 Reading time: 6 min.

“Our Lady did it all”, we are used to reading in Salesian spiritual literature, to indicate that the Virgin was at the origin of Don Bosco’s whole story. If we apply those words to the construction of the Church of Mary Help of Christians, the truth of it is very well documented, always bearing in mind that, alongside heavenly intervention, Don Bosco also played his part, and how!

Launching the idea and first promises of grants (1863)

At the end of January and beginning of February 1863, Don Bosco sent out a lengthy circular about the purpose of a church, dedicated to Mary Help of Christians, which he had in mind to build at Valdocco: it was to serve the masses of young people taken in there and the twenty thousand souls from the surrounding area, with the further possibility of being erected as a parish by the diocesan authority.
Shortly afterwards, on 13 February, he informed Pope Pius IX, not only that the church was a parish church, but that it was already “under construction”. He obtained the desired outcome from Rome: at the end of March he received 500 lira. Thanking the Cardinal Secretary of State Antonelli for the grant received, he wrote that “the works… are about to begin”. In fact, in May he bought land and timber for the building site and in the summer the excavation work began, which continued until the autumn.
On the eve of the feast of Mary Help of Christians, 23 May, the Ministry of Grace, Justice and Worship, having heard the Mayor, Marquis Emanuele Luserna, declared that it was willing to provide a grant. Don Bosco took the opportunity to make an immediate appeal to the generosity of the first Secretary of the *Ordine Mauriziano* (The Orders of Sts Maurice and Lazaraus) and the Mayor. He sent a twofold appeal to them on the same date: he asked the former, privately, for as big a grant as possible as possible, reminding him of the commitment he had made on the occasion of his visit to Valdocco; he asked the latter formally, officially, for the same, but dwelling in detail on the church to be built.

Early replies

The appeals made for offerings were followed by replies. The reply on 29 May from the secretary of the Order of St Maurice was negative for the current year, but not for the following year when a grant (amount unspecified) could be budgeted for. The reply from the Ministry on 26 July, however, was positive: 6,000 lire were allocated, but half would be delivered when the foundations were laid at ground

level, and the other half when the church was roofed; everything, however, was conditional on the inspection and approval of a special government commission. Finally, on 11 December came the answer, unfortunately negative, from the city council: the municipality's financial contribution was only envisaged for parish churches, and Don Bosco's was not such. Nor, given the fact that the Diocese was a vacant see at that stage, could it easily be granted. Don Bosco then took a few days of reflection and on Christmas Eve reaffirmed his intention to the Mayor to build a large parish church to serve the "densely populated neighbourhood." If there was a failure in providing a grant, he would have to limit himself to a much smaller church. But this new appeal also fell on deaf ears.
1863 thus ended for Don Bosco with little to show for it in real terms, apart from a few general promises. There was cause for discouragement. But if the public authorities were lacking in financial support, Don Bosco thought, Divine Providence would not fail. He had experienced its strong presence some fifteen years earlier, during the construction of the church of St Francis de Sales. He therefore entrusted the engineer, Antonio Spezia, already known to him as an excellent professional, with the task of drawing up the plans for the new church he had in mind. Among other things, he was to work, once again, free of charge.

The decisive year (1864)

In little more than a month the plans were ready, and at the end of January 1864 they were handed over to the municipal building commission. In the meantime, Don Bosco had asked the management of the State Railways of Upper Italy to transport the stones from Borgone in the lower Susa Valley to Turin free of charge. The favour was quickly granted, but the Building Commission was not so favourable. In mid-March it rejected the drawings that had been delivered due to some "construction irregularity", inviting the engineer to modify them. Resubmitted on 14 May, they were found to be defective again on 23 May, with a further invitation to take them into account; alternatively, it was suggested that a different design be considered. Don Bosco accepted the first proposal, and on 27 May the revised project was approved and on 2 June the City Council issued the building permit.


First photo of the Church of Mary Help of Christians

Meanwhile Don Bosco had wasted no time. He had asked the Mayor to have the exact alignment of the sunken Via Cottolengo drawn up, in order to be able to raise it at his own expense with material from church excavations. In addition, he had sent out a printed circular throughout central and northern Italy, through some trusted benefactors, in which he presented the pastoral reasons for the new church, its dimensions, and its costs (which actually quadrupled during the course of construction). The appeal, addressed above all to “devotees of Mary”, was accompanied by a registration form for those who wished to indicate in advance the sum they would pay over the three-year period 1864-1866. The circular also indicated the possibility of offering materials for the church or other items needed for it. In April the announcement was published in the Official Gazette of the Kingdom and in *L’Unità Cattolica.*
The work continued and Don Bosco had to always be there because of the constant requests for changes, especially regarding the demarcation lines on the irregular Via Cottolengo. In September he sent out a new circular to a wider circle of benefactors, modelled on the previous one, but specifying that the work would be finished within three years. He also sent a copy to Princes Tommaso and Eugenio of the House of Savoy and to Mayor Emanuele Luserna di Rorà; however, he only asked them, once again, to collaborate on the project by rectifying Via Cottolengo.

Debts, a lottery and much courage
At the end of January 1865, on the feast of St Francis de Sales when Salesians from various houses were gathered at Valdocco, Don Bosco told them of his intention to start a new lottery to raise funds for the continuation of the work (of excavation) for the church. However, he had to postpone it due to the simultaneous presence in the city of another work on behalf of deaf-mutes. As a result, the work, which would

have resumed in the spring after the winter break, had no financial cover. So, Don Bosco urgently asked his friend and confrere from Mornese, Fr Domenico Pestarino, for a loan of 5000 lire (20,000 euro). He did not want to resort to a bank loan in the capital, since interest rates were too high. As if these thorny financial problems were not enough, others arose at the same time with the neighbours, in particular those in the Casa Bellezza. Don Bosco had to pay them compensation so he could deny them passage through the Via della Giardiniera, which then ceased to be a road.

Solemn laying of the foundation stone

The day finally came for the laying of the foundation stone of the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians on 27 April 1865. Three days before, Don Bosco issued the invitations in which he announced that His Royal Highness Prince Amadeus of Savoy would lay the cornerstone, while the religious function would be presided over by the Bishop of Casale, Bishop Pietro Maria Ferrè. However, the latter passed away at the last minute and the solemn ceremony was celebrated by the Bishop of Susa, Bishop Giovanni Antonio Odone, in the presence of the City Prefect, the Mayor, various City Councillors, benefactors, members of the city nobility and the Lottery Commission. Duke Amedeo’s procession was welcomed to the sound of the royal march by the band and the children’s choir at Valdocco, and Mirabello students. The city press acted as a sounding board for the festive event and Don Bosco, for his part, grasping its great political-religious significance, extended its historical scope with his own publications.



Mary Help of Christians Square and Church

Three days later, in a long and painful letter to Pope Pius IX about the difficult situation in which the Holy See found itself in in the face of the politics of the Kingdom of Italy, he mentioned the church with its walls already rising from ground level. He asked for a blessing on the ongoing enterprise and for gifts for the lottery he was about to launch. In fact, in mid-May he formally asked the Prefecture of Turin for authorisation, justifying it with the need to pay off the debts of the various oratories in Turin, to provide food, clothing, accommodation and schooling for the 880 or so pupils at Valdocco, and to continue the work on the Church of Mary Help of Christians. Obviously, he undertook to observe all the numerous legal provisions in this regard.

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