

□ Reading time: 5 min.

*In the twilight of his life, obeying a wish of Pope Leo XIII, Don Bosco took on the difficult task of building the Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus at the Castro Pretorio in Rome. To complete the gigantic undertaking he spared no tiring journeys, humiliations, sacrifices, shortening his precious life as an apostle of youth.*

Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus dates back to the beginnings of the Church. In the early centuries, the Holy Fathers invited people to look at the pierced side of Christ, a symbol of love, even if it did not explicitly refer to the Heart of the Redeemer.

The earliest references found are from the mystics Matilda of Magdeburg (1207-1282), St Matilda of Hackeborn (1241-1299), St Gertrude of Helfta (ca. 1256-1302) and Blessed Henry Suso (1295-1366).

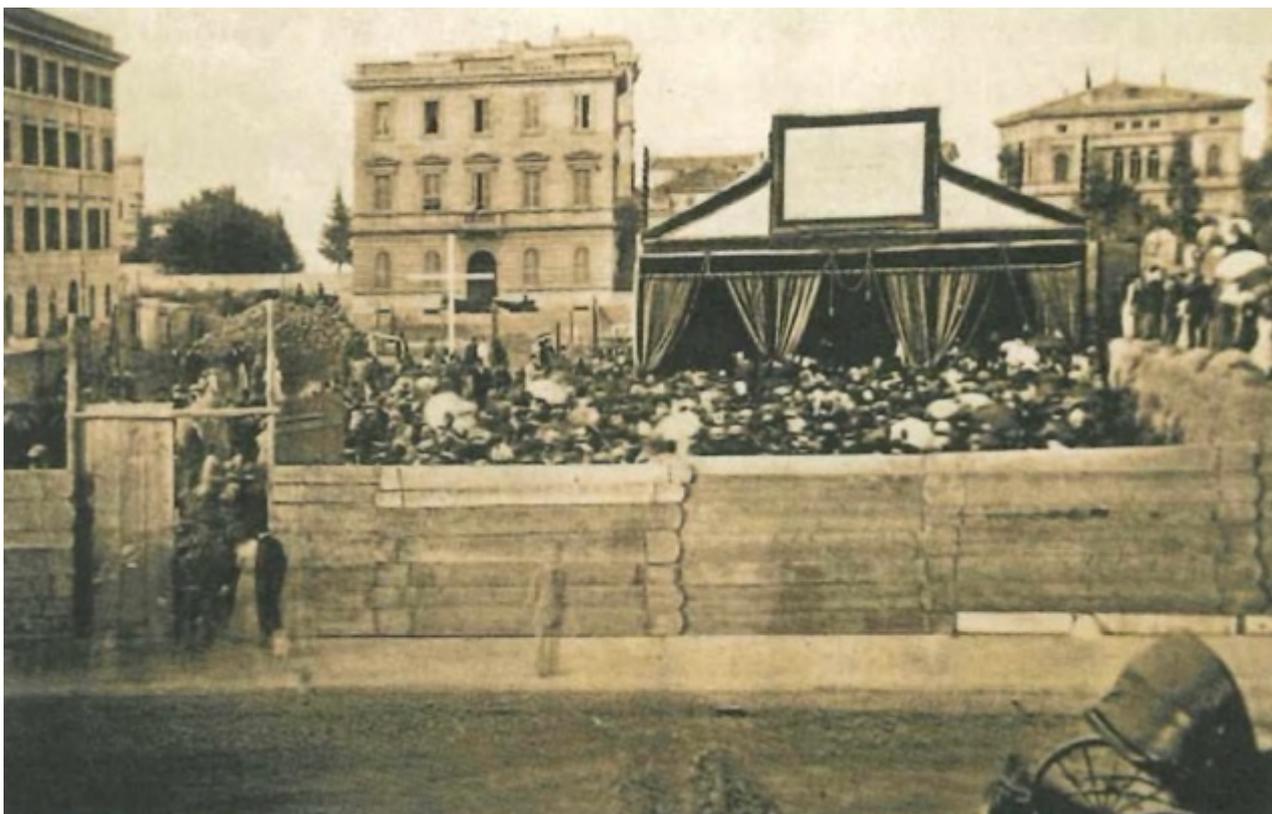
An important development came with the works of St John Eudes (1601-1680), then with the private revelations of the Sisters of the Visitation, St Margaret Mary Alacoque, spread by St Claude de la Colombière (1641-1682) and his Jesuit brethren.

At the end of the 19th century, churches consecrated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus spread, mainly as churches of expiation.

With the consecration of mankind to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, through Leo XIII's encyclical, *Annum Sacrum*(1899) the cult was greatly extended and strengthened with two more encyclicals to come later: *Miserentissimus Redemptor*(1928) by Pius XI and especially *Haurietis Aquas*(1956) by Pius XII.

In Don Bosco's time, after the construction of the Termini railway station by Pope Pius IX in 1863, the neighbourhood began to be populated, and the surrounding churches could not serve the faithful adequately. This led to the desire to build a church in the area, and it was initially planned to dedicate it to St Joseph, who was appointed as the patron saint of the Universal Church on 8 December 1870. After a series of events, in 1871 the pope changed the patronage of the desired church, dedicating it to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and it remained in the planning stage until 1879. Meanwhile, the cult to the Sacred Heart continued to spread, and in 1875, in Paris, on the city's highest hill, Montmartre (Mount of Martyrs), the foundation stone was laid for the church of the same name, *Sacré Cœur*, which was completed in 1914 and consecrated in 1919.

After the death of Pope Pius IX, the new Pope Leo XIII (as Archbishop of Perugia he had consecrated his diocese to the Sacred Heart) decided to resume the project, and the foundation stone was laid on 16 August 1879. Work stopped shortly afterwards due to a lack of financial support. One of the cardinals, Gaetano Alimonda (future archbishop of Turin) advised the Pope to entrust the enterprise to Don Bosco and, even though the pontiff was initially hesitant knowing the commitments of the Salesian missions inside and outside Italy, he made the proposal to the Saint in April 1880. Don Bosco did not think twice and replied: "The Pope's wish is a command for me: I accept the commitment that Your Holiness has the goodness to entrust to me." When the Pope warned him that he could not support him financially, the Saint only asked for the apostolic blessing and spiritual favours necessary for the task entrusted to him.



Laying the foundation stone of the Sacred Heart of Jesus Church in Rome

On his return to Turin, he wanted the Chapter's approval for this undertaking. Of the seven votes, only one was positive: his... The Saint was not discouraged and argued: "You have all given me a resounding *no* for an answer, and that is fine, because you acted with all the prudence needed to make serious, major decisions

such as this. However, were you to give me a yes answer, I can promise you that the Sacred Heart of Jesus will supply the funds to build the Church, He will pay off our debts, and He will even give us a handsome bonus as well." ([MB XIV,580](#)). After this speech the vote was repeated and the results were all positive and the main boon was the Hospice of the Sacred Heart which was built next to the church for poor and abandoned boys. This second hospice project was included in an Agreement made on 11 December 1880, which guaranteed the perpetual use of the church to the Salesian Congregation. Acceptance caused him grave worries and cost him his health, but Don Bosco, who taught his sons work and temperance and said it would be a day of triumph when it was said that a Salesian had died on the battlefield worn out by fatigue, preceded them by example.

The building of the Church of the Sacred Heart at the Castro Pretorio in Rome was done not only out of obedience to the Pope but also out of devotion.

Let us take up one of his talks on this devotion, made during a "good night" to his pupils and confreres only a month after his acceptance, on 3 June 1880, the eve of the Feast of the Sacred Heart.

"Tomorrow, my dear children, the Church celebrates the feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. It is necessary that we too, with great effort, try to honour him. It is true that the external solemnity moves to Sunday; but tomorrow let us begin to celebrate in our hearts, to pray in a special way, to make a fervent communion. Then on Sunday there will be music and the other ceremonies of external worship which make Christian feasts so beautiful and majestic.

Some of you will want to know what this feast is and why the Sacred Heart of Jesus is especially honoured. I will tell you that this feast is nothing other than to honour with a special remembrance the love that Jesus brought to mankind. Oh the great, infinite love that Jesus brought us in his incarnation and birth, in his life and preaching, and particularly in his passion and death! Since then the seat of love is the heart, so the Sacred Heart is venerated as the object that served as a furnace to this boundless love. This veneration of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, that is, of the love that Jesus showed us, was of all times and always; but there was not always a feast specially established to venerate it. How Jesus appeared to Blessed Margaret a feast manifested to her the great good that will come to mankind by honouring His most loving heart with special worship, and how the feast was therefore established, you will hear in the sermon on Sunday evening.

Now let us take courage and each one do his best to correspond to so much love that Jesus has brought us". ([MB XI,249](#))

The church was completed for worship seven years later, in 1887. On 14 May of that year Don Bosco attended the consecration of the Church with great emotion, solemnly presided over by the Cardinal Vicar Lucido Maria Parocchi. Two days later, on 16 May, he celebrated the only Holy Mass in this church, at the altar of Mary Help of Christians, interrupted more than fifteen times by tears. They were tears of gratitude for the divine light he had received: he had understood the words of his dream when he was nine: "In good time you will understand everything!" A task completed amidst many misunderstandings, difficulties and hardships, but crowning a life spent for God and the young, rewarded by the same Divinity.

A video was recently made about the Basilica of the Sacred Heart. We offer it to you below.