

□ Reading time: 6 min.

Today, the original vocation of the Sacred Heart House sees a new beginning. Tradition and innovation continue to characterise the past, present, and future of this significant work.

So often did Don Bosco desire to come to Rome to open a Salesian house. From his first trip in 1858, his goal was to be present in the Eternal City with an educational presence. He came to Rome twenty times, and only on his last trip in 1887 was he able to realise his dream by opening the Sacred Heart house in Castro Pretorio.

The Salesian Work is located in the Esquiline district, established in 1875, after the breach of Porta Pia and the Savoy's need to build the ministries of the Kingdom of Italy in the new capital. The district, also called Umbertino, has Piedmontese architecture. All the streets are named after battles or events related to the Savoy state. In this place that recalls Turin, there had to be a Temple, which was also a parish, built by a Piedmontese, Don Giovanni Bosco. Don Bosco did not choose the name of the Church, but it was the will of Leo XIII to revive a devotion, more relevant than ever, to the Heart of Jesus.

Today, the Sacred Heart House is completely renovated to meet the needs of the Salesian Central Headquarters. From the time of its foundation to the present day, the house has undergone several transformations. The Work began as a Parish and International Temple for the spread of devotion to the Sacred Heart. From the beginning, Don Bosco's declared goal was to build a home next door to accommodate up to 500 poor children. Fr. Rua completed the Work and opened workshops for artisans (arts and crafts school). In the following years, the middle school and classical high school were opened. For some years, it was also the seat of the university (Pontifical Salesian Athenaeum) and a training house for Salesians who studied at Roman universities and were involved in the school and oratory (among these students there was Fr. Quadrio). It was also the headquarters of the Roman Province first and of the Circumscription of Central Italy from 2008. Since 2017, due to the move from Via della Pisana, it has become the Salesian Central Headquarters. Renovation began in 2022 to adapt the spaces to the function of the Rector Major's house. Don Bosco, Fr. Rua, Cardinal Cagliero (his apartment was located on the first floor of Via Marsala), Zeffirino Namuncurà, Monsignor Versiglia, Artemide Zatti, all the Rectors Major successors of Don Bosco, and Saint John Paul II, Saint Teresa of Calcutta, and Pope Francis have lived or passed through this house.

Among the directors of the house, Monsignor Giuseppe Cognata served (during his rectorship, in 1930, the statue of the Sacred Heart was placed on the bell tower).

Thanks to the Sacred Heart, the Salesian charism has spread to various neighbourhoods of Rome. In fact, all the other Salesian presences in Rome have been an offshoot of this house: Testaccio, Pio XI, Borgo Ragazzi Don Bosco, Don Bosco Cinecittà, Gerini, the Pontifical Salesian University.

Crossroads of Hospitality

From the beginning, there have been two determining characteristics of the Sacred Heart House:

1) *Catholicity*, in that opening a house in Rome has always meant for the founders of religious orders a closeness to the Pope and a broadening of horizons at a universal level. In the first conference to the Salesian Cooperators at the monastery of Tor De' Specchi in Rome in 1874, Don Bosco stated that the Salesians would spread throughout the world and that helping their works meant living the most authentic Catholic spirit;

2) *attention towards poor young people*: the location near the station, a crossroads of arrivals and departures, a place where the poorest have always gathered, is inscribed in the history of the Sacred Heart.

In the beginning, the House took in poor children to teach them a trade, and later, the oratory gathered the children of the neighbourhood. After the war, the shoeshine boys (boys who shined shoes for people leaving the station) were gathered and cared for first in this house and then moved to Borgo Ragazzi Don Bosco. During the mid-1980s, with the first immigration to Italy, young immigrants were hosted in collaboration with the nascent Caritas. In the 1990s, a Day Centre gathered children as an alternative to prison and taught them the basics of reading and writing and a trade. Since 2009, an integration project between young refugees and young Italians has seen many initiatives of welcome and evangelisation flourish. The Sacred Heart House has also been the headquarters of the National Centre of Salesian Works of Italy for about 30 years.

The New Beginning

Today, the original vocation of the Sacred Heart House sees a new beginning. Tradition and innovation continue to characterise the past, present, and future of this significant work.

First of all, the presence of the Rector Major with his council and of the confreres who take care of the global dimension indicates the continuum of Catholicity. It is a vocation to welcome many Salesians who come from all over the

world and find in the Sacred Heart House a place to feel at home, experience fraternity and meet with Don Bosco's successor. At the same time, it is the place from which the Rector Major animates and governs the Congregation, tracing the lines to be faithful to Don Bosco in the present.

Secondly, there is the presence of a significant Salesian place where Don Bosco wrote the letter from Rome and understood the dream of the nine years. Inside the house there will be the Don Bosco House Museum of Rome, which, distributed on three floors, will tell the story of the Saint's presence in the eternal city. The centrality of education as a "thing of the heart" in his Preventive System, the relationship with the Popes who loved Don Bosco and whom he first loved and served, the Sacred Heart as a place of expansion of the charism throughout the world, the difficult path of approval of the Constitutions, the understanding of the dream of the nine years and his last educational breath in writing the letter from Rome are the thematic elements that, in an immersive multimedia form, will be revealed to those who visit the Museum.

Thirdly, the devotion to the Sacred Heart represents the centre of the charism. Don Bosco, even before receiving the invitation to build the Church of the Sacred Heart, had oriented young people towards this devotion. In *The Companion of Youth* there are prayers and practices of piety addressed to the Heart of Christ. However, with the acceptance of the proposal of Leo XIII he becomes a true apostle of the Sacred Heart. He spares no effort to seek money for the Church. The attention to the smallest details infuses his thought and devotion to the Sacred Heart into the architectural and artistic choices of the Basilica. To support the construction of the Church and the house, he founded the **Pious Work of the Sacred Heart of Jesus**, the last of the five foundations created by Don Bosco throughout his life together with the Salesians, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, the Salesian Cooperators, the Association of Devotees of Mary Help of Christians. It **was erected for the perpetual celebration of six daily masses in the Church of the Sacred Heart in Rome**. All the members, living and deceased, participate through the prayer offered and the good works performed by the Salesians and young people in all their houses.

The vision of the Church that derives from the foundation of the Pious Work is that of a "living body" composed of the living and the dead in communion with each other through the Sacrifice of Jesus, renewed daily in the Eucharistic celebration in service of the poorest young people. The desire of the Heart of Jesus is that all may be one (*ut unum sint*) as He and the Father. The Pious Work connects, through prayer and offerings, the benefactors, living and deceased, the Salesians of the whole world and the young people who live at the Sacred Heart.

Only through communion, which has its source in the Eucharist, can benefactors, Salesians and young people contribute to building the Church, to making it shine in its missionary face. The Pious Work also has the task of promoting, spreading, deepening devotion to the Sacred Heart throughout the world and renewing it according to the times and the feeling of the Church.

The central station for evangelising

Finally, attention to poor young people is manifested in the missionary will to reach the young people of all Rome through the Youth Centre open on Via Marsala, right at the exit of Termini station where about 300,000 people pass every day. A place that is home for the many Italian and foreign young people, who visit or live in Rome and are thirsty, sometimes unconsciously, for God. Moreover, various poor people, marked by the fatigue of life, have always crowded around Termini station. It is another open door on Via Marsala, in addition to that of the Youth Centre and the Basilica, that expresses the desire to respond to the needs of these people with the Heart of Christ. In fact, the glory of His face shines in them.

Don Bosco's prophecy about the Sacred Heart House of April 5, 1880, accompanies and guides the realisation of what has been told:

But Don Bosco looked further into the future. Our own Bishop John Marengo recalled a mysterious remark he made which we should not let time obliterate. On the very day he accepted that burdensome assignment, Don Bosco asked him:

- Do you know why we accepted that house in Rome?

- No, he answered.

- Listen, then. We agreed because one day, when there will be another Pope and he shall be the right one, we shall set up our headquarters there to evangelise the Roman countryside. It will be no less important a task than that of evangelising Patagonia. Then will the Salesians be acknowledged and their glory shine forth! (BM XIV, 474)

don Francesco Marcoccio