

□ Reading time: 5 min.

The origin of the Salesian presence in Naples goes back to Don Bosco himself; Naples was the southernmost city visited by Don Bosco between 29 and 31 March 1880. On this occasion Don Bosco celebrated the Eucharist in the church of St Joseph in Via Medina, assisted by a young altar server called Peppino Brancati. A few years later the Neapolitan boy went to Valdocco to Don Bosco and became the first Salesian from southern Italy; a family home in Torre Annunziata was also dedicated to him.

On the outskirts of Naples, in a district called Doganella, the sons of Don Bosco began their activities in 1934 in poor premises that were insufficient to accommodate the large numbers of young people who flocked around them.

Twenty years later, after the terrible storm of the war had passed, in 1954 they set to work on the large Institute that exists today, built with conspicuous contributions from private benefactors and organisations.

On 28 May 1959, it was opened by the President of the Republic, Giovanni Gronchi. In the centenary year of Don Bosco's death, on 21 October 1988, the Rector Major Fr Egidio Viganò opened the Don Bosco Social Centre in which the Institute was redesigned according to the needs of the times and in dynamic fidelity to the Founder.

Today the Don Bosco of Naples presents itself as a dynamic reality open to its local area. In accordance with the charism of Don Bosco, it responds to the new educational poverty found in the city.

Naples is a beautiful and complex city that generates complex problems, and it is for this reason that our Salesian house has developed in such a way that it responds to a simple unifying criterion: the oratory criterion, the Oratory of a Thousand Trades!

A house that welcomes

Over the years, the Salesians have been able to reinvent its call to be welcoming, from the large boarding schools of the 1960s to family communities, more child-friendly structures with individualised educational projects. In our house we have three of them! The first is the "Il Sogno" (The Dream) family community, run by the Salesian APS "Piccoli Passi grandi sogni" (Small Steps, Big Dreams), founded in 2007. In its 15 years of existence it has welcomed 120 youngsters, mostly from Naples and the province, from both penal and administrative areas. In 2017, Naples experienced the refugee landings emergency and the Salesians responded: the community for unaccompanied foreign minors, known as "Il Ponte"

was born. These are children who have faced endless journeys amidst a thousand dangers to come to Europe. For most of them, Libya was the most traumatic stage. But that is not enough... in 2018, faced with the dramatic situation of minors abandoned on the streets, especially around the railway station, the rapid reception “La zattera” community was set up. It is a 24-hour educational emergency room to which the police, social workers or citizens can always turn to provide a roof, a meal, clothes but above all the chance to start again. More than 250 young people from 32 countries around the world have passed through these two communities! Among the stories of redemption and rebirth of these young people, I like to tell Mustafà’s story, a 17-year-old from Somalia. He was found by the police lying on the ground at central station. I remember the evening when he arrived in the porter’s lodge of our centre accompanied by the social worker, welcomed by Pietro and Fr Vanni. He looked terrified, but above all I noticed that he could not walk; in Libyan prisons they had broken his hip. It has been three years since Mustafà took the third grade with us, had surgery, and now walks quite well; he has enrolled in the first year of our Vocational Training Centre. Every time I see him I think back to that evening in the porter’s lodge and I think of Don Bosco’s miracles.

School that prepares for life

Don Bosco used to say, my boys have “intelligence in their hands” and this applies all the more to Neapolitan boys. Naples, however, is also the city in Italy with the highest school drop-out rate. How can we combat early school leaving by leveraging the intelligence in the hands of Neapolitan girls and boys? Vocational training! In 2018 we inaugurated a new Vocational Training Centre together with other partners who share this great educational mission: the *San Gennaro Foundation*, the *Franca and Alberto Riva Foundation*, *IF learn and do*, *Cooperativa il Millepiedi*, *Cometa Formazione*. The *School of Doing* was born, an innovative, beautiful school that makes educational focus and the relationship with companies its hallmark. With the two “logistics systems and services operator” and “motor vehicle repair operator” courses, we are giving a concrete response to local young people.

Alongside these two structured three-year courses, the Oratory of a Thousand Trades offers many workshops in which to practise, experiment, learn a trade, find one’s own place in the world: the “Anem e Pizza” pizzeria workshop, the “Cap Appost” hairdresser’s workshop, the “Le Ali” centre with the possibility it offers of qualifying as a cook, waiter and bar tender, the Don Bosco band that offers the opportunity for young people to learn and play an instrument, and many other possibilities, many other trades.

A Church that evangelises

Our Salesian community runs the Don Bosco Parish in the Amicizia district. It is an evangelising presence in an area that sees in us Salesians a point of reference, a constant presence that accompanies in all seasons of life and all situations of life, given that our community also takes care of the pastoral care of St John Bosco Hospital.

The central moment of oratory life is prayer with the Salesian good night, when all sectors and all projects stop to dedicate a few minutes to converse with God in simple words close to each day. So it is that the children who attend the day centre, the street education workshops, the territorial projects with the schools, the boys in the football school and the youngsters who freely enter the oratory recognise themselves as belonging to the same big Salesian family. Fr Michael's "call" to prayer at 5.30 p.m. represents an essential educational rite for our work, because education also needs its rites!

A playground to meet as friends

The playground is the geographical and charismatic centre of our work. Don Bosco has a beautiful and spacious courtyard/playground with many fields, a large portico, a "square" on the scale of young people, the square of joy. This space is all the more precious because it is located in a part of the city that has no space dedicated to young people, who are often forced to stay on the streets with all the dangers that entails. I still remember one sunny afternoon in the courtyard when a mother arrived, almost with tears in her eyes, leaving her children in the oratory, saying "thank goodness you Salesians are here". A few minutes earlier in a nearby square, a little girl walking with her grandmother had been stuck by a bullet. Aware that we cannot educate alone, we have built a network with other agencies in the area, family, school, social services, parishes, associations.

The courtyard/playground is inhabited daily by hundreds of children and dozens of educators who make it an educational space to meet as friends. Sport open to all, then allows us to engage with hundreds of boys and girls with their families.

Over these years I have become more and more convinced that Don Bosco with his educational style, his loving-kindness has so much to give to Naples, but also that Naples with its beauty, its brilliance, enriches Don Bosco, makes him more likeable, in short they are a winning couple!

Fabio Bellino