

□ Reading time: 4 min.

*The first Christmas Mass celebrated by Don Bosco at Valdocco was in 1846. After obtaining permission to celebrate it in the poor Pinardi chapel, he began preparing the minds of his boys by teaching them to receive Holy Communion, make visits to the Blessed Sacrament, and to learn some devout hymns. Fr Lemoyne recounts.*

“The feast of the Immaculate Conception served as a preparation for Christmas. Don Bosco made much of all the mysteries of our Faith. Anxious to express outwardly and with greater transport his devotion to the Incarnate Word and to arouse it and foster it in others, he petitioned the Holy See for the faculty of distributing Holy Communion at the solemn Christmas Midnight Mass in the chapel of the oratory. Pius IX granted it for three years.

After announcing the good news to the boys, he taught his young singers a short Mass and several hymns which he himself had composed in honor of the Child Jesus. He also decorated the small church as best he could and invited several people to join the boys during the novena. The archbishop had granted Don Bosco permission to impart Benediction with the Blessed Sacrament whenever he wanted to, but only on such occasions was he authorized to preserve the Blessed Sacrament in the tabernacle.

A great crowd of boys was present, for he had instilled into the hearts of his little friends a deep love for the Divine Child. Since he was the only priest available, every evening throughout the novena he heard the confessions of many who wanted to go to Communion the following day. Early every morning he was there again to accommodate those boys who had to go to work. After Mass and Communion, he preached a short sermon, which was followed by the chanting of the prophecies by several catechists he had trained, and by Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament.

On Christmas eve he heard confessions until eleven o'clock, sang the Midnight Mass, and distributed Holy Communion to several hundred people. Afterwards, he exclaimed with tears in his eyes: ‘How wonderful! It was like heaven!’ After the service, he gave the boys some refreshment and then sent them home to bed.

After a few hours sleep he was back in church, waiting for the larger crowd of boys that had been unable to attend the Midnight Mass. He celebrated two more Masses, and then went through his usual busy Sunday schedule.

The novena and the feast of Christmas were celebrated this way for many years,

until Don Bosco had other priests to help him.

But Christmas, in those early years, had a special flavor about it which made it truly unforgettable, because it not only symbolized the formal and definitive taking over of the Pinardi house, but also confirmed the promises of future buildings that would testify of the Lord's goodness to future generations. How fondly Don Bosco, his heart and mind full of plans, must have repeated on that blessed day, when reciting his breviary, the words of the Psalmist: "O God, we ponder your kindness within your temple! As your name, O God, so also your praise reaches to the ends of the earth. Of justice your right hand is full!" (BM II 453-454).

The Masses on Holy Christmas Eve were celebrated by Don Bosco from then on until the last years of his life, with a special joy that shone from his face. But it was not only this joy that encouraged lively devotion in everyone, but also the exhortations he made to his little friends to prepare themselves well for Christmas. He would say:

"My dear boys, tomorrow we begin the Christmas novena. There is a story about a man who was very devoted to the Infant Jesus. While going through a forest one winter day, he heard a child's whimper.

Following the sound, he came upon a very beautiful child in tears. 'My dear one,' he exclaimed, 'what happened? Why are you here alone?'

'Nobody cares for me,' the child replied tearfully. With that, he vanished. The man understood then it was the Infant Jesus Himself lamenting man's ingratitude and coldness.

I have told you this story that we may all do our best not to give Jesus cause to complain of us too. Let us get set to make this novena well. Every morning, besides Holy Mass, we will have the chanting of the prophecies, followed by a short talk and Benediction.

I suggest two things to make this novena well:

1. Often think of the Infant Jesus and His love for you. He proved it by dying on the Cross. In the morning, rise promptly at the sound of the bell and, if you feel the cold, think of Jesus shivering in the manger.

During the day study your lessons diligently, do your homework, and pay attention to your teachers for the love of Jesus. Remind yourselves that Jesus grew in wisdom, age, and grace before God and men. Above all, take care not to do anything to displease Him.

2. Visit Him often in the Blessed Sacrament. We envy the shepherds who went to the grotto of Bethlehem to see Him, kissed His little hand, and offered Him their

gifts. 'Lucky shepherds!' we exclaim. And yet there is no reason to envy them, for their fortune is ours too. The same Jesus they visited in the grotto is in our tabernacle. The only difference is that the shepherds saw Him with the eyes of the body, whereas we see Him with the eyes of faith. Nothing will please Him more than our frequent visits to Him. How? First, by receiving Him often in Holy Communion - a custom that has always been eagerly and fervently observed at the Oratory especially during this novena. I hope it will be the same this year. Second, by slipping into church during the day, even for only a minute, even for only a 'Glory Be.' Have I made myself clear?

Two things, then, we shall do to make this novena well. What are they? Can you tell me? Let us often think of the Infant Jesus; let us visit Him by receiving Him in Holy Communion and frequently calling on Him in the tabernacle." (BM VI, 193-194).

Don Bosco's words are also valid today. If they bore fruit in the past, they can also bear fruit today, if we follow them with living faith.