 Reading time: 10 min.

(continuation from previous article)

Chapter XV. Devotion and plans for a church to Mary Help in Turin.

Before speaking of the church built in Turin in honour of Mary Help of Christians, it is worth noting that the devotion of the people of Turin to this heavenly Benefactress goes back to the earliest days of Christianity. St Maximus, the first bishop of this city, speaks of it as a public and ancient fact.

The shrine of the Consolata is a wonderful monument to what we are saying. But after the victory at Lepanto, the people in Turin were the first to invoke Mary under the special title of Help of Christians. Cardinal Maurice, Prince of Savoy greatly promoted this devotion, and at the beginning of the 10th century he had a chapel built in the church of St Francis di Paola with an altar and a beautiful statue dedicated to Mary Help of Christians, made of precious and elegant marble. The Virgin is presented holding the Divine Child in her hand.

This prince was a fervent devotee of Mary Help of Christians, and as he often made an offering of his heart to his heavenly Mother during his lifetime, so when he died he left in his will that his heart, as the dearest pledge of himself, be placed in a casket and placed in the wall to the right of the altar.[1]

Time having worn and rendered this chapel somewhat shabby, King Victor Emmanuel II ordered everything to be restored at his own expense.

Thus the floor, the predella, and the altar itself were as new.

Observing the people’s recourse to Mary Help of Christians to be a very effective means of obtaining extraordinary graces, they began to join the Confraternity in Munich, Bavaria, but because of the overwhelming number of members, a Confraternity was established in this same church. It received the apostolic approval of Pope Pius VI, who granted many indulgences with other spiritual favours by rescript of 9 February 1798.

Thus, the devotion of the people of Turin to the august Mother of the Saviour was becoming ever more widespread, and its most salutary effects were felt when the plan for a church to be dedicated to Mary Help of Christians was conceived in Valdocco, a densely populated district of the city. Many thousands of citizens lived here without a church of any kind other than the one in Borgo Dora, which however could not hold more than 1,500 people.[2]

There were the small churches of the Little House of Divine Providence and the Oratory of St Francis de Sales in this district, but both were barely sufficient to

serve their respective communities.

In the fervent desire, therefore, to provide for the urgent needs of the inhabitants of Valdocco, and of the many young people who come to the Oratory on Sundays from various parts of the city, and who can no longer be contained in the present little church, it was decided to attempt to build a church with enough capacity for this double purpose. But a very special reason for the construction of this church was a commonly felt need to give a public sign of veneration to the B. Virgin Mary, who, with the heart of a truly merciful Mother, had protected our towns and saved us from the evils to which so many others had succumbed.

Two things lay ahead to get the pious undertaking off the ground: the location of the building and the title under which it was to be consecrated. So that the designs of Divine Providence could be fulfilled, this church had to be built on Cottolengo Street in a spacious, free site in the centre of that large population. An area was therefore chosen between Cottolengo Street and the Oratory of St Francis de Sales.

While deliberations were in progress regarding the title under which the new building was to be erected, one incident removed all doubt. The reigning Supreme Pontiff Pius IX, to whom nothing escapes the notice of what can be advantageous to Religion, having been informed of the need for a church in the above-mentioned place, sent his first gracious offering of 500 francs, making it known that Mary Help of Christians would certainly be a title pleasing to the august Queen of Heaven. He then accompanied the charitable offering with a special blessing to the donors adding these words: “May this small offering have more powerful and generous donors who will cooperate in promoting the glory of the august Mother of God on earth, and thus increase the number of those who will one day make her glorious crown in heaven.”

Having thus established the place and the name of the building, a well-deserving engineer, Antonio Spezia, came up with the design and developed it in the form of a Latin cross over an area of 1,200 square metres. During this time there were many difficulties but the Blessed Virgin, who wanted this building for her greater glory, dispelled, or better still, removed all the obstacles that were present at the time, and ones that would become more serious in the future. Therefore, it merely remained to begin the longed-for building.

Chapter XVI. Initial works and the laying of the foundation stone.

Once the excavations had been made to the usual depth, we were about to

lay the first stones and the first lime, when we realised that the foundations were resting on top of alluvial soil and therefore unable to support the foundations of a building of that size. Therefore, the excavations had to be further deepened and a strong and wide piling made corresponding to the periphery of the planned building.

The piling and digging to a considerable depth was a cause of greater expense, both for the increase in work and for the increased amount of materials and timbers that had to be placed underground. Nevertheless, the work continued apace, and on 27 April 1865 the foundations could be blessed and the cornerstone laid.

In order to understand the meaning of this event, it should be noted that it is the discipline of the Catholic Church that no one should begin the construction of a sacred building without the express permission of the bishop, under whose jurisdiction the land to be used for this purpose is found. *Aedificare ecclesiam nemo potest, nisi auctoritate dioecesani.**[3]*

After the Bishop has seen the need for the Church and determined its location, he goes to lay the cornerstone, either in person or through one of his delegates. This stone is Jesus Christ, who is called in the sacred books the cornerstone, that is, the foundation of all authority, of all holiness. By this act, the Bishop shows that he derives his authority from Jesus Christ, to whom this building belongs and on whom every religious practice that will take place in this Church in the future must depend, while the Bishop, by laying the cornerstone, takes spiritual possession of it.

The faithful of the early Church, when they wished to build any church, first marked the site with a cross to denote that the site, having been destined for the worship of the true God, could no longer be for secular use.

The blessing is then made by the bishop as the patriarch Jacob did when in a desert he raised a stone over which he made a sacrifice to the Lord: *Lapis iste, quem erexi in titulum, vocabitur domus Dei.*

It is good here to note that every church, and every worship exercised in it, is always addressed to God, to whom every act, every word, every sign is dedicated and consecrated. This religious act is called *Latria,* or supreme worship, or service par excellence that is rendered to God alone. Churches are also dedicated to the saints with a second form of veneration called *Dulia*, which means service rendered to the Lord’s servants.

When the veneration is addressed to the Blessed Virgin, it is called *Hyperdulia, that is,* service above and beyond that which is rendered to the saints. But the glory and honour given to the saints and the B. Virgin do not remain in them, but pass through them to God, who is the goal of our prayers and actions.

Hence the churches are all consecrated first to *God Optimus Maximus*, then to the B. Virgin Mary; then to some saint at the will of the faithful. Thus we read that St Mark the Evangelist in Alexandria consecrated a church to God and to his master St Peter the Apostle.[4]

It is also worth noting with regard to these ceremonies that sometimes the bishop blesses the cornerstone and some distinguished personage lays it in its place, and puts the first lime on it. Thus we have from history that the Supreme Pontiff Innocent X in the year 1652 blessed the cornerstone of the church of St Agnes in Piazza Navona, while Prince Pamfili Duke of Carpinete laid it down in the foundations.

Thus in our case Bishop Odone of happy memory, bishop of Susa, was in charge of conducting the religious service while Prince Amadeus of Savoy placed the cornerstone in its place and put the first lime on it.

Therefore on 27 April 1865, the religious service began at two o'clock in the afernoon. The weather was clear, there were many people, the aristocracy of Turin and also others from outside Turin attended. The boys from the house at Mirabello on that occasion had come to form a kind of army with the boys in Turin.

After the prescribed prayers and psalms, the venerable Prelate sprinkled holy water on the foundations of the building, then went to the pillar of the dome on the Gospel side, which was already at the level of the current floor. Here a record was made of what was done, and it was read aloud as follows:

The year of the Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-five, the twenty-seventh day of April, two o'clock in the afternoon; the tenth year of the Pontificate of Pius IX, of the Count and Countess Mastai Ferretti happily reigning; the tenth year of the reign of Victor Emmanuel II; the archiepiscopal See of Turin being vacant due to the death of Archbishop Luigi dei Marchesi Franzoni, the Chapter Vicar Collegiate Father Giuseppe Zappata; Parish Priest of the Parish of Borgo Dora Father Cattino Cav. Agostino; director of the Oratory of St. Francis, Father Bosco Giovanni; in the presence of HRH Prince Amadeus of Savoy, Duke of Aosta; Count Costantino Radicati Prefect of Turin; the Municipal Council represented by the Mayor of this city Lucerna di Rorà Marquis Emanuele, and the Commission promoting this church[5] to be dedicated to *God Optimus Maximus* and Mary Help of Christians, Bishop Odone G. Antonio bishop of Susa, having received the appropriate faculty from the Ordinary of this Archdiocese, proceeded to bless the foundations of this church and placed the cornerstone of the same in the large pillar of the dome on the Gospel side of the high altar. Enclosed in this stone were a number of coins of different metal and value, some medals bearing the effigy of the Supreme Pontiff Pius IX and our Sovereign, and an inscription in Latin recalling the object of this sacred

ceremony The well-deserving engineer architect Cav. Spezia Antonio, who conceived the design and with a Christian spirit lent and still lends his services in the management of the work.

The form of the church is that of a Latin cross, with a surface area of one thousand two hundred metres; the reason for this construction is the lack of churches among the faithful of Valdocco, and to give a public attestation of gratitude to the great Mother of God for the great benefices received, for those that are expected in greater numbers from this heavenly Benefactress. The work was begun, and it is hoped that it will be brought to a happy conclusion with the charity of the devout.

The inhabitants of Valdocco, the people of Turin and other faithful benefited by Mary, now gathered in this blessed enclosure, unanimously send to the Lord God, to the Virgin Mary, Help of Christians, a fervent prayer to obtain from heaven abundant blessings on the people of Turin, on Christians throughout the world, and especially on the Supreme Head of the Catholic Church, the promoter and distinguished benefactor of this sacred edifice, on all the ecclesiastical authorities, on our august Sovereign, and on the entire Royal Family, and especially on H. R. H. Prince Amedeo, the Supreme Commander of the Catholic Church, the promoter and distinguished benefactor of this sacred edifice, on all the ecclesiastical authorities, on our august Sovereign, and on the entire Royal Family, and especially on H. R. H. the Most Excellent Prince of the Order of Malta. HRH Prince Amadeus, who by accepting the humble invitation gave a sign of veneration to the great Mother of God. May the august Queen of Heaven assure a place in eternal beatitude to all those who have given or will give work to complete this sacred edifice, or in some other way contribute to increasing the worship and glory of Her above the earth."

Having read and approved this report, it was signed by all those named above and by the most illustrious persons present. It was then folded and wrapped with the design of the church and some other writing, and placed in a specially prepared glass vase. It was hermetically, sealed and placed in the hollow made in the middle of the foundation stone. Blessed by the bishop, more stone was placed on top, and Prince Amadeus placed the first lime on it. Afterwards, the masons continued their work up to the height of over a metre.

After the other religious rites were completed, the aforementioned personalities visited the establishment, then attended a performance by the young people themselves. Various poems written for the occasion were read to them, various pieces of vocal and instrumental music were performed, with a dialogue, in which a historical account of the solemnity of the day was given.[6]

At the end of the pleasant entertainment the day ended with a devout

thanksgiving to the Lord with Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. H.R.H. and his entourage left the Oratory at 5 30 p.m., each one showing himself fully satisfied. Among other tokens of appreciation, the Augustus Prince offered the gracious sum of Fr. 500 from his special box, and gave his gymnastics equipment to the young people of this establishment. Shortly afterwards, the engineer was decorated with the cross of Saints Maurice and Lazarus.

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[1] Upon the death of that prince, Count Tesauro made the following epigraph, which was carved into the floor of the altar.
D. O. M.
SERENISSIMIS PRINCEPS MAURITIUS SABAUDIAE
MELIOREM SUI PARTEM
COR
QUOD VIVENS
SUMMAE REGINAE COELORUM LITAVERAT
MORIENS CONSECRAVIT
HICQUE AD MINIMOS QUOS CORDE DILIGERAT
APPONI VOLUIT
CLAUSIT ULTIMUM DIEM
QUINTO NONAS OCTOBRIS MDCLVII.

[2] This district is called Valdocco from the initials *Val. Oc. Vallis Occisorum* or valley of the slain, because it was watered with the blood of Saints Adventor and Octavius, who brought the palm of martyrdom here.

From the parish church of Borgo Dora, if you draw a line to the church of the Consolata and the one in Borgo s.. Donato; then across to the Royal Forge (cannons) as far as the river Dora, you have an area covered with houses, where more than 35,000 inhabitants lived, for whom there was no public church.

[3] Council Aurelian. dist. l, *De consacr*.

[4] See Moroni, article *Churches*.

[5] Members of the commission promoting the lottery for this church.

LUCERNA DI RORA’ March. Emanuele Mayor of the City of Turin Honorary President

SCARAMPI DI PRUNEY March. LODOVICO President

FASSATI March. DOMENICO V. President

MORIS Comm. GIUSEPPE Municipal Councillor V. Chairman

GRIBAUDI Mr GIOVANNI Doctor of Medicine and Surgery. Secretary

OREGLIA DI S. STEFANO Cav. FEDERICO Secretary

COTTA Commendatore GIUSEPPE Senator of the Kingdom Cashier

ANZINO Theolog. Can. VALERIO Chaplain to His Majesty

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BONA COMRNEN. Director-General of Southern Railways

BOSCO sac. GIOVANNI Director of the Oratories

CAYS OF GILEITA Count CARLO Exhibition Director

DUPRA’ Cav. GIO. Batt. Accountant to the Chamber of Accounts

DUPRÈ Cav. GIUSEPPE Municipal Councillor

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RADICATI Count COSTANTINO Prefect

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[6] One of the poems with the dialogue and inscription can be read in the Appendix at the end of the booklet.