 Reading time: 6 min.

For over a century and a half, on the day of the Nativity of St John the Baptist, the Salesian Family has celebrated the successor of Don Bosco. A tradition born in the courtyards of Valdocco, which began with two silver hearts and became, over time, the great feast of gratitude of a family spread throughout the world.

Anyone entering Valdocco in the last days of June, in any given year of the second half of the nineteenth century, would have breathed an air of joyful conspiracy. Band rehearsals that stopped abruptly at the approach of a well-known cassock, papers hastily hidden under desks, boys whispering verses in Italian, Piedmontese, even Latin and French. Outside, the city was preparing for the feast of its patron saint: the cathedral of Turin is dedicated to St John the Baptist and on the eve, the traditional bonfire lit up the night. Inside the Oratory, meanwhile, another feast was being prepared, more intimate and more anticipated than all the others: Don Bosco's name day.

When the name day mattered

To understand this feast, one must enter into the mindset of the time. In nineteenth-century Piedmont, birthdays counted for little or nothing; people celebrated their name day, the day of the saint whose name they bore. Don Bosco himself was convinced for most of his life that he was born on 15 August, the feast of the Assumption, whereas the parish registers of Castelnuovo indicate 16 August 1815; no one at Valdocco ever dreamt of wishing him well in August.

Baptised with the names Giovanni Melchiorre, his day was 24 June, the solemnity of the Nativity of St John the Baptist. It is one of the oldest feasts in the Christian calendar, the only one, along with the Birth of the Lord and the Nativity of Mary, in which the liturgy celebrates a birth. And in Turin, that date had a very special flavour, because the Baptist is the patron saint of the city. Thus, while Turin

celebrated its saint, the boys of the Oratory celebrated their father. Two feasts in one: that of the Forerunner and that of a priest who, between a game and a confession, showed the poorest boys of the city the same path.

Two silver hearts

Salesian tradition traces everything back to a specific gesture. On 24 June 1849, two young men from the Oratory, Carlo Gastini and Felice Reviglio, presented themselves to Don Bosco on behalf of all their companions and offered him two silver hearts. They were poor boys, errand boys and apprentices, who had scraped together, penny by penny, months of small savings for that gift. Don Bosco – Salesian memory recounts – was moved to tears.

That gift said something decisive about the educational method that was being born in that courtyard. In his famous letter from Rome in 1884, Don Bosco would write that it is not enough to love the young; they must know that they are loved. The two silver hearts were the early confirmation of this. The boys had noticed, and they responded to love with love. For this reason, the name day feast soon took on, in the language of the house, another name destined to last, the feast of gratitude.

Those two young men deserve to be followed over time. Felice Reviglio would become a priest and an esteemed parish priest in Turin. Carlo Gastini, a bookbinder, would remain the cheerful soul of the Valdocco feasts and, twenty years later, would give the feast a sequel that no one had foreseen. He would go down in history as the animator and later promoter of the Salesian Past Pupils movement.

The most beautiful feast of the year

Year after year, Don Bosco’s name day became the most anticipated feast at the Oratory, capable of mobilising everyone for weeks: the programme of the “academy”, with poems, dialogues, and speeches in the most diverse languages; the music, often composed for the occasion by the young Giovanni Cagliero, a

future cardinal; the theatrical performances and the new marches by the band. On the evening of the feast, the courtyard was transformed: illuminations, Venetian lanterns, Bengal lights, and in the middle of it all, Don Bosco, besieged by the boisterous affection of his sons.

Then there was a quieter and more precious custom: the “little letters”, notes that each boy wrote to Don Bosco with good wishes, some confidences, a resolution. He read them all. And when it was his turn to speak, he turned the logic of gifts upside down. The only gift he asked for was their hearts and the good of their souls. The feast thus became a school of gratitude, of family spirit, of shared joy. After all, the young people knew well what to be grateful for: “For you I study, for you I work, for you I live, for you I am ready even to give my life,” Don Bosco would repeat to them. The feast of 24 June was the choral response to that total dedication.

The last time was in June 1887. Don Bosco, by then consumed by fatigue, attended the feast almost without a voice, while his young people sang for him, barely holding back their tears. Seven months later, at dawn on 31 January 1888, he died. But his feast did not die with him.

From that courtyard the Past Pupils were born

Before following the feast beyond the Founder’s death, an unexpected fruit must be noted. On 24 June 1870, Carlo Gastini showed up again at Valdocco. He was no longer a boy. He was an artisan with a trade and a family, and with him was a group of former pupils of the Oratory who had come to celebrate the name day of the man who had welcomed, fed, and educated them. As a gift, they brought a set of coffee cups, bought by pooling their savings, just like in the old days. That return, repeated from year to year with increasingly larger groups, is considered the seed from which the movement of the Past Pupils of Don Bosco sprouted, today spread all over the world.

At Valdocco, gratitude was not the emotion of a single day: it became a lifelong belonging. The feast of 24 June is, quite literally, a feast that generated a family.

The feast that did not change its date

Upon Don Bosco's death, the question was inevitable: what would become of the feast? The first successor, Blessed Michael Rua, would have had his name day on 29 September, the feast of St. Michael the Archangel. But it was not even discussed: the young people and the Salesians continued to celebrate him on 24 June. In that choice lay a profound intuition: that date did not celebrate the name of a man, it celebrated the father. The Salesian Constitutions still say it today with essential words: the Rector Major is Don Bosco's successor, the father and centre of unity of the Salesian Family (art. 126). To celebrate him on the day that belonged to Don Bosco means professing, year after year, that this fatherhood has not been interrupted: in him, the family continues to see and love the Founder.

And so it has been for all the successors: for Fr Paolo Albera, whom they called "the little Don Bosco" in France; for Blessed Philip Rinaldi, of whom the elderly Salesians used to say that he lacked only Don Bosco's voice; and then for Fr. Pietro Ricaldone, Fr. Renato Ziggiotti, Fr. Luigi Ricceri, Fr. Egidio Viganò, Fr. Juan Vecchi – the first non-Italian successor –, Fr. Pascual Chávez, and Cardinal Ángel Fernández Artime, called by Pope Francis to a new service in the Church. Up to today: the eleventh successor of Don Bosco is Fr. Fabio Attard. This 24 June, the Salesian Family will gather around him for the second time: from Turin to Nairobi, from Rome to the Andes, with the same good wishes as the boys of 1849.

Why still celebrate

What is the meaning, today, of a feast born one hundred and seventy-seven years ago in a suburban courtyard? It has at least three, which are surprisingly relevant today.

The first: it educates in gratitude. In a culture that takes everything for granted, saying thank you has become almost a counter-cultural gesture. The feast of the Rector Major – which in Salesian houses is reflected in the rector's feast day and in

the “feasts of gratitude” celebrated at local, provincial, and worldwide levels – teaches young people the memory of the good they have received. Exactly as in 1849: education that passes through the heart generates hearts capable of gratitude. For Don Bosco, it was not a detail: it was the verification that the preventive system was working.

The second: it safeguards unity. The Salesian Family today counts some thirty groups – Salesians, Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, Salesian Cooperators, Past Pupils (male and female), ADMA, and many others – and the Salesians of Don Bosco alone number over thirteen thousand, present in 136 nations. Such a vast and plural reality would risk dispersing if it did not have a living centre. To celebrate together, on the same day and in every corner of the planet, the one who is father and centre of unity means recognising ourselves as a single family, with a single mission: the young, especially the poorest.

The third: it keeps the charism young. Every 24 June, the Salesian Family recounts where it comes from – a meadow, a courtyard, a priest who made himself loved – to remember where it must go. The feast is not nostalgia: it is memory that becomes future, fidelity that becomes creativity.

From those two silver hearts of 1849 to today, Venetian lanterns have given way to digital connections and greetings travel in dozens of languages. But the substance is the same: children saying thank you to a father, and a father who, like Don Bosco, asks for nothing in return but their hearts. And on 24 June, from every corner of the Salesian world, the traditional greeting will rise once again towards Don Bosco’s successor, the one the boys used to shout in the illuminated courtyard of Valdocco: happy feast day, Father!