

□ Reading time: 7 min.

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

The archive data

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Soon after Don Bosco's death, however, the Salesians felt the urgency to gather all possible evidence about him in view of the Process of Beatification and Canonisation. It was in this climate of research that a Salesian from Castelnuevo d'Asti, Fr Secondo Marchisio, went to Castelnuevo d'Asti, with the intention of questioning the older people from Becchi, Castelnuevo and Moncucco on what they remembered of Don Bosco's youth. After about three months of work, Fr Marchisio returned to Turin in October 1888 with a wealth of testimonies. Among other things, he had also made a point of consulting the parish archives at Castelnuevo where he

had seen the baptismal record that indicated 16 August, and not 15, as Don Bosco's date of birth.

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

The Madonna of August in the people's calendar

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

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

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

In this situation, one can understand how the three days of the August bank holiday, 14-15-16, were simply referred to as "the Madonna of August" (*La Madòna d'agost*). The Feast of the Assumption was one of the most important and most heartfelt festivities of the year, and devotion to the Madonna of August was among the most deeply rooted and celebrated throughout Piedmont. Suffice it to think that the cathedrals in Asti, Ivrea, Novara, Saluzzo and Tortona are all dedicated to Our Lady of the Assumption and that, even today, throughout the Piedmontese dioceses, no fewer than 201 parish churches are dedicated to Our Lady of the Assumption. To name but a few, we mention the parish of Arignano, Lauriano, Marentino, Riva presso Chieri and Villafranca d'Asti among the villages closest to Castelnuovo. And it is worth mentioning that the diocese of Acqui has 9 parishes dedicated to the Assumption: Alba has 10, Alessandria 9, Aosta 5, Asti 4, Biella 9, Casale 9, Cuneo 4, Fossano 3, Ivrea 12, Mondovì 18, Novara 34, Pinerolo 6, Saluzzo 12, Susa 7, Turin 16, Vercelli 18, Tortona 28, 16 of which are in Piedmontese territory.

As one can therefore imagine, the feast of Our Lady in August was celebrated solemnly everywhere with processions and festivals lasting a minimum of three days. Even today in Castelnuovo Don Bosco, the Feast of the Assumption (*èl dì dla Madòna* – note the similarity with Don Bosco's words, *the day dedicated to Mary*

Assumed into Heaven) is celebrated with great solemnity. After a devout novena of prayer, everyone flocks to Our Lady of the Castle for the procession, authorities and townspeople alike. Eight days of merriment follow with jousts and floats in the square. Needless to say, the feast of St Roch, on 16 August, is not considered a feast in itself, but practically merged with that of the Assumption.

The date of Don Bosco's birth

It is only by considering these customs and devotions that one can come to understand the date of Don Bosco's birth. Mamma Margaret must have always told her son John: "You were born on Our Lady of August." We obviously have no written record of this, but those who know the environment and the language cannot really imagine any other expression on her lips. And when in 1873, on the orders of Pius IX, Don Bosco was finally about to compile his "Memoirs", Italianising his mother's Piedmontese expression (*a la Madòna d'agost*) with one of the many snippets of dialect so frequent in his writing, he wrote: "I was born on the day dedicated to Mary Assumed into Heaven in 1815."

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



Don Bosco's birth certificate

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

registers.”

The writer of this article knows that he was born on 27 August; yet the registry documents assign him the 28th as his day of birth. So he will not be the first to deny the possibility of Fr Teresio’s hypothesis that Don Bosco may really have been born on the 15th.

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

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

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

To sum up

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

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

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

We are not aware of Don Bosco expressly speaking of “15 August”, but it is possible, all the more so since it cannot be excluded, that he believed that date to be correct.

Certainly this is what his followers believed before his death, interpreting statements: “I was born on the Madonna of August” in its narrowest sense (not forgetting that most people spoke with Don Bosco, in private conversation, in

Piedmontese).

His saintly mother Margaret had also told him when he entered the seminary:

“When you came into the world, I consecrated you to the Blessed Virgin Mary; when you began your studies, I recommended to you devotion to this Mother of ours. Now I say to you, be completely hers: love those of your companions who have devotion to Mary; and, if you become a priest, always preach and promote devotion to Mary.” And so Don Bosco did throughout his life.

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