 Reading time: 5 min.

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The Lottery
The authorisation was granted very quickly, so the complex machine of collecting and evaluating the gifts and selling the tickets was immediately set in motion in Valdocco: everything as indicated in the regulation plan circulated in the press. It was Cav. Federico Oreglia di Santo Stefano, a Salesian Brother, who personally worked to obtain names of prominent people to be included in the Promoters' catalogue, ask for other gifts, and find buyers or "sellers" of lottery tickets. The lottery was, of course, publicised in the city's Catholic press, although only after the closing of the deaf-mute lottery at the beginning of June.

The works continue, as well as expenses and debts
On 4 June the masonry work was already two metres above ground, but on 2 July Don Bosco was forced to resort urgently to a generous benefactor so that the master builder Buzzetti could pay the "workers' salary" (8000 euro). A few days later he again asked another aristocratic benefactor if he could undertake to pay for at least some of the four batches of tiles, planks and laths for the church roof over the course of the year, for a total expenditure of around 16,000 lire (64,000 euro). On 17 July it was the turn of a priest promoter of the lottery to be asked for urgent help in paying "another workers' salary": Don Bosco suggested that he get the money with an immediate bank loan, or rather prepare it for the end of the week when he himself would go to pick it up, or even better, to bring it directly to Valdocco where he could see the church under construction in person. In short, he was navigating by sight and the risk of foundering due to lack of liquidity was renewed every month.
On 10 August, he sent the printed forms to Countess Virginia Cambray Digny, wife of the Mayor of Florence, the new capital of the Kingdom, inviting her to personally promote the lottery. By the end of the month, part of the walls were already at roof level. And shortly before Christmas, she sent 400 tickets to Marquis Angelo Nobili Vitelleschi of Florence with a request to distribute them among known individuals. The search for donations for the Valdocco lottery and the sale of the tickets would continue over the following years. Don Bosco's circulars would spread especially to the centre north of the country. Even benefactors in Rome, the pope himself, would play their part. But why would they have committed themselves to selling lottery

tickets to build a church that was not their own, moreover in a city that had just ceased to be the capital of the Kingdom (January 1865)?
There could have been many reasons, obviously including winning some nice prize, but certainly one of the most important was of a spiritual nature: to all those who had contributed to building the “Mary’s house” on earth, at Valdocco, by means of alms in general or paying for items (windows, stained glass windows, altar, bells, vestments…) Don Bosco in the Virgin Mary’s name, had guaranteed a special prize: “fine accommodation”, a “room” not just anywhere, but “in paradise”.

Our Lady seeks alms for her church

On 15 January 1867, the Prefecture of Turin issued a decree establishing the date for the lottery draw on 1 April. From Valdocco there was a rush to send the remaining tickets throughout Italy, with a request to return the unsold ones by mid-March so that they could be sent elsewhere before the draw.
Don Bosco, who had already been preparing for a second trip to Rome at the end of December 1866 (9 years after the first one), with a stopover in Florence, to try to reach an agreement between State and Church on the appointment of new bishops, took the opportunity to go back over the network of his Florentine and Roman friendships. He managed to sell many bundles of tickets, so much so that his travelling companion, Fr Francesia, urged the shipment of others, because “everyone wants some”.


The basilica and the primitive square

If Turin charity, once the city was downgraded from its role as capital of the Kingdom, was in crisis, Florence's, on the other hand, was growing and so played its part with many generous aristocratic women; Bologna was no less worthy, with Marquis Prospero Bevilacqua and Countess Sassatelli. No was Milan lacking, even though it was to the Milanese Rosa Guenzati on 21 March that Don Bosco confided: "The lottery is nearing its end and we still have many tickets."
What was the final economic result of the lottery? About 90,000 lire [328,000 euro], a nice sum, one might say, but it was only a sixth of the money already spent; so much so that on 3 April Don Bosco had to ask a benefactor for an urgent loan of 5,000 lire [18,250 euro] for payment for building materials that could be delayed no further: some expected income had not turned up.

Our Lady intervenes
The following week, while negotiating about the side altars with Countess Virginia Cambray Digny of Florence – she had personally promoted a collection of funds for

an altar to be dedicated to St Anne (Our Lady's mother) – Don Bosco informed her of the resumption of work and the hope (which turned out to be in vain) of being able to open the church within the year. He was always counting on the offerings for graces that Our Lady continually granted his donors, and wrote to everyone, to Cambray Digny herself, to Miss Pellico, sister of the famous Silvio, etc. Some of his female benefactors, incredulous, asked him for confirmation and Don Bosco repeated his request.


The Basilica of Mary Help of Christians as Don Bosco built it

The graces increased, their reputation spread and Don Bosco had to restrain himself because, as he wrote on 9 May to Cav. Oreglia di S. Stefano, a Salesian sent to Rome to seek charity: "I cannot write because I am too involved." Indeed, he could not fail to update his alms-giver the following month: "A gentleman who had his arm healed immediately brought 3,000 lire [€11,000] used to pay part of the previous year's debts... I have never boasted of extraordinary things; I have always said that Our Lady Help of Christians has granted and still grants extraordinary graces to those who in some way contribute to the building of this church. I have always said and I still say: 'the offering will be made when grace is received, not before' [italics in the original]". And on 25 July he told Countess Callori about a girl he had taken in who was "mad and furious" and held down by two men; as soon as she was blessed she calmed down and went to confession.

If Our Lady was active, Don Bosco certainly was not standing still either. On 24 May he sent out another circular for the building and furnishing of the chapel of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary: he enclosed a form for the monthly offering, while he asked everyone for a Hail Mary for the donors. On the same day, with

remarkable “nerve” he asked Mother Galeffi, Superior of the Oblates at Tor de Specchi in Rome, whether or not the 2000 *scudi* promised some time before for the altar of the Sacred Hearts was part of her renewed willingness to do other things for the church. On 4 July, he thanked Prince Orazio Falconieri di Carpegna of Rome for the gift of a chalice and an offering for the church. He wrote to everyone that the church was progressing and that he was awaiting promised gifts such as altars, bells, balustrades etc. The large offerings therefore came from aristocrats, the princes of the church, but there was no lack of “widow’s mites”, offerings from simple people: “Last week, in small offerings made for graces received, 3800 francs were recorded” [€12,800].
On 20 February 1867, the *Gazzetta Piemontese* gave the following news: “to the many calamities with which Italy is afflicted – [think of the third war of independence that has just ended], we must now add the reappearance of cholera.” It was the beginning of the nightmare that would threaten Italy for the next twelve months, with tens of thousands of deaths all over the country, including Rome, where the disease also claimed victims among civil and ecclesiastical dignitaries. Don Bosco’s benefactors were worried, but he reassured them: “none of those taking part in the construction of the church in honour of Mary will fall victim to these illnesses, as long as they put their trust in her”, he wrote at the beginning of July to the Duchess of Sora.

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