 Reading time: 10 min.

(continuation from previous article)

A memento of the ceremony for the laying of the cornerstone of the church consecrated to Mary Help of Christians on 27 April 1865.

PHILIP, BENEDICT, CRISPIN AND THEODORE.

Phil. What a fabulous celebration it is today
Cris. Yes, it is fabulous; I've been in this Oratory for many years, but I have never seen a celebration like it before, and I don't think we will ever have another one like it.
Ben. Let me introduce myself to you, my friends. I'm gob-smacked: I just can't get over it.
Phil. Get over what?
Ben. I can't get over what I've seen.
Theo. Who are you? Where do you come from? What have you seen?
Ben. I'm a kid from way outa town. I left my place to join the boys at the Oratory of St Francis de Sales. When I rocked up to Turin, I asked to be taken here but the moment I walked in, I saw these flash carriages, horses, footmen, and coachies, all done up to the nines. "Is it possible", I asked myself, "that this is the house where I, a poor orphan, am coming to live?" Then I step into the Oratory grounds, and I see a mob of young kids yelling, buzzing with joy, and almost going bonkers: "Viva, glory, triumph" getting cheers and good vibes from everyone, all the time. Then I raise my gaze towards the bell tower and see a small bell moving in all directions producing a harmonious ringing with all its effort. In the courtyard, it's a symphony of sound: tunes coming from here, tunes coming from there. Some kids tearing around, some leaping about, some belting out songs, and others getting stuck into games. So I say to myself, "what the hell's goin on?"
Phil. Here's why in just a few words. Today the cornerstone of our new church was blessed. His Royal Highness Prince Amedeo has been good enough to lay down the first brick. His Lordship the Bishop of Susa shows up to do the religious part. And there's a crowd of well-to-do people and our top-notch benefactors who've come to show respect to the King's son and make this solemn day even more grand.
Ben. Now it all makes sense why everyone's in such high spirits, and you lot have every reason to throw a top-notch party. But, mate, if you'll permit me to point out something, I reckon you've slipped up on the main bit. On a day as big as this, to

welcome so many bigwigs, including the royal Heir, you'd reckon there'd be some fair dinkum grand preparations sorted. You should've thrown up triumphal arches, thrown flowers all over the streets, decked out every nook with roses, laid out classy frescoes on every wall, and a thousand other fancy touches.
Theo. You are right, dear Ben, you are right. This is what we all wanted to do. But think about it. As the battlers we are, us young guys weren't held back by a lack of keenness, but by our lack of muscle.
Phil. To give our beloved Prince a decent welcome, we all got together a few days back to yarn about what needed sorting for this big day. One of us piped up, saying, "If I had a kingdom to spare, I'd throw it his way, 'cause he's really worthy of it." "Spot on!" we all chimed in, "But strewth, we're as broke as a bloke without a bob." "That's right" our mates jumped in, "If we haven't got no kingdom to hand over, we can at least crown him King of the Oratory of St Francis de Sales." "Lucky us!" the whole mob yelled, "Then we'd be laughing! No more misery, just one big endless festa!" Then another kid, seeing that the others' ideas were a bit far-fetched, reckoned we could make him the king of our hearts, the boss of our affections. And since a few of our mates are already taking orders from him in the military, we could offer up our loyalty, our full attention when it's our turn to serve in the regiment he's running.
Ben. What did your mates say to that?
Phil. Everyone happily agreed with the plan. When it came to sorting out how to welcome him, we all agreed without a second thought: These gents are used to the high life, seeing grandeur and magnificence wherever they go, and they'll understand our humble setup and be gentle with us. We've got every reason to reckon they'll come through with flying colours, given the generosity and kindness we know they're made of.
Ben. Great. You've put it well.
Theo. Yep. I reckon you've got it right. But it wouldn't go astray, would it, to give 'em a word of thanks, a few kind words to show our appreciation?
Ben. OK mates, but first I've got a few questions about the Oratories and what goes on in 'em that I need to get sorted.
Phil. But that would mean that our kind benefactors will have to be pretty patient.
Ben. True, but I reckon they'd love to hear it. Since they've been and still are our main benefactors, they'll be chuffed to bits to hear from those who've been on the receiving end of their generosity.
Phil. I'm a bit limited in what I can do, you see, 'cause I've only been around for about a year, give or take. Maybe Crispin, one of the older ones, will be able to satisfy us; is that right, Cris?

Cris. If you reckon I'm up to the task, I'll give it my best shot to meet your expectations. First off, I'll say that back in 1841, these Oratories were just a bunch of youngsters, mostly from out of town, who'd turn up on Sundays to certain spots to get schooled in the Catechism. Then, when they scored better lodgings, these Oratories in 1844 turned into spots where kids could hang out and enjoy themselves in proper ways after doing their religious part. So, our idea of a good time was playing, having a laugh, jumping about, running amok, singing our hearts out, and belting out tunes on the trumpet and drums. Soon afterwards (1846) Sunday school was added, then (1847) evening classes followed. The first Oratory is the one where we are now, called St Francis de Sales. After this another was opened at Porta Nuova, then another one later in Vanchiglia, and a few years ago the St Joseph's Oratory in St Salvano.
Ben. You're telling me about the history of the festive Oratories, and that's great, I like it, but I would like to know something about this one. So what's the deal for the kids taken in here? What are they up to?
Cris. I can fill you in on that. Among the kids at the Oratories, and even some who roll in from other places outside of town, you've got some who, either 'cause they're completely on their own or 'cause they're flat broke and haven't got much to their name, would be staring down the barrel of a bleak future if someone with a bit of heart didn't take 'em under their wing, look out for 'em like a dad, and sort 'em out with the basics for life.
Ben. From what you're telling me, it seems that this place is for poor kids, but I can see you are all spruced up like little gents. What gives?
Cris. Check it out, Ben. Knowing we've got this massive show on today, everyone's gone all out, showing up in their fanciest stuff, making sure we're all looking spick and span, if not downright flashy.
Ben. Are there many of you in this house?
Cris. There's about eight hundred of us.
Ben. Eight hundred! Eight hundred, you said! And how do you reckon you're gonna fill the bellies of all these ravenous loaf demolishers?
Cris. Not our problem, that's for the baker to work out.
Ben. But who coughs up the cash?
Cris. Just cast your eyes around at all these good people who are lending us their ears, and you'll figure out who's stepping up to the plate and how – sorting us out with grub, gear, and anything else we need to make this happen.
Ben. But I can't get over that number – eight hundred! What can all these kids possibly be doing, both day and night!
Cris. It's a breeze to keep them busy at night. They're all asleep in their own bunk,

keeping to the rules, everything tidy, and as quiet as a mouse till the morning.
Ben. You gotta be joking.

Cris. I thought you were the one joking. If you're keen to know what we get up to each day, I'll give it to you in a nutshell. There's two groups. One is the working boys, the other is the students. The working boys (they call them artisans) here are flat out with lots of trades – tailoring, cobbling, smithing, woodworking, bookbinding, composing, typesetting, doing music, and painting. For example, these lithographs, these paintings are their work. This book was printed here, and was bound in our workshop.

So, basically, they're all students since they're all attending evening classes, but the ones who really shine and behave well usually get the nod from our superiors to focus solely on their studies. That's why it's pretty sweet having all kinds around here from among us. Some are docs, others are notaries, lawyers, teachers, professors, and even a few priests in the mix.
Ben. Is this music all from the kids from this house?
Cris. Yeah, those lads who just belted out a tune or played a riff are from right here in the house. In fact, most of the music you hear is cooked up right here in the Oratory. See, every day at a set time, there's a class just for music, so everyone, on top of their regular trade or book learnin', can level up their musical skills.

That's why we're chuffed to have a bunch of our mates holding down top-notch civil and military roles, thanks to their smarts. Plus, loads of 'em are dabbling in music in different regiments, the National Guard, and even in His Royal Highness's Regiment, Prince Amedeo's.
Ben. Stoked to hear that! So, the smart ones can really flex their brains and nurture their talents, instead of being held back by poverty or having to do stuff that's not their cup of tea. But tell me one more thing: when I came in I saw a beautiful church already built and decked out, and you told me you need another one: Why do you need this?
Cris. The reason is very simple. The church we have so far used was meant especially for the kids from outside who come on Sundays. But with the number of young kids we're taking in skyrocketing, our church is chockers, and there's barely any room for outsiders. We reckon that not even a third of the ones who would like to come can find a place. Imagine! We've had to send lots of 'em away, leaving 'em to stir up trouble in the squares, all because there's no more space left in the church!

I reckon it's also worth mentioning that from the parish church of Borgo Dora to St Donato, there's a whole bunch of houses and thousands of people living there, but there's not a church or chapel in sight – not a small one, nor a big one.

And there’s heaps of kids and grown-ups who’d really benefit from having one around. So there was a real need for a big enough church that could fit all the kids and still have room for the adults. That urgent, genuine need is what got us cracking on building the church that’s the centerpiece of all our celebrations.
Ben. The stuff you’ve filled me in on paints a clear picture of what the Oratories are all about and why we’re building this church, and I reckon it’ll sit well with these gents, knowing where their kindness is headed. I don’t really have the gift of the gab or able to spin poetry to come up with a good speech or deep bit of poetry about what you have told me, but hey, even a few heartfelt words of thanks can go a long way in showing these people how much we appreciate their help.
Theo. I’d love to do it, but I have just learned about lines and rhymes in poems; it’s all a bit tricky. So on behalf of my mates and beloved superiors, I’ll just say this to H.R.H. Prince Amedeo and all the others: We reckon this celebration was great. We’re even planning on engraving it in gold letters, saying:

May this day live on forever!
Sooner shall the sun reverse
Journey eastward in its course;
Every river backward flow

To its source begin to go,
Than this day be lost or fade
From our hearts, where it shall stay,
Among the fairest ever made.

And to you, Your Royal Highness, I want to say that we’ve got a real soft spot for you. Your visit means the world to us, and whenever we’re lucky enough to catch sight of you in the city or anywhere else, or even just hear people talking about you, it’ll always be a source of pride, honour, and genuine joy for us. But before we part ways, I’ve got a little request from my esteemed superiors and my mates. We’d be over the moon if you’d be up for swinging by again in the future, so we can remember what a great time we’ve had.
And you, Your Lordship the Bishop, if you could keep showing us that same fatherly kindness you’ve been showing so far, we’d be forever grateful. And you, Mr Mayor, who’ve played a big role in looking out for us, please keep watching our backs and see if you can arrange to have Via Cottolengo rerouted in front of the new church. We’ll make sure to double down on our heartfelt thanks to you.
And to you, our Parish Priest, please keep seeing us not just as parishioners, but as

your own dear kids, always finding in you a caring and gentle father. We urge all of you to keep up the stellar work as renowned benefactors, just as you've been in the past, especially when it comes to finishing up that church we're celebrating today. The work's already underway, rising up from the ground, and that in itself calls out to the generous souls among us to lend a hand and see it through to the finish. Lastly, rest assured that the memory of this splendid day will be forever cherished in our hearts. We all join together in praying to the Queen of Heaven, to whom the new church is dedicated, asking her to bless you with a long life and many joyous days ahead, bestowed by the Source of all blessings.

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