

# Lotteries: real feats

Don Bosco was not only a tireless educator and pastor of souls, but also a man of extraordinary resourcefulness, capable of inventing new and courageous solutions to support his works. The economic needs of the Valdocco Oratory, which was constantly expanding, pushed him to seek increasingly effective means to guarantee food, lodging, schooling, and work for thousands of boys. Among these, lotteries represented one of his most ingenious intuitions: true collective enterprises that involved nobles, priests, benefactors, and ordinary citizens. It was not simple, as Piedmontese legislation rigorously regulated lotteries, allowing private individuals to organise them only in well-defined cases. And it was not just about raising funds, but about creating a network of solidarity that united Turin society around the educational and spiritual project of the Oratory. The first, in 1851, was a memorable adventure, full of unforeseen events and successes.

The sums of money that came into Don Bosco's hands remained there for a short time, because it was immediately used to provide food, accommodation, school and work for tens of thousands of boys or to build colleges, orphanages and churches or to support the South American missions. His accounts, as we know, were always in the red; debts accompanied him throughout his life.

Now among the means intelligently adopted by Don Bosco to finance his works we can certainly place the lotteries: about fifteen were organised by him, both small and large ones. The first, a modest effort, was the one in Turin in 1851 for the church of St Francis de Sales in Valdocco and the last, a very big one in the mid-1880s, was to meet the immense expenses of the church and the Hospice of the Sacred Heart at Termini station in Rome.

A true history of these lotteries has yet to be written,

although there is no lack of sources in this regard. Just with reference to the first one in 1851, have we ourselves recovered a dozen unpublished items. We can use them to reconstruct its eventful history in two episodes.

#### Application for authorisation

According to the law of 24 February 1820 – modified by Royal Patents of January 1835 and by Instructions of the Azienda Generale delle Regie Finanze on 24 August 1835 and later by Royal Patents of 17 July 1845 – prior governmental authorisation was required for any national lottery (Kingdom of Sardinia).

For Don Bosco it was first of all a matter of having the moral certainty of succeeding in the project. This he gained from the economic and moral support of the very first benefactors: the noble Callori and Fassati families and Canon Anglesio of Cottolengo. He therefore launched himself into what would turn out to be a genuine enterprise. In a short time, he succeeded in setting up an organising commission, initially comprising sixteen well-known personalities, later increased to twenty. Among them were numerous officially recognised civil authorities, such as a senator (appointed treasurer), two Deputy Mayors, three municipal councillors; then prestigious priests such as Frs Pietro Baricco, Deputy Mayor and secretary of the Commission, Giovanni Borel, court chaplain, Giuseppe Ortalda, director of the Opera Pia di Propaganda Fide, Roberto Murialdo, co-founder of the Collegio degli Artigianelli and the Charity Association; and finally, experienced men such as an engineer, a respected goldsmith, a wholesale trader, etc., all of whom were mostly landowners and had a wealth of experience. All people known to Don Bosco and “close” to the work at Valdocco.

Having completed the Commission, at the beginning of December 1851 Don Bosco forwarded the formal request to the General Intendant of Finance, Cavalier Alessandro Pernati di Momo (future Senator and Minister of the Interior of the Kingdom) as well as a “friend” of the work at Valdocco.

## The appeal for gifts

He attached a very interesting circular to the request for authorisation, in which, after outlining a moving history of the Oratory – appreciated by the royal family, the government authorities, and the municipal authorities – he pointed out that the constant need to expand the work at Valdocco to accommodate more and more young people was consuming the economic resources of private charity. Therefore, in order to pay the expenses for the completion of the new chapel under construction, the decision was taken to appeal to public charity by means of a lottery of gifts to be offered spontaneously: “This consists of a lottery of items which the undersigned came up with the idea for, undertaking to cover the expenses for the completion of the new chapel, a venture to which your lordship will no doubt want to lend his support, reflecting on the excellence of the work to which it is directed. Whatever item your lordship would like to offer, be it of silk, wool, metal or wood, or the work of a reputable artist, or of a modest worker, or of a hard-working craftsman, or of a charitable gentlewoman, all will be gratefully accepted, because in the matter of charity every little help is a great thing, and because the offerings, even small ones, of many together can suffice to complete the desired work.”

The circular also indicated the names of the promoters, to whom the gifts could be handed over, and the trusted persons who would then collect and guard them. The 46 promoters included various categories of people: professionals, professors, impresarios, students, clerics, shopkeepers, merchants, priests; on the other hand, among the 90 or so promoters, noblewomen (baroness, marquise, countess and their attendants) seemed to prevail.

He did not fail to enclose the ‘lottery plan’ in all its many formal aspects with the application: collection of items, receipt of delivery of items, their valuation, authenticated tickets to be sold in a number proportionate to the number and value of the items, their display to the public, drawing of winners, publication of the numbers drawn, time for collecting

the prizes, etc. A series of demanding tasks that Don Bosco did not shirk. The Pinardi chapel was no longer enough for his youngsters: they needed a bigger church, the planned one of St Francis de Sales (a dozen years later they would need another even bigger one, that of Mary Help of Christians!).

### Positive response

Given the seriousness of the initiative and the high “quality” of the members of the proposing Commission, the response could only be positive and immediate. On 17 December the aforementioned Deputy Mayor Pietro Baricco transmitted to Don Bosco the relative decree, with the invitation to transmit copies of the future formal acts of the lottery to the municipal administration, responsible for the regularity of all legal requirements. At this point before Christmas Don Bosco sent the above circular to the printers, circulated it and began to collect gifts.

He was given two months to do this, as other lotteries were also taking place during the year. However, the gifts arrived slowly, so in mid-January Don Bosco was forced to reprint the above circular and asked for the collaboration of all the young people of Valdocco and friends to write addresses, visit known benefactors, publicise the initiative and collect the gifts.

But ‘the best’ was yet to come.

### The exhibition hall

Valdocco had no space to display the gifts, so Don Bosco asked the Deputy Mayor Baricco, treasurer of the lottery commission, to ask the Ministry of War for three rooms in a part of St Dominic’s Convent that was available to the army. The Dominican Fathers agreed. Minister Alfonso Lamarmora granted them on 16 January. But soon Don Bosco realised that they would not be large enough, so he asked the King, through the almoner, Abbot Stanislao Gazzelli, for a larger room. He was told by the Royal Superintendent Pamparà that the King had no suitable premises and proposed to rent premises used for a

game called Trincotto (or pallacorda: a kind of hand tennis) at his own expense. This room, however, would only be available for the month of March and under certain conditions. Don Bosco refused the proposal but accepted the 200 lire offered by the King for renting the premises. He then went in search of another hall and found a suitable one on the recommendation of the town hall, behind the church of St Dominic, a few hundred metres from Valdocco.

### Arrival of the gifts

In the meantime, Don Bosco had asked the Minister of Finance, the famous Count Camillo Cavour, for a reduction or exemption on the cost of postage for circular letters, tickets and the gifts themselves. Through the Count's brother, the very religious Marquis Gustavo di Cavour, he received approval for various postal reductions.

It was now a matter of finding an expert to assess the amount of the gifts and the consequent number of tickets to be sold. Don Bosco asked the Intendant and also suggested his name: a goldsmith who was a member of the Commission. The Intendant, however, replied through the Mayor asking him for a double copy of the gifts arrived in order to appoint his own expert. Don Bosco immediately carried out the request and so on 19 February the expert valued the 700 items collected at 4124,20 lire. After three months there were 1000 gifts, after four months 2000, until finally there were 3251 gifts, thanks to Don Bosco's continuous "begging" with individuals, priests and bishops and his repeated formal requests to City Hall to extend the time. Don Bosco also did not fail to criticise the estimate made by the municipal assessor of the gifts that continually arrived, which he said was lower than their actual value; and in fact other assessors were added, especially a painter for works of art.

The final figure was such that Don Bosco was authorised to issue 99,999 tickets at the price of 50 cents each. To the catalogue already printed with the gifts numbered with the name of the donor and the promoters a supplement was added

with the latest gifts arrived. Among them were gifts from the Pope, the King, the Queen Mother, the Queen Consort, deputies, senators, municipal authorities, but also many humble people, especially women, who offered household objects and furnishings, even ones of little value (glass, inkwell, candle, carafe, corkscrew, cap, thimble, scissors, lamp, tape measure, pipe, key ring, soap, sharpener, sugar bowl). The most frequently offered gifts were books, 629 of them, and pictures, 265. Even the Valdocco boys competed to offer their own small gift, perhaps a booklet given to them by Don Bosco himself.

A huge job until the numbers were drawn

At this point it was necessary to print the tickets in a progressive series in two forms (small stub and ticket), have them both signed by two members of the commission, send the ticket with a note, document the money collected. Many benefactors were sent dozens of tickets, with an invitation to keep them or to pass them on to friends and acquaintances.

The date of the draw, initially set for 30 April, was postponed to 31 May and then to 30 June, to be held in mid-July. This last postponement was due to the explosion at the Borgo Dora powder magazine that devastated the Valdocco area.

For two afternoons, 12-13 July 1852, tickets were drawn on the balcony of the town hall. Four differently coloured wheel urns contained 10 pellets (0 to 9) identical and of the same colour as the wheel. Inserted one by one by the Deputy Mayor into the urns, and spun, eight young people from the Oratory performed the operation and the number drawn was proclaimed loudly and then published in the press. Many gifts were left at the Oratory, where they were later reused.

Was it worth it?

For the approximately 74,000 tickets sold, after deducting expenses, Don Bosco was left with approximately 26,000 lire, which he then divided equally with the neighbouring Cottolengo work. A small capital of course (half the purchase price of

the Pinardi cottage the previous year), but the greatest result of the gruelling work he underwent to carry out the lottery – documented by dozens of often unpublished letters – was the direct and heartfelt involvement of thousands of people from every social class in his ‘fledgling Valdocco project’: in making it known, appreciated and then supported economically, socially and politically.

Don Bosco resorted many times to lotteries and always with the twofold purpose: to raise funds for his works for poor boys, for the missions, and to offer ways for believers (and non-believers) to practise charity, the most effective means, as he continually repeated, to ‘obtain the forgiveness of sins and secure eternal life’.

“I have always needed everyone” Don Bosco

To Senator Giuseppe Cotta

Giuseppe Cotta, banker, was a great benefactor of Don Bosco. The following declaration on stamp paper dated 5 February 1849 is preserved in the archives: ‘The undersigned priests T. Borrelli Gioanni of Turin and D. Bosco Gio’ di Castelnuovo d’Asti declare themselves to be debtors of three thousand francs to the ill.mo Cavaliere Cotta who lent it to them for a pious work. This sum is to be repaid by the undersigned in one year with legal interest’. Signed D. Giovanni Borel, D. Bosco Gio.

At the bottom of the same page and on the same date Fr Joseph Cafasso writes: “The undersigned renders distinct thanks to Ill. mo Sig. Cav. Cotta for the above and at the same time makes himself guarantor to the same for the sum mentioned.” At the bottom of the page, Cotta signs that he received 2,000 lire on 10 April 1849, another 500 lire on 21 July 1849 and the balance on 4 January 1851.

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# **Don Jose-Luis Carreno, Salesian missionary**

Fr. José Luis Carreño (1905-1986) was described by historian Joseph Thekkedath as “the most beloved Salesian of South India” in the first half of the twentieth century. In every place he lived, whether in British India, the Portuguese colony of Goa, the Philippines, or Spain, we find Salesians who cherish his memory with affection. Strangely, however, we still lack an adequate biography of this great Salesian, except for the lengthy obituary letter written by Fr. José Antonio Rico: “José Luis Carreño Etxeandía, God’s labourer.” We hope this gap will soon be filled. Fr. Carreño was one of the architects of the South Asia region, and we cannot afford to forget him.

José-Luis Carreño Etxeandía was born in Bilbao, Spain, on 23 October 1905. Orphaned of his mother at the tender age of eight, he was welcomed into the Salesian house in Santander. In 1917, at the age of twelve, he entered the Aspirantate at Campello. He recalled that in those days, “we didn’t speak much about Don Bosco... But for us, a Fr. Binelli was a Don Bosco, not to mention Fr. Rinaldi, then General Prefect, whose visits left us with a supernatural sensation, like when Yahweh’s messengers visited Abraham’s tent.”

After novitiate and post-novitiate, he did his practical training as an assistant to the novices. He must have been a brilliant cleric, because Fr. Pedro Escursell wrote about him to the Rector Major, “I am speaking at this very moment with one of the model clerics of this house. He is an assistant in the formation of personnel in this Province. He tells me that for some time he has been asking to be sent to the missions and says he has given up asking because he receives no



response. He is a young man of great intellectual and moral worth."

On the eve of his priestly ordination in 1932, the young José-Luis wrote directly to the Rector Major, offering himself for the missions. The offer was accepted, and he was sent to India, where he landed in Mumbai in 1933. Just a year later, when the South India Province was established, he was appointed novice master at Tirupattur; he was only 28 years old. With his extraordinary qualities of mind and heart, he quickly became the soul of the house and left a deep impression on his novices. "He won us over with his fatherly heart," wrote one of them, Archbishop Hubert D'Rosario of Shillong.

Fr. Joseph Vaz, another novice, often recounted how Carreño noticed him shivering with cold during a conference. "Wait a moment, hombre," said the novice master, and he went out. Shortly after, he returned with a blue jumper which he handed to Joe. Joe noticed that the jumper was strangely warm. Then he remembered that under his cassock, his master was wearing something blue... which was now missing. Carreño had given him his own jumper.

In 1942, when the British government in India interned all foreigners from countries at war with Britain, Carreño, being a citizen of a neutral country, was left undisturbed. In 1943, he received a message via Vatican Radio: he was to take the place of Fr. Eligio Cinato, Provincial of the South India Province, who had also been interned. Around the same time, Salesian Archbishop Louis Mathias of Madras-Mylapore invited him to be his vicar general.

In 1945, he was officially appointed Provincial, a position he held from 1945 to 1951. One of his very first acts was to consecrate the Province to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Many Salesians were convinced that the extraordinary growth of the South Province was due precisely to this gesture. Under Fr. Carreño's leadership, Salesian works doubled. One of his most far-sighted acts was the establishment of a university college in the remote and poor village of Tirupattur. Sacred Heart

College would eventually transform the entire district.

Carreño was also the main architect of the "Indianisation" of the Salesian face in India, seeking local vocations from the outset, rather than relying solely on foreign missionaries. A choice that proved providential, first, because the flow of foreign missionaries ceased during the War; then, because independent India decided to no longer grant visas to new foreign missionaries. "If today there are more than two thousand Salesians in India, the credit for this growth must be attributed to the policies initiated by Fr. Carreño," wrote Fr. Thekkedath in his history of the Salesians in India.

Fr. Carreño, as we have said, was not only Provincial but also vicar to Bishop Mathias. These two great men, who deeply respected each other, were nevertheless very different in temperament. The archbishop favoured severe disciplinary measures for confreres in difficulty, while Fr. Carreño preferred milder procedures. The extraordinary visitor, Fr. Albino Fedrigotti, seems to have sided with the archbishop, describing Fr. Carreño as "an excellent religious, a man with a big heart," but also "a bit too much of a poet."

There was also the accusation of being a poor administrator, but it is significant that a figure like Fr. Aurelio Maschio, great procurator and architect of Salesian works in Mumbai, firmly rejected this accusation. In reality, Fr. Carreño was an innovator and a visionary. Some of his ideas, such as involving non-Salesian volunteers for a few years of service, were viewed with suspicion at the time but are now widely accepted and actively promoted.

In 1951, at the end of his official term as Provincial, Carreño was asked to return to Spain to work with the Salesian Cooperators. This was not the real reason for his departure after eighteen years in India, but Carreño accepted serenely, though not without suffering.

In 1952, however, he was asked to go to Goa, where he remained until 1960. "Goa was love at first sight," he wrote in *Urdimbre en el telar*. Goa, for its part, welcomed him into its heart. He continued the tradition of Salesians serving as

spiritual directors and confessors to diocesan clergy and was even patron of the Konkani writers' association. Above all, he governed the Don Bosco Panjim community with love, cared with extraordinary fatherliness for the many poor boys, and once again actively sought vocations to Salesian life. The first Salesians of Goa, people like Thomas Fernandes, Elias Diaz, and Romulo Noronha recounted with tears in their eyes how Carreño and others would go to the Goa Medical College, right next to the Salesian house, to donate blood and thus earn a few rupees to buy food and other necessities for the boys.

In 1961, the Indian military action and annexation of Goa took place. At that time, Fr. Carreño was in Spain and could no longer return to his beloved land. In 1962, he was sent to the Philippines as novice master. He accompanied only three groups of novices because in 1965, he asked to return to Spain. His decision stemmed from a serious divergence of vision between him and the Salesian missionaries from China, especially with Fr. Carlo Braga, superior of the Preprovince. Carreño strongly opposed the policy of sending young Filipino Salesians who had just professed to Hong Kong for philosophy studies. As it happened, in the end, the superiors accepted the proposal to keep the young Salesians in the Philippines, but by then, Carreño's request to return home had already been granted.

Don Carreño spent only four years in the Philippines, but here too, as in India, he left an indelible mark, "an immeasurable and crucial contribution to the Salesian presence in the Philippines," in the words of Salesian historian Nestor Impelido.

Back in Spain, he collaborated with the Missionary Procures of Madrid and of New Rochelle and in the animation of the Iberian Provinces. Many in Spain still remember the old missionary who visited Salesian houses, infecting the young with his missionary enthusiasm, his songs, and his music.

But in his creative imagination, a new project was taking shape. Carreño devoted himself wholeheartedly to the dream of founding a Pueblo Misionero with two objectives: preparing

young missionaries – mostly from Eastern Europe – for Latin America; and offering a refuge for ‘retired’ missionaries like himself, who could also serve as formators. After long and painful correspondence with his superiors, the project finally took shape in the Hogar del Misionero in Alzuza, a few kilometres from Pamplona. The missionary vocational component never took off, and very few elderly missionaries actually joined Carreño. His main apostolate in these last years remained that of the pen. He left more than thirty books, five of which were dedicated to the Holy Shroud, to which he was particularly devoted.

Fr. José-Luis Carreño died in 1986, in Pamplona at the age of 81. Despite the ups and downs of his life, this great lover of the Sacred Heart of Jesus could affirm, on the golden jubilee of his priestly ordination, “If fifty years ago my motto as a young priest was ‘Christ is everything,’ today, old and overwhelmed by His love, I would write it in golden letters, because in reality CHRIST IS EVERYTHING.”

Fr. Ivo COELHO, SDB

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## **Beatification of Camille Costa de Beauregard. And afterwards...?**

*The diocese of Savoy and the city of Chambéry experienced three historic days on 16, 17, and 18 May 2025. An account of the events and future prospects.*

The relics of Camille Costa de Beauregard were transferred from Bocage to the Church of Notre-Dame (the site

of Camille's baptism) on Friday, 16 May. A magnificent procession then wound through the city streets from 8 pm onwards. After the Alpine horns, bagpipes took over to lead the march, followed by a flower-decked carriage carrying a giant portrait of the "father of orphans." Next came the relics, borne on a stretcher by young students from Bocage secondary school, dressed in splendid red sweaters emblazoned with Camille's words: *"The higher the mountain, the further we see."* Several hundred people of all ages followed in a cheerful, family-friendly atmosphere. Along the route, respectful onlookers paused in awe at this unusual parade.

Upon arrival at Notre-Dame, a priest led a prayer vigil accompanied by hymns from a beautiful youth choir. The ceremony unfolded in a relaxed yet solemn atmosphere. At the vigil's close, everyone filed past to venerate the relics and entrust personal intentions to Camille. A truly moving moment!

Saturday, 17 May. The big day! Since Pauline Marie Jaricot (beatified in May 2022), France had not welcomed a new "Blessed." Thus, the entire Apostolic Region was represented by its bishops: Lyon, Annecy, Saint-Étienne, Valence, etc. They were joined by two former archbishops of Chambéry: Monsignor Laurent Ulrich, now Archbishop of Paris, and Monsignor Philippe Ballot, Bishop of Metz. Two bishops from Burkina Faso had travelled to attend the celebration. Numerous diocesan priests came to concelebrate, along with several religious figures, including seven Salesians of Don Bosco. The Apostolic Nuncio to France, Monsignor Celestino Migliore, was tasked with representing Cardinal Semeraro (Prefect of the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints), detained in Rome for the enthronement of Pope Leo XIV. Needless to say, the cathedral was packed, as were the side chapels, forecourt, and Bocage—over 3,000 people in total.

What emotion when, after the reading of the papal decree (signed just the day before by Pope Leo XIV) by Father Pierluigi Cameroni, postulator of the cause, Camille's

portrait was unveiled in the cathedral! What fervour filled that great nave! What solemnity, upheld by the hymns of a magnificent inter-diocesan choir and the grand organ, masterfully played by Thibaut Duré! In short, a majestic ceremony for this humble priest who devoted his entire life to serving the least among us!

Coverage was provided by RCF Savoie (a French regional radio station part of the RCF network, Radios Chrétiennes Francophones), with interviews of key figures involved in Camille's cause, and by KTO (the French-language Catholic TV channel), which broadcast the glorious celebration live.

A third day, Sunday 18 May, crowned the festivities. Held at Bocage under a large marquee, it featured a thanksgiving Mass presided over by Monsignor Thibault Verny, Archbishop of Chambéry, flanked by the two African bishops, the Salesian Provincial, and several priests—including Father Jean François Chiron (13-year president of the Camille Committee founded by Monsignor Philippe Ballot), who delivered a remarkable homily. A considerable crowd gathered to pray and participate. After Mass, a "Camille Costa de Beauregard, Founder of Bocage" rose—selected by alumni and offered to dignitaries—was blessed by Father Daniel Féderspiel, Provincial of the Salesians of France (now available for purchase at Bocage's greenhouses).

After the ceremony, Alpine horns performed a concert until Pope Leo, during his *Regina Coeli* discourse, declared his joy at the first beatification of his pontificate: Chambéry's priest, Camille Costa de Beauregard. Thunderous applause erupted under the marquee!

That afternoon, various youth groups from Bocage—secondary school pupils, children's home residents, and scouts—took turns on stage to enliven the festivities. What a celebration!

And now? Is it all over? Or is there more to come?

Camille's beatification is just one step toward canonisation. The work continues, and you are invited to contribute. What remains to be done? Spread awareness of the new Blessed through every means, for many must pray for his intercession to obtain another miracle unexplained by science, which would allow the consideration of a new process and a rapid canonisation. Camille's holiness would then be proclaimed to the world. It's possible; we must believe! Let's not stop halfway!

Resources of various kinds include:

- the book *“Blessed Camille Costa de Beauregard: Nobility of Heart”* by Françoise Bouchard (Éditions Salvator);
- the book *“Praying Fifteen Days with Camille Costa de Beauregard”* by Father Paul Ripaud (Éditions Nouvelle Cité);
- the comic book: *“Blessed Camille Costa de Beauregard”* by Gaëtan Evrard (Éditions Triomphe);
- Videos on the “Amis de Costa” website and the *beatification footage*;
- Visits to memorial sites at Bocage in Chambéry, are possible by contacting either the Bocage welcome desk or directly, Mr. Gabriel Tardy, Director of *La Maison des Enfants*).

To everyone, thank you for supporting Blessed Camille's cause—he deserves it!

*Fr. Paul Ripaud, SDB*

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# The title of Basilica for the Church of the Sacred Heart in Rome

On the centenary of the death of Fr Paul Albera it was highlighted how the second successor of Don Bosco realised what could be described as a dream of Don Bosco. In fact, thirty-four years after the consecration of the church of the Sacred Heart in Rome, which took place in the presence of the by now exhausted Don Bosco (May 1887), Pope Benedict XV – the pope of the famous and unheard of definition of the First World War as ‘useless slaughter’ – conferred on the church the title of Minor Basilica (11 February 1921). Don Bosco had “given his soul” (and his body too!) for its construction in the last seven years of his life. He had done the same in the previous twenty years (1865-1868) with the construction of the church of Mary Help of Christians in Valdocco, Turin, the first Salesian church elevated to the dignity of a minor basilica on 28 June 1911, in the presence of the new Rector Major Fr Paul Albera.

## Discovery of the request

But how did this result come about? Who was behind it? We now know for sure thanks to the recent discovery of the typewritten draft of the request for this title by Rector Major Fr Paul Albera. It is included in a booklet commemorating the 25th anniversary of the Sacred Heart published in 1905 by the then Rector Fr Francesco Tomasetti (1868-1953). The typescript, dated 17 January 1921, has minimal corrections by the Rector Major but, what is important, bears his handwritten signature.

After describing Don Bosco’s work and the unceasing activity of the parish, probably taken from the old file, Fr Albera addresses the Pope in these terms



“While the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus is growing and spreading all over the world, and new Churches are being dedicated to the Divine Heart, also through the noble initiative of the Salesians, as in S. Paolo in Brazil, in La Plata in Argentina, in London, in Barcelona and elsewhere, it seems that the primary Church-Sanctuary dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Rome, where such an important devotion has an affirmation so worthy of the Eternal City, deserves special distinction. The undersigned, therefore, having heard the opinion of the Superior Council of the Pious Salesian Society, humbly begs Your Holiness to deign to grant the Church-Sanctuary of the Sacred Heart of Jesus at the Castro Pretorio in Rome the Title and Privileges of a Minor Basilica, hoping that this honourable elevation will increase devotion, piety and every catholic beneficial activity”.

The request, in its final draft, signed by Fr Albera, was most likely sent by the procurator Fr Francesco Tomasetti to the Sacred Congregation of the Brevi, which welcomed it. He quickly drew up the draft of the Apostolic Brief to be kept in the Vatican Archives, had it transcribed by expert calligraphers on rich parchment and passed it on to the Secretariat of State for the signature of the the one in charge at the time, Cardinal Pietro Gasparri.

Today, the faithful can admire this original of the granting of the requested title nicely framed in the sacristy of the Basilica (see photo).

We can only be grateful to Dr Patrizia Buccino, a scholar of archaeology and history, and Salesian historian Fr Giorgio Rossi, who spread the news. It is up to them to complete the investigation begun by searching the Vatican Archives for the entire correspondence which will also be made known to the scientific world through the well-known Salesian history magazine “Ricerche Storiche Salesiane”.

### **Sacred Heart: a national basilica with an international reach**

Twenty-six years earlier, on 16 July 1885, at the request of

Don Bosco and with the explicit consent of Pope Leo XIII, Archbishop Gaetano Alimonda, Archbishop of Turin, had warmly urged the Italians to participate in the success of the “noble and holy proposal [of the new church] calling it a national vow of the Italians”.

Fr Albera in his request to the pontiff, after recalling Cardinal Alimonda’s pressing appeal, recalled that all the nations of the world had been asked to contribute economically to the construction, decoration of the church and annexed works (including the inevitable Salesian oratory with a hospice!) so that the Church-Sanctuary, as well as a national vow, had become a “worldwide or international manifestation of devotion to the Sacred Heart”.

In this regard, in a historical and ascetical paper published on the occasion of the 1st Centenary of the Consecration of the Basilica (1987), the scholar Armando Pedrini described it as: “A church that is therefore international because of the catholicity and universality of its message to all peoples”, also in consideration of the Basilica’s “prominent position” adjacent to the acknowledged internationality of the railway station.

Rome-Termini is therefore not only a large railway station with problems of public order and a difficult scene to manage, often mentioned in the newspapers and like many railway stations in many European capitals. But it is also home to the Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. And while in the evening and at night time the area does not convey security to tourists, during the day the Basilica offers peace and serenity to the faithful who enter it, stop there in prayer, receive the sacraments.

Will the pilgrims who will pass through the Termini railway station in the not too distant holy year (2025) remember this? All they have to do is cross the street... and the Sacred Heart of Jesus awaits them.

PS. In Rome there is a second Salesian parish basilica, larger and artistically richer than the Sacred Heart one: it is the

Basilica of St John Bosco at Tuscolano, which became such in 1965, a few years after its inauguration (1959). Where is it located? Obviously in the Don Bosco district (a stone's throw from the famous Cinecittà studios). While the statue on the bell tower of the basilica of the Sacred Heart dominates the square of Termini station, the dome of the basilica of Don Bosco, slightly lower than St. Peter's, however, overlooks it directly, albeit from two extreme points of the capital. And since there is no two without three, there is a third splendid Salesian parish basilica in Rome: that of Santa Maria Ausiliatrice, in the Appio-Tuscolano district, next to the large Pio XI Institute.

**Apostolic Letter entitled *Pia Societas*, dated 11 February 2021, by which His Holiness Benedict XV elevated the Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus to the rank of Basilica.**

Ecclesia parochialis SS.mi Cordis Iesu ad Castrum Praetorium in urbe titulo et privilegiis Basilicae Minoris decoratur.  
Benedictus pp. XV

Ad perpetuam rei memoriam.

Pia Societas sancti Francisci Salesii, a venerabili Servo Dei Ioanne Bosco iam Augustae Taurinorum condita atque hodie per dissitas quoque orbis regiones diffusa, omnibus plane cognitum est quanta sibi merita comparaverit non modo incumbendo actuose sollerterque in puerorum, orbitate laborantium, religiosam honestamque institutionem, verum etiam in rei catholicae profectum tum apud christianum populum, tum apud infideles in longinquis et asperrimis Missionibus. Eiusdem Societatis sodalibus est quoque in hac Alma Urbe Nostra ecclesia paroecialis Sacratissimo Cordi Iesu dicata, in qua, etsi non abhinc multos annos condita, eximii praesertim Praedecessoris Nostri Leonis PP. XIII iussu atque auspiciis, christifideles urbani, eorumdem Sodalium opera, adeo ad Dei cultum et virtutum laudem exercentur, ut ea vel cum antiquioribus paroeciis in honoris ac meritorum contentionem veniat. Ipsemet Salesianorum

Sodaliū fundator, venerabilis Ioannes Bosco, in nova Urbis regione, aere saluberrimo populoque confertissima, quae ad Gastrum Praetorium exstat, exaedificationem inchoavit istius templi, et, quasi illud erigeret ex gentis italicae voto et pietatis testimonio erga Sacratissimum Cor Iesu, stipem praecipue ex Italiae christifidelibus studiose conlegit; verumtamen pii homines ex ceteris nationibus non defuerunt, qui, in exstruendum perficiendumque templum istud, erga Ssmum Cor Iesu amore incensi, largam pecuniae vim contulerint. Anno autem MDCCCLXXXVII sacra ipsa aedes, secundum speciosam formam a Virginio Vespignani architecto delineatam, tandem perfecta ac sollemniter consecrata dedicataque est. Eamdē vero postea, magna cum sollertia, Sodales Salesianos non modo variis altaribus, imaginibus affabre depictis et statuīs, omnique sacro cultui necessaria supellectili exornasse, verum etiam continentibus aedificiis iuventuti, ut tempora nostra postulant, rite instituendae ditasse, iure ac merito Praedecessores Nostri sunt" laetati, et Nos haud minore animi voluptate probamus. Quapropter cum dilectus filius Paulus Albera, hodiernus Piaae Societatis sancti Francisci Salesii rector maior, nomine proprio ac religiosorum virorum quibus praeest, quo memorati templi Ssmi Cordi Iesu dicati maxime augeatur decus, eiusdem urbanae paroeciae fidelium fides et pietas foveatur, Nos supplex rogaverit, ut eidem templo dignitatem, titulum et privilegia Basilicae Minoris pro Nostra benignitate impertiri dignemur; Nos, ut magis magisque stimulos fidelibus ipsius paroeciae atque Urbis totius Nostrae ad Sacratissimum Cor Iesu impensius colendum atque adamandum addamus, nec non benevolentiam, qua Sodales Salesianos ob merita sua prosequimur, publice significemus, votis hisce piis annuendum ultro libenterque censemus. Quam ob rem, conlatis consiliis cum VV. FF. NN. S. R. E. Cardinalibus Congregationi Ss. Rituum praepositis, Motu proprio ac de certa scientia et matura deliberatione Nostris, deque apostolicae potestatis plenitudine, praesentium Litterarum tenore perpetuumque in modum, enunciatum templum Sacratissimo Cordi Iesu dicatum, in hac alma Urbe Nostra atque ad Castrum Praetorium situm,

dignitate ac titulo Basilicae Minoris honestamus, cum omnibus et singulis honoribus, praerogativis, privilegiis, indultis quae aliis Minoribus Almae huius Urbis Basilicis de iure competunt. Decernentes praesentes Litteras firmas, validas atque efficaces semper exstare ac permanere, suosque integros effectus sortiri iugiter et obtinere, illisque ad quos pertinent nunc et in posterum plenissime suffragari; sicque rite iudicandum esse ac definiendum, irritumque ex nunc et inane fieri, si quidquam secus super his, a quovis, auctoritate qualibet, scienter sive ignoranter attentari contigerit. Non obstantibus contrariis quiblibet.

Datum Romae apud sanctum Petrum sub annulo Piscatoris, die XI februarii MCMXXI, Pontificatus Nostri anno septimo.

P. CARD. GASPARRI, a Secretis Status.

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The parish church of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus at Castrum Praetorium in the city is honoured with the title and privileges of a Minor Basilica.

Pope Benedict XV

For perpetual remembrance.

The Pious Society of St Francis de Sales, founded in Augusta Taurinorum by the Venerable Servant of God John Bosco and now spread throughout diverse regions of the world, is well known to all for the great merits it has acquired—not only by diligently and zealously devoting itself to the religious and moral education of orphaned and labouring children, but also by advancing the Catholic cause both among Christian populations and in distant and arduous missions among unbelievers. In this Our Beloved City, the members of the same Society also serve the parish church dedicated to the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, where, though established not many years ago by the command and under the auspices of Our illustrious predecessor Pope Leo XIII, the urban faithful,

through the work of these same members, are so fervently trained in divine worship and the praise of virtue that it may even rival older parishes in honour and merit.

The founder of the Salesian Society himself, the Venerable John Bosco, began the construction of this church in a new district of the City, renowned for its wholesome air and dense population, near *Castrum Praetorium*. As if raising it in fulfilment of the Italian people's vow and as a testimony of devotion to the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, he diligently collected funds chiefly from the faithful of Italy; yet pious individuals from other nations were not lacking, who, inflamed with love for the Most Sacred Heart, contributed generously to the building and completion of this church. In the year 1887, the sacred edifice, designed according to the splendid plan of the architect *Virginio Vespignani*, was finally completed and solemnly consecrated and dedicated.

Afterwards, with great diligence, the Salesians adorned it not only with various altars, skilfully painted images and statues, and all the furnishings necessary for sacred worship, but also enriched it with adjoining buildings for the proper education of youth, as our times demand. Our predecessors rightly and justly rejoiced at this, and We too approve with no less satisfaction.

Wherefore, since Our beloved son *Paul Albera*, the present Superior General of the Pious Society of *St Francis de Sales*, in his own name and that of the religious under his care, has humbly besought Us that the honour of the aforesaid church dedicated to the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus may be greatly enhanced, and the faith and piety of the faithful of the urban parish may be fostered, and that We may deign in Our kindness to bestow upon the same church the dignity, title, and privileges of a Minor Basilica; We, desiring to further stimulate the faithful of this parish and of Our whole City to more fervent worship and love of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, and to publicly signify the benevolence with which We

regard the Salesians for their merits, have willingly and gladly resolved to grant these pious requests.

For this reason, having consulted with Our Venerable Brothers the Cardinals of the Holy Roman Church assigned to the Congregation of Sacred Rites, by Our own initiative, with certain knowledge and mature deliberation, and by the fullness of apostolic authority, We, by the tenor of these present Letters and in perpetuity, honour the aforesaid church dedicated to the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, located in this Our Beloved City near Castrum Praetorium, with the dignity and title of a Minor Basilica, together with all and singular the honours, prerogatives, privileges, and indults which by right belong to other Minor Basilicas of this Beloved City.

We decree that these present Letters shall always be firm, valid, and effective, and shall perpetually obtain their full and complete effects, and shall fully avail those to whom they pertain now and hereafter; and thus it is to be judged and defined in due form, and anything to the contrary, attempted by any authority, knowingly or unknowingly, is hereby declared null and void.

Notwithstanding any contrary provisions.

Given at Rome, at St Peter's, under the Fisherman's Ring, on the 11th day of February 1921, in the seventh year of Our Pontificate.

P. Cardinal Gasparri, Secretary of State.

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## **Salesians in Ukraine (video)**

*The Salesian Vice-Province of Mary Help of Christians of the Byzantine Rite (UKR) has reshaped its educational-pastoral*

*mission since the beginning of the Russian invasion in 2022. Amidst air raid sirens, makeshift shelters, and schools in basements, the Salesians have become a tangible presence: they host displaced people, distribute aid, provide spiritual accompaniment to soldiers and civilians, transformed a house into a reception centre, and run the "Mariapolis" modular campus, where they serve a thousand meals daily and organize oratory and sports activities, even founding the first Ukrainian Amputee Football team. The personal testimony of a confrere reveals the wounds, hopes, and prayers of those who have lost everything but continue to believe that, after this long national Way of the Cross, the Easter of peace will dawn for Ukraine.*

### **The Pastoral Work of the Vice-Province of Mary Help of Christians of the Byzantine Rite (UKR) During the War**

Our pastoral work had to change when the war began. Our educational-pastoral activities had to adapt to a completely different reality, often marked by the incessant sound of sirens announcing the danger of missile attacks and bombings. Every time the alarm sounds, we are forced to interrupt activities and go down with the young people into underground shelters or bunkers. In some schools, lessons are held directly in the basements to ensure greater safety for the students.

From the very beginning, we immediately set about helping and assisting the suffering population. We opened our houses to welcome displaced people, organized the collection and distribution of humanitarian aid: with our boys and young people, we prepare thousands of packages with food, clothing, and everything necessary to send to needy people in territories near the fighting or in the combat zones themselves. Furthermore, some of our Salesian confreres serve as chaplains in the combat zones. There, they provide spiritual support to young soldiers, but also bring humanitarian aid to people who have remained in villages under



constant bombardment, helping some of them move to a safer place. One deacon confrere who was in the trenches suffered damage to his health and lost his ankle. When, some years ago, I read an article in the Italian Salesian Bulletin about Salesians in the trenches during the First or Second World War, I never thought this would happen in this modern era in my own country. I was once struck by the words of a very young Ukrainian soldier who, quoting a historian and eminent officer, defender, and fighter for our people's independence, said: *"We fight defending our independence not because we hate those before us, but because we love those behind us."*

During this period, we also transformed one of our Salesian Houses into a reception centre for displaced people.

To support the physical, mental, psychological, and social rehabilitation of young people who lost limbs in the war, we created an Amputee Football team, the first team of its kind in Ukraine.

Since the beginning of the invasion in 2022, we made available to the Lviv City Council a plot of our land, intended for the construction of a Salesian school, to build a modular campus for internally displaced persons: "Mariapolis," where we Salesians operate in collaboration with the Centre of the City Council's Social Department. We provide welfare support and spiritual accompaniment, making the environment more welcoming. Supported by aid from our Congregation, various organizations including VIS and Don Bosco Missions, various mission offices and other charitable foundations, and even state agencies from other countries, we were able to set up the campus kitchen with its respective staff, allowing us to offer lunch every day for about 1,000 people. Furthermore, thanks to their help, we can organize various Salesian-style activities for the 240 children and young people present on the campus.

### **A Small Experience and a Humble Personal Testimony**

I would like to share my small experience and testimony here... I truly thank the Lord who, through my Provincial, called me to this particular service. For three years, I have been working in the campus that hosts about 1,000 internally displaced persons. From the beginning, I have been alongside people who lost everything in an instant, except their dignity. Their homes are destroyed and looted; the savings and possessions painstakingly accumulated over years of life have vanished. Many have lost much more, and more precious things: their loved ones, killed before their eyes by missiles or mines. Some of the people on campus had to live for months in the basements of collapsed buildings, feeding on whatever little they could find, even if expired. They drank water from radiators and boiled potato peels to feed themselves. Then, at the first opportunity, they fled or were evacuated without knowing where to go, with no certainty about what awaited them. Moreover, some saw their cities, like Mariupol, razed to the ground. In fact, in honour of this beautiful city of Mary, we Salesians named the campus for the displaced "Mariapolis," entrusting this place and its inhabitants to the Virgin Mary. And She, like a mother, stands by everyone in these times of trial. In the campus, I set up a chapel dedicated to Her, where there is an icon painted by a lady from the campus, originally from the tormented city of Kharkiv. The chapel has become a place of encounter with God and with oneself for all residents, regardless of their Christian faith denomination.

Being with them, loving them, welcoming them, listening to them, consoling them, encouraging them, praying for them and with them, and supporting them in whatever way I can – these are the moments that make up my service, which has now become my life during this period. It is a true school of life, of spirituality, where I learn so much by being close to their suffering. Almost all of them hope that the war will end soon and peace will come, so they can return home. But for many, that dream is now unattainable: their homes no longer exist. So, as best I can, I try to offer them some anchor of hope,

helping them to encounter the One who abandons no one, who is close in the sufferings and difficulties of life.

Sometimes they ask me to prepare them for Reconciliation: with God, with themselves, with the harsh reality they are forced to live. Other times, I help them with more concrete needs: medicine, clothes, diapers, hospital visits. I also do administrative work alongside my three lay colleagues. Every day, at 5:00 PM, we pray for peace, and a small group has learned to recite the Rosary, praying it daily.

As a Salesian, I try to be attentive to the needs of the young people. From the beginning, with the help of animators, we created an oratory within the campus. We also have activities, trips, and mountain camps during the summer. Furthermore, one of the commitments I carry forward is overseeing the canteen, to ensure that none of the residents on campus go without a hot meal.

Among the campus inhabitants is little Maksym, who wakes up in the middle of the night, terrified by any loud noise. Maria, a mother who lost everything, including her husband, smiles at her children every day so as not to burden them with her suffering. Then there is Petro, 25 years old, who was at home with his girlfriend when a Russian drone dropped a bomb. The explosion amputated both his legs, while his girlfriend died shortly after. Petro lay dying all night until soldiers found him in the morning and brought him to safety. The ambulance couldn't get close due to the fighting.

Amidst so much suffering, I continue my apostolate with the Lord's help and the support of my confreres.

We Byzantine Rite Salesians, together with our 13 Latin Rite confreres present in Ukraine – largely of Polish origin and belonging to the Salesian Province of Krakow (PLS) – deeply share the pain and suffering of the Ukrainian people. As sons of Don Bosco, we continue our educative-pastoral mission with faith and hope, adapting daily to the difficult conditions

imposed by the war.

We stand alongside the young, the families, and all those who suffer and need help. We wish to be visible signs of God's love, so that the life, hope, and joy of the young may never be stifled by violence and pain.

In this common witness, we reaffirm the vitality of our Salesian charism, which knows how to respond even to the most dramatic challenges of history. Our two particularities, that of the Byzantine rite and that of the Latin rite, make visible the indivisible unity of the Salesian Charism as affirmed by the Salesian Constitutions in Art. 100: *"The Founder's charism is the principle of unity of the Congregation and, through its fruitfulness, is the origin of the different ways of living the one Salesian vocation."*

We believe that pain and suffering do not have the last word, and that in faith, every Cross already contains the seed of the Resurrection. After this long Holy Week, the Resurrection will inevitably come for Ukraine: true and just PEACE will arrive.

### **Some Information**

Some chapter confreres asked for information about the war in Ukraine. Allow me to say something in the form of a Snapshot. A clarification: the war in Ukraine cannot be interpreted as an ethnic conflict or a territorial dispute between two peoples with opposing claims or rights over a specific territory. It is not a quarrel between two parties fighting over a piece of land. And therefore, it is not a battle between equals. What is happening in Ukraine is an invasion, a unilateral aggression. Here, it is about one people improperly attacking another. A nation, which fabricated baseless motives, inventing a supposed right, violating international order and laws, decided to attack another State, violating its sovereignty and territorial integrity, its right to decide its

own fate and direction of development, occupying and annexing territories. Destroying cities and towns, many razed to the ground, taking the lives of thousands of civilians. Here there is an aggressor and an attacked party: this is precisely the peculiarity and horror of this war.

And it is starting from this premise that the peace we await should also be conceived. A peace that has the flavour of justice and is based on truth, not temporary, not opportunistic, not a peace founded on hidden commercial conveniences, avoiding the creation of precedents for autocratic regimes in the world that might one day decide to invade other countries, occupy or annex part of a neighbouring or distant country, simply because they wish to or because they feel like it, or because they are more powerful.

Another absurdity of this unprovoked and undeclared war is that the aggressor forbids the victim the right to defend itself, tries to intimidate and threaten all those – in this case, other countries – who side with the defenceless and set out to help the unjustly attacked victim defend itself and resist.

### **Some Sad Statistics**

From the beginning of the 2022 invasion until today (08.04.2025), the UN has recorded and confirmed data relating to 12,654 deaths and 29,392 injuries among CIVILIANS in Ukraine.

According to the latest available verified UNICEF news, at least 2,406 CHILDREN have been killed or injured by the escalation of the war in Ukraine since 2022. Child victims include 659 CHILDREN KILLED and 1,747 INJURED – meaning at least 16 children killed or injured every week. Millions of children continue to have their lives disrupted due to ongoing attacks or having to flee and evacuate to other places and countries. The children of Donbas have been already suffering from the war for 11 years.

Alongside the plan for an invasion of Ukraine, Russia also initiated a program of forced deportations of Ukrainian children. Latest data indicate 20,000 children taken from their homes, detained for months, and subjected to forced Russification through intense propaganda before forced adoption.

Fr. Andrii Platosh, sdb

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## **Venerable Francesco (Francis) Convertini, pastor according to the Heart of Jesus**

*The venerable Father Francesco Convertini, a Salesian missionary in India, emerges as a shepherd after the Heart of Jesus, forged by the Spirit and totally faithful to the divine plan for his life. Through the testimonies of those who met him, his profound humility, unconditional dedication to the proclamation of the Gospel, and fervent love for God and neighbor are revealed. He lived with joyful evangelical simplicity, facing hardships and sacrifices with courage and generosity, always attentive to everyone he met along his path. The text highlights his extraordinary humanity and spiritual richness, a precious gift for the Church.*

### **1. Farmer in the vineyard of the Lord**

Presenting the virtuous profile of Father Francesco Convertini, Salesian missionary in India, a man who let himself be moulded by the Spirit and knew how to realise

his spiritual physiognomy according to God's plan for him, is something both beautiful and serious because it recalls the true meaning of life, as a response to a call, a promise, a project of grace.

There is a quite original summary sketched about him by a priest from his town, Fr Quirico Vasta, who got to know Father Francis (as he was known in India) on rare visits to his beloved Apulia. This witness offers us a summary of the virtuous profile of the great missionary, introducing us in an authoritative and compelling way to discover something of the human and religious stature of this man of God.

"The way to measure the spiritual stature of this holy man, Father Francis Convertini, is not an analytical approach, comparing his life to the many religious 'parameters of behaviour' (Father Francis, as a Salesian, also accepted the commitments proper to a religious: poverty, obedience, chastity, and remained faithful to them throughout his life). On the contrary, Father Francis Convertini appears, in summary, as he really was from the beginning: a young peasant farmer who, after – and perhaps because of – the ugliness of the war, opened himself up to the light of the Spirit and leaving everything behind, set out to follow the Lord. On the one hand, he knew what he was leaving behind; and he left it not only with the vigour typical of the southern peasant who was poor but tenacious; but also joyfully and with the very personal strength of spirit that the war had invigorated: the strength of someone who intends to pursue headlong, albeit silently and in the depths of his soul, what he has focused his attention on. On the other hand, again like a peasant who has grasped the 'certainties' of the future and the groundedness of his hopes in something or someone and knows 'who to trust' he allowed the light of the one who has spoken to him put him in a position of clarity in what to do. And he immediately adopted the strategies to achieve the goal: prayer and availability without measure, whatever the cost. It is no coincidence that the key virtues of this holy man are silent activity without show (cf. St Paul: 'It is when I am weak that

I am strong') and a very respectful sense of others (cf. Acts: 'There is more joy in giving than in receiving').

Seen in this way, Father Francis Convertini was truly a man: shy, inclined to conceal his gifts and merits, averse to boasting, gentle with others and strong with himself, measured, balanced, prudent and faithful; a man of faith, hope and in habitual communion with God; an exemplary religious, in obedience, poverty and chastity."

## **2. Distinguishing traits: "charm emanated from him, which healed you".**

Retracing the stages of his childhood and youth, his preparation for the priesthood and missionary life, God's special love for his servant and his correspondence with this good Father are evident. In particular, they stand out as distinctive features of his spiritual character:

*– Unbounded faith and trust in God, embodied in filial abandonment to the divine will.*

He had great faith in the infinite goodness and mercy of God and in the great merits of the passion and death of Jesus Christ, in whom he confided everything and from whom he expected everything. On the firm rock of this faith he undertook all his apostolic labours. Cold or heat, tropical rain or scorching sun, difficulty or fatigue, nothing prevented him from always proceeding with confidence when it was a matter of God's glory and the salvation of souls.

*– Unconditional love for Jesus Christ the Saviour, to whom he offered everything as a sacrifice, beginning with his own life, consigned to the cause of the Kingdom.*

Father Convertini rejoiced in the promise of the Saviour and rejoiced in the coming of Jesus, as universal Saviour and sole mediator between God and man: "Jesus gave us all of Himself by dying on the cross, and shall we not be able to give ourselves completely to Him?"

*– Integral salvation of our neighbour, pursued with passionate*



*evangelisation.*

The abundant fruits of his missionary work were due to his unceasing prayer and unsparing sacrifices made for his neighbour. It is people and missionaries of such temperament who leave an indelible mark on the history of the Salesian missions, charism and priestly ministry.

Even in contact with Hindus and Muslims, while on the one hand he was urged by a genuine desire to proclaim the Gospel, which often led to the Christian faith, on the other hand he felt compelled to emphasise the basic truths easily perceived even by non-Christians, such as the infinite goodness of God, love of neighbour as the way to salvation, and prayer as the means to obtain graces.

*– Unceasing union with God through prayer, the sacraments, entrustment to Mary Mother of God and ours, love for the Church and the Pope, devotion to the saints.*

He felt himself to be a son of the Church and served her with the heart of an authentic disciple of Jesus and missionary of the Gospel, entrusted to the Immaculate Heart of Mary and in the company of the saints felt as intercessors and friends.

*– Simple and humble evangelical asceticism in the following of the cross, incarnated in an extraordinarily ordinary life.*

His profound humility, evangelical poverty (he carried with him only what was necessary) and angelic countenance transpired from his whole person. Voluntary penance, self-control: little or no rest, irregular meals. He deprived himself of everything to give to the poor, even his clothes, shoes, bed and food. He always slept on the floor. He fasted for a long time. As the years went by, he contracted several illnesses that undermined his health: he suffered from asthma, bronchitis, emphysema, heart ailments... many times they attacked him in such a way that he was bedridden. It was a marvel how he could bear it all without complaining. It was precisely this that attracted the veneration of the Hindus,

for whom he was the “sanyasi”, the one who knew how to renounce everything for the love of God and for their sake.

His life seemed to be a straight ascent to the heights of holiness in the faithful fulfilment of God’s will and in the gift of himself to his brothers and sisters through the priestly ministry lived faithfully. Lay, religious and clergy alike speak of his extraordinary way of living daily life.

### **3. Missionary of the Gospel of joy: “I proclaimed Jesus to them. Jesus the Saviour. Merciful Jesus.”**

There was not a day when he did not go to some family to talk about Jesus and the Gospel. Father Francis had such enthusiasm and zeal that he even hoped for things that seemed humanly impossible. Father Francis became famous as a peacemaker between families, or between villages in discord. “It is not through arguments that we come to understand. God and Jesus are beyond dispute. We must above all pray and God will give us the gift of faith. Through faith one will find the Lord. Is it not written in the Bible that God is love? By the way of love one comes to God.”

He was an inwardly peaceful man and brought peace. He wanted this to exist among people, in homes or villages, where there should be no quarrels, or fights, or divisions. “In our village we were Catholics, Protestants, Hindus and Muslims. So that peace would reign among us, from time to time father would gather us all together and tell us how we could and should live in peace among ourselves.” Then he would listen to those who wanted to say something and at the end, after praying, he would give the blessing: a wonderful way to keep the peace among us. He had a truly astonishing peace of mind; it was the strength that came from the certainty he had of doing God’s will, sought with effort, but then embraced with love once found.

He was a man who lived with evangelical simplicity, the transparency of a child, a willingness to make

every sacrifice, knowing how to get in tune with every person he met on his path, travelling on horseback, or on a bicycle, or more often walking whole days with his rucksack on his shoulders. He belonged to everyone without distinction of religion, caste or social status. He was loved by all, because to all he brought "the water of Jesus that saves".

#### **4. A man of contagious faith: lips in prayer, rosary in hands, eyes to heaven**

"We know from him that he never neglected prayer, both when he was with others and when he was alone, even as a soldier. This helped him to do everything for God, especially when he did first evangelisation among us. For him, there was no fixed time: morning or evening, sun or rain; heat or cold were no impediment when it came to talking about Jesus or doing good. When he went to the villages he would walk even at night and without taking food in order to get to some house or village to preach the Gospel. Even when he was placed as a confessor in Krishnagar, he would come to us for confessions during the sweltering heat of after lunch. I once said to him, "Why do you come at this hour?" And he replied, "In the passion, Jesus did not choose his convenient time when he was being led by Annas or Caiaphas or Pilate. He had to do it even against his own will, to do the Father's will."

He evangelised not by proselytism, but by attraction. It was his behaviour that attracted people. His dedication and love made people say that Father Francis was the true image of the Jesus he preached. His love of God led him to seek intimate union with him, to collect himself in prayer, to avoid anything that might displease God. He knew that one only knows God through charity. He used to say, "Love God, do not displease Him."

"If there was one sacrament in which Father Francis excelled heroically, it was the administration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. For any person in our diocese of Krishnagar to say Father Francis is to say the man of God who

showed the Father's fatherhood in forgiveness especially in the confessional. He spent the last 40 years of his life more in the confessional than in any other ministry: hours and hours, especially in preparation for feasts and solemnities. Thus the whole night of Christmas and Easter or patronal feasts. He was always punctually present in the confessional every day, but especially on Sundays before Masses or on the evening eve of feasts and Saturdays. Then he would go to other places where he was a regular confessor. This was a task very dear to him and much expected by all the religious of the diocese, for who he was available weekly. His confessional was always the most crowded and most desired. Priests, religious, ordinary people: it seemed as if Father Francis knew everyone personally, so pertinent was he in his advice and admonitions. I myself marvelled at the wisdom of his admonitions when I went to confession to him. In fact, the Servant of God was my confessor throughout his life, from the time he was a missionary in the villages until the end of his days. I used to say to myself: "That is just what I wanted to hear from him...". Bishop Morrow, who went to him regularly for confession, considered him his spiritual guide, saying that Father Francis was guided by the Holy Spirit in his counsels and that his personal holiness made up for his lack of natural gifts.

Trust in God's mercy was an almost nagging theme in his conversations, and he used it well as a confessor. His confessional ministry was a ministry of hope for himself and for those who confessed to him. His words inspired hope in all who came to him. "In the confessional the Servant of God was the model priest, famous for administering this sacrament. The Servant of God was always teaching, trying to lead everyone to eternal salvation... The servant of God liked to direct his prayers to the Father who is in heaven, and he also taught people to see the good Father in God. Especially to those in difficulties, including spiritual ones, and to repentant sinners, he reminded them that God is merciful and that one

must always trust in him. The Servant of God increased his prayers and mortifications to discount his infidelities, as he said, and for the sins of the world.”

Father Rosario Stroschio, religious superior, who concluded the announcement of Father Francis’ death, spoke eloquently as follows: “Those who knew Father Francis will always remember with love the little warnings and exhortations he used to give in confession. With his weak little voice, yet so full of ardour: ‘Let us love souls, let us work only for souls... Let us approach the people... Let us deal with them in such a way that the people understand that we love them...’ His entire life was a magnificent testimony to the most fruitful technique of priestly ministry and missionary work. We can sum it up in the simple expression: ‘To win souls to Christ there is no more powerful means than goodness and love!’”

## **5. He loved God and loved his neighbour for God’s sake: Put love! Put love!**

His mother Catherine used to say “Put love! Put love!” to Ciccilluzzo, his nickname at home as he helped in the fields watching turkeys and doing other work appropriate to his young age,

“Father Francisco gave everything to God, because he was convinced that having consecrated everything to him as a religious and missionary priest, God had full rights over him. When we asked him why he did not go home (to Italy), he replied that he had now given himself entirely to God and to us.” His being a priest was all for others: “I am a priest for the good of my neighbour. This is my first duty.” He felt indebted to God in everything, indeed, everything belonged to God and to his neighbour, while he had given himself totally, reserving nothing for himself: Father Francesco continually thanked the Lord for choosing him to be a missionary priest. He showed this sense of gratitude towards anyone who had done anything for him, even the poorest.

He gave extraordinary examples of fortitude by

adapting to the living conditions of the missionary work assigned to him: a new and difficult language, which he tried to learn quite well, because this was the way to communicate with his people; a very harsh climate, that of Bengal, the grave of so many missionaries, which he learned to endure for the love of God and souls; apostolic journeys on foot through unknown areas, with the risk of encountering wild animals.

He was a tireless missionary and evangeliser in a very difficult area such as Krishnagar – which he wanted to transform into Christ-nagar, the city of Christ – where conversions were difficult, not to mention the opposition of Protestants and members of other religions. For the administration of the sacraments he faced all possible dangers: rain, hunger, disease, wild beasts, malicious people. “I have often heard the episode about Father Francesco, who one night, while taking the Blessed Sacrament to a sick person, came across a tiger crouching on the path where he and his companions had to pass... As the companions tried to flee, the Servant of God commanded the tiger: “Let your Lord pass!”, and the tiger moved away. But I have heard other similar examples about the Servant of God, who many times travelled on foot at night. Once a band of brigands attacked him, believing they could steal something from him. But when they saw him thus deprived of everything except what he was carrying, they excused themselves and accompanied him to the next village.”

His life as a missionary was constant travelling: by bicycle, on horseback and most of the time on foot. This walking on foot is perhaps the attitude that best portrays the tireless missionary and the sign of the authentic evangeliser: “How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of the messenger of glad tidings who proclaims peace, the messenger of good things who proclaims salvation” (Is 52:7).

## **6. Clear eyes turned to heaven**

“Observing the smiling face of the Servant of God and looking at his eyes clear and turned to heaven, one

thought that he did not belong here, but in heaven. On seeing him for the very first time, many reported an unforgettable impression of him: his shining eyes that showed a face full of simplicity and innocence and his long, venerable beard recalled the image of a person full of goodness and compassion. One witness stated: "Father Francis was a saint. I do not know how to make a judgement, but I think that such people are not easily found. We were small, but he talked to us, he never despised anyone. He did not differentiate between Muslims and Christians. Father went to everyone in the same way and when we were together he treated us all the same. He would give us children advice: 'Obey your parents, do your homework well, love each other as brothers'. He would then give us little sweets: in his pockets there was always something for us."

Father Francis displayed his love for God above all through prayer, which seemed to be uninterrupted. He could always be seen moving his lips in prayer. Even when he spoke to people, he always kept his eyes raised as if he were seeing someone he was talking to. What most often struck people was Father Convertini's ability to be totally focused on God and, at the same time, on the person in front of him, looking with sincere eyes at the brother he met on his path: "Without a doubt he had his eyes fixed on the face of God. This was an indelible trait of his soul, a spiritual concentration of an impressive level. He followed you attentively and answered you with great precision when you spoke to him. Yet, you sensed that he was 'elsewhere', in another dimension, in dialogue with the Other."

He encouraged others to holiness, as in the case of his cousin Lino Palmisano, who was preparing for the priesthood: "I am very happy knowing you are already in practical training; this too will soon pass, if you know how to take advantage of the graces of the Lord that he will give you every day, to transform yourself into a Christian saint of good sense. The most satisfying studies of theology await you,

which will nourish your soul with the Spirit of God, who has called you to help Jesus in His apostolate. Think not of others, but of yourself alone, of how to become a holy priest like Don Bosco. Don Bosco also said in his time: times are difficult, but we will *puf, puf*, we will go ahead even against the current. It was the heavenly mother telling him: *infirmi mundi elegit Deus*. Don't worry, I will help you. Dear brother, the heart, the soul of a holy priest in the eyes of the Lord is worth more than anything else. The day of your sacrifice together with that of Jesus on the altar is near, prepare yourself. You will never regret being generous to Jesus and to your Superiors. Trust in them, they will help you overcome the little difficulties of the day that your beautiful soul may encounter. I will remember you at Holy Mass every day, so that you too may one day offer yourself wholly to the Good Lord."

## Conclusion

As at the beginning, so also at the end of this brief excursus on the virtuous profile of Father Convertini, here is a testimony that summarises what has been presented.

"One of the pioneer figures that struck me deeply was that of the Venerable Father Francis Convertini, a zealous apostle of Christian love who managed to bring the news of the Redemption to churches, parish areas, to the alleyways and huts of refugees and to anyone he met, consoling, advising, helping with his exquisite charity: a true witness to the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, on which we shall be judged: always ready and zealous in the ministry of the sacrament of forgiveness. Christians of all denominations, Muslims and Hindus, accepted with joy and readiness the one they called the man of God. He knew how to bring to each one the true message of love, which Jesus preached and brought to this land: with evangelical direct and personal contact, for young and old, boys and girls, poor and rich, authorities and pariahs (outcasts), that is, the last and most despised rung of (sub)human refuse. For me and for many others, it was deeply emotional experience that helped me to understand and



live the message of Jesus: 'Love one another as I have loved you'."

The last word goes to Father Francis, as a legacy he leaves to each of us. On 24 September 1973, writing to his relatives from Krishnagar, the missionary wanted to involve them in the work for non-Christians that he had been doing with difficulty since his recent illness, but always with zeal: "After six months in hospital my health is a little weak, I feel like a broken and patched piñata. However, the merciful Jesus miraculously helps me in his work for souls. I let Him take me to the city and then return on foot, after making Jesus and our holy religion known. Having finished hearing confessions at home, I go among the pagans who are much better than some Christians. Affectionately yours in the Heart of Jesus, Father Francis."

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## **Don Bosco International**

*Don Bosco International (DBI) is a non-governmental organisation based in Brussels, representing the Salesians of Don Bosco to the institutions of the European Union, with a focus on the protection of children's rights, youth development, and education. Founded in 2014, DBI collaborates with various European partners to promote inclusive social and educational policies, paying attention to vulnerable individuals. The organisation promotes youth participation in policy-making, emphasising the importance of informal education. Through networking and advocacy activities, DBI aims to create synergies with European institutions, civil society organisations, and Salesian networks globally. The guiding values are solidarity, the integral formation of young people and intercultural dialogue. DBI organises seminars,*

*conferences, and European projects aimed at ensuring greater youth presence in decision-making processes, fostering an inclusive environment that supports them in their journey of growth, autonomy and spiritual development, through cultural and educational exchanges. The Executive Secretary, Sara Sechi, explains the activities of this institution.*

### **Advocacy as an act of responsibility for and with our youth**

Don Bosco International (DBI) is the organisation that manages the institutional representation of the Salesians of Don Bosco to the European institutions and civil society organisations that revolve around them. DBI's mission is centred on *advocacy*, which can be translated as "political influence", meaning all those actions aimed at influencing a decision-making-legislative process, in our case the European one. The DBI office is based in Brussels and is hosted by the Salesian community of Woluwe-Saint-Lambert (FRB Province). Working in the European capital is dynamic and stimulating. Nevertheless, the proximity of the community allows us to keep the Salesian charism alive in our mission, avoiding getting trapped in the so-called "European bubble", that world of 'privileged' relationships and dynamics often distant from our realities.

DBI's action follows two directions: on the one hand, bringing the Salesian educational-pastoral mission closer to the institutions through the sharing of good practices, youth requests, projects and related results, creating spaces for dialogue and participation for those who traditionally would not have access to them. On the other hand, they deal with bringing the European dimension within the Congregation through monitoring and information on ongoing processes and new initiatives, facilitating new contacts with institutional representatives, NGOs and confessional organisations that can give rise to new collaborations.

A question that often arises spontaneously is how DBI manages to concretely create political influence. In *advocacy* actions, networking with other organisations or

entities that share principles, values, and objectives is fundamental. In this regard, DBI ensures an active presence in alliances, formal and informal, of NGOs or confessional actors who work together on issues dear to Don Bosco's mission: the fight against poverty and social inclusion, the defence of the rights of young people, especially those in vulnerable situations, and integral human development. Whenever a Salesian delegation visits Brussels, we facilitate meetings for them with Members of the European Parliament, Commission officials, diplomatic corps, including the Apostolic Nunciature to the European Union, and other actors of interest. We often manage to meet groups of young people and students from Salesian schools who visit the city, organising a moment of dialogue for them with other youth organisations.

DBI is a service that the Congregation offers to give visibility to its works and bring the voice of those who would otherwise not be heard to institutional forums. The Salesian Congregation has a potential for *advocacy* that is not fully expressed. The presence in 137 countries to protect young people at risk of poverty and social exclusion represents an educational and social network that few organisations can count on. However, it is still difficult to strategically present good results at decision-making tables, where policies and investments are outlined, especially at the international level. For this reason, ensuring a constant dialogue with the institutions represents both an opportunity and an act of responsibility. It is an opportunity because in the long term visibility facilitates contacts, new partnerships, funding for projects and the sustainability of the works. It is also a responsibility because, not being able to remain silent in the face of the difficulties faced by our boys and girls in today's world, political influence is the active testimony of that civic commitment that we often try to generate in young people.

By guaranteeing rights and dignity for young people, Don Bosco was the first actor of political influence of the Congregation, for example through the signing of the

first Italian apprenticeship contract. *Advocacy* represents an intrinsic element of the Salesian mission. Salesians do not lack experience, nor success stories, nor concrete and innovative alternatives to face current challenges, but often a cohesion that allows for coordinated networking and clear and shared communication. By giving voice to the authentic testimonies of young people, we can transform challenges into opportunities, creating a lasting impact in society that gives hope for the future.

*Sara Sechi*

*Don Bosco International – DBI, Brussels*

Sara Sechi, Executive Secretary of DBI, has been in Brussels for two and a half years. She is the daughter of the Erasmus+ generation, which together with other European programmes has guaranteed her life and training experiences that would otherwise have been denied. She is very grateful to Don Bosco and the Salesian Congregation, where she has found meritocracy, growth, and a second family. And we wish her good and fruitful work for the cause of young people.

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## **Blessed Luigi Variara: 150th Anniversary of His Birth**

*This year marks the 150th anniversary of the birth of Blessed Luigi Variara, an extraordinary priest and Salesian missionary. Born on January 15, 1875, in Viarigi, in the province of Asti, Luigi grew up in an environment enriched with faith, culture, and fraternal love, which shaped his character and prepared him for the extraordinary mission that would lead him to serve those most in need in Colombia.*

*From his childhood spent in Monferrato, in a family marked by the spiritual influence of Don Bosco, to his missionary vocation developed in Valdocco, the life of Blessed Variara represents a commendable example of dedication to others and fidelity to God. Let us retrace the highlights of his childhood and formation, offering a glimpse into the extraordinary spiritual and human legacy he left us.*

### **From Viarigi to Agua de Dios**

Luigi Variara was born in Viarigi, in the province of Asti, on January 15, 1875, 150 years ago, to a deeply Christian family. His father, Pietro, had listened to Don Bosco speak in 1856 when he came to the village to preach a mission. When Luigi was born, his father Pietro was forty-two years old and had married for the second time to Livia Bussa. Pietro had obtained a teaching diploma, loved music and singing, and animated parish functions as an organist and as the director of the choir he himself had founded. He was a highly esteemed and appreciated presence in the village of Viarigi. When Luigi was born, it was during a harsh winter, and due to the circumstances of his birth, the midwife deemed it prudent to baptise the newborn. Two days later, the baptismal rites were completed.

Luigi's childhood was inspired by local traditions and family life, a cultural and spiritual blend that helped shape his character and impart valuable meaning to the growth of the young boy, marking his future missionary vocation in Colombia.

Luigi's relationship with his father Pietro was important. Pietro was his mentor and teacher and instilled in him the Christian sense of life, the early fundamentals of school, and a love for music and singing—elements that, as we know, would affect the life and mission of Luigi Variara. His younger brother Celso recalls: "Although he never accomplished anything exceptional, Luigi was all goodness and love in the manifestations of his life, both with our parents, and

especially with our mother, and with us... I don't remember my brother ever being less courteous and less fraternal with us, younger siblings. A faithful and devoted attendee of Church and its functions, he spent the rest of his time not having fun in the streets, rather at home, reading and studying his school books and keeping his mother company."

It is also nice to remember the relationship of young Luigi with his older sister Giovanna, daughter from the first marriage and godmother at his Baptism. Although she married young, Giovanna always maintained a special bond with little Luigi, helping to strengthen the features of his personality, his inclination towards piety and study. Of Giovanna's children, one, Ulisse, would become a priest, and Ernestina, a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians. Furthermore, Giovanna, who would die at ninety in 1947, maintained the epistolary ties between Luigi and their mother Livia during her brother's missionary life.

Another aspect that would influence the growth of little Luigi is that the Variara home was almost always full of children. His father Pietro, at the end of lessons, would take the students most in need with him, and after doing some tutoring, he would entrust them to the care of mother Livia. Other families did the same. A witness recounts: "Mrs. Livia was the mother of the whole neighbourhood; her yard was always full of boys and girls; she taught us to sew, played with us, and was always in a good mood." Luigi grew up in this "oratory" atmosphere, where one felt at home, felt loved, and the paternal presence of father Pietro and the maternal presence of mother Livia were top-quality educational and affectionate resources not only for their children, but for many other children and young people, especially the poorest and most disadvantaged.

During these years, Luigi met and dedicated himself to a disabled companion, Andrea Ferrari, taking care of him and making him feel at ease. In this, one can glimpse a seed of that solicitude and closeness that would later mark the life and mission of Luigi Variara in serving leprosy

patients in Agua de Dios, Colombia.

Indeed, as a child, Luigi Variara experienced, with his siblings and the neighbourhood children, the sincere love of his parents, and through their example, he came to know the true face of God the Father, the source of authentic love.

### **Passing through Valdocco**

Don Bosco was well known in Monferrato. He had travelled through it in every direction with the well-known autumn walks alongside his boys, who, with their noise and contagious joy, brought festivity wherever they went. The local boys happily joined the cheerful and lively troop, and later, many would leave to find themselves with that priest, eager to be educated by him in the oratory of Turin.

In Viarigi, the visit of Don Bosco in February 1856 left a deeply heartfelt memory. Don Bosco had accepted the invitation of the parish priest, Fr. Giovanni Battista Melino, to preach a mission, as the village was deeply troubled and divided due to the scandals of a former priest, a certain Grignaschi, who had gathered around himself a true sect, gaining great popularity. Don Bosco managed to attract a very large audience and invited the population to conversion. Thus, Viarigi regained its religious balance and spiritual peace. The spiritual bond that was created between this Asti village and the Saint of the young continued over time. It was young Luigi who, at his First Communion, was prepared by the parish priest Fr. Giovanni Battista Melino, the same one who had invited Don Bosco to preach the popular mission.

In the Variara family, according to the wishes of father Pietro, Luigi was to orient himself towards the priesthood: However, at the end of elementary school, he had no desire or particular vocational concerns. In any case, he had to continue his studies, and at this point, Don Bosco comes into play. The memory he left in Viarigi, his reputation as a man of God, his friendship with the parish priest, the dreams of father Pietro, the fame of the oratory in Turin led

Luigi to enter Valdocco on October 1, 1887, having enrolled in his first year of middle school, with the desire of his father who wanted his son to be initiated into the priesthood. However, young Luigi, in all simplicity but firmly speaking, did not hesitate to declare that he felt no vocation, but his father replied: "If you don't have it, Mary Help of Christians will give it to you. Be good and study!" Don Bosco died four months after the arrival of young Variara at the oratory of Valdocco, but the encounter that Luigi had with him was enough to mark him for life. He himself recalls the event: "We were in the winter season, and one afternoon we were playing in the large courtyard of the oratory when suddenly we heard shouting from one side to the other: 'Don Bosco, Don Bosco!' Instinctively, we all rushed towards the point where our good Father appeared, who was being taken out for a walk in his carriage. We followed him to the place where he was to get into the vehicle. Immediately, Don Bosco was seen surrounded by the beloved crowd of children. I was desperately looking for a way to get to a spot where I could see him how I wanted to, since I ardently desired to meet him. I got as close as I could, and the moment they were helping him get into the carriage, he turned to me with a sweet look, and his eyes rested attentively upon me. I do not know what I felt at that moment... it was something I cannot express! That day was one of the happiest for me. I was sure I had met a Saint, and that this Saint had read something in my soul that only God and he could know."

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## **Community of the Mission of**



# Don Bosco, a story of “family” and “prophecy”

*The Salesian Family, born from Don Bosco's intuition, has continued to grow over time and has taken on different forms, while remaining faithful to its roots. Among these Salesian realities is the Community of the Mission of Don Bosco (CMB), a private missionary association of the faithful, which has officially been part of the Salesian Family since 2010.*

## **The origins of the CMB**

It all began in 1983 in Rome, at the Gerini Institute, during a meeting of young Salesian Cooperators. At the concluding Mass, a clear inspiration remained imprinted in the hearts and minds of some of the participants: *your life and your faith must take on a missionary dimension wherever you may be*. From this inspiration, the Community of the Mission of Don Bosco was born at the Salesian Institute in Bologna.

We asked Deacon Guido Pedroni, founder and general custodian of the CMB, to narrate the story of its foundation. The CMB is composed of laypeople presently found in various parts of the world. It is a missionary community in style and in preferences, deeply rooted in the Salesian spirit and in the lives of its founders. Alongside Guido Pedroni, four other laypeople have shared the ideal of the CMB from the beginning: Paola Terenziani (who passed away a few years ago and whose cause for beatification has begun), Rita Terenziani, Andrea Bongiovanni, and Giacomo Borghi. Recently, Daniele Landi, who was already present at the origins of the Community, has joined these figures, gathered in the so-called “Mother Tent.”

## **A Marian and Missionary Community**

It is noteworthy that the CMB is the only group of the Salesian Family founded by a layperson and born from a

missionary and community dream. It is profoundly Marian, as the definitive act of belonging to the Community, the Act of Dedication, is inspired by the life of Mary, who was entirely dedicated to Jesus. As Guido Pedroni recounts, the CMB was born from “an intuition, the Act of Dedication, which for us is a true consecration to God and to the Community after the example of Mary and Don Bosco.”

### **Its Way of Life and Spirituality**

The CMB way of life of the CMB is one of living faith, of opening new missionary presences, of carrying out various projects, of establishing educational relationships, and of experiencing community life. It is a way of life marked by initiative, that can even be described as “recklessness.” It is based on four pillars: *to inspire, to involve, to create, and to believe*. This means to inspire motivations, to involve people in action, to create authentic relationships, and to believe in the Providence of the Spirit that precedes and safeguards every choice made.

For the CMB, living in a “State of Mission” means witnessing to the Gospel at every moment of the day and in every place, whether it be Africa, America, Italy, a nomadic camp, or a classroom. The essential thing is to feel part of the Church’s mission, embodied in the way of Don Bosco for the good of young people.

There are three cornerstones of the spirituality of the CMB:

- *Unity*, built on fraternal dialogue;
- *Charity*, towards young people and the poor in the spirit of communion;
- *Essentiality*, embodied in the simple and familial sharing typical of the Salesian spirit.

Other distinctive elements are the conferral of a specific mandate and the awareness of the “State of Mission.” The charismatic identity is rooted in the Salesian spirituality, enriched by some unique traits of the CMB. In particular, these traits are a spirituality of quest and an

attitude of familiarity, which lay the foundations for unity among the members of the Community and of the Association.

### **Missions and Dissemination in the world**

Initially, the CMB was engaged in the Ethiopian missions. However, over time, the commitment shifted from mere leisure time activity to commitment in daily life. These have guided the fundamental CMB options. In a climate of deep friendship, of intense spiritual life rooted in the Word of God, and of concrete work for the poor and for young people, the Dedication emerged. It became clear that the missionary endeavor was meant not only for Ethiopia but for every needy place in the world.

In 1988, the first Rule of Life was drafted. In 1994 the CMB became an Association with its own legal structure in order to continue the missionary commitment and animation initiatives in the Bologna area.

All the missionary presences of the CMB arose from a call and a sign. Currently, the Community is present in Europe, Africa, South America, and Central America. The first missionary expedition took place in 1998 in Madagascar. Since then, it has spread to nine countries: Italy, Madagascar, Burundi, Haiti, Ghana, Chile, Argentina, Ukraine, and Mozambique. The two most recent "adventures" concern Mozambique and Ukraine.

In the coming months, a new presence will be opened in Mozambique. Last September, in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians in Turin-Valdocco, the missionary crucifix was handed over to Angelica and, symbolically, to three other young people from Madagascar and Burundi, who were absent for bureaucratic reasons. They will form the first community in that country.

In Ukraine, several CMB members have traveled multiple times to provide aid to this war-stricken place and now, with the help of the Salesians, are trying to understand what new challenge that the Spirit is showing.

## **A Vocation of Trust and Service**

It is evident that the CMB vocation is missionary and Marian within the Salesian charism. But it also possesses its own peculiar identity, forged by history and the signs of the Lord's presence that have emerged in the Community's pivotal events. It is a story intertwined with the life of Don Bosco and that of the people who were part of it. It has never been easy to remain faithful to the call of the Spirit, as he always invites people to widen their horizon and to trust even "in the dark."

The CMB mission is one of testimony and of service, of fraternal sharing and of unrelenting trust in God. The witness of one's life, of educational service, of the sharing of goods, time, and talent resulting from community discernment, and the taking on of responsibility for every project is rooted in that undiminished trust in God after the example of Don Bosco.

*Marco Fulgaro*

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## **St Francis de Sales, personal companion**

'My spirit always accompanies yours,' wrote Francis de Sales one day to Jeanne de Chantal, at a time when she felt assailed by darkness and temptations. He added: 'Walk therefore, my dear Daughter, and advance in bad weather and during the night. Be courageous, my dear Daughter; with God's help, we shall do much.' Accompaniment, spiritual direction, guidance of souls, direction of conscience, spiritual assistance: these are more or less synonymous terms, as they designate this particular form of education and formation

exercised in the spiritual sphere of the individual conscience.

### **Formation of a future companion**

The formation he received as a young man had prepared Francis de Sales to become a spiritual director in turn. As a student of the Jesuits in Paris he most likely had a spiritual father whose name we do not know. In Padua, Antonio Possevino had been his director; with this famous Jesuit Francis would later rejoice at having been one of his 'spiritual sons'. During his tormented path to the clerical state, his confidant and support was Amé Bouvard, a priest friend of the family, who then prepared him for ordination.

At the beginning of his episcopate, he entrusted the care of his spiritual life to Father Fourier, rector of the Jesuits in Chambéry, 'a great, erudite and devout religious', with whom he established 'a very special friendship' and who was very close to him 'with his advice and warnings'. For several years, he went to confession regularly to the cathedral penitentiary, whom he called 'dear brother and perfect friend'.

His stay in Paris in 1602 profoundly influenced the development of his gifts as a director of souls. Sent by the bishop to negotiate some diocesan affairs at court, he had little diplomatic success, but this prolonged visit to the French capital allowed him to establish contacts with the spiritual elite who came together around Madam Acarie, an exceptional woman, mystic and hostess at the same time. He became her confessor, observed her ecstasies and listened to her without question. 'Oh! what a mistake I made,' he would later say, 'for not having taken sufficient advantage of her most holy company! She did indeed open her soul to me freely; but the extreme respect I had for her meant that I did not dare to inform myself of the slightest thing.'

### **A, insistent activity 'that reassures and heartens'**

Helping each individual, personally accompanying

them, advising them, possibly correcting their mistakes, encouraging them, all this requires time, patience and a constant effort of discernment. The author of the *Introduction to the Devout Life* speaks from experience when he states in the preface:

I grant that the guidance of individual souls is a labour, but it is a labour full of consolation, even as that of harvesters and grape-gatherers, who are never so well pleased as when most heavily laden. It is a labour which refreshes and invigorates the heart by the comfort which it brings to those who bear it.

We know this important area of his formative work especially from his correspondence, but it should be pointed out that spiritual direction is not only done in writing. Personal meetings and individual confessions are part of it, although one must distinguish them properly. In 1603, he met the Duke of Bellegarde, a great figure in the kingdom and a great sinner, who a few years later asked him to guide him on the path to conversion. The Lenten series that he preached in Dijon the following year was a turning point in his 'career' as a spiritual director, because he met Jeanne Frémyot, widow of the Baron de Chantal.

From 1605 onwards, the systematic visitation of his vast diocese brought him into contact with an endless number of people of all circumstances, mainly peasants and mountain people, most of whom were illiterate and left us no correspondence. Preaching Lent at Annecy in 1607, he found a twenty-one year old lady, 'but all gold', named Louise Du Chastel, who had married the bishop's cousin, Henri de Charmois. The letters of spiritual direction that Francis sent to Madame de Charmois would serve as basic material for the drafting of his future work, the *Introduction to the Devout Life*.

Preaching in Grenoble in 1616, 1617 and 1618 brought him a considerable number of daughters and spiritual

sons who, having heard him speak, would seek closer contact. New women followed him on his last trip to Paris in 1618-1619, where he was part of the Savoy delegation that was negotiating the marriage of the Prince of Piedmont, Victor Amadeus, to Christine of France, sister of Louis XIII. After the princely wedding, Christine chose him as her confessor and 'great chaplain'.

### **The director is father, brother, friend**

When addressing the people he directed, Francis de Sales made abundant use, according to the custom of the time, of titles taken from family and social life, such as *father, mother, brother, sister, son, daughter, uncle, aunt, niece, godfather, godmother, or servant*. The title of father signified authority and at the same time love and confidence. The father 'assists' his son and daughter with advice using wisdom, prudence and charity. As a spiritual father, the director is the one who in certain cases says: I do! Francis de Sales knew how to use such language, but only in very special circumstances, as when he ordered the baroness not to avoid meeting with her husband's murderer:

You asked me how I wanted you to behave in the meeting with the one who killed your lord husband. I answer in order. It is not necessary for you to seek the date and occasion yourself. However, if this arises I want you to welcome it with a gentle, kind and compassionate heart.

He once wrote to a distressed woman: 'I command you in the name of God', but it was to remove her scruples. His authority was always humble, good, even tender; his role with regard to the people he directed, he specified in the preface to the *Introduction*, consisted of a special 'assistance', a term that appears twice in this context. The intimacy that was established between him and the Duke of Bellegarde was such that Francis de Sales was able to respond to the duke's request, hesitatingly using the epithets 'my son' or 'monsignor my son', knowing full well that the duke

was older than him. The pedagogical implication of spiritual direction is underlined by another significant image. After recalling the tiger's swift race to save her cub, moved by the power of natural love, he goes on to say:

And how much more willingly will a paternal heart care for a soul that it has found full of desire for holy perfection, carrying it on its breast, like a mother her child, without feeling the weight of the dear burden.

With regard to the people he directed, women and men, Francis de Sales also acted like a brother, and it is in this capacity that he often presented himself to the people who had recourse to him. Antoine Favre was constantly called 'my brother'. At first he addressed the Baroness de Chantal as '*madame*' (lady), but later he switched to 'sister', 'this name, which is the one by which the apostles and the first Christians used to express their mutual love'. A brother does not command, he gives advice and practices fraternal correction.

But what best characterises the Salesian style is the friendly and reciprocal atmosphere that united the director and the directee. As André Ravier said so well, 'there is no true spiritual direction if there is no friendship, that is, exchange, communication, mutual influence'. It is not surprising that Francis de Sales loved his referents with a love that he witnessed to them in a thousand ways; it is surprising, instead, that he desired to be equally loved by them. With Jeanne de Chantal, the reciprocity became so intense as to sometimes turn 'mine' and 'yours' into 'ours': 'It is not possible for me to distinguish *mine* and *yours* in what concerns us is *ours*'.

### **Obedience to the director, but in an atmosphere of confidence and freedom**

Obedience to the spiritual director is a guarantee against excesses, illusions and missteps made more often than not for one's own sake; it maintains a prudent and wise



attitude. The author of the *Introduction* considered it necessary and beneficial, without resorting to it; 'humble obedience, so much recommended and so much practised by all the ancient devotees', is part of a tradition. Francis de Sales recommended it to the Baroness de Chantal with regard to her first director, but indicating the way to live it:

I greatly commend the religious respect you feel for your director, and I urge you to preserve it with great care; but I must also say one more word to you. This respect must undoubtedly induce you to persevere in the holy conduct to which you have so happily adapted yourself, but it must by no means impede or stifle the just liberty which the Spirit of God gives to whomever he possesses.

In any case, the director must possess three indispensable qualities: 'He must be full of charity, knowledge and prudence: if one of these three is lacking, there is danger' (*I I 4*). This does not seem to be the case with Mme de Chantal's first director. According to her biographer, Mother de Chaugy, he 'bound her to his direction' warning her never to think of changing it; they were 'inappropriate ties that kept her soul trapped, cooped up and without freedom'. When, after meeting Francis de Sales, she wanted to change her director, she was plunged into a sea of scruples. To reassure her, he showed her another way:

Here is the general rule of our obedience, written in very large letters: YOU MUST DO EVERYTHING OUT OF LOVE, AND NOTHING BY CONSTRAINT; YOU MUST LOVE OBEDIENCE MORE THAN YOU FEAR DISOBEDIENCE. I leave you the spirit of freedom: not the one that excludes obedience, for then one would have to speak of the freedom of the flesh, but the one that excludes compulsion, scruple and haste.

The Salesian way is founded on the respect and obedience due to the director, without any doubt, but above all on confidence: 'Have the greatest confidence in him,

together with sacred reverence, so that reverence does not diminish confidence and confidence does not impede reverence; trust him with the respect of a daughter towards her father, respect him with the confidence of a daughter towards her mother'. Confidence inspires simplicity and freedom, which foster communication between two people, especially when the one being directed is a fearful young novice:

I will tell you, in the first place, that you must not use words of ceremony or apology in my regard, for, by God's will, I feel for you all the affection you could desire, and I would not know how to forbid myself to feel it. I love your spirit deeply, because I think God wills it, and I love it tenderly, because I see you still weak and too young. Write to me, therefore, with all confidence and freedom, and ask all that seems useful for your good. And let this be said once and for all.

How should one write to the Bishop of Geneva? 'Write to me freely, sincerely, simply,' he said to one of the souls he directed. 'On this point, I have nothing more to say, except that you must not put *Monsignor* on the letter either alone or accompanied by other words: it is enough for you to put *Sir*, and you know why. I am a man without ceremony, and I love and honour you with all my heart.' This refrain returns frequently at the beginning of a new epistolary relationship. Affection, when it is sincere and especially when it has the good fortune to be reciprocated, authorises freedom and utmost frankness. 'Write to me whenever you feel like it,' he said to another woman, 'with full confidence and without ceremony; for this is how one should behave in this sort of friendship.' He told one of his correspondents: 'Do not ask me to excuse you for writing well or badly, because you owe me no ceremony other than that of loving me. This means speaking "heart to heart".' The love of God as well as the love of our neighbour makes us go on "in a good way, without a lot of fuss" because, as he put it, 'true love does not need a method'. The key to

this is love, for 'love makes lovers equal', that is, love works a transformation in the people one loves, making them equal, similar and on the same level.

**'Every flower requires special care'.**

While the goal of spiritual direction is the same for everyone, namely the perfection of the Christian life, people are not all the same, and it belongs to the skill of the director to know how to indicate the appropriate path for each person to reach the common goal. A man of his time, aware that social stratifications were a reality, Francis de Sales knew well the difference between the gentleman, the artisan, the valet, the prince, the widow, the girl and the married woman. Each, in fact, should produce fruit 'according to his qualification and profession'. But the sense of belonging to a particular social group went well, in him, with the consideration of the peculiarities of the individual: one must 'adapt the practice of devotion to the strengths, activities and duties of each one in particular'. He also believed that 'the means to achieve perfection are different according to the diversity of vocations'.

The diversity of temperaments is a fact which must be taken into account. One can detect in Francis de Sales a 'psychological flair' that predates modern discoveries. The perception of the unique characteristics of each person is very pronounced in him and is the reason why each subject deserves special attention from the spiritual father: 'In a garden, each herb and each flower requires special care. Like a father or mother with their children, he adapts to the individuality, temperament, and particular situations of each individual. To this person, impatient with himself, disappointed because he is not progressing as he would like, he recommends self-love; to this other, attracted by the religious life but endowed with a strong individuality, he advises a lifestyle that takes into account these two tendencies; to a third, wavering between exaltation and depression, he suggests peace of heart through the struggle

against distressing imaginations. To a woman in despair because of her husband's 'spendthrift and frivolous' character, the director will have to advise 'the right means and moderation' and the means to overcome her impatience. Another, a woman with a head on her neck, with an 'all in one piece' character, full of anxieties and trials, will need 'holy sweetness and tranquillity'. Still another is distressed by the thought of death and often depressed: her director inspires her with courage. There are souls who have a thousand desires for perfection; it is necessary to calm their impatience, the fruit of their self-love. The famous Angélique Arnauld, abbess of Port-Royal, wanted to reform her monastery with rigidity: he needed to recommend flexibility and humility to her.

As for the Duke de Bellegarde, who had meddled in all the political and amorous intrigues of the court, the bishop encouraged him to acquire 'a masculine, courageous, invariable devotion to serve as a mirror to many, exalting the truth of heavenly love, worthy of reparation for past faults'. In 1613 he drew up a *Reminder for making a good confession*, containing eight general 'warnings', a detailed description 'of sins against the ten commandments', an 'examination concerning capital sins', 'sins committed against the precepts of the Church', a 'means of discerning mortal sin from venial sin', and finally 'means of turning the great away from the sin of the flesh'.

### **Regressive method**

The art of direction of conscience very often requires the director to take a step back and leave the initiative to the recipient, or to God, especially when it comes to making choices that require a demanding decision. 'Do not take my words too literally,' he wrote to Baroness de Chantal, 'I do not want them to be an imposition on you, but that you retain the freedom to do what you think best. He wrote, for example, to a woman who was very attached to 'vanities':

When you left, it came into my mind to tell you that you should renounce musk and perfumes, but I restrained myself, in order to follow my system, which is gentle and seeks to await those movements which, little by little, the exercises of piety tend to arouse in souls who consecrate themselves entirely to divine Goodness. My spirit, in fact, is extremely friendly to simplicity; and the billhook with which it is customary to cut off useless suckers, I habitually leave in God's hand.

The director is not a despot, but one who 'guides our actions with his warnings and counsels', as he says at the beginning of the *Introduction*. He refrains from commanding when he writes to Madame de Chantal: 'These are good and suitable counsels for you, but not commands'. She would also say, at his canonisation process, that she sometimes regretted that she was not guided enough with commands. In fact, the role of the director is defined by the following response of Socrates to a disciple: 'I will therefore take care to return you to yourself better than you are'. As he always declared to Madame de Chantal, Francis had 'devoted himself', put himself at the 'service' of the 'most holy Christian freedom'. He fought for freedom:

You will see that I speak the truth and that I fight for a good cause when I defend the holy and lovable freedom of the spirit, which, as you know, I honour in a very special way, provided it is true and free from dissipation and libertinism, which are nothing but a mask of freedom.

In 1616, during a retreat, Francis de Sales had the mother of Chantal do an exercise of 'undressing', to reduce her to 'the lovely and holy purity and nakedness of children'. The time had come for her to take the step towards the 'autonomy' of the directee. He urged her, among other things, not to 'take any nurse' and not to keep telling him – he specified – 'that I will always be her nurse', and, in short, to be willing to renounce Francis' spiritual direction.

God alone suffices: 'Have no other arms to carry you but God's, no other breasts on which to rest but His and Providence. [...] Think no more of the friendship or unity that God has established between us'. For Madame de Chantal the lesson is harsh: 'My God! My true Father, whom you have cut deeply with your razor! Can I remain in this state of mind for long'? She now sees herself 'stripped and naked of all that was most precious to her'. Francis also confesses: 'And yes, I too find myself naked, thanks to Him who died naked to teach us to live naked'. Spiritual direction reaches its peak here. After such an experience, spiritual letters would become rarer and affection would be more restrained in favour of a wholly spiritual unity.