legs, while his girlfriend died shortly after. Petro lay dying all night until soldiers found him in the morning and brought him to safety. The ambulance couldn't get close due to the fighting.

Amidst so much suffering, I continue my apostolate with the Lord's help and the support of my confreres.

We Byzantine Rite Salesians, together with our 13 Latin Rite confreres present in Ukraine – largely of Polish origin and belonging to the Salesian Province of Krakow (PLS) – deeply share the pain and suffering of the Ukrainian people. As sons of Don Bosco, we continue our educative-pastoral mission with faith and hope, adapting daily to the difficult conditions imposed by the war.

We stand alongside the young, the families, and all those who

suffer and need help. We wish to be visible signs of God's love, so that the life, hope, and joy of the young may never be stifled by violence and pain.

In this common witness, we reaffirm the vitality of our Salesian charism, which knows how to respond even to the most dramatic challenges of history. Our two particularities, that of the Byzantine rite and that of the Latin rite, make visible the indivisible unity of the Salesian Charism as affirmed by the Salesian Constitutions in Art. 100: *"The Founder's charism is the principle of unity of the Congregation and, through its fruitfulness, is the origin of the different ways of living the one Salesian vocation."*

We believe that pain and suffering do not have the last word, and that in faith, every Cross already contains the seed of the Resurrection. After this long Holy Week, the Resurrection will inevitably come for Ukraine: true and just PEACE will arrive.

Some Information

Some chapter confreres asked for information about the war in Ukraine. Allow me to say something in the form of a Snapshot. A clarification: the war in Ukraine cannot be interpreted as an ethnic conflict or a territorial dispute between two peoples with opposing claims or rights over a specific territory. It is not a quarrel between two parties fighting over a piece of land. And therefore, it is not a battle between equals. What is happening in Ukraine is an invasion, a unilateral aggression. Here, it is about one people improperly attacking another. A nation, which fabricated baseless motives, inventing a supposed right, violating international order and laws, decided to attack another State, violating its sovereignty and territorial integrity, its right to decide its own fate and direction of development, occupying and annexing territories. Destroying cities and towns, many razed to the ground, taking the lives of thousands of civilians. Here there

is an aggressor and an attacked party: this is precisely the peculiarity and horror of this war.

And it is starting from this premise that the peace we await should also be conceived. A peace that has the flavour of justice and is based on truth, not temporary, not opportunistic, not a peace founded on hidden commercial conveniences, avoiding the creation of precedents for autocratic regimes in the world that might one day decide to invade other countries, occupy or annex part of a neighbouring or distant country, simply because they wish to or because they feel like it, or because they are more powerful.

Another absurdity of this unprovoked and undeclared war is that the aggressor forbids the victim the right to defend itself, tries to intimidate and threaten all those – in this case, other countries – who side with the defenceless and set out to help the unjustly attacked victim defend itself and resist.

Some Sad Statistics

From the beginning of the 2022 invasion until today (08.04.2025), the UN has recorded and confirmed data relating to 12,654 deaths and 29,392 injuries among CIVILIANS in Ukraine.

According to the latest available verified UNICEF news, at least 2,406 CHILDREN have been killed or injured by the escalation of the war in Ukraine since 2022. Child victims include 659 CHILDREN KILLED and 1,747 INJURED – meaning at least 16 children killed or injured every week. Millions of children continue to have their lives disrupted due to ongoing attacks or having to flee and evacuate to other places and countries. The children of Donbas have been already suffering from the war for 11 years.

Alongside the plan for an invasion of Ukraine, Russia also initiated a program of forced deportations of Ukrainian children. Latest data indicate 20,000 children taken from

their homes, detained for months, and subjected to forced Russification through intense propaganda before forced adoption.

Fr. Andrii Platosh, sdb

The Cemetery Boys

The ordeal of abandoned young people continues to resonate in the contemporary world. Statistics speak of approximately 150 million children forced to live in the streets, a reality that is also dramatically evident in Monrovia, the capital of Liberia. To mark the feast day of St. John Bosco, a campaign was held in Vienna, promoted by Jugend Eine Welt, an initiative that highlighted not only the local situation but also the difficulties encountered in distant countries, such as Liberia, where the Salesian, Lothar Wagner, dedicates his life to giving these young people hope.

Lothar Wagner: A Salesian who dedicates his life to street children in Liberia

Lothar Wagner, a German Salesian Cooperator, has dedicated over twenty years of his life to supporting children in West Africa. After gaining extensive experience in Ghana and Sierra Leone, over the last four years he has focused his passion on Liberia, a country marked by prolonged conflicts, health crises, and devastation such as the Ebola epidemic. Lothar has become a spokesman for a reality that is often ignored, where social and economic scars compromise opportunities for young people to grow.

Liberia, with a population of 5.4 million, is a country where extreme poverty is accompanied by fragile institutions and widespread corruption. The consequences of decades of armed conflict and health crises have left the education system among the worst in the world, while the social fabric has frayed under the weight of economic hardship and lack of essential services. Many families are unable to guarantee their children's basic needs, thus pushing a large number of young people to seek refuge on the streets.

In particular, in Monrovia, some young people find refuge in the most unexpected places: the city's cemeteries. Known as the "cemetery boys," these young people, lacking a safe home, take refuge among the graves, a place that becomes a symbol of total abandonment. Sleeping outdoors, in parks, in landfills, even in sewers or inside tombs, has become the tragic daily refuge for those who have no other choice.

"It is truly very heart-breaking when you walk through the cemetery and see boys coming out of the tombs. They lie down with the dead because they no longer have a place in society. Such a situation is scandalous."

A multiple approach: from the cemetery to detention cells

The cemetery boys are not the only focus of Lothar's attention. The Salesian also dedicates himself to another dramatic reality: that of underage prisoners in Liberian prisons. The Monrovia prison, built for 325 inmates, now houses over 1,500 prisoners, including many young people incarcerated without a formal charge. The cells, extremely overcrowded, are a clear example of how human dignity is often sacrificed.

"There is a lack of food, clean water, hygienic standards, medical and psychological assistance. Constant hunger and the dramatic spatial situation due to overcrowding greatly weaken the boys' health. In a small cell, intended for two inmates, eight to ten young people are locked up. They sleep in shifts,

because this cell size only offers standing space to its many inhabitants."

To cope with this situation, he organises everyday visits to the prison, bringing drinking water, hot meals, and a psycho-social support that becomes a lifeline. His constant presence is essential to try to re-establish a dialogue with the authorities and families, also raising awareness of the importance of protecting the rights of minors, who are often forgotten and abandoned to a dire fate. "We do not leave them alone in their solitude, but we try to give them hope," Lothar emphasises with the firmness of someone who knows the everyday pain of these young lives.

A day for awareness in Vienna

Support for these initiatives also comes from international attention. On January 31, in Vienna, Jugend Eine Welt organised a day dedicated to highlighting the precarious situation of street children, not only in Liberia, but throughout the world. During the event, Lothar Wagner shared his experiences with students and participants, involving them in practical activities – such as using barrier tape to simulate the conditions of an overcrowded cell – to give them a first-hand understanding of the difficulties and anguish of young people who live in minimal spaces and in degrading conditions every day.

In addition to daily emergencies, the work of Lothar and his collaborators also focuses on long-term interventions. The Salesian missionaries are in fact involved in rehabilitation programmes ranging from educational support to vocational training for young prisoners, to legal and spiritual assistance. These interventions aim to reintegrate young people into society once they are released, helping them build a dignified and fulfilling future. The goal is clear: to offer not only immediate help, but to create a path that allows young people to develop their potential and actively contribute to the rebirth of the country.

The initiatives also encompass the construction of vocational training centres, schools, and reception facilities, with the hope of expanding the number of young beneficiaries and ensuring constant support, day and night. The success story of many former “cemetery boys” – some of whom have become teachers, doctors, lawyers, and entrepreneurs – is tangible confirmation that, with the right support, transformation is possible.

Despite the commitment and dedication, this path is fraught with obstacles: bureaucracy, corruption, the children’s distrust, and the lack of resources represent daily challenges. Many young people, marked by abuse and exploitation, struggle to trust adults, making the task of establishing a relationship of trust and offering real and lasting support even more difficult. However, every small success – every young person who regains hope and begins to build a future – confirms the importance of this humanitarian work.

The path undertaken by Lothar and his collaborators testifies that, despite the difficulties, it is possible to make a difference in the lives of abandoned children. The vision of a Liberia in which every young person can realise their potential translates into concrete actions, from international awareness to the rehabilitation of prisoners, through educational programmes and reception projects. The work, based on love, solidarity, and a constant presence, represents a beacon of hope in a context in which despair seems to prevail.

In a world marked by abandonment and poverty, the stories of rebirth of street children and young prisoners are an invitation to believe that, with the right support, every life can rise again. Lothar Wagner continues to fight to guarantee these young people not only shelter, but also the possibility of rewriting their destiny, demonstrating that solidarity can truly change the world.

Salesians in Tarnowskie Góry

There is a perhaps unique place in Poland where Salesians care for young people from different social backgrounds. Children and young people from urban and rural areas, rich and poor, disabled, abandoned by their parents, marginalised come together in one work. Some study at school, others have found a home, a yard, a place to meet God there. For twenty-five years, the Salesian Institute in Tarnowskie Góry has been a second home not only for young people, but also a place where different circumstances mingle, supporting people, every individual.

A brief history

Tarnowskie Góry is a town of sixty thousand inhabitants located in Upper Silesia, a very special region on the map of Poland due to its original culture, dialect and numerous traditions. It is a city with a rich history, whose origins are linked to the silver mines that operated here from the end of the 15th century until the beginning of the 20th century. Dedication to work and loyalty to tradition still characterise the inhabitants of this area today.

The Salesians from Wrocław Province (PL0) arrived in Tarnowskie Góry at the turn of 1998-1999 to take over the buildings of the former rehabilitation institute for the disabled, located in a beautiful natural park known as Repty Park. The park belonged to the wealthy Donnersmarck family, who built a palace and servants' quarters there. After the Second World War the palace was destroyed and in its place a hospital was set up for miners who were victims of accidents. The servants' quarters were enlarged and a facility was created to rehabilitate and adapt miners and other disabled people. In time, this institution was called the

Rehabilitation Institute for the Disabled and was handed over to the Salesians. Once the most necessary work was completed, the Salesian presence in the town was solemnly inaugurated on 30 September 1999. It is a special presence, for it is not just a Salesian school with oratory, but the entire structure needed to welcome and integrate the disabled.

The structure of the Institute

Today the structure of the Salesian Institute includes:

- Primary and Secondary School with 633 students in the school year 2023-2024;
- Special Needs School with almost 50 students with a boarding school, mainly for the disabled, where 30 pupils live;
- Care Centre for Persons with Disabilities, with about 40 persons;
- the Rehabilitation Centre, which provides almost 870 rehabilitation services each year for almost 530 young minors;
- the Oratory, where about 70 young people receive training;
- the Hospitality Centre, which welcomes various groups for retreats or recreational activities.

More than 150 people work in the Institute, caring for young people on a daily basis.

The schools

The value of the schools lies in the students and teachers. The Institute's schools employ teachers who, in addition to their specialist training, have qualifications in special pedagogy and therapy. The skills of these teachers are a response to the special needs of students with physical disabilities and specific learning difficulties, which are not lacking in Salesian schools in Tarnowskie Góry. The teachers are creative, constantly improving their skills and have a lot

of experience in their work.

The schools' educational programme is derived from the principles of the Salesian Educational System. At the same time, the programme defines the specific nature of the Catholic and Salesian school which bases its educational activities on Christian values. In particular, young people are educated in self-acceptance and self-formation according to their abilities and the limitations of disability; in kindness and tolerance of worldviews, religion and race; in living and acting in accordance with the teachings of the Catholic Church; in patriotism and concern for the common good; in sensitivity to the lot of others; in the ability to cope with preparation for professional, family and personal life; in truth, independence, responsibility; in communion with nature and the use of its goods; in the formation of personal culture.

School for Special Needs with a boarding hostel



The Special Needs School with a boarding hostel welcomes pupils with disabilities from all over Poland. The purpose of the school and boarding hostel is to enable pupils to receive an education appropriate to their abilities and to provide comprehensive educational care, as well as to enable participation in therapeutic and social rehabilitation and to prepare pupils for independent participation in social life. This part of the Salesian work in Tarnowskie Góry makes the home dimension present in a special way according to the criteria of Don Bosco's Preventive System and makes the entire community aware of the young people most in need.

Centre of assistance for people with disabilities

The care centre for people with disabilities is a public facility within the Salesian work that carries out the tasks

of social and professional rehabilitation. It assists general development by improving the ability of adults to function as independently and actively as possible in their environment. The rehabilitation activities are adapted to the individual abilities and skills of the participants. They have access to appropriately equipped therapeutic workshops conducted by qualified therapists and instructors.

Rehabilitation Centre

This is an institution established to provide ongoing and comprehensive therapeutic and rehabilitation activities for disabled pupils and pupils with special needs. This is an undoubted advantage of the Salesian Institute, as young people in need of rehabilitation can benefit from it in their place of study and residence and at times coordinated with school activities.

Oratory

The Oratory is the fulfilment of Don Bosco's fundamental idea: to create an environment for young people that is a home, school, playground and church. It offers pupils and those in charge of the Centre, as well as children and young people from outside, the opportunity to spend their free time well, develop their social, artistic and intellectual skills, educate them to be active and act for the good of others, and give them the chance to deepen their spiritual life. Young people, especially schoolchildren, are trained to be "good Christians and upright citizens" in adult life; they participate in formation in the local community, but also at the level of the Wroclaw Province. They provide a service for young people both in school and out of school, such as in the youth summer.



Hospitality

The Centre provides a place to welcome guests who wish to rest, renew themselves spiritually and enjoy the beauty of the surrounding countryside. Indeed, throughout the year the Institute welcomes various groups, especially those wishing to experience moments of formation or retreat.

The Hill of the Beatitudes, where Don Bosco's dream is realised

The heart of the Salesian Work in Tarnowskie Góry is a chapel dedicated to Don Bosco. On the altar there is a statue of the Turin educator pointing out the goal to St Dominic Savio: heaven. Indeed, the aim of Salesian activity in Tarnowskie Góry is education through evangelisation and evangelisation through education. It is interesting to note that the Institute is situated on a hill. It is in a sense the 'Hill of the Beatitudes': here God truly blesses young people, here he teaches them the way of life according to the Gospel Beatitudes through the hands of teachers and educators. On this hill, every day, Don Bosco's dream is realised, even if sometimes it has to be realised along a path strewn with thorns, as he himself dreamed: "Here is the field of your work. Make yourself humble, strong and energetic (...). In good time you will understand everything."

fr. Krystian SUKIENNIK, sdb

The Don Bosco of Naples. The oratory of a thousand trades

The origin of the Salesian presence in Naples goes back to Don Bosco himself; Naples was the southernmost city visited by Don Bosco between 29 and 31 March 1880. On this

occasion Don Bosco celebrated the Eucharist in the church of St Joseph in Via Medina, assisted by a young alter server called Peppino Brancati. A few years later the Neapolitan boy went to Valdocco to Don Bosco and became the first Salesian from southern Italy; a family home in Torre Annunziata was also dedicated to him.

On the outskirts of Naples, in a district called Doganella, the sons of Don Bosco began their activities in 1934 in poor premises that were insufficient to accommodate the large numbers of young people who flocked around them.

Twenty years later, after the terrible storm of the war had passed, in 1954 they set to work on the large Institute that exists today, built with conspicuous contributions from private benefactors and organisations.

On 28 May 1959, it was opened by the President of the Republic, Giovanni Gronchi. In the centenary year of Don Bosco's death, on 21 October 1988, the Rector Major Fr Egidio Viganò opened the Don Bosco Social Centre in which the Institute was redesigned according to the needs of the times and in dynamic fidelity to the Founder.

Today the Don Bosco of Naples presents itself as a dynamic reality open to its local area. In accordance with the charism of Don Bosco, it responds to the new educational poverty found in the city.

Naples is a beautiful and complex city that generates complex problems, and it is for this reason that our Salesian house has developed in such a way that it responds to a simple unifying criterion: the oratory criterion, the Oratory of a Thousand Trades!

A house that welcomes

Over the years, the Salesians have been able to reinvent its call to be welcoming, from the large boarding schools of the 1960s to family communities, more child-friendly structures with individualised educational projects. In our house we have three of them! The first is the "Il Sogno" (The Dream) family community , run by the Salesian APS

“Piccoli Passi grandi sogni”(Small Steps, Big Dreams), founded in 2007. In its 15 years of existence it has welcomed 120 youngsters, mostly from Naples and the province, from both penal and administrative areas. In 2017, Naples experienced the refugee landings emergency and the Salesians responded: the community for unaccompanied foreign minors, known as “Il Ponte” was born. These are children who have faced endless journeys amidst a thousand dangers to come to Europe. For most of them, Libya was the most traumatic stage. But that is not enough... in 2018, faced with the dramatic situation of minors abandoned on the streets, especially around the railway station, the rapid reception “La zattera” community was set up. It is a 24-hour educational emergency room to which the police, social workers or citizens can always turn to provide a roof, a meal, clothes but above all the chance to start again. More than 250 young people from 32 countries around the world have passed through these two communities! Among the stories of redemption and rebirth of these young people, I like to tell Mustafà’s story, a 17-year-old from Somalia. He was found by the police lying on the ground at central station. I remember the evening when he arrived in the porter’s lodge of our centre accompanied by the social worker, welcomed by Pietro and Fr Vanni. He looked terrified, but above all I noticed that he could not walk; in Libyan prisons they had broken his hip. It has been three years since Mustafà took the third grade with us, had surgery, and now walks quite well; he has enrolled in the first year of our Vocational Training Centre. Every time I see him I think back to that evening in the porter’s lodge and I think of Don Bosco’s miracles.

School that prepares for life

Don Bosco used to say, my boys have “intelligence in their hands” and this applies all the more to Neapolitan boys. Naples, however, is also the city in Italy with the highest school drop-out rate. How can we combat early school leaving by leveraging the intelligence in the hands of

Neapolitan girls and boys? Vocational training! In 2018 we inaugurated a new Vocational Training Centre together with other partners who share this great educational mission: the *San Gennaro Foundation*, the *Franca and Alberto Riva Foundation*, *IF learn and do*, *Cooperativa il Millepiedi*, *Cometa Formazione*. The *School of Doing* was born, an innovative, beautiful school that makes educational focus and the relationship with companies its hallmark. With the two “logistics systems and services operator” and “motor vehicle repair operator” courses, we are giving a concrete response to local young people.

Alongside these two structured three-year courses, the Oratory of a Thousand Trades offers many workshops in which to practise, experiment, learn a trade, find one's own place in the world: the “Anem e Pizza” pizzeria workshop, the “Cap Appost” hairdresser's workshop, the “Le Ali” centre with the possibility it offers of qualifying as a cook, waiter and bar tender, the Don Bosco band that offers the opportunity for young people to learn and play an instrument, and many other possibilities, many other trades.

A Church that evangelises

Our Salesian community runs the Don Bosco Parish in the Amicizia district. It is an evangelising presence in an area that sees in us Salesians a point of reference, a constant presence that accompanies in all seasons of life and all situations of life, given that our community also takes care of the pastoral care of St John Bosco Hospital.

The central moment of oratory life is prayer with the Salesian good night, when all sectors and all projects stop to dedicate a few minutes to converse with God in simple words close to each day. So it is that the children who attend the day centre, the street education workshops, the territorial projects with the schools, the boys in the football school and the youngsters who freely enter the oratory recognise themselves as belonging to the same big Salesian family. Fr Michael's “call” to prayer at 5.30 p.m.

represents an essential educational rite for our work, because education also needs its rites!

A playground to meet as friends

The playground is the geographical and charismatic centre of our work. Don Bosco has a beautiful and spacious courtyard/playground with many fields, a large portico, a “square” on the scale of young people, the square of joy. This space is all the more precious because it is located in a part of the city that has no space dedicated to young people, who are often forced to stay on the streets with all the dangers that entails. I still remember one sunny afternoon in the courtyard when a mother arrived, almost with tears in her eyes, leaving her children in the oratory, saying “thank goodness you Salesians are here”. A few minutes earlier in a nearby square, a little girl walking with her grandmother had been stuck by a bullet. Aware that we cannot educate alone, we have built a network with other agencies in the area, family, school, social services, parishes, associations.

The courtyard/playground is inhabited daily by hundreds of children and dozens of educators who make it an educational space to meet as friends. Sport open to all, then allows us to engage with hundreds of boys and girls with their families.

Over these years I have become more and more convinced that Don Bosco with his educational style, his loving-kindness has so much to give to Naples, but also that Naples with its beauty, its brilliance, enriches Don Bosco, makes him more likeable, in short they are a winning couple!

Fabio Bellino

Salesian House at Châtillon

Located in a beautiful mountainous area at the foot of the Alps, close to Switzerland, the [Salesian House at Châtillon](#) has a special and successful history.

In the region of Valle d'Aosta, there is a municipality called Châtillon (the name comes from the Latin "Castellum") located between Mount Zerbion to the north and Mount Barbeston to the south; it is the third most populated municipality in the region.

In 1917, during the First World War, a company, Soie de Châtillon (English "Silk of Châtillon"), was founded in this locality and started to work in the field of techno-fibres with modern technology. The presence of nearby hydroelectric power stations that supplied electricity conditioned the choice of location for the company, as there were still no extensive power grids to transport electricity.

In 1942, the company came under the ownership of Società Saifta (*Società Anonima Italiana per le Fibre Tessili Artificiali S.p.A.*).

After the Second World War, the Saifta Company, which managed the Soie factory in Châtillon, initially intended as a boarding school for female workers, called in the Salesians and put these buildings at their disposal to take in war orphans and children of Soie employees as boarders. Thus began the Salesian *Don Bosco Orphanage in Châtillon*, a name that has remained to this day, even though the orphans are no longer there.

At the end of August 1948, 33 boys began an Industrial Vocational Training course in the two specialisations for Mechanics-Adjusters and Carpenters-Cabinetmakers: the latter specialisation was very useful in the mountainous, wooded area.

A few months later, on 5 February 1949, the Don Bosco Orphanage was officially inaugurated, destined to take in the

poor youngsters of the Aosta Valley and initiate them into learning a profession.

With the introduction of compulsory schooling in 1965, the Vocational School was replaced by the Middle School, and the Technical School by the Professional Institute for Industry and Handicrafts (IPIA), in the two specialisations: Mechanical Carpenters and Cabinet-Makers.

At the end of the 1970s, the Saifta Company went into crisis, stopped supporting the Orphanage financially and put the Soie structure up for sale. The Valle d'Aosta Region, in May 1980, realising the importance and value of the work – which had developed so much in the meantime – bought the entire educational structure and offered it for management to the Salesians.

Educational activities continued, developing into the vocational school, the result of the Salesians' collaboration with local companies.

Since 1997, the Vocational Training Centre (VTC) has offered courses for carpenters, mechanics and graphic designers.

In 2004 the CFP offered courses for electrical installers and also post diploma courses.

Since 2006 there have been courses for electrical fitters, mechanics, post diploma courses and car mechanics.

From the 2010-2011 school year, with the Gelmini reform, the Professional Institute changed from a three-year to a five-year course.

Currently, the Salesian House called the Don Bosco Salesian Orphanage Institute, has various educational areas

- a Vocational Training Centre: a three-year course in car mechanics and bodywork; courses for workers and businesses (daytime initial post-diploma training courses and evening refresher courses for the employed), which are part of the CNOS/FAP Valle d'Aosta Region federation, set up in July 2001

- a Vocational Institute for Industry and Craftsmanship (IPIA), with two addresses: MAT (Maintenance-Technical Assistance-Mechanical); PIA (Production-Industrial Handicraft-

Made in Italy-wood);

- a middle school, an equal secondary school, which welcomes boys and girls from the lower-middle valley;
- a Don Bosco boarding school, reserved for students attending the IPIA, which hosts, from Monday to Friday, young people from nearby Piedmont or the valleys.

The preparation of these young people is entrusted to an educating community, whose primary protagonists are the Salesian community, the lay teachers, educators, collaborators, and also the parents and groups of the Salesian family (cooperators, alumni).

However, the educational focus has not only stopped at human and professional preparation to form upright citizens, but also to make good Christians.

Even though the house – being too small – did not allow for Christian formation activities, a solution was found for these and for important celebrations. Further up and a short distance from the Salesian House in Châtillon is the ancient parish of St Peter (attested to go back as early as the 12th century), which has a large church. The agreement with the parish has brought many fruits, including the propagation of devotion to Don Bosco's Madonna, Mary Help of Christians, an invocation dear to the Salesians. The fruit of this devotion also manifested itself in the recovery of the health of various people (Blanchod Martina, Emma Vuillermoz, Pession Paolina, etc.), attested to by the writings of the times.

The sincere desire to do good on the part of all those who contributed to the development led to the success of this Salesian work.

First of all, the entrepreneurs who understood the need and importance of the education of at-risk children, and at the same time promoted the training of possible future employees. They not only offered their facilities, but also financially supported the educational activities.

Then there was the wisdom of the local authorities, who

understood the importance of the work carried out over more than 30 years and immediately offered to continue providing support for the children and also for the companies in the area, thus providing them with qualified workers.

Last but not least, recognition must be given to the work carried out by the Salesians and their collaborators of all kinds, who have done their utmost to ensure that the hope of the future is not extinguished: young people and their integral education.

This professionalism in the preparation of the young, together with the care of the logistical structures (classrooms, laboratories, gyms, courtyards), the careful and constant maintenance of the premises, the connection with the territory, have led to widespread recognition that is also reflected in the fact that a street and a square in Châtillon are dedicated to St John Bosco.

When people sincerely seek good and strive for it, God gives his blessing.

Tibidabo Salesian house

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

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

devil to Jesus from a great height, showing him the kingdoms of the earth, trying to tempt him with the riches of this world.

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

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

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

have given me so many beautiful proofs – will be remembered forever.” ([MB](#) XVIII,114).

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

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

In 1902, the foundation stone of the church was laid and in 1911 the crypt of the current Tibidabo sanctuary was opened in the presence of the then Rector Major, Fr Paul Albera. A few days after the opening, the latter was named the “Expiatory and National Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus” in accordance with a decision taken at the 22nd International Eucharistic Congress held in Madrid at the end of June 1911. The work was completed in 1961 with the erection of the statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, seventy-five years after John Bosco’s visit to Barcelona. On 29 October 1961, the church received the title of minor basilica, granted by Pope John XXIII.

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

Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament is continued during the day, and the practice of adoration at night is encouraged. And to those who wish to make a retreat, accommodation and food are provided within the Salesian structure.

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

Fr Joan Codina i Giol, sdb
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Photo gallery Salesian House in Tibidabo

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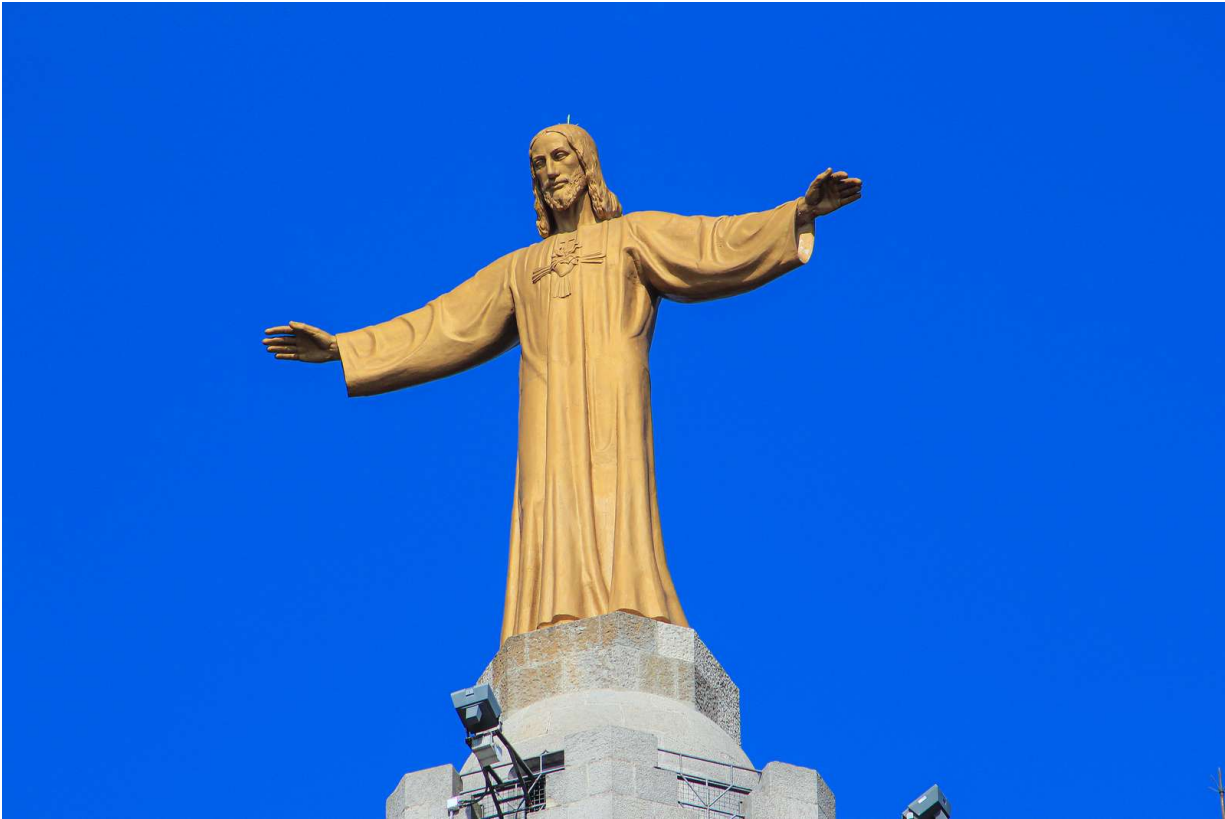
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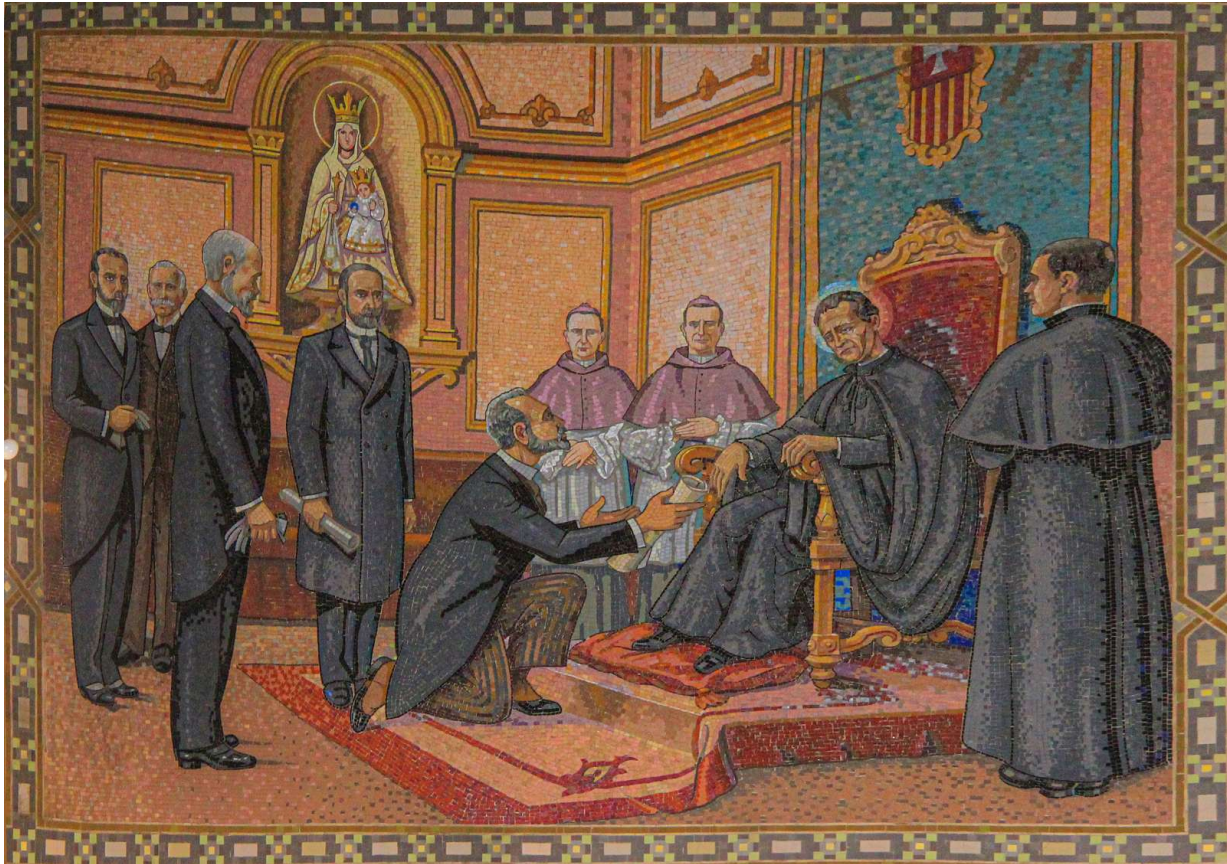
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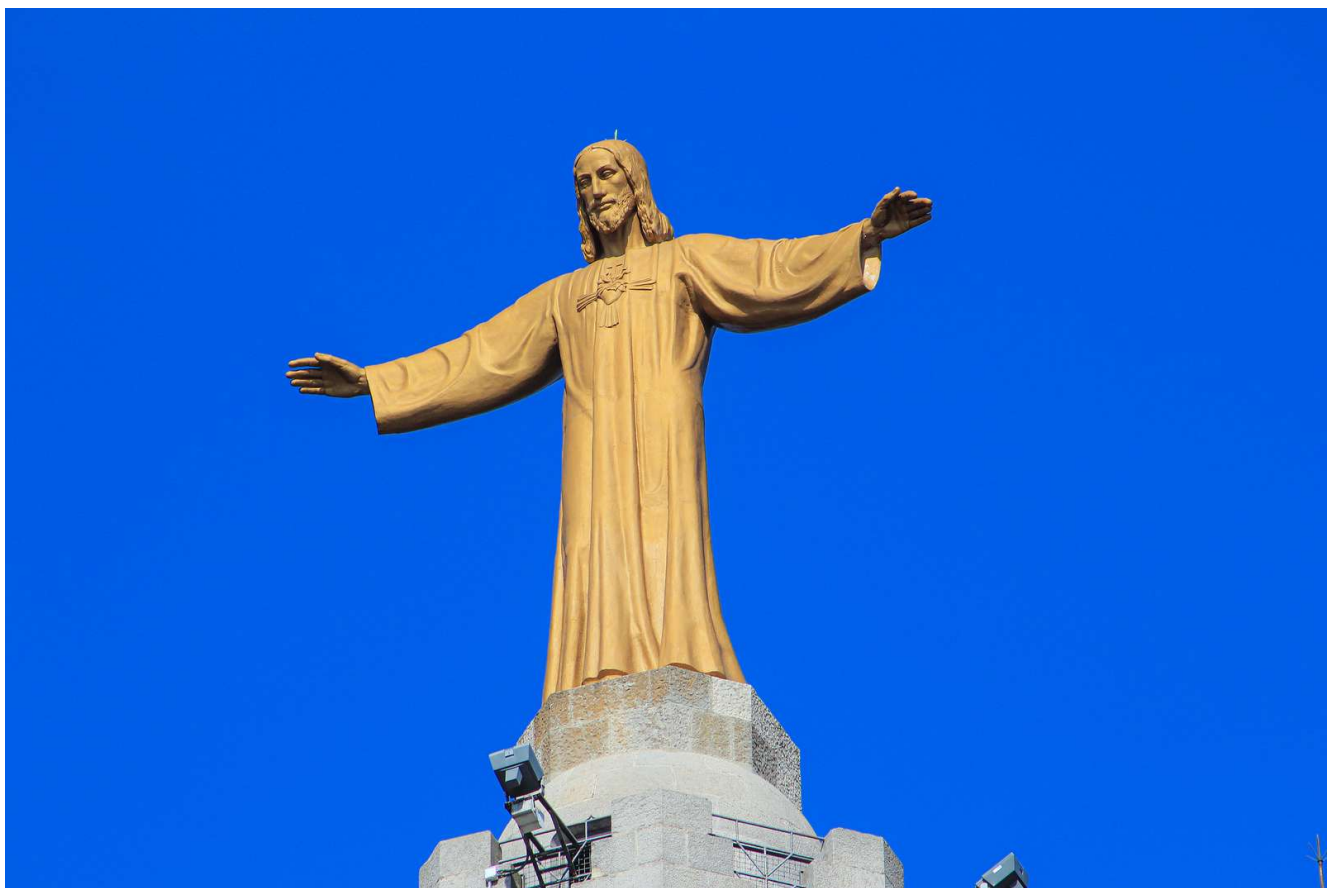
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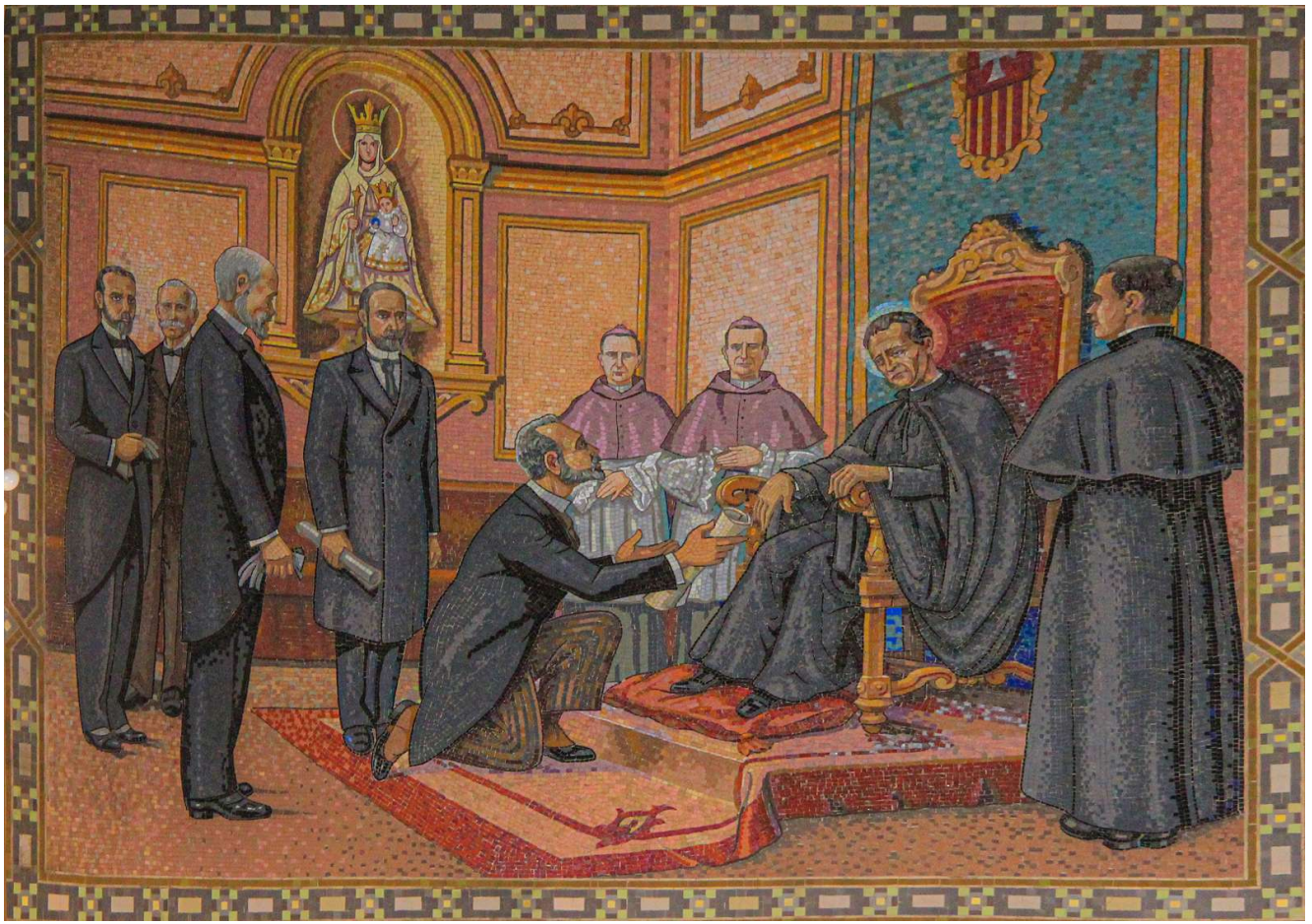


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Basilica of the Sacred Heart in Rome

In the twilight of his life, obeying a wish of Pope Leo XIII, Don Bosco took on the difficult task of building the Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus at the Castro Pretorio in Rome. To complete the gigantic undertaking he spared no tiring journeys, humiliations, sacrifices, shortening his precious life as an apostle of youth.

Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus dates back to the beginnings of the Church. In the early centuries, the Holy Fathers invited people to look at the pierced side of Christ, a symbol of love, even if it did not explicitly refer to the Heart of the Redeemer.

The earliest references found are from the mystics Matilda of Magdeburg (1207-1282), St Matilda of Hackeborn (1241-1299), St Gertrude of Helfta (ca. 1256-1302) and Blessed Henry Suso (1295-1366).

An important development came with the works of St John Eudes (1601-1680), then with the private revelations of the Sisters of the Visitation, St Margaret Mary Alacoque, spread by St Claude de la Colombière (1641-1682) and his Jesuit brethren.

At the end of the 19th century, churches consecrated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus spread, mainly as churches of expiation. With the consecration of mankind to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, through Leo XIII's encyclical, *Annum Sacrum* (1899) the cult was greatly extended and strengthened with two more encyclicals to come later: *Miserentissimus Redemptor* (1928) by Pius XI and especially *Haurietis Aquas* (1956) by Pius XII.

In Don Bosco's time, after the construction of the Termini railway station by Pope Pius IX in 1863, the neighbourhood

began to be populated, and the surrounding churches could not serve the faithful adequately. This led to the desire to build a church in the area, and it was initially planned to dedicate it to St Joseph, who was appointed as the patron saint of the Universal Church on 8 December 1870. After a series of events, in 1871 the pope changed the patronage of the desired church, dedicating it to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and it remained in the planning stage until 1879. Meanwhile, the cult to the Sacred Heart continued to spread, and in 1875, in Paris, on the city's highest hill, Montmartre (Mount of Martyrs), the foundation stone was laid for the church of the same name, *Sacré Cœur*, which was completed in 1914 and consecrated in 1919.

After the death of Pope Pius IX, the new Pope Leo XIII (as Archbishop of Perugia he had consecrated his diocese to the Sacred Heart) decided to resume the project, and the foundation stone was laid on 16 August 1879. Work stopped shortly afterwards due to a lack of financial support. One of the cardinals, Gaetano Alimonda (future archbishop of Turin) advised the Pope to entrust the enterprise to Don Bosco and, even though the pontiff was initially hesitant knowing the commitments of the Salesian missions inside and outside Italy, he made the proposal to the Saint in April 1880. Don Bosco did not think twice and replied: "The Pope's wish is a command for me: I accept the commitment that Your Holiness has the goodness to entrust to me." When the Pope warned him that he could not support him financially, the Saint only asked for the apostolic blessing and spiritual favours necessary for the task entrusted to him.



Laying the foundation stone of the Sacred Heart of Jesus Church in Rome

On his return to Turin, he wanted the Chapter's approval for this undertaking. Of the seven votes, only one was positive:

his... The Saint was not discouraged and argued: "You have all given me a resounding *no* for an answer, and that is fine, because you acted with all the prudence needed to make serious, major decisions such as this. However, were you to give me a yes answer, I can promise you that the Sacred Heart of Jesus will supply the funds to build the Church, He will pay off our debts, and He will even give us a handsome bonus as well." ([MB XIV,580](#)). After this speech the vote was repeated and the results were all positive and the main boon was the Hospice of the Sacred Heart which was built next to the church for poor and abandoned boys. This second hospice project was included in an Agreement made on 11 December 1880, which guaranteed the perpetual use of the church to the Salesian Congregation.

Acceptance caused him grave worries and cost him his health, but Don Bosco, who taught his sons work and temperance and said it would be a day of triumph when it was said that a Salesian had died on the battlefield worn out by fatigue, preceded them by example.

[The building of the Church of the Sacred Heart at the Castro Pretorio in Rome was done not only out of obedience to the Pope but also out of devotion.](#)

Let us take up one of his talks on this devotion, made during a "good night" to his pupils and confreres only a month after his acceptance, on 3 June 1880, the eve of the Feast of the Sacred Heart.

"Tomorrow, my dear children, the Church celebrates the feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. It is necessary that we too, with great effort, try to honour him. It is true that the external solemnity moves to Sunday; but tomorrow let us begin to celebrate in our hearts, to pray in a special way, to make a fervent communion. Then on Sunday there will be music and the other ceremonies of external worship which make Christian feasts so beautiful and majestic.

Some of you will want to know what this feast is and why the Sacred Heart of Jesus is especially honoured. I will tell you

that this feast is nothing other than to honour with a special remembrance the love that Jesus brought to mankind. Oh the great, infinite love that Jesus brought us in his incarnation and birth, in his life and preaching, and particularly in his passion and death! Since then the seat of love is the heart, so the Sacred Heart is venerated as the object that served as a furnace to this boundless love. This veneration of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, that is, of the love that Jesus showed us, was of all times and always; but there was not always a feast specially established to venerate it. How Jesus appeared to Blessed Margaret a feast manifested to her the great good that will come to mankind by honouring His most loving heart with special worship, and how the feast was therefore established, you will hear in the sermon on Sunday evening. Now let us take courage and each one do his best to correspond to so much love that Jesus has brought us". ([MB XI,249](#))

The church was completed for worship seven years later, in 1887. On 14 May of that year Don Bosco attended the consecration of the Church with great emotion, solemnly presided over by the Cardinal Vicar Lucido Maria Parocchi. Two days later, on 16 May, he celebrated the only Holy Mass in this church, at the altar of Mary Help of Christians, interrupted more than fifteen times by tears. They were tears of gratitude for the divine light he had received: he had understood the words of his dream when he was nine: "In good time you will understand everything!" A task completed amidst many misunderstandings, difficulties and hardships, but crowning a life spent for God and the young, rewarded by the same Divinity.

A video was recently made about the Basilica of the Sacred Heart. We offer it to you below.