

Don Bosco and the titles of Our Lady

Don Bosco's devotion to Mary stems from a filial and vibrant relationship with Mary's maternal presence, which he experienced throughout every stage of his life. From the votive pillars erected during his childhood in Becchi, to the revered images in Chieri and Turin, and the pilgrimages he made with his boys to the sanctuaries of Piedmont and Liguria, each stop reveals a different title for the Virgin—Consolata, Addolorata, Immacolata, Madonna delle Grazie, and many others—that speaks to the faithful of protection, comfort, and hope. However, the title that would forever define his veneration was “Mary Help of Christians”: according to Salesian tradition, it was the Madonna herself who indicated it to him. On December 8, 1862, Don Bosco confided to the cleric Giovanni Cagliero: “Up until now,” he added, “we have celebrated the feast of the Immaculate Conception with solemnity and pomp, and on this day our first works of the festive oratories began. But the Madonna wants us to honor her under the title of Mary Help of Christians: the times are so sad that we truly need the Most Holy Virgin to help us preserve and defend the Christian faith.” (MB VII, 334)

Marian titles

To write an article today on the “Marian titles” under which Don Bosco venerated the Blessed Virgin during his life may seem out of place. Someone, in fact, might say: Isn't there just one Our Lady? What is the point of so many titles if not to create confusion? And then, after all, isn't Don Bosco's title for her Mary Help of Christians?

Leaving deeper reflections that justify these titles from a historical, theological and devotional point of view to the experts, we will content ourselves with a passage from *Lumen*

Gentium, the document on the Church of the Second Vatican Council, which reassures us, reminding us that Mary is our mother and that "her constant intercession continued to bring us the gifts of eternal salvation. By her maternal charity, she cares for the brethren of her Son, who still journey on earth surrounded by dangers and cultics, until they are led into the happiness of their true home. Therefore the Blessed Virgin is invoked by the Church under the titles of Advocate, Auxiliatrix, Adjutrix, and Mediatrix." (*Lumen Gentium* 62).

These four titles admitted by the Council, well considered, encompass in synthesis a whole series of titles and invocations by which the Christian people have called Mary, titles that made Alessandro Manzoni exclaim

"O Virgin, O Lady, O All-holy One, what beautiful names every language holds up to thee: more than one proud people boast to be in thy gentle guardianship" (from *The Name of Mary*).

The Church's liturgy itself seems to understand and justify the praises raised to Mary by the Christian people, when it asks. "How shall we sing your praises, Holy Virgin Mary?"

So, let us leave doubts aside and go and see what Marian titles were dear to Don Bosco, even before he spread that of Mary Help of Christians throughout the world.

In his youth

The little niches scattered along city streets in many parts of Italy, the country chapels and pedestals found at road crossroads or at the entrance to private roads in our lands, are a heritage of popular faith that even today time has not erased.

It would be an arduous task to calculate exactly how many can be found on the roads of Piedmont. In the 'Becchi- Morialdo' area alone there are about twenty, and no less than fifteen in the Capriglio area.

They are mostly votive pedestals inherited from the old ones and restored several times. There are also more recent ones that document a piety that has not disappeared.

The oldest pedestal in the Becchi region appears to date back

to 1700. It was erected at the bottom of the 'plain' towards the *Mainito*, where the families living in the ancient *Scaiota*' later a Salesian farmstead, now undergoing renovation, used to meet.

This is the Consolata pedestal with a small statue of Our Lady of Consolation, always honoured with country flowers brought by devotees.

John Bosco must have passed by that pedestal many times, taking off his hat, perhaps bending the knee and murmuring a Hail Mary as his mother had taught him.

In 1958, the Salesians renovated the old pedestal and, with a solemn religious service, returned it to renewed worship by the community and the population.

That little statue of the Consolata may be the first effigy of Mary that Don Bosco worshipped outdoors in his lifetime.

In the old house

Without mentioning the churches in Morialdo and Capriglio, we do not know exactly which religious images hung on the walls in the Biglione farmstead or at the Casetta. We do know that later in Joseph's house, when Don Bosco went to stay there, he could see two old pictures on the walls of his bedroom, one of the Holy Family and the other of Our Lady of the Angels. So assured Sister Eulalia Bosco. Where did Joseph get them? Did John see them as a boy? The one of the Holy Family is still on display today in the middle room on the first floor of Joseph's house. It depicts St Joseph seated at his work table, with the Child in his arms, while Our Lady, standing on the other side, watches.

We also know that at the Cascina Moglia, near Moncucco, as a boy John used to say prayers and the rosary together with the owners' family in front of a small painting of Our Lady of Sorrows which is still kept at the Becchi on the first floor of Joseph's house in Don Bosco's room above the head of the bed. It is very blackened with a black frame outlined in gold on the inside.

At Castelnuovo John then had frequent occasions to go up to

the Church of Madonna del Castello (Our Lady of the Castle) to pray to the Blessed Virgin. On the Feast of the Assumption, the villagers carried the statue of the Madonna in procession. Not everyone knows that that statue, as well as the painting on the icon on the high altar, depict Our Lady of the Cincture, a devotion of the Augustinians.

In Chieri, John Bosco student and seminarian cleric prayed many times at the altar of Our Lady of Graces in the Cathedral of Santa Maria della Scala, at the altar of the Holy Rosary in the Church of San Domenico, and before the Immaculate Conception in the Seminary chapel.

So in his youth Don Bosco had the opportunity to venerate Mary Most Holy under the titles of the Consolata, Our Lady of Sorrows, Our Lady of Grace, Our Lady of the Rosary and the Immaculate.

In Turin

In Turin John Bosco had already gone to the Church of Our Lady of the Angels for the examination for admission to the Franciscan Order in 1834. He returned there several times to do the Spiritual Exercises, in preparation for Holy Orders, in the Church of the Visitation, and received Holy Orders in the Church of the Immaculate Conception at the Archiepiscopal Curia.

When he arrived at the Convitto he certainly often prayed before the image of the Annunciation in the first chapel on the right in the Church of St Francis of Assisi. On his way to the Duomo and entering, as is still the custom today, through the right-hand portal, how many times will he have paused for a moment in front of the ancient statue of the Madonna delle Grazie, known by the old Torinese as *La Madòna Granda*.

If we then think of the pilgrimages or walks that Don Bosco used to make with his rascals from Valdocco to Turin's Marian shrines in the days of the itinerant Oratory, then we can recall first of all the Sanctuary of the Consolata, the religious heart of Turin, full of memories of the first Oratory. Don Bosco took his youngsters many times to

the *Consolà*. And it was to the *Consolà* that he resorted in tears at the death of his mother.

But we cannot forget the city outings to Madonna del Pilone, Madonna di Campagna, to Monte dei Cappuccini, to the Church of the Nativity at Pozzo Strada, to the Church of the Graces at Crocetta.

The most spectacular pilgrimage of those early Oratory years was to Our Lady of Superga. That monumental Church dedicated to the Nativity of Mary reminded Don Bosco's youngsters that the Mother of God is 'like a dawn rising', a prelude to the coming of Christ.

So Don Bosco made his boys experience the mysteries of Mary's life through her most beautiful titles.

On the autumn walks

In 1850 Don Bosco began walks beyond Turin first to the Becchi and the surrounding area, then to the hills of Monferrato as far as Casale, of Alessandria as far as Tortona and in Liguria as far as Genoa.

In the early years his main, if not exclusive, destination was the Becchi and surroundings, where he celebrated the feast of the Rosary with solemnity in the little chapel erected on the ground floor of his brother Joseph's house in 1848.

The years 1857-64 were the golden years of the autumn walks, and the boys took part in them in ever larger groups, entering the villages with the brass band at their head, festively welcomed by the people and the local parish priests. They rested in barns, ate frugal peasant meals, held devout services in churches and in the evenings gave performances on an improvised stage.

In 1857 a pilgrimage destination was *Santa Maria di Vezzolano*, a sanctuary and abbey so dear to Don Bosco, located below the village of Albugnano, 5 km from Castelnuovo.

In 1861 it was the turn of the *sanctuary at Crea*, famous throughout Monferrato. On that same trip Don Bosco again took the boys to *Madonna del Pozzo* (Our Lady of the Well) at San Salvatore.

On 14 August 1862 from Vignale, where the youngsters were staying, Don Bosco led the happy group on a pilgrimage to the shrine of *Madonna delle Grazie* at Casorzo. A few days later, on 18th October, before leaving Alexandria, they went again to the cathedral to pray to *Madonna della Salve*, venerated with such piety by the Alexandrians, for a happy conclusion to their walk.

Also on the last walk of 1864 in Genoa, on the way back, between Serravalle and Mornese, a group led by Fr Cagliero went on a devout pilgrimage to the shrine of *Nostra Signora della Guardia*, in Gavi.

These pilgrimage-trips traced the vestiges of a popular religiosity characteristic of our people; they were the expression of a Marian devotion, which John Bosco had learnt from his mother.

And then again...

In the 1860s the title of Mary Help of Christians began to dominate Don Bosco's mind and heart, with the construction of the church he had dreamt of since 1844 and which then became the spiritual centre of Valdocco, the mother-church of the Salesian Family, the radiating point of devotion to Our Lady, invoked under this title.

But Don Bosco's Marian pilgrimages did not cease because of this. It is enough to follow him on his long journeys through Italy and France and see how often he took the opportunity for a fleeting visit to the shrine of the local Virgin.

From *Madonna di Oropa* in Piedmont to *Our Lady of the Miracle* in Rome, from Our Lady of the Boschetto in Camogli to Our Lady of Gennazzano, from *Madonna del Fuoco* in Forlì to *Madonna dell'Olmo* (Elm) in Cuneo, from *Our Lady of Good Hope* in Bigione to *Our Lady of Victories* in Paris.

Our Lady of Victories, placed in a golden niche, is standing, holding her Divine Son with both hands. Jesus has his feet resting on the starry ball representing the world.

Don Bosco before this Queen of Victories in Paris gave a

“sermon de charité” in 1883, that is, one of those conferences to obtain help for his works of charity for poor and abandoned youth. It was his first conference in the French capital, in the shrine that is to Parisians what the shrine of the Consolata is to the people of Turin.

That was the culmination of Don Bosco’s Marian wanderings, which began at the foot of the Consolata pillar under the Becchi’s “Scaiota”.