 Reading time: 4 min.

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

The history of the church of the Sacred Heart in Rome, now a basilica, is quite well known, and it is much frequented by people hurrying through the adjacent Termini station. A history fraught with problems and difficulties of all kinds for Don Bosco while the church was under construction (1880-1887), but also a source of joy and satisfaction once it was completed (1887). Less well known, however, is the story of the origin of the "house of charity capable of accommodating at least 500 youngsters" that Don Bosco wanted to build next to the church. A work, an extremely relevant reflection for today… from 140 years ago! Don Bosco himself presented it to us in the January 1884 issue of the *Salesian Bulletin*: "Today there are hundreds and thousands of poor children wandering the streets and squares of Rome, their faith and morals at risk. As already pointed out on other occasions, many young people, either alone or with their families, come to this city not only from various parts of Italy, but also from other nations, in the hope of finding work and money; but disappointed in their expectation they soon fall into misery and the risk of doing badly, and consequently of ending up in prison."
Analysing the condition of young people in the "eternal city" was not difficult: the worrying situation of "street kids", whether Italian or not, was there for all to see, for the civil and ecclesiastical authorities, for the Roman citizens and the multitude of "buzzurri" and foreigners who had arrived in the city once it had been declared capital of the Kingdom of Italy (1871). The difficulty stemmed from not knowing what solution to propose and whether there was the ability to implement it once identified.
Don Bosco, not always well liked in the city because of his Piedmontese origin, proposed his solution to the Cooperators: "The aim of the Hospice of the Sacred Heart of Jesus would be to take in poor and abandoned youngsters from any city in Italy or any other country in the world, to educate them in knowledge and religion, to instruct them in some art or trade, and so remove them from the prison cell, give them back to their families and to civil society as good Christians, upright citizens capable of earning an honourable livelihood through their own labours."

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

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

The religious dimension

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

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

Finally, in his appeal to the generosity of benefactors for the construction of the Hospice, Don Bosco could not fail to make explicit reference to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, to whom the adjoining church was dedicated: “We can also believe for certain that this Hospice will be well pleasing to the Heart of Jesus… In the nearby Church the divine Heart will be the refuge of adults, and in the adjoining Hospice he will show himself to be the loving friend, the tender father of the children. He will have a group of 500 children in Rome every day to divinely crown him, pray to him, sing hosannas to him, ask his holy blessing.”

New times, new peripheries

The Salesian hospice, built as a school of arts and crafts and an oratory on the

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