

Have you thought about your vocation? St Francis de Sales could help you (4/10)

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4. Where is your heart

Dear young people,
you have written to me asking about discernment which, I remind you, means being attentive to the voice of God that is deep in your heart. As Jesus tells us, “where your heart is, there is your treasure.” In other words, who am I and for whom am I prepared to give my heart? The journey to the depths of the heart is not always easy, for along with the whispers of God there are also loud cries and other voices competing with Him and trying to get your attention. These voices can manifest themselves in our thoughts, feelings and desires. Does that mean we have to ignore them in order to hear God’s voice? I would say the opposite: we must learn to discern these voices. We must sift our thoughts, feelings and desires to understand what belongs to what we know to be temptations and, instead, to understand the inspirations that come from and lead to God. It is precisely through these inspirations that God communicates desires to our hearts.

As you know from my writings, I am a great admirer of St Paul. We should follow his suggestions and teachings: “Do not conform to the mentality of this century, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may discern the will of God, what is good, pleasing and perfect to him.” If we decide to simply follow our thoughts, emotions, and superficial desires, we will never truly perceive the voice of God speaking in the depths of our hearts. So it is really necessary that we question ourselves:

- firstly: do these feelings, thoughts and desires come from God or from something else?
- secondly: are they helping me to reach God or are they leading me away from him?

Once you have laid this foundation, you can proceed to discern and seek the voice of God that is already present in your spirit.

Unfortunately, we spend a lot of time and energy revolving around ever-changing emotions and a “multiplicity of desires” that prevent us from making the choices that would lead us deeper. This process simply produces inconstancy, impatience and a constant desire for change.

In my *Spiritual conversations*, I recalled St Paul’s words that everyone is a temple of God (1 Cor 3:16): as in the temple in Jerusalem, we need to pass through a series of courtyards in our hearts to reach the innermost and deepest place called the Holy of Holies.

Taking the idea from an invention of your time, I would like to use the image of the lift. You enter the lift with your thoughts, feelings, desires; if these become inspirations, they can take you deep into the Holy of Holies. The lift will take you lower and lower as you learn the truth contained in these feelings, thoughts and desires.

Finally you will reach the core, although I prefer the biblical term “heart”. These words are no longer necessary. In the heart, in fact, the Spirit can reach the soul of each of you and become fully your Master. Here the mind is called to silence and there is no longer any need for reasoning or words that would lead to distraction. Here we understand what spirit discernment is because God is Spirit and He speaks directly to your soul illuminating your path and showing you the way forward. If you live in the Spirit, walk according to the Spirit (Gal 5:26).

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Have you thought about your vocation? St Francis de Sales could help you (3/10)

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3. If I do not know myself, can I be free to choose?

Dear young people,

it is a great joy for me to welcome and share your vocational concerns. You are living a very beautiful period of life, you deeply feel the desire to live to the full, and all the paths to reach it are open before you. Have the courage to search patiently and, above all, to arrive at a decision that will fill your yearnings with truest happiness. It is not an easy task: it implies assuming one's own fragility and discovering the fundamental truth that life is a wonderful gift that has been given to us, a mysterious gift that surpasses us.

God has given us life and faith. The Christian vocation is precisely the response to the call to life and love with which God has created us. We are called to be children of God and to live as children, feeling and acting in the love that God has poured into our hearts. We are called to be his disciples and to be them with passion. By responding to it, we find the path to true happiness.

What we seek, what we want to be, has as its basis and foundation who we are. Starting from the loving acceptance of what we are, the Lord calls us to build our identity. We can hardly live this search and this effort alone. We have the great good fortune that Jesus himself wants to accompany us. Always keep Jesus close to you, as your companion and friend. Nobody like him can help you find your way to God and be

happy. Next to him, invoking him with simplicity and with much confidence, you will be able to discover better the meaning of existence and of your vocation.

Seeking your vocation means being concerned about how to respond to God's dream for you. By him you were created and dreamed. What is God's dream for your life? And how can you respond to this dream? Let it always be God's will, the divine will, that which guides your life. Seek, love and strive to do God's will. He has given you life to give it, for you to give it, to share it, to hand it over, not for you to keep it for yourself. To whom do you want to give your life? It has a divine destiny. Out of love you were created in the image and likeness of God and only He will fill your desire for goodness, happiness and love.

The first and most important task you have in your hands is to discover and build your vocation. It is not something established from the beginning, in advance. It is the fruit of freedom, of a freedom built slowly, capable of venturing on the path of self-giving. Only with great inner freedom can you arrive at an authentic vocational decision. Freedom and love, in fact, are the two great wings to face the path of life, to give and deliver it.

I conclude by assuring you that I will always remember and commend you to the Lord, so that He may accompany you, guide you and direct your life along the path of grace and love. On your part, always seek the good Jesus, have Him as the friend of your soul, invoke Him, share with Him your sorrows, your anxieties, your worries, your joys and your sadnesses. And dare to commit yourself seriously to Him and to His cause. He is waiting for you.

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Have you thought about your vocation? St Francis de Sales could help you (2/10)

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2. What to do tomorrow

Dear young people,
you are certainly asking yourselves: what will we do later, what can we expect from life? What are we called to? These are questions that everyone asks themselves, consciously or even unconsciously. Perhaps you know the word 'vocation'. What a strange word: vocation! If you prefer, we can talk about happiness, the meaning of life, the will to live...

Vocation means call. Who is calling? That is a good question. Perhaps someone who loves me. Each of us has his or her own vocation. Mine was a bit special. In my native Savoy, when I was a small boy, at the age of eleven, I felt called to give myself to God in the service of his people, but my parents, particularly my father, had other plans for me, as I was the eldest in the family. As the years passed and during the studies my father had me do in Paris, my desire grew more and more: grammar, literature, philosophy, but also horse riding, fencing, dancing...

At 17, I had a crisis. I was doing well in my studies, but my heart was not satisfied. I was looking for something... During the carnival in Paris a friend saw me sad: "What's wrong, are you sick? Let's go and see the carnival", "But I don't want to see the carnival", I answered him, "I want to see God!" That year a famous Bible teacher was explaining the Song of Songs. I went to hear him. It was like a thunderbolt for me. The

Bible was a love story. I had found the One I was looking for! And with the help of my spiritual companion, I made a little rule to receive Jesus in the Eucharist as often as possible. At the age of 20 a new serious crisis hit me. I was convinced that I would go to hell, that I would be eternally damned. What pained me most, besides of course the deprivation of the vision of Jesus, was to be deprived of the vision of Mary. This thought tortured me: I almost did not eat any more, I did not sleep any more, I had become all yellow! My prayer was this: "Lord, I know, I will go to hell, but give me at least this grace that when I am in hell, I may continue to love you!" After six weeks of anguish I went to church before Our Lady's altar and prayed to her with a prayer that begins: "Remember, O Virgin Mary, that it has never been heard that anyone, having recourse to your patronage, imploring your help and protection, has been abandoned by you." After that my illness fell to the ground "like the scales of leprosy". I was cured!

After Paris, my father sent me to Padua to study law. Meanwhile I continued to suffer from my vocational dilemma: I felt that the call came from God, and at the same time I owed obedience to my father, according to the custom very much felt in my time. I was perplexed. I sought advice from my companions, especially Father Antonio Possevino. With his help and discernment, I chose some rules and exercises for the spiritual life and also for life in society with companions and all kinds of people. At the end of my studies I made a pilgrimage to Loreto. I remained as if in ecstasy – my companions say – for half an hour in the Holy House of Mary of Nazareth. I again entrusted my vocation and my future to the Mother of Jesus. I have never regretted having trusted Her totally.

Back home at the age of 24, I met a beautiful girl called Francesca. I liked her, but I liked my life project better. What to do? I will not tell you all the details of my battle here. Just know that in the end I dared to ask my father to give me permission to follow my dream. He finally accepted my

choice, but he cried.

From that moment on, my life changed completely. Before, my family and my classmates saw me all focused on myself, worried, a bit closed off. Then from one moment to the next, everything was set in motion. I had become another man. I was ordained a priest at the age of 26 and immediately threw myself into my mission. I had no more doubts: God wanted me on this path. I was happy.

My vocation, you may think, was a special vocation, although I will tell you that I was also made bishop of Geneva-Annecy at the age of 35. In my pastoral and accompaniment ministry, I was always convinced and taught that every one has a vocation. Indeed, it should not be said: everyone has a vocation, but it should be said: everyone is a vocation, that is, a person who has received a “providential” task in this world, in anticipation of the future world promised to us.

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Tibidabo Salesian house

Located on the highest peak of the Collserola mountains, offering a beautiful view of Barcelona, the Tibidabo Salesian House has a special history, linked to Don Bosco's visit to Spain in 1886.

The name of the hill, “Tibidabo”, derives from the Latin *Tibidabo*, which means “I will give you”, and is derived from some verses of Holy Scripture: “... *et dixit illi haec tibi omnia dabo si cadens adoraveris me*”, “... and he said to him: All these things I will give you if you will fall down and worship me” (Matthew 4:9). This sentence is uttered by the

devil to Jesus from a great height, showing him the kingdoms of the earth, trying to tempt him with the riches of this world.

The old name of the Barcelona hill was *Puig de l'Àliga* (Eagle Hill). The new name "Tibidabo", like other biblical names (Valley of Hebron, Mount Carmel, etc.), was given by some religious people who lived in the area. The choice of this new name was made because of the majestic view it offers over the city of Barcelona, from a height that gives one the feeling of dominating everything.

During his trip to Spain, on the afternoon of 5 May 1886, Don Bosco went to the basilica of Our Lady of Mercy, patron saint of the city of Barcelona, to thank her for the favours he had received during his visit to the city and for the Salesian work he had begun in Sarrià. There, some gentlemen from the Conferences of St Vincent de Paul approached him, gave him the ownership of a piece of land at the top of Tibidabo and asked him to build a shrine to the Sacred Heart of Jesus there. They asked him this favour "to keep firm and indestructible the religion that you have preached to us with such zeal and example and which is the inheritance of our fathers."

Don Bosco's reaction was spontaneous: "I am overwhelmed by this fresh, unexpected proof you give me of your piety and faith. Thank you, but you must realize that in this, you are the tools of Divine Providence. As I was leaving Turin to come to Spain, I was thinking to myself, now that the Church of the Sacred Heart in Rome is almost completed, I must look for some other way to honor the Sacred Heart and promote devotion to it. An interior voice bade me to be calm, assuring me that here I would be able to gratify this vow. That voice kept repeating to me, '*Tibi dabo, tibi dabo!*' Yes, gentlemen, you are the tools of Divine Providence. With your help, a shrine dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus will soon rise upon that mount. Everyone will find there an opportunity to receive the holy sacraments, and your charity and faith – of which you

have given me so many beautiful proofs – will be remembered forever.” ([MB](#) XVIII,114).

On 3 July of the same year, 1886, the now Venerable Dorothea de Chopitea, promoter of Salesian work in Barcelona and facilitator of Don Bosco’s visit to the city, financed the construction of a small chapel dedicated to the Sacred Heart on the same hill.

The church’s construction project was significantly delayed, mainly due to the appearance of a new project to build an astronomical observatory on top of Tibidabo, which was eventually built on a nearby hill (Fabra Observatory).

In 1902, the foundation stone of the church was laid and in 1911 the crypt of the current Tibidabo sanctuary was opened in the presence of the then Rector Major, Fr Paul Albera. A few days after the opening, the latter was named the “Expiatory and National Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus” in accordance with a decision taken at the 22nd International Eucharistic Congress held in Madrid at the end of June 1911. The work was completed in 1961 with the erection of the statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, seventy-five years after John Bosco’s visit to Barcelona. On 29 October 1961, the church received the title of minor basilica, granted by Pope John XXIII.

Today, the church continues to attract large numbers of pilgrims and visitors from all over the world. It warmly welcomes all those who come to the Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, for whatever reason, giving them the opportunity to receive the message of the Gospel and to approach the sacraments, especially the Eucharist and Reconciliation. It is at the same time a parish entrusted to the Salesians, even though it has few permanent parishioners. For those who have come with the intention of spending some time in prayer, it also makes available the materials offered by the Pope’s World Prayer Network, of which the church is a member.

Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament is continued during the day, and the practice of adoration at night is encouraged. And to those who wish to make a retreat, accommodation and food are provided within the Salesian structure.

A work dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus desired by Providence through St John Bosco, which continues its mission through history.

Fr Joan Codina i Giol, sdb
Director Tibibabo

Photo gallery Salesian House in Tibidabo

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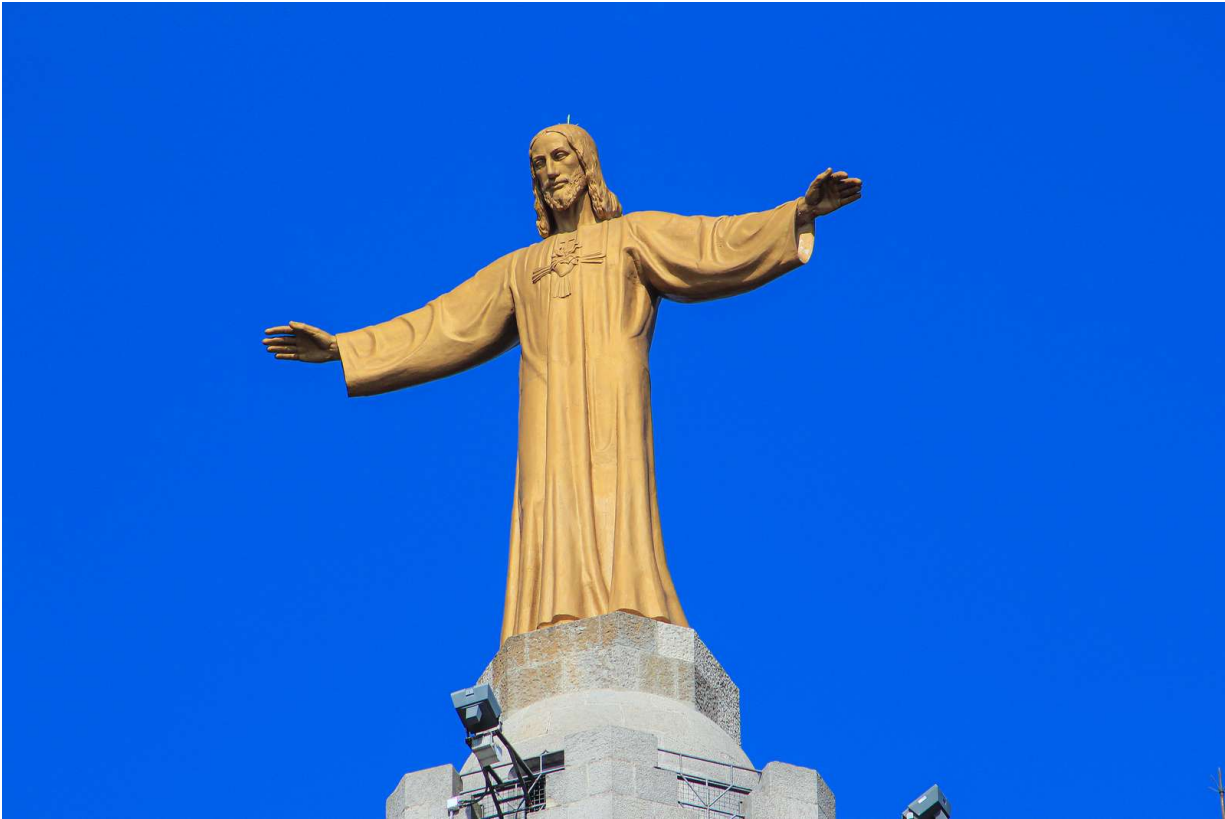
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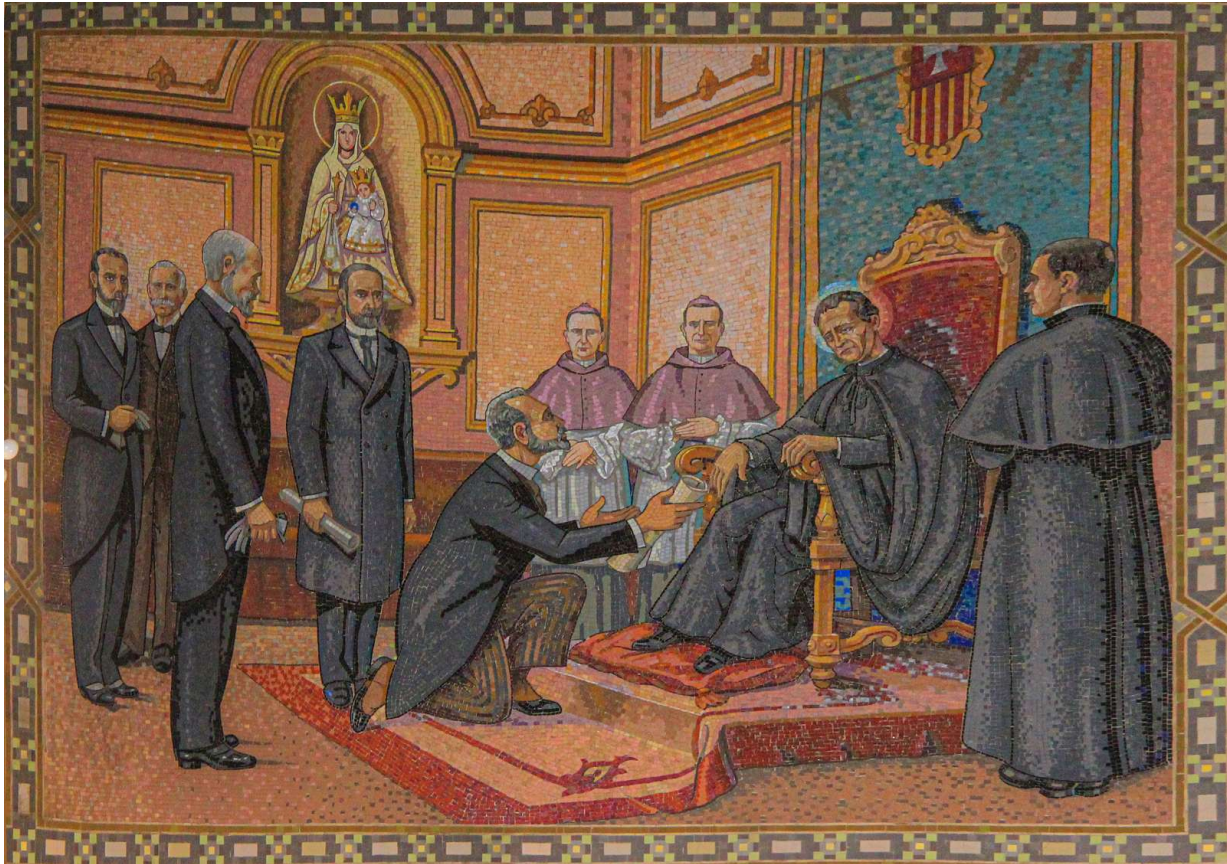
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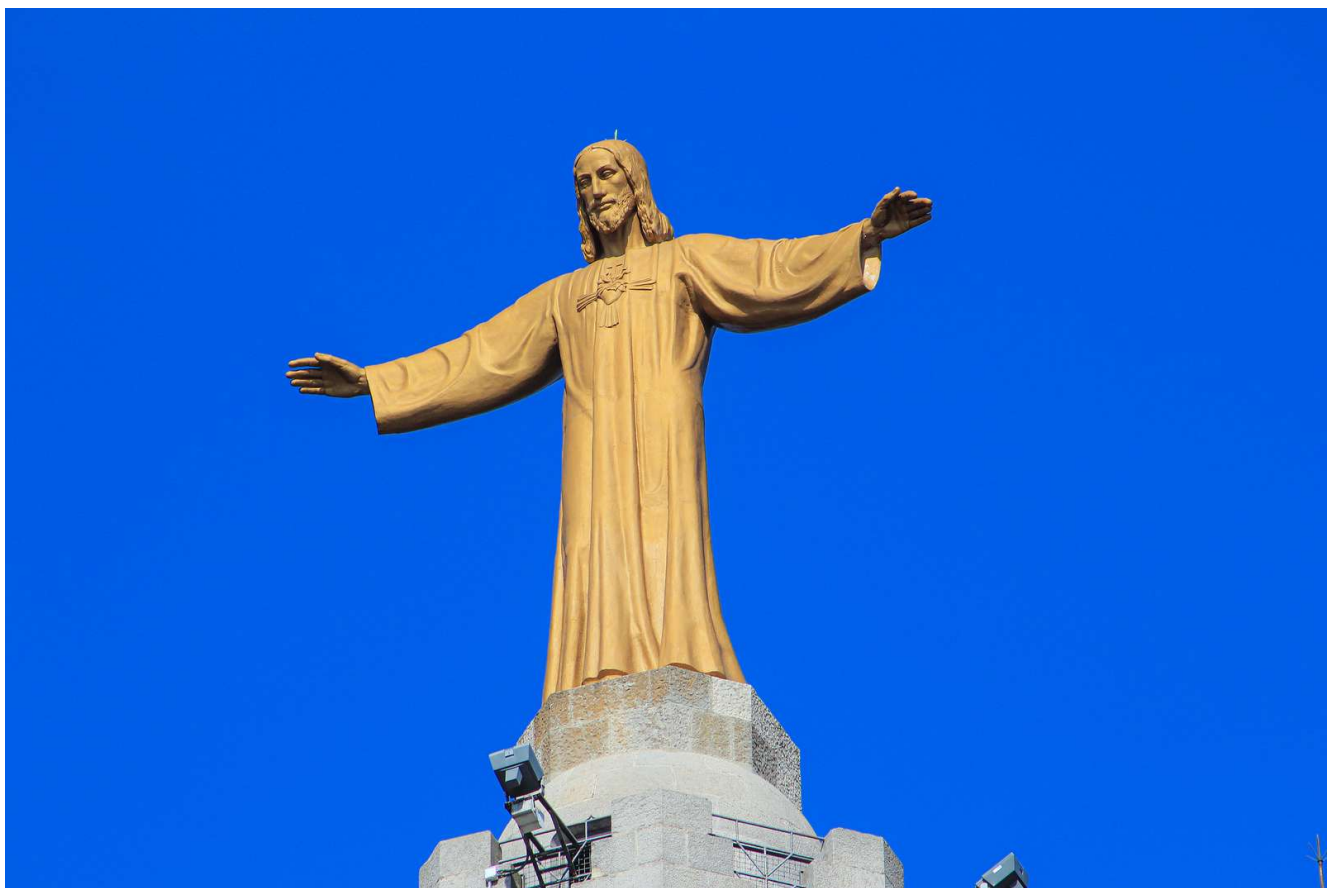
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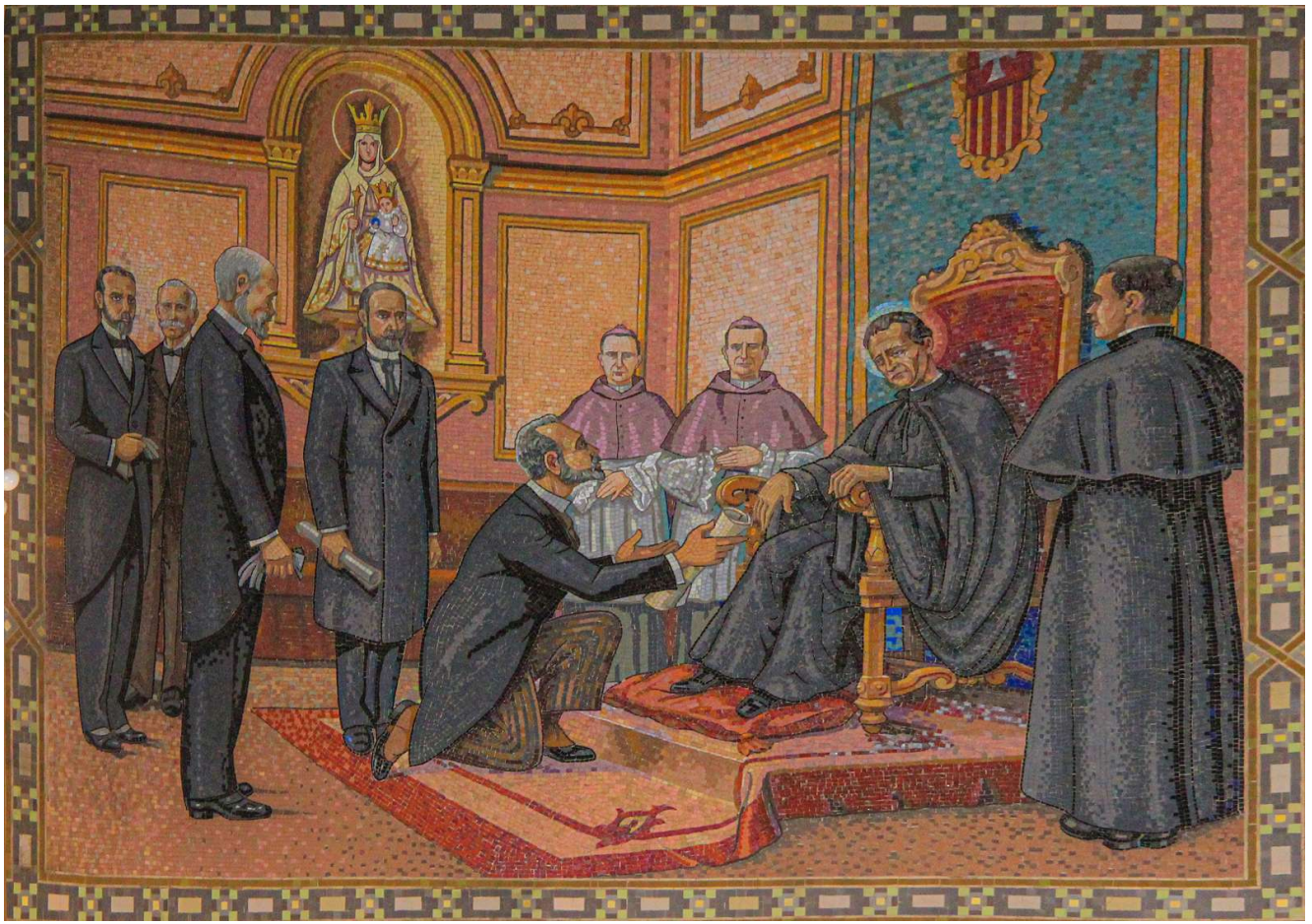


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Have you thought about your vocation? St Francis de Sales could help you (1/10)

“It is not by the greatness of our deeds that we will please God, but by the love with which we do them”, St Francis de Sales.

A ten-part process in which Saint Francis de Sales could also accompany young people today who are asking questions about the meaning of their lives.

1. If we started from the ABC of the Christian life

Dear young people,

I know that I am writing to those who already carry in their hearts a small desire for good, a search for light. You have already walked in friendship with the Lord, but allow me to summarise for you here the ABC of life as a believer, that is, a rich and deep inner and spiritual life. With this foundation you will be equipped to make fruitful choices in your existence. This work is not new to me: when I was Bishop, I visited all the parishes in my diocese, and many were located in the mountains. To reach them there were no roads and I had to walk long distances, even in winter, but I was happy to meet those simple people, to encourage them to live as God likes.

To walk fruitfully, the work of the spiritual guide who notices what is going on in your heart, encourages you, follows you, offers clear, gradual and stimulating proposals is decisive. I wrote in the *Philothea*: “Do you want to set out on the paths of the Spirit with confidence? Find someone capable who will be your guide and accompany you; it is the

recommendation of recommendations.” Four centuries ago, as today: this is the crucial, decisive point.

The goal to be reached is holiness, which consists of a conscious Christian life, that is, a deep friendship with God, a fervent spiritual life, marked by love of God and neighbour. It is a simple path, knowing that the great opportunities to serve God rarely present themselves, while the small ones always do. This encourages us to ready, active, diligent charity.

If, when thinking of such a goal, you are tempted by discouragement, I repeat what I wrote centuries ago: “We must not expect everyone to begin with perfection: it matters little how we begin. Just be determined to continue and finish well.”

To start off on the right foot, I invite you to purify your heart through confession. Sin is a lack of love, a robbery of your humanity, being in the dark and cold: in confession you hand over to Jesus everything that can weigh you down and make your journey dark. It is getting back the joy of the heart.

Going forward, the tools for walking are as old and valuable as the Church, and have sustained generations of Christians of all ages, for 20 centuries! You too have certainly experienced them.

Prayer, that is, dialogue with a Father who is in love with you and your life. Do not forget that you learn to pray by praying: so be faithful and persevering with it.

The Word of God, that is, the “letter from God” addressed precisely to you as individuals. It is like a sort of compass that guides your walking, especially when it is foggy, dark and you risk losing your bearings! Do not forget that in reading it you have the Treasure in your hands.

The sacrament of the Eucharist is the thermometer of your believing life: if your heart has not gained a lively desire to receive the Bread of Life, your encounter with Him will have modest results. I wrote to my contemporaries: “If the world asks you why you take communion so often, answer that it is to learn to love God, to purify you from your

imperfections, to free you from your miseries, to find strength in your weaknesses and consolation in your afflictions. Two kinds of people must communicate with each other often: the perfect, because being well-disposed they would do wrong not to approach the fountain and source of perfection; and the imperfect in order to strive for perfection. The strong so they don't weaken and the weak to strengthen themselves. The sick to heal and the healthy not to fall ill." Attend Holy Mass with great frequency: as much as possible!

I then insist on the virtues, because if the encounter with God is true and profound, it also changes relationships with people, work, things. They make it possible to have a humanly rich character, capable of true and profound friendships, to be joyfully committed to doing your duty well (work-study), being patient and warm in manner, kind.

All this does not take place in your lonely heart, to improve and please yourself. Life with others is an encouragement to journey better (how many are better than us!), to help more (how many need us!), to be helped (how much we have to learn!), to remind ourselves that we are not self-sufficient (we are not self-created and self-educated!). Without a community dimension, we soon lose ourselves.

I hope you have already tasted the fruits of stable guidance, of genuine confessions, of faithful and firm prayer, of the richness of the Word, of the Eucharist lived fruitfully, of virtues practised in the joy of daily life, of enriching friendships, of the indispensability of service. We flourish in this humus: only in this ecosystem can we perceive the true face of the Christian God, into whose hands it is wonderful and joyful to entrust ours life.

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The story of the construction of the Church of Mary Help of Christians (3/3)

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Always in action

But Providence must also be “sought”. And in August Don Bosco wrote again to Count Cibrario, Secretary of the Order of St Maurcie, to remind him that the time had come to honour the second part of the financial commitment he had made two years earlier. From Genoa, fortunately, he received substantial offers from Count Pallavicini and Counts Viancino di Viancino; other offers reached him in September from Countess Callori di Vignale and likewise from other cities, Rome and Florence in particular.

However, a very cold winter soon arrived, with the consequent increase in consumer prices, including bread. Don Bosco went into a liquidity crisis. Between feeding hundreds of mouths and suspending building work, the choice was forced on him. Work on the church therefore stagnated, while debts grew. So, on 4 December, Don Bosco took pen and paper and wrote to Cavalier Oreglia in Rome: “Collect lots of money, then come back, because we don’t know where to get any more. It is true that Our Lady always does her part, but at the end of the year, all the providers ask for money.” Great!

9 June 1868: solemn consecration of the Church of Mary Help of Christians

In January 1868 Don Bosco set about completing the interior decoration of the Church of Mary Help of Christians.

At Valdocco the situation was still quite serious. Don Bosco wrote to Cav. Oreglia in Rome: "Here we continue with very intense cold: today it reached 18 degrees below zero; despite the fire in the stove, the ice in my room would not melt. We have delayed rising time for the boys, and as most are still dressed for summer, each puts on two shirts, a jacket, two pairs of breeches, military coats; others keep the blankets over their shoulders throughout the day and look like carnival masquerades."

Fortunately, a week later the cold diminished and the metre of snow began to melt.

Meanwhile, the commemorative medal was being prepared in Rome. Don Bosco, once he had it in hand, had corrections made to the inscription and the thickness halved in order to save money. Even so, the amount of money collected was always less than what was needed. So, the collection for the chapel of St. Anne promoted by the Florentine noblewomen, in particular Countess Virginia Cambray Digny, wife of the Minister of Agriculture, Finance and Commerce, in mid-February, was still one sixth of the total (6000 lira). However, Don Bosco did not despair and invited the Countess to Turin: "I hope that on some occasion you will be able to visit us and see with your own eyes this majestic building, of which it can be said that every brick is an offering made by those now near and now far but always for grace received."

And so it really was. At the beginning of spring, he told the Cavlier as usual (and he would print it shortly afterwards in the commemorative booklet (*The wonders of the Mother of God invoked under the title of Mary Help of Christians*): "I am swamped with expenses, many things to be settled, all the work to be resumed; do what you can but pray with faith. I think the time is right for those who want grace from Mary! We see one every day."



Initial altar of the Church of Mary Help of Christians

Preparations for the feast

In mid-March, Archbishop Riccardi fixed the date for consecration of the church for the first fortnight in June. Everything was ready by then: the two bell towers on the façade surmounted by two archangels, the large golden statue on the dome already blessed by the archbishop, the five marble altars with their respective paintings, including the marvellous one of Mary Help of Christians with the child in her arms, surrounded by angels, apostles, evangelists, in a blaze of light and colour.

An exceptional plan for the preparation was then set in motion. First of all, it was a matter of finding the consecrating bishop; then contacting various bishops for the solemn celebrations in the morning and evening of each day of the Octave; then issuing personal invitations to dozens of distinguished benefactors, priests and lay people from all over Italy, many of whom were to be hosted in the house in a worthy manner; finally, it was a matter of preparing hundreds of children both to solemnise the pontifical and liturgical ceremonies with songs, and to participate in academies, games, parades, moments of joy and merriment.

Finally the big day

Three days before 9 June, the boys from the Lanzo boarding school arrived in Valdocco. On Sunday 7 June, *L'Unità Cattolica* published the programme for the celebrations, and on Monday 8 June the first guests arrived and the arrival of the Duke of Aosta representing the Royal Family was announced. The boys from the Mirabello boarding school also arrived. The singers spent hours rehearsing the new Mass by Maestro De Vecchi and Fr Cagliero's new *Tantum Ergo*, as well as the solemn antiphon *Maria Succurre Miseris* also by Cagliero, which had been inspired by the polyphonic *Tu es Petrus* from the Vatican basilica.

The following morning, 9 June, at 5.30 a.m., passing between a double line of 1,200 festive and singing boys, the archbishop

made the triple tour around the church and then with the clergy entered the church to perform the planned consecration ceremonies of the altars behind closed doors. It was only at 10.30 that the church was thrown open to the public, who attended the archbishop's Mass and Don Bosco's following Mass. The archbishop returned in the afternoon for the pontifical vespers, solemnized by the triple choir of singers: 150 tenors and basses at the foot of St Joseph's altar, 200 sopranos and contraltos on the dome, another 100 tenors and basses in the orchestra. Fr Cagliero conducted them, even without seeing them all, through an electric contraption designed for the occasion.



The old sacristy of the Church of Mary Help of Christians

It was a triumph of sacred music, an enchantment, something heavenly. Indescribable was the emotion of those present, who on leaving the church were also able to admire the external illumination of the façade and the dome surmounted by the illuminated statue of Mary Help of Christians.

And Don Bosco? All day surrounded by a crowd of benefactors and friends, moved beyond words, he did nothing but praise Our Lady. An "impossible" dream had come true.

An equally solemn octave

Solemn celebrations alternated morning and evening throughout the octave. They were unforgettable days, the most solemn Valdocco had ever seen. Don Bosco immediately made them widely known through a solid publication "[Remembrance of a solemnity in honour of Mary Help of Christians](#)".

On 17 June some peace returned to Valdocco, the young guests went back to their schools, the devotees to their homes; the church still lacked interior finishing touches, ornaments, furnishings... But the devotion to Mary Help of Christians, which by then had become "Don Bosco's Madonna" quickly spread

throughout Piedmont, Italy, Europe and Latin America. Today in the world there are hundreds of churches dedicated to her, thousands of altars, millions of pictures and little images. Don Bosco repeats to everyone today, as he did to Fr Cagliero as he left for the missions in November 1875: "Place all your trust in Jesus Christ in the Blessed Sacrament and in Mary Help of Christians and you will see what miracles are."

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The story of the construction of the Church of Mary Help of Christians (2/3)

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The Lottery

The authorisation was granted very quickly, so the complex machine of collecting and evaluating the gifts and selling the tickets was immediately set in motion in Valdocco: everything as indicated in the regulation plan circulated in the press. It was Cav. Federico Oreglia di Santo Stefano, a Salesian Brother, who personally worked to obtain names of prominent people to be included in the Promoters' catalogue, ask for other gifts, and find buyers or "sellers" of lottery tickets. The lottery was, of course, publicised in the city's Catholic press, although only after the closing of the deaf-mute lottery at the beginning of June.

The works continue, as well as expenses and debts

On 4 June the masonry work was already two metres above ground, but on 2 July Don Bosco was forced to resort urgently

to a generous benefactor so that the master builder Buzzetti could pay the “workers’ salary” (8000 euro). A few days later he again asked another aristocratic benefactor if he could undertake to pay for at least some of the four batches of tiles, planks and laths for the church roof over the course of the year, for a total expenditure of around 16,000 lire (64,000 euro). On 17 July it was the turn of a priest promoter of the lottery to be asked for urgent help in paying “another workers’ salary”: Don Bosco suggested that he get the money with an immediate bank loan, or rather prepare it for the end of the week when he himself would go to pick it up, or even better, to bring it directly to Valdocco where he could see the church under construction in person. In short, he was navigating by sight and the risk of foundering due to lack of liquidity was renewed every month.

On 10 August, he sent the printed forms to Countess Virginia Cambray Digny, wife of the Mayor of Florence, the new capital of the Kingdom, inviting her to personally promote the lottery. By the end of the month, part of the walls were already at roof level. And shortly before Christmas, she sent 400 tickets to Marquis Angelo Nobili Vitelleschi of Florence with a request to distribute them among known individuals.

The search for donations for the Valdocco lottery and the sale of the tickets would continue over the following years. Don Bosco’s circulars would spread especially to the centre north of the country. Even benefactors in Rome, the pope himself, would play their part. But why would they have committed themselves to selling lottery tickets to build a church that was not their own, moreover in a city that had just ceased to be the capital of the Kingdom (January 1865)?

There could have been many reasons, obviously including winning some nice prize, but certainly one of the most important was of a spiritual nature: to all those who had contributed to building the “Mary’s house” on earth, at Valdocco, by means of alms in general or paying for items (windows, stained glass windows, altar, bells, vestments...) Don Bosco in the Virgin Mary’s name, had guaranteed a special

prize: “fine accommodation”, a “room” not just anywhere, but “in paradise”.

Our Lady seeks alms for her church

On 15 January 1867, the Prefecture of Turin issued a decree establishing the date for the lottery draw on 1 April. From Valdocco there was a rush to send the remaining tickets throughout Italy, with a request to return the unsold ones by mid-March so that they could be sent elsewhere before the draw.

Don Bosco, who had already been preparing for a second trip to Rome at the end of December 1866 (9 years after the first one), with a stopover in Florence, to try to reach an agreement between State and Church on the appointment of new bishops, took the opportunity to go back over the network of his Florentine and Roman friendships. He managed to sell many bundles of tickets, so much so that his travelling companion, Fr Francesia, urged the shipment of others, because “everyone wants some”.



The basilica and the primitive square

If Turin charity, once the city was downgraded from its role as capital of the Kingdom, was in crisis, Florence's, on the other hand, was growing and so played its part with many generous aristocratic women; Bologna was no less worthy, with Marquis Prospero Bevilacqua and Countess Sassatelli. No was Milan lacking, even though it was to the Milanese Rosa Guenzati on 21 March that Don Bosco confided: “The lottery is nearing its end and we still have many tickets.”

What was the final economic result of the lottery? About 90,000 lire [328,000 euro], a nice sum, one might say, but it was only a sixth of the money already spent; so much so that on 3 April Don Bosco had to ask a benefactor for an urgent loan of 5,000 lire [18,250 euro] for payment for building

materials that could be delayed no further: some expected income had not turned up.

Our Lady intervenes

The following week, while negotiating about the side altars with Countess Virginia Cambray Digny of Florence – she had personally promoted a collection of funds for an altar to be dedicated to St Anne (Our Lady's mother) – Don Bosco informed her of the resumption of work and the hope (which turned out to be in vain) of being able to open the church within the year. He was always counting on the offerings for graces that Our Lady continually granted his donors, and wrote to everyone, to Cambray Digny herself, to Miss Pellico, sister of the famous Silvio, etc. Some of his female benefactors, incredulous, asked him for confirmation and Don Bosco repeated his request.



The Basilica of Mary Help of Christians as Don Bosco built it

The graces increased, their reputation spread and Don Bosco had to restrain himself because, as he wrote on 9 May to Cav. Oreglia di S. Stefano, a Salesian sent to Rome to seek charity: "I cannot write because I am too involved." Indeed, he could not fail to update his alms-giver the following month: "A gentleman who had his arm healed immediately brought 3,000 lire [€11,000] used to pay part of the previous year's debts... I have never boasted of extraordinary things; I have always said that Our Lady Help of Christians has granted and still grants extraordinary graces to those who in some way contribute to the building of this church. I have always said and I still say: 'the offering will be made when grace is received, not before' [*italics in the original*]". And on 25 July he told Countess Callori about a girl he had taken in who was "mad and furious" and held down by two men; as soon as she was blessed she calmed down and went to confession.

If Our Lady was active, Don Bosco certainly was not standing still either. On 24 May he sent out another circular for the building and furnishing of the chapel of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary: he enclosed a form for the monthly offering, while he asked everyone for a Hail Mary for the donors. On the same day, with remarkable “nerve” he asked Mother Galeffi, Superior of the Oblates at Tor de Specchi in Rome, whether or not the 2000 *scudi* promised some time before for the altar of the Sacred Hearts was part of her renewed willingness to do other things for the church. On 4 July, he thanked Prince Orazio Falconieri di Carpegna of Rome for the gift of a chalice and an offering for the church. He wrote to everyone that the church was progressing and that he was awaiting promised gifts such as altars, bells, balustrades etc. The large offerings therefore came from aristocrats, the princes of the church, but there was no lack of “widow’s mites”, offerings from simple people: “Last week, in small offerings made for graces received, 3800 francs were recorded” [€12,800].

On 20 February 1867, the *Gazzetta Piemontese* gave the following news: “to the many calamities with which Italy is afflicted – [think of the third war of independence that has just ended], we must now add the reappearance of cholera.” It was the beginning of the nightmare that would threaten Italy for the next twelve months, with tens of thousands of deaths all over the country, including Rome, where the disease also claimed victims among civil and ecclesiastical dignitaries.

Don Bosco’s benefactors were worried, but he reassured them: “none of those taking part in the construction of the church in honour of Mary will fall victim to these illnesses, as long as they put their trust in her”, he wrote at the beginning of July to the Duchess of Sora.

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The story of the construction of the Church of Mary Help of Christians (1/3)

“Our Lady did it all”, we are used to reading in Salesian spiritual literature, to indicate that the Virgin was at the origin of Don Bosco’s whole story. If we apply those words to the construction of the Church of Mary Help of Christians, the truth of it is very well documented, always bearing in mind that, alongside heavenly intervention, Don Bosco also played his part, and how!

Launching the idea and first promises of grants (1863)

At the end of January and beginning of February 1863, Don Bosco sent out a lengthy circular about the purpose of a church, dedicated to Mary Help of Christians, which he had in mind to build at Valdocco: it was to serve the masses of young people taken in there and the twenty thousand souls from the surrounding area, with the further possibility of being erected as a parish by the diocesan authority.

Shortly afterwards, on 13 February, he informed Pope Pius IX, not only that the church was a parish church, but that it was already “under construction”. He obtained the desired outcome from Rome: at the end of March he received 500 lira. Thanking the Cardinal Secretary of State Antonelli for the grant received, he wrote that “the works... are about to begin”. In fact, in May he bought land and timber for the building site and in the summer the excavation work began, which continued until the autumn.

On the eve of the feast of Mary Help of Christians, 23 May, the Ministry of Grace, Justice and Worship, having heard the Mayor, Marquis Emanuele Luserna, declared that it was willing

to provide a grant. Don Bosco took the opportunity to make an immediate appeal to the generosity of the first Secretary of the *Ordine Mauriziano* (The Orders of Sts Maurice and Lazaraus) and the Mayor. He sent a twofold appeal to them on the same date: he asked the former, privately, for as big a grant as possible as possible, reminding him of the commitment he had made on the occasion of his visit to Valdocco; he asked the latter formally, officially, for the same, but dwelling in detail on the church to be built.

Early replies

The appeals made for offerings were followed by replies. The reply on 29 May from the secretary of the Order of St Maurice was negative for the current year, but not for the following year when a grant (amount unspecified) could be budgeted for. The reply from the Ministry on 26 July, however, was positive: 6,000 lire were allocated, but half would be delivered when the foundations were laid at ground level, and the other half when the church was roofed; everything, however, was conditional on the inspection and approval of a special government commission. Finally, on 11 December came the answer, unfortunately negative, from the city council: the municipality's financial contribution was only envisaged for parish churches, and Don Bosco's was not such. Nor, given the fact that the Diocese was a vacant see at that stage, could it easily be granted. Don Bosco then took a few days of reflection and on Christmas Eve reaffirmed his intention to the Mayor to build a large parish church to serve the "densely populated neighbourhood." If there was a failure in providing a grant, he would have to limit himself to a much smaller church. But this new appeal also fell on deaf ears.

1863 thus ended for Don Bosco with little to show for it in real terms, apart from a few general promises. There was cause for discouragement. But if the public authorities were lacking in financial support, Don Bosco thought, Divine Providence would not fail. He had experienced its strong presence some fifteen years earlier, during the construction of the church

of St Francis de Sales. He therefore entrusted the engineer, Antonio Spezia, already known to him as an excellent professional, with the task of drawing up the plans for the new church he had in mind. Among other things, he was to work, once again, free of charge.

The decisive year (1864)

In little more than a month the plans were ready, and at the end of January 1864 they were handed over to the municipal building commission. In the meantime, Don Bosco had asked the management of the State Railways of Upper Italy to transport the stones from Borgone in the lower Susa Valley to Turin free of charge. The favour was quickly granted, but the Building Commission was not so favourable. In mid-March it rejected the drawings that had been delivered due to some “construction irregularity”, inviting the engineer to modify them. Resubmitted on 14 May, they were found to be defective again on 23 May, with a further invitation to take them into account; alternatively, it was suggested that a different design be considered. Don Bosco accepted the first proposal, and on 27 May the revised project was approved and on 2 June the City Council issued the building permit.



First photo of the Church of Mary Help of Christians

Meanwhile Don Bosco had wasted no time. He had asked the Mayor to have the exact alignment of the sunken Via Cottolengo drawn up, in order to be able to raise it at his own expense with material from church excavations. In addition, he had sent out a printed circular throughout central and northern Italy, through some trusted benefactors, in which he presented the pastoral reasons for the new church, its dimensions, and its costs (which actually quadrupled during the course of construction). The appeal, addressed above all to “devotees of Mary”, was accompanied by a registration form for those who

wished to indicate in advance the sum they would pay over the three-year period 1864-1866. The circular also indicated the possibility of offering materials for the church or other items needed for it. In April the announcement was published in the Official Gazette of the Kingdom and in *L'Unità Cattolica*.

The work continued and Don Bosco had to always be there because of the constant requests for changes, especially regarding the demarcation lines on the irregular Via Cottolengo. In September he sent out a new circular to a wider circle of benefactors, modelled on the previous one, but specifying that the work would be finished within three years. He also sent a copy to Princes Tommaso and Eugenio of the House of Savoy and to Mayor Emanuele Luserna di Rorà; however, he only asked them, once again, to collaborate on the project by rectifying Via Cottolengo.

Debts, a lottery and much courage

At the end of January 1865, on the feast of St Francis de Sales when Salesians from various houses were gathered at Valdocco, Don Bosco told them of his intention to start a new lottery to raise funds for the continuation of the work (of excavation) for the church. However, he had to postpone it due to the simultaneous presence in the city of another work on behalf of deaf-mutes. As a result, the work, which would have resumed in the spring after the winter break, had no financial cover. So, Don Bosco urgently asked his friend and confrere from Mornese, Fr Domenico Pestarino, for a loan of 5000 lire (20,000 euro). He did not want to resort to a bank loan in the capital, since interest rates were too high. As if these thorny financial problems were not enough, others arose at the same time with the neighbours, in particular those in the Casa Bellezza. Don Bosco had to pay them compensation so he could deny them passage through the Via della Giardiniera, which then ceased to be a road.

Solemn laying of the foundation stone

The day finally came for the laying of the foundation stone of the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians on 27 April 1865. Three days before, Don Bosco issued the invitations in which he announced that His Royal Highness Prince Amadeus of Savoy would lay the cornerstone, while the religious function would be presided over by the Bishop of Casale, Bishop Pietro Maria Ferrè. However, the latter passed away at the last minute and the solemn ceremony was celebrated by the Bishop of Susa, Bishop Giovanni Antonio Odone, in the presence of the City Prefect, the Mayor, various City Councillors, benefactors, members of the city nobility and the Lottery Commission. Duke Amedeo's procession was welcomed to the sound of the royal march by the band and the children's choir at Valdocco, and Mirabello students. The city press acted as a sounding board for the festive event and Don Bosco, for his part, grasping its great political-religious significance, extended its historical scope with his own publications.



Mary Help of Christians Square and Church

Three days later, in a long and painful letter to Pope Pius IX about the difficult situation in which the Holy See found itself in in the face of the politics of the Kingdom of Italy, he mentioned the church with its walls already rising from ground level. He asked for a blessing on the ongoing enterprise and for gifts for the lottery he was about to launch. In fact, in mid-May he formally asked the Prefecture of Turin for authorisation, justifying it with the need to pay off the debts of the various oratories in Turin, to provide food, clothing, accommodation and schooling for the 880 or so pupils at Valdocco, and to continue the work on the Church of Mary Help of Christians. Obviously, he undertook to observe all the numerous legal provisions in this regard.

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Life

'Life' is a group of young people which began in 1975 in Sicily, who want to live human and Christian values with commitment and express them through artistic language. Shows, music, songs, dances to propose a message to the public, to say something that helps people reflect and pray. They want to bring the Christian proposal to theatres and squares in a new way of evangelising.

I had seen them at work on the stage of one of the biggest theatres in Catania, in front of more than 1,800 young people from the city's schools. They were presenting a musical that helped to reflect on the value of life in youthful language. Singing, dancing, lights, special effects kept the youngsters nailed to their seats all morning. On my way out, I wanted to mingle with the spectators to catch a few comments: "Really cool! I loved the ballets!"... "Did you see that there was also a live orchestra? I'd like to ask if I could join"..."They're about my age, but what voices!..."

I, too, was impressed by that group of young actors, not only because of the quality of their performance, but also because even before the audience arrived I had seen that they were working hard to get everything in order: there were some positioning the floodlights, some testing out the microphones, some setting out the costumes, some at the last rehearsal of a ballet and some doing vocals to get their voices ready. Everyone knew what they had to do and carried out their task responsibly. When the theatre was full, before kicking off, they all disappeared behind the closed curtain. I wanted to peek in and saw that they were all there in a circle for a short prayer before the performance began. I was struck by this fact. I knew that it was a Salesian group belonging to

the CGS Association (*Cinecircoli Giovanili Socioculturali*); so, I decided to go and see them at their headquarters to find out more and get to know them better.

I found a very simple setting: a small room for rehearsals and meetings, a small room for recordings, a mezzanine with wardrobes for costumes, a storage room for scenes and lighting and sound equipment, but above all I found a lot of creativity and Salesian spirit. Welcoming me was Armando B., founder and head of the group, as well as composer of all the music, and five other young men. I asked them to tell me a little about their story.

"Our group," Armando said, "is called LIFE, *Vita*! Yes, because we are together to discover the meaning of life and to announce the joy of life to the world. We began in 1975 out of the desire some of us had (we were 15 years old then) to be together, bound by our love for music. We have come a long way since then! Over the years, the need has gradually matured to deepen our faith, to live human and Christian values in a committed way, and to express them through artistic language. Thus, our musicals were born, shows entirely conceived and produced by us: from the music to the lyrics, the costumes to the sets, from the lighting to the sound... and we have also recorded many cassettes and CDs." "See here on the walls the posters and photos of our shows over all these years," Paolo added.



'Life' was the first original show that tackled the problem of drugs and dialogue within the family; then there was **'Welcome Poverty'**, which helps us reflect on consumerism and the true freedom that comes from detachment from riches; there juvenile delinquency and Don Bosco's educational proposals in **'My name too is John'**; the choice in the last in the musical **'The Girl from Poitiers'**, the culture of life versus the culture of

death in **'Open up to Life'**; the wisdom of the Gospel overlapping the wisdom of the world in **'What if it wasn't a Dream?'**; **'Stories for Living'**, small stories of today and yesterday in the light of Salesian spirituality; **'3P'** – Padre Pino Puglisi, the story of the priest victim of the Mafia; **'On the Wings of Love'**, presenting the experience of the Servant of God Nino Baglieri; and **'What Remains is Love'** on the message of St Paul.

"Recently we staged **'Baraccopoli,'**" Giuseppe said, "a musical that touches on the theme of the marginalised and solidarity. The latest, however, is a play about Pope Francis and his message to the people of our time. It is entitled **'From the End of the World'.**"

Sara interrupted him and, showing me some DVDs, added:

"You see, we have also tried our hand at film production and, in addition to the film versions of **'Stories for Living'** and **'Open to Life'**, we have made three other films – **'God's Athlete, Placido and Nicolò'** -, which have received special prizes and awards.

I was truly amazed at the material documenting so many years of activity, and ventured a question:

"What drives you to do all this?"

Alessandra smiled and answered:

"Ours seeks to be a new way of doing evangelisation, of bringing the Christian proposal to the theatres and squares. The experience of our tours is always exciting: we have travelled from one end of Italy to the other and we have also been abroad. Each time it is a new boost for us because at the same time as we **'announce'** something, the awareness and conviction of what we are proposing to others grows."

Armando added:

"In order to be able to say something to others, it is essential to have lived it in real time first! This is why our CGS. invests a lot in formation: every Saturday we meet to pray together and every Sunday we have our formation meeting. In the summer we set aside ten days or so for **'expression camp'**, days in which we reflect on God's word and express our

reflections creatively (music, dance, mime...). At times during the liturgical year, we meet for a day of retreat. It is a proposal, ours, that we offer to many young people in our area and beyond, of different age groups. The older ones accompany the younger ones. Many come to us attracted by the music and the desire to find friends and form a group, and gradually become involved in a journey of faith.

"Yes," Simone said, "I can testify with my own story: at the beginning I came to the group only because I liked acting and also wanted to learn to play an instrument. Here I found both, but above all I met people who knew how to listen to me and who showed me a way of life different from the one I had experienced until then. Here I also began to get to know the Gospel."

I felt good with them and stayed to chat until the evening. I learned about the many experiences of these young people, such as going to pubs to play music and engaging young customers in conversations on certain topics that would encourage them to reflect on their lives, or going to bring help to the homeless on particularly cold evenings, or running an oratory in the neighbourhood in the Don Bosco manner, or animating youth gatherings at diocesan or regional gatherings.

I went back again one Saturday to see them. It was all a construction site: Joseph was animating the meeting of the pre-adolescents who were crammed into the small room usually used for recordings, three other young people were painting the scenes of the show being planned, a small group was rehearsing the various voices of a song, while two were intent on writing on sheets of paper. "Let's prepare tomorrow night's meeting for the families," they said. "There will be couples who belong to the group, but also the parents of our boys. We also want to involve them in a formative journey."

So much life in this group, I said to myself; they really have chosen the right name: LIFE!

Photo gallery "Life"

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