

□ Reading time: 9 min.

There are images that do not limit themselves to representing an institution: they tell its story, explain it, and guard its soul. The Salesian coat of arms belongs to this category. Born in the lively climate of the origins, it is not primarily an exercise in heraldry. Connoisseurs, perhaps, could have advanced some technical observations. Don Bosco, however, was not looking for a perfect blazon according to the rules of heraldic art. He desired a sign capable of speaking to his sons, friends, benefactors, the young, and posterity.

In that shield is Don Bosco. There is his spiritual programme. There is the ideal that moved him in acting and suffering, in writing and speaking. For this reason, the Salesian coat of arms should not be looked at only as a mark of belonging, but as a small visual synthesis of the Salesian vocation.

The Congregation, born on 18 December 1859, did not immediately have an official coat of arms. For the use of the seal, recourse was made to the figure of Saint Francis de Sales, Patron of the Society, surrounded by a Latin inscription designating the Pious Salesian Society. The motto used then was: “*Discite a me quia mitis sum*” (*Learn from me, for I am meek*). It was an evangelical reference perfectly suited to the spirit of Saint Francis de Sales and to Don Bosco’s choice to place his work under the sign of sweetness, meekness, and pastoral charity.

The need for an official coat of arms matured later, in 1884. In Rome, the basilica of the Sacred Heart was under construction, entrusted by Leo XIII to Don Bosco. It was deemed appropriate to also place the Salesian coat of arms alongside those of Pius IX and Leo XIII. On 12 September 1884, Fr. Antonio Sala presented to the Superior Chapter a first sketch of the Salesian emblem. The design was the work of Professor Boidi, a teacher of technical drawing at the San Giovanni Evangelista college in Turin, a friend and collaborator of the Salesians.

The proposed shield already presented almost all the elements that would remain in the definitive version. In the centre stood a large anchor; on one side appeared the bust of Saint Francis de Sales, on the other a flaming heart. At the top was a radiant six-pointed star; in the lower part, a wood with high mountains in the background, a

reference to the alpine reliefs visible from Becchi, Don Bosco's birthplace. Two branches, one of palm and one of laurel, intertwined at the base, embraced the shield halfway up. A garland of roses crowned the upper part, surrounding a radiant trefoil Latin cross. At the base, on a fluttering ribbon, was written the motto: *Sinite parvulos venire ad me*, "*Let the little children come to me*".

That motto was beautiful and profoundly evangelical, but it was observed that it had already been adopted in other coats of arms. A discussion then opened. It was first proposed "*Sinite parvulos venire ad me*" (*Let the little children come to me*), written on a fluttering ribbon at the base of the shield; but it was pointed out that it had already been adopted in other coats of arms. Fr. Barberis proposed "*Temperance and Work*", a pairing dear to the Salesian tradition and suggested by a dream of Don Bosco as a distinctive trait of the Congregation. Fr. Durando would have preferred "*Maria Auxilium Christianorum, ora pro nobis*" (*Mary Help of Christians, pray for us*). It was Don Bosco who resolved the question, recalling a motto already adopted since the beginnings of the Oratory, at the time of the Convitto, when he used to go to the prisons: "*Da mihi animas, cetera tolle*" (*Give me souls, take away the rest*).

The Chapter enthusiastically welcomed the choice. It was not an ornamental phrase: it was the clearest definition of the Salesian mission. The former pupils of the Oratory, including Canon Ballesio and Cardinal Cagliero, testified that that motto could already be seen written in large letters on the door of Don Bosco's little room. It is the same spiritual climate that we find in the famous meeting with Dominic Savio, when the boy, reading those words, intuited the heart of the work of Valdocco: there "a commerce of souls is carried out".

The design also underwent a personal intervention by Don Bosco. He did not like the star surmounting the shield, because it seemed to him to recall a Masonic emblem. He therefore had it replaced with a radiant cross. The star did not disappear, but was placed in the form of a comet, above the heart. In this way, in the coat of arms, the three great symbols of the theological virtues were brought together: the star for faith, the anchor for hope, the heart for charity.

The official coat of arms of the Congregation appeared for the first time in Don Bosco's circular dated 8 December 1885, the feast of the Immaculate Conception of Mary Most Holy. Since then, it has remained, in substance, what we know.

Every element of the coat of arms speaks.

The star

The star is first of all light. In the Christian tradition it refers to faith, that is, to the light that guides the way. Scripture knows this symbol well: from Balaam's prophecy — "a star shall come out of Jacob" — up to the Apocalypse, where Christ presents himself as "the bright morning star". In ancient Christian art, the star often accompanies the mystery of the coming of Christ, the light that puts darkness to flight. In the Salesian coat of arms, it says that the educational and pastoral work does not arise from a simple human project: it is born from faith and leads to faith.

The anchor

The anchor, placed in a central position, is the symbol of hope. In the life of the sea, the anchor is what holds, fixes, gives stability. Amidst the mobility of the waves, it becomes an image of firmness and security. The Letter to the Hebrews speaks of hope as "a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul". It is an image very dear also to the spiritual tradition: to anchor the heart in God means not letting oneself be overwhelmed by the storms, passions, fears, and agitations of history. For a Salesian, the anchor recalls that education is always an act of hope: hope in God, in the young, in the good that can grow even where it seems hidden.

The heart

The flaming heart is the symbol of charity. As the coat of arms was also intended for the Basilica of the Sacred Heart in Rome, this profound symbol could not be missing. In the Bible, the heart does not only indicate feeling, but the centre of the person: interiority, will, intelligence, memory, the capacity to love. A burning heart speaks of a living, ardent, active charity. In the Salesian coat of arms there is not a generic charity, but that pastoral charity that drove Don Bosco to consume himself for the young, especially the poorest and most abandoned. The Salesian mission is not born from an efficient organisation, but from a heart that burns.

Saint Francis de Sales

The figure of Saint Francis de Sales recalls the Patron of the Society. Don Bosco wanted his sons to bear the name of Salesians precisely to refer to the goodness, sweetness, patience, and apostolic charity of the holy bishop of Geneva. The depiction present in the coat of arms is inspired by a canvas preserved in the monastery of the Visitandines in Turin, founded in 1638 by Saint Jane Frances de Chantal. However, a pen and a sheet of paper are added: a significant detail, which recalls the importance attributed by Don Bosco to the press, to good reading, to the popular diffusion of Christian culture. Don Bosco wrote a great deal and wanted an avant-garde printing press: this too was an apostolate.

The woods

The woods placed in the lower part of the shield is an immediate reference to the Founder's surname (Bosco means wood). But it is not a simple play on words. That little wood refers to a concrete root, to a history, to a poor and providential origin. Don Bosco was not born in a palace, but in a peasant house; not from a strategy of power, but from a vocation matured amidst family, work, simple faith, and dreams of God.

The mountains

Behind the wood rise the mountains. They indicate the peaks of perfection to which the members must tend, as Saint John of the Cross indicates in his writing the "Ascent of Mount Carmel". The mountain, in the Bible and in the Christian tradition, is often a place of encounter with God: Sinai, Tabor, the Mount of Beatitudes, the Mount of Olives. It is a point of contact between heaven and earth, an image of spiritual ascent. In the Salesian coat of arms, the mountains recall that Salesian life cannot be satisfied with mediocrity. It is a call to holiness, lived not outside the world, but in the heart of the educational mission.

The palm and the laurel

The palm and the laurel, intertwined at the base, embrace the shield as emblems of the reward reserved for a sacrificed and virtuous life. The palm is a symbol of victory, of martyrdom, of resurrection, of fidelity carried to the end. In the Christian tradition it accompanies the martyrs and recalls Christ's victory over death. It is a prophetic intuition, because today two-thirds of the Salesian saints and blessed are martyrs. The laurel, evergreen, is also a sign of glory, immortality, honour, and peace. Together, palm and laurel say that Salesian life bears fruit when it is given: there is no apostolic fruitfulness without sacrifice, there is no true glory without fidelity.

The garland of roses

The garland of roses, placed at the top of the shield, seems to allude to the famous dream of the pergola of roses, so important for understanding the Salesian spirit. In the dream, the beauty of the roses is accompanied by thorns: a luminous and realistic image of the mission. Salesian life is attractive, full of joy, of youth, of promise; but it also involves fatigue, sacrifice, patience, suffering. Roses without thorns would be an illusion; thorns without roses would be a sterile sadness. Don Bosco teaches to hold both together.

The Cross

At the top of the coat of arms stands the cross. Not as a decorative element, but as the secret centre of the whole mission. The radiant cross replaces the star initially planned at the top of the shield and orients the whole image towards Christ. Salesian education, charity for the young, hope, faith, the sweetness of Saint Francis de Sales, the ascent towards holiness. Everything finds its meaning in the cross of the Lord, the source of salvation and love.

The motto: "Da mihi animas, cetera tolle"

In Genesis, chapter 14, there is talk of the struggle of an alliance of four kings against another five kings. The former won over the latter and took the goods and the people and, among them, also Lot, the son of Abram's brother, and his goods, because he resided in Sodom, in the kingdom of Bera. Abraham made war on the five kings and recovered Lot and his household. On his return, Bera, the defeated king of Sodom, asked Abraham with these words: "Da mihi animas, cetera tolle" (Give me the persons; take the goods for yourself). And Abraham assured him that he would keep nothing of what was not his. In Christian spiritual reading, those words are transfigured: no longer an interested request for possession, but the apostolic cry of one who desires the salvation of souls.

The phrase is also attributed to Saint Francis de Sales, but it does not appear in his works. It is attributed to him by Bishop Jean-Pierre Camus in the *Spirit of Saint Francis de Sales*, where the saint is presented as entirely directed towards the conversion of souls.

The same expression then recurs in Saint Joseph Cafasso, in the spiritual literature of the clergy, in the *Forma Cleri* and in the *Regula Cleri*, a book that Don Bosco often used for his daily meditation. In that tradition, the motto becomes a prayer: "Lord, who love souls, give me your love, so that I may say with fervour: give me souls, take away the rest".

Thus, it is understood why Don Bosco wanted it in the coat of arms. *Da mihi animas, cetera tolle* is not a phrase to be contemplated from a distance. It is a programme of life. It asks to put people, their salvation, their dignity, their eternal destiny at the centre. It asks to relativise everything else: prestige, comfort, interests, securities, even oneself.

In 1934, there was also an attempt to update some details of the coat of arms. A more rounded shape of the shield was considered, a light blue field, figures rendered with colours closer to reality. The comet took on a yellowish tone and a more elongated point. Palm and laurel, instead of surrounding the shield, were conceived as a support. The garland of roses was replaced by two garlands of oak foliage; the radiant trefoil Latin cross gave way to a larger crosslet Latin cross; the frame accentuated baroque elements. The motto also remained on a fluttering

ribbon. It was a graphic update, not a change of substance.

At a distance of over a century, the Salesian coat of arms continues to speak. Perhaps precisely because it was not born from an aesthetic preoccupation as an end in itself, but from a spiritual intuition. In it meet the faith that illuminates, the hope that anchors, the charity that burns; Saint Francis de Sales and Don Bosco; the memory of the origins and the ascent towards holiness; the sacrifice and the reward; the roses and the thorns; the cross and the mission.

To look at it means to find again, in a simple and dense form, the heart of the Salesian vocation: to belong to God for the young and to seek souls, letting everything else fade into the background. Don Bosco had understood and lived it. For this reason, even today, his coat of arms is not only a distinctive sign. It is a mandate.