

The title of Basilica for the Church of the Sacred Heart in Rome

On the centenary of the death of Fr Paul Albera it was highlighted how the second successor of Don Bosco realised what could be described as a dream of Don Bosco. In fact, thirty-four years after the consecration of the church of the Sacred Heart in Rome, which took place in the presence of the by now exhausted Don Bosco (May 1887), Pope Benedict XV – the pope of the famous and unheard of definition of the First World War as ‘useless slaughter’ – conferred on the church the title of Minor Basilica (11 February 1921). Don Bosco had “given his soul” (and his body too!) for its construction in the last seven years of his life. He had done the same in the previous twenty years (1865-1868) with the construction of the church of Mary Help of Christians in Valdocco, Turin, the first Salesian church elevated to the dignity of a minor basilica on 28 June 1911, in the presence of the new Rector Major Fr Paul Albera.

Discovery of the request

But how did this result come about? Who was behind it? We now know for sure thanks to the recent discovery of the typewritten draft of the request for this title by Rector Major Fr Paul Albera. It is included in a booklet commemorating the 25th anniversary of the Sacred Heart published in 1905 by the then Rector Fr Francesco Tomasetti (1868-1953). The typescript, dated 17 January 1921, has minimal corrections by the Rector Major but, what is important, bears his handwritten signature.

After describing Don Bosco’s work and the unceasing activity of the parish, probably taken from the old file, Fr Albera addresses the Pope in these terms

“While the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus is growing and spreading all over the world, and new Churches are being dedicated to the Divine Heart, also through the noble initiative of the Salesians, as in S. Paolo in Brazil, in La Plata in Argentina, in London, in Barcelona and elsewhere, it seems that the primary Church-Sanctuary dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Rome, where such an important devotion has an affirmation so worthy of the Eternal City, deserves special distinction. The undersigned, therefore, having heard the opinion of the Superior Council of the Pious Salesian Society, humbly begs Your Holiness to deign to grant the Church-Sanctuary of the Sacred Heart of Jesus at the Castro Pretorio in Rome the Title and Privileges of a Minor Basilica, hoping that this honourable elevation will increase devotion, piety and every catholic beneficial activity”.

The request, in its final draft, signed by Fr Albera, was most likely sent by the procurator Fr Francesco Tomasetti to the Sacred Congregation of the Brevi, which welcomed it. He quickly drew up the draft of the Apostolic Brief to be kept in the Vatican Archives, had it transcribed by expert calligraphers on rich parchment and passed it on to the Secretariat of State for the signature of the the one in charge at the time, Cardinal Pietro Gasparri.

Today, the faithful can admire this original of the granting of the requested title nicely framed in the sacristy of the Basilica (see photo).

We can only be grateful to Dr Patrizia Buccino, a scholar of archaeology and history, and Salesian historian Fr Giorgio Rossi, who spread the news. It is up to them to complete the investigation begun by searching the Vatican Archives for the entire correspondence which will also be made known to the scientific world through the well-known Salesian history magazine “Ricerche Storiche Salesiane”.

Sacred Heart: a national basilica with an international reach

Twenty-six years earlier, on 16 July 1885, at the request of

Don Bosco and with the explicit consent of Pope Leo XIII, Archbishop Gaetano Alimonda, Archbishop of Turin, had warmly urged the Italians to participate in the success of the “noble and holy proposal [of the new church] calling it a national vow of the Italians”.

Fr Albera in his request to the pontiff, after recalling Cardinal Alimonda’s pressing appeal, recalled that all the nations of the world had been asked to contribute economically to the construction, decoration of the church and annexed works (including the inevitable Salesian oratory with a hospice!) so that the Church-Sanctuary, as well as a national vow, had become a “worldwide or international manifestation of devotion to the Sacred Heart”.

In this regard, in a historical and ascetical paper published on the occasion of the 1st Centenary of the Consecration of the Basilica (1987), the scholar Armando Pedrini described it as: “A church that is therefore international because of the catholicity and universality of its message to all peoples”, also in consideration of the Basilica’s “prominent position” adjacent to the acknowledged internationality of the railway station.

Rome-Termini is therefore not only a large railway station with problems of public order and a difficult scene to manage, often mentioned in the newspapers and like many railway stations in many European capitals. But it is also home to the Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. And while in the evening and at night time the area does not convey security to tourists, during the day the Basilica offers peace and serenity to the faithful who enter it, stop there in prayer, receive the sacraments.

Will the pilgrims who will pass through the Termini railway station in the not too distant holy year (2025) remember this? All they have to do is cross the street... and the Sacred Heart of Jesus awaits them.

PS. In Rome there is a second Salesian parish basilica, larger and artistically richer than the Sacred Heart one: it is the

Basilica of St John Bosco at Tuscolano, which became such in 1965, a few years after its inauguration (1959). Where is it located? Obviously in the Don Bosco district (a stone's throw from the famous Cinecittà studios). While the statue on the bell tower of the basilica of the Sacred Heart dominates the square of Termini station, the dome of the basilica of Don Bosco, slightly lower than St. Peter's, however, overlooks it directly, albeit from two extreme points of the capital. And since there is no two without three, there is a third splendid Salesian parish basilica in Rome: that of Santa Maria Ausiliatrice, in the Appio-Tuscolano district, next to the large Pio XI Institute.

Apostolic Letter entitled *Pia Societas*, dated 11 February 2021, by which His Holiness Benedict XV elevated the Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus to the rank of Basilica.

Ecclesia parochialis SS.mi Cordis Iesu ad Castrum Praetorium
in urbe titulo et privilegiis Basilicae Minoris decoratur.
Benedictus pp. XV

Ad perpetuam rei memoriam.

Pia Societas sancti Francisci Salesii, a venerabili Servo Dei Ioanne Bosco iam Augustae Taurinorum condita atque hodie per dissitas quoque orbis regiones diffusa, omnibus plane cognitum est quanta sibi merita comparaverit non modo incumbendo actuose sollerterque in puerorum, orbitate laborantium, religiosam honestamque institutionem, verum etiam in rei catholicae profectum tum apud christianum populum, tum apud infideles in longinquis et asperrimis Missionibus. Eiusdem Societatis sodalibus est quoque in hac Alma Urbe Nostra ecclesia paroecialis Sacratissimo Cordi Iesu dicata, in qua, etsi non abhinc multos annos condita, eximii praesertim Praedecessoris Nostri Leonis PP. XIII iussu atque auspiciis, christifideles urbani, eorumdem Sodalium opera, adeo ad Dei cultum et virtutum laudem exercentur, ut ea vel cum antiquioribus paroeciis in honoris ac meritorum contentionem veniat. Ipsemet Salesianorum

Sodaliū fundator, venerabilis Ioannes Bosco, in nova Urbis regione, aere saluberrimo populoque confertissima, quae ad Gastrum Praetorium exstat, exaedificationem inchoavit istius templi, et, quasi illud erigeret ex gentis italicae voto et pietatis testimonio erga Sacratissimum Cor Iesu, stipem praecipue ex Italiae christifidelibus studiose conlegit; verumtamen pii homines ex ceteris nationibus non defuerunt, qui, in exstruendum perficiendumque templum istud, erga Ssmum Cor Iesu amore incensi, largam pecuniae vim contulerint. Anno autem MDCCCLXXXVII sacra ipsa aedes, secundum speciosam formam a Virginio Vespignani architecto delineatam, tandem perfecta ac sollemniter consecrata dedicataque est. Eamdē vero postea, magna cum sollertia, Sodales Salesianos non modo variis altaribus, imaginibus affabre depictis et statuīs, omnique sacro cultui necessaria supellectili exornasse, verum etiam continentibus aedificiis iuventuti, ut tempora nostra postulant, rite instituendae ditasse, iure ac merito Praedecessores Nostri sunt" laetati, et Nos haud minore animi voluptate probamus. Quapropter cum dilectus filius Paulus Albera, hodiernus Piae Societatis sancti Francisci Salesii rector maior, nomine proprio ac religiosorum virorum quibus praeest, quo memorati templi Ssmi Cordi Iesu dicati maxime augeatur decus, eiusdem urbanae paroeciae fidelium fides et pietas foveatur, Nos supplex rogaverit, ut eidem templo dignitatem, titulum et privilegia Basilicae Minoris pro Nostra benignitate impertiri dignemur; Nos, ut magis magisque stimulos fidelibus ipsius paroeciae atque Urbis totius Nostrae ad Sacratissimum Cor Iesu impensius colendum atque adamandum addamus, nec non benevolentiam, qua Sodales Salesianos ob merita sua prosequimur, publice significemus, votis hisce piis annuendum ultro libenterque censemus. Quam ob rem, conlatis consiliis cum VV. FF. NN. S. R. E. Cardinalibus Congregationi Ss. Rituum praepositis, Motu proprio ac de certa scientia et matura deliberatione Nostris, deque apostolicae potestatis plenitudine, praesentium Litterarum tenore perpetuumque in modum, enunciatum templum Sacratissimo Cordi Iesu dicatum, in hac alma Urbe Nostra atque ad Castrum Praetorium situm,

dignitate ac titulo Basilicae Minoris honestamus, cum omnibus et singulis honoribus, praerogativis, privilegiis, indultis quae aliis Minoribus Almae huius Urbis Basilicis de iure competunt. Decernentes praesentes Litteras firmas, validas atque efficaces semper exstare ac permanere, suosque integros effectus sortiri iugiter et obtinere, illisque ad quos pertinent nunc et in posterum plenissime suffragari; sicque rite iudicandum esse ac definiendum, irritumque ex nunc et inane fieri, si quidquam secus super his, a quovis, auctoritate qualibet, scienter sive ignoranter attentari contigerit. Non obstantibus contrariis quiblibet.

Datum Romae apud sanctum Petrum sub annulo Piscatoris, die XI februarii MCMXXI, Pontificatus Nostri anno septimo.

P. CARD. GASPARRI, a Secretis Status.

The parish church of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus at Castrum Praetorium in the city is honoured with the title and privileges of a Minor Basilica.

Pope Benedict XV

For perpetual remembrance.

The Pious Society of St Francis de Sales, founded in Augusta Taurinorum by the Venerable Servant of God John Bosco and now spread throughout diverse regions of the world, is well known to all for the great merits it has acquired—not only by diligently and zealously devoting itself to the religious and moral education of orphaned and labouring children, but also by advancing the Catholic cause both among Christian populations and in distant and arduous missions among unbelievers. In this Our Beloved City, the members of the same Society also serve the parish church dedicated to the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, where, though established not many years ago by the command and under the auspices of Our illustrious predecessor Pope Leo XIII, the urban faithful,

through the work of these same members, are so fervently trained in divine worship and the praise of virtue that it may even rival older parishes in honour and merit.

The founder of the Salesian Society himself, the Venerable John Bosco, began the construction of this church in a new district of the City, renowned for its wholesome air and dense population, near *Castrum Praetorium*. As if raising it in fulfilment of the Italian people's vow and as a testimony of devotion to the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, he diligently collected funds chiefly from the faithful of Italy; yet pious individuals from other nations were not lacking, who, inflamed with love for the Most Sacred Heart, contributed generously to the building and completion of this church. In the year 1887, the sacred edifice, designed according to the splendid plan of the architect *Virginio Vespignani*, was finally completed and solemnly consecrated and dedicated.

Afterwards, with great diligence, the Salesians adorned it not only with various altars, skilfully painted images and statues, and all the furnishings necessary for sacred worship, but also enriched it with adjoining buildings for the proper education of youth, as our times demand. Our predecessors rightly and justly rejoiced at this, and We too approve with no less satisfaction.

Wherefore, since Our beloved son *Paul Albera*, the present Superior General of the Pious Society of *St Francis de Sales*, in his own name and that of the religious under his care, has humbly besought Us that the honour of the aforesaid church dedicated to the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus may be greatly enhanced, and the faith and piety of the faithful of the urban parish may be fostered, and that We may deign in Our kindness to bestow upon the same church the dignity, title, and privileges of a Minor Basilica; We, desiring to further stimulate the faithful of this parish and of Our whole City to more fervent worship and love of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, and to publicly signify the benevolence with which We

regard the Salesians for their merits, have willingly and gladly resolved to grant these pious requests.

For this reason, having consulted with Our Venerable Brothers the Cardinals of the Holy Roman Church assigned to the Congregation of Sacred Rites, by Our own initiative, with certain knowledge and mature deliberation, and by the fullness of apostolic authority, We, by the tenor of these present Letters and in perpetuity, honour the aforesaid church dedicated to the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, located in this Our Beloved City near Castrum Praetorium, with the dignity and title of a Minor Basilica, together with all and singular the honours, prerogatives, privileges, and indults which by right belong to other Minor Basilicas of this Beloved City.

We decree that these present Letters shall always be firm, valid, and effective, and shall perpetually obtain their full and complete effects, and shall fully avail those to whom they pertain now and hereafter; and thus it is to be judged and defined in due form, and anything to the contrary, attempted by any authority, knowingly or unknowingly, is hereby declared null and void.

Notwithstanding any contrary provisions.

Given at Rome, at St Peter's, under the Fisherman's Ring, on the 11th day of February 1921, in the seventh year of Our Pontificate.

P. Cardinal Gasparri, Secretary of State.