

Don Bosco with his Salesians

If Don Bosco happily joked with his boys to see them cheerful and serene, he also revealed in jest with his Salesians the esteem he had for them, the desire to see them form one big family with him, poor yes, but trusting in Divine Providence, united in faith and charity.

Don Bosco's fiefdoms

In 1830 Margaret Occhiena, widow of Francis Bosco, made the division of the property inherited from her husband between her stepson Anthony and her two sons Joseph and John. It consisted, among other things, of eight plots of land comprising meadows, fields and vineyards. We know nothing precise about the criteria followed by Mamma Margaret in dividing her father's inheritance between the three of them. However, among the plots of land there was a vineyard near the Becchi (at Bric dei Pin), a field at Valcapone (or Valcappone) and another at Bacajan (or Bacaiau). In any case, these three lands constitute the "fiefdoms" as Don Bosco jokingly termed his property.

The Becchi, as we all know, is the lowly hamlet where Don Bosco was born; Valcappone (or Valcapone) was a site to the east of the Colle under the Serra di Capriglio but down in the valley in the area known as Sbaruau (= bogeyman), because it was thickly wooded with a few huts hidden among the branches that served as a place of storage for launderers and as a refuge for brigands. Bacajan (or Bacaiau) was a field east of the Colle between the Valcapone and Morialdo plots. Here are Don Bosco's "fiefdoms"!

The Biographical Memoirs say that for some time Don Bosco had conferred noble titles on his lay collaborators. So there was the Count of the Becchi, the Marquis of Valcappone, the Baron of Bacaiau, the three lands that Don Bosco must have known to be part of his inheritance. "For some time now he had been in the habit of jestingly conferring titles of nobility such as

“Count of Becchi” or “Marquis of Valcappone” on his senior lay co-workers, particularly [Joseph] Rossi, [Charles] Gastini, [Peter] Enria, [Andrew] Pelazza, and [Joseph] Buzzetti, not only within the Oratory but also outside, especially when traveling with any of them during the summer months” (BM VIII, 101).

Among these “noble” Salesians, we know for sure, that the Count of the Becchi (or of the Bricco del Pino) was Giuseppe Rossi, the first lay Salesian, or “Coadjutor” who loved Don Bosco like a most affectionate son and was faithful to him for ever.

Once Don Bosco went to the Porta Nuova station with Joseph Rossi, who was carrying Don Bosco’s suitcase. As usual, he arrived as the train was about to leave and all the coaches were full. The windows were either closed or had passengers blocking the view to convey the impression that there were no vacant seats in their compartments. Turning to Rossi, Don Bosco rather loudly remarked, “My dear Count, I regret inconveniencing you. You shouldn’t be carrying my suitcase.” “Forget it. I feel honoured to be of service to you.” At hearing this, the passengers closest to them exchanged surprised looks.

“Don Bosco!” they immediately shouted. “We have two seats here. Please come in!”

“But I wouldn’t want to trouble you!” Don Bosco replied.

“Never mind! It’s a pleasure to have you. We have plenty of room!”

And so the “Count of the Becchi” was able to get on the train with Don Bosco and the suitcase.

The pumps and a shack

Don Bosco lived and died poor. For food he was content with very little. Even a glass of wine was already too much for him, and he systematically watered it down.

“Often he forgot to drink, taken up by quite different thoughts, and his table companions would have to pour wine into his glass. If the wine was good, he then would instantly

reach for water to dilute it and 'make it even better,' as he would say. With a smile he would add, 'I've renounced the world and the devil, but not the pumps.' He drank only one glass at each meal." (BM IV, 134).

Even for accommodation we know how he lived. On 12 September 1873 the General Conference of the Salesians was held to re-elect an Economer and three Councillors. On that occasion Don Bosco spoke memorable and prophetic words on the development of the Congregation. Then when he came to speak about the Superior Chapter, which by now seemed to need a suitable residence, he said, amidst universal hilarity: "Were it possible (he went on in a humorous vein) I would like to set up a shed in the middle of the playground for the chapter members so they could be isolated from all other mortals. But since they are still entitled to live on this earth, they may choose to reside in whatever house it may seem best." (BM X, 464).

Otis, botis, pija tutis

Don Bosco also had a mysterious answer for a cleric or a student who asked him how he could know the future and guess so many secrets.

"I'll tell you,' he would reply. "The key to everything is Otis, Batis, Pia, Tutis. Do you know what that means?"

"No, Father!"

"Pay attention. It's Greek." And slowly he would repeat: "O-tis, Bo-tis, Pi-a, Tu-tis. Is it clear now?"

"No!"

"I know those words are hard to understand. That's why I never reveal their meaning. No one knows it and no one ever will because it would not be wise for me to reveal it. It is the big secret to all my wonders. With this magic formula I can read consciences and solve any mystery. Let's see how smart you are. See if you can make something out of it!" He would then repeat the four words while placing his forefinger successively on the questioner's forehead, nose, chin, and chest, ending with an unexpected little tap on the cheek. The

boy or cleric would laugh and, while kissing Don Bosco's hand, still insist, "But, Father, at least translate those words." "I could, but you still wouldn't understand." And then playfully he would add in Piedmontese dialect, "When they give you a beating, take it like a man!" This conclusion would set them all laughing heartily. (BM VI, 236-237). And he meant that in order to become a saint, one must accept all the sufferings that life has in store for us.

Protector of tinsmiths

Every year the young boarders went on an outing to Monsieur Olive's villa, the generous cooperator already known to us. On this occasion, the father and mother waited on the superiors while their children waited on their pupils. They also organized a lottery, giving a number to everyone of the superiors and boys so that everyone won something. In this way, the Olive family made a gift of their coach to the Oratory of St. Leo. This outing occurred during Don Bosco's visit to Marseille in 1884, and an amusing incident occurred. While the boys were playing in the gardens, a servant came running up to Madame Olive, greatly agitated.

"Madame, the pot where the soup is cooking for the boys is leaking badly and there is no way to stop it. We will have to go without soup." The mistress of the house, who had immense faith in Don Bosco, had a sudden idea. She summoned all the boys and told them, "Listen, if you want to have some soup, kneel down here and say a Pater, Ave, and Gloria to Don Bosco, so that he may resolder the soup pot."

The boys obeyed and instantly the pot stopped leaking. This is an historical event, and when Don Bosco heard it, he laughed heartily, saying, "From this day on, people will say that Don Bosco is the patron of tinsmiths." (BM XVII, 36-37).

The tree

A man had four children. He wanted his children to learn not to judge things quickly. Therefore, he invited each of them to take a trip to look at a tree that was planted in a distant place. He sent them out one at a time, three months apart. The children obeyed.

When the last one returned, he gathered them together and asked them to describe what they had seen.

The first son said that the tree was ugly, twisted and bent.

The second son said, however, that the tree was covered with green buds and promise of life.

The third son disagreed; he said it was covered with flowers which smelled so sweet and were so beautiful that he said they were the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

The last son disagreed with all the others; he said that the tree was full of fruit, life and bounty.

The man then explained to his sons that all the answers were correct as each had only seen one season of the tree's life.

He said that one cannot judge a tree, or a person, by a single season, and that their essence, the pleasure, joy and love that come from those lives can only be measured at the end, when all the seasons are complete.

When spring is over all the flowers die, but when it returns they smile happily. In my eyes everything passes, on my head everything goes white.

But never believe that in spring's dying moments all flowers die because, just last night, a peach branch was blooming.

(anonymous from Vietnam)

Do not let the pain of one season destroy the joy of what will come later.

Do not judge your life by a difficult season. Persevere through the difficulties, and surely better times will come when you least expect it! Live each of your seasons with joy and the power of hope.

Missionary volunteering changes the lives of young people in Mexico

Missionary volunteering is an experience that profoundly transforms the lives of young people. In Mexico, the Salesian Province of Guadalajara has for decades developed an organic path of Salesian Missionary Volunteering (SMV) that continues to have a lasting impact on the hearts of many young men and women. Thanks to the reflections of Margarita Aguilar, coordinator of missionary volunteering in Guadalajara, we will share the journey regarding the origins, evolution, formation phases, and motivations that drive young people to get involved in serving communities in Mexico.

Origins

Volunteering, understood as a commitment to others born from the need to help one's neighbour both socially and spiritually, strengthened over time with the contribution of governments and NGOs to raise awareness on issues of health, education, religion, the environment, and more. In the Salesian Congregation, the voluntary spirit has been present since its origins. Mamma Margherita, alongside Don Bosco, was among the first "volunteers" in the Oratory, committing herself to assisting young people to fulfil God's will and contribute to the salvation of their souls. Already the XXII General Chapter (1984) began to speak explicitly of volunteering, and subsequent chapters insisted on this commitment as an inseparable dimension of the Salesian mission.

In Mexico, the Salesians are divided into two Provinces:

Mexico City (MEM) and Guadalajara (MEG). It is precisely in the latter that, starting from the mid-1980s, a youth volunteer project was structured. The Province of Guadalajara, founded 62 years ago, has for almost 40 years offered young people eager to experience the Salesian charism the opportunity to dedicate a period of their lives to serving communities, especially in border areas.

On 24 October 1987, the Provincial sent a group of four young people together with Salesians to the city of Tijuana, in a rapidly expanding Salesian border area. This marked the beginning of Salesian Youth Volunteering (SYV), which gradually developed and became increasingly structured.

The initial objective was proposed to young people around 20 years old, available to dedicate one to two years to build the first oratories in the communities of Tijuana, Ciudad Juárez, Los Mochis, and other locations in the north. Many remember the early days: shovel and hammer in hand, living together in simple houses with other volunteers, afternoons spent with children, adolescents, and young people from the neighbourhood playing on the land where the oratory would be built. Sometimes the roof was missing, but there was no lack of joy, a sense of family, and encounter with the Eucharist.

Those first communities of Salesians and volunteers brought in their hearts love for God, for Mary Help of Christians, and for Don Bosco, demonstrating a pioneering spirit, missionary ardour, and total care for others.

Evolution

As the Province and Youth Ministry grew, the need for clear formation itineraries for volunteers emerged. The organisation was strengthened through:

Application questionnaire: each aspiring volunteer filled out a form and answered a questionnaire that outlined their human, spiritual, and Salesian characteristics, initiating the personal growth process.

Initial formation course: theatre workshops, games and group dynamics, catechesis and practical tools for field activities. Before leaving, volunteers met to conclude their formation and receive their assignment to Salesian communities.

Spiritual accompaniment: the candidate was invited to be accompanied by a Salesian in their community of origin. For a period, the preparation was carried out together with Salesian Aspirants, strengthening the vocational aspect, although this practice later underwent changes based on the vocational animation of the Province.

Annual provincial meeting: every December, near International Volunteer Day (5 December), volunteers meet to evaluate the experience, reflect on each person's journey, and consolidate the accompaniment processes.

Visits to the communities: the coordination team regularly visits the communities where volunteers work, to support not only the young people themselves, but also Salesians and lay people of the educational-pastoral community, strengthening support networks.

Personal life project: each candidate develops, with the help of the spiritual guide, a life project that helps to integrate the human, Christian, Salesian, vocational, and missionary dimensions. A minimum preparation period of six months is foreseen, with online moments dedicated to the various dimensions.

Family involvement: informative meetings with parents on the SYV processes, to help them understand the path and strengthen family support.

Continuous formation during the experience: each month a dimension (human, spiritual, apostolic, etc.) is addressed through reading materials, reflection, and in-depth work in progress.

Post-volunteering: after the conclusion of the experience, a closing meeting is organised to evaluate the experience, plan the next steps, and accompany the volunteer in reintegration into their community of origin and family, with in-person and online phases.

New stages and renewals

Recently, the experience has taken the name of Salesian Missionary Volunteering (SMV), in line with the Congregation's emphasis on the spiritual and missionary dimension. Some new features introduced:

Short pre-volunteering: during school holidays (December-January, Holy Week and Easter, and especially summer) young people can experience community life and service commitment for short periods, to get a first "taste" of the experience.

Formation for international experience: a specific process has been established to prepare volunteers to live the experience outside national borders.

Greater emphasis on spiritual accompaniment: no longer just "sending to work", but placing the encounter with God at the centre, so that the volunteer discovers their vocation and mission.

As Margarita Aguilar, SMV coordinator in Guadalajara, points out, "A volunteer needs to have empty hands to be able to embrace their mission with faith and hope in God."

Motivations of young people

At the heart of the SMV experience is always the question, "What is your motivation to become a volunteer?" Three main groups can be identified:

Operative/practical motivation: those who believe they will carry out concrete activities related to their skills (teaching in a school, serving in a canteen, animating an

oratory). They often discover that volunteering is not just manual or didactic work and may be disappointed if they expected a merely instrumental experience.

Motivation related to the Salesian charism: former beneficiaries of Salesian work who wish to deepen and live the charism more fully, imagining an intense experience like a long festive meeting of the Salesian Youth Movement, but for a prolonged period.

Spiritual motivation: those who intend to share their experience of God and discover Him in others. Sometimes, however, this “fidelity” is conditioned by expectations (e.g. “yes, but only in this community” or “yes, but if I can return for a family event”), and it is necessary to help the volunteer mature their “yes” freely and generously.

Three key elements of SMV

The Salesian Missionary Volunteering experience is based on three fundamental dimensions:

Spiritual life: God is the centre. Without prayer, sacraments, and listening to the Spirit, the experience risks being reduced to a simple operational commitment, tiring the volunteer to the point of abandonment.

Community life: communion with the Salesians and with other members of the community strengthens the volunteer’s presence among children, adolescents, and young people. Without community, there is no support in times of difficulty nor context to grow together.

Apostolic life: joyful witness and affectionate presence among young people evangelises more than any formal activity. It is not just about “doing”, but about “being” salt and light in everyday life.

To fully live these three dimensions, an integral formation path is needed that accompanies the volunteer from beginning

to end, embracing every aspect of the person (human, spiritual, vocational) according to Salesian pedagogy and the missionary mandate.

The role of the host community

The volunteer, to be an authentic instrument of evangelisation, needs a community that supports them, be an example and guide. Likewise, the community welcomes the volunteer to integrate them, supporting them in moments of fragility and helping them to free themselves from ties that hinder total dedication. As Margarita highlights, "God has called us to be salt and light of the Earth and many of our volunteers have found the courage to take a plane leaving behind family, friends, culture, their way of life to choose this lifestyle focused on being missionaries."

The community offers spaces for discussion, common prayer, practical and emotional accompaniment, so that the volunteer can remain firm in their choice and bear fruit in service.

The history of Salesian missionary volunteering in Guadalajara is an example of how an experience can grow, structure, and renew itself by learning from mistakes and successes. By always placing the young person's deep motivation, the spiritual and community dimension at the centre, a path capable of transforming, not only the realities served, but also the lives of the volunteers themselves, is offered.

Margarita Aguilar tells us, "A volunteer needs to have empty hands to be able to embrace their mission with faith and hope in God."

We thank Margarita for her valuable reflections. Her testimony reminds us that missionary volunteering is not a mere service, but a journey of faith and growth that touches the lives of young people and communities, renewing hope and the desire to give oneself for the love of God and neighbour.

Don Bosco and Eucharistic processions

A little-known but important aspect of St John Bosco's charism is Eucharistic processions. For the Saint of young people, the Eucharist was not only a personal devotion but also a pedagogical tool and public witness. In a Turin undergoing transformation, Don Bosco saw processions as an opportunity to strengthen the faith of young people and proclaim Christ in the streets. The Salesian experience, which has continued throughout the world, shows how faith can be embodied in culture and respond to social challenges. Even today, when lived with authenticity and openness, these processions can become prophetic signs of faith.

When we speak of St. John Bosco (1815-1888), we immediately think of his popular oratories, his passion for educating young people, and the Salesian family born of his charism. Less well known, but no less decisive, is the role that Eucharistic devotion – and in particular Eucharistic processions – played in his work. For Don Bosco, the Eucharist was not only the heart of his inner life; it was also a powerful pedagogical tool and a public sign of social renewal in a Turin undergoing rapid industrial transformation. Retracing the link between the saint of young people and the processions with the Blessed Sacrament means entering a pastoral workshop where liturgy, catechesis, civic education, and human promotion are intertwined in an original and, at times, surprising way.

Eucharistic processions in the context of the 19th century

To understand Don Bosco, it is necessary to remember that the 19th century in Italy was marked by intense debate on the

public role of religion. After the Napoleonic era and the Risorgimento, religious demonstrations in the streets were no longer a given. In many regions, a liberal State was emerging that viewed any public expression of Catholicism with suspicion, fearing mass gatherings or 'reactionary' resurgence. Eucharistic processions, however, retained a powerful symbolic force. They recalled Christ's lordship over all reality and, at the same time, brought to the fore a popular Church, visible and embodied in the neighbourhoods. Against this backdrop stood the stubbornness of Don Bosco, who never gave up accompanying his boys in witnessing their faith outside the walls of the oratory, whether on the avenues of Valdocco or in the surrounding countryside.

From his formative years at the seminary in Chieri, John Bosco developed a 'missionary' sensitivity to the Eucharist. The chronicles tell us that he often stopped in the chapel after lessons and spent a long time in prayer before the tabernacle. In his Memoirs of the Oratory, he himself acknowledges that he learned from his spiritual director, Fr. Cafasso, the value of 'becoming bread' for others. Contemplating Jesus giving himself in the Eucharist meant for him, learning the logic of gratuitous love. This line runs through his entire life, "Keep Jesus in the sacrament and Mary Help of Christians as your friends," he would repeat to young people, pointing to frequent Communion and silent adoration as the pillars of a path of lay and daily holiness.

The Valdocco oratory and the first internal processions

In the early 1840s, the Turin oratory did not yet have a proper church. Celebrations took place in wooden huts or in adapted courtyards. Don Bosco, however, did not give up organising small internal processions, almost 'dress rehearsals' for what would become a regular practice. The boys carried candles and banners, sang Marian hymns and, at the end, gathered around a makeshift altar for the Eucharistic benediction. These first attempts had an eminently pedagogical

function, to accustom young people to devout but joyful participation, combining discipline and spontaneity. In working-class Turin, where poverty often led to violence, marching in an orderly fashion with a red handkerchief around one's neck was already a sign of going against the tide. It showed that faith could teach respect for oneself and others.

Don Bosco knew well that a procession cannot be improvised. It requires signs, songs, and gestures that speak to the heart even before they speak to the mind. For this reason, he personally took care of explaining the symbols. The canopy became the image of the tent of meeting, a sign of the divine presence accompanying the people on their journey. The flowers scattered along the route recalled the beauty of the Christian virtues that must adorn the soul. The street lamps, indispensable for evening outings, alluded to the light of faith that illuminates the darkness of sin. Each element was the subject of a small 'sermon' in the refectory or during recreation, so that the logistical preparation was intertwined with systematic catechesis. The result? For the boys, the procession was not a ritual duty but an occasion for celebration full of meaning.

One of the most characteristic aspects of Salesian processions was the presence of a band formed by the students themselves. Don Bosco considered music an antidote to idleness and, at the same time, a powerful tool for evangelisation. "A cheerful march performed well," he wrote, "attracts people like a magnet attracts iron." The band preceded the Blessed Sacrament, alternating sacred pieces with popular tunes adapted with religious lyrics. This 'dialogue' between faith and popular culture reduced the distance between passers-by and created an aura of shared celebration around the procession. Many secular chroniclers testified to having been 'intrigued' by that group of young, disciplined musicians, so different from the military or philharmonic bands of the time.

Processions as a response to social crises

Nineteenth-century Turin experienced cholera epidemics (1854 and 1865), strikes, famines, and anti-clerical tensions. Don Bosco often reacted by proposing extraordinary processions of reparation or supplication. During the cholera epidemic of 1854, he led young people through the most affected streets, reciting litanies for the sick aloud and distributing bread and medicine. It was at that juncture that he made his promise – which he later kept – to build the church of Mary Help of Christians. “If Our Lady saves my boys, I will raise a temple to her.” The civil authorities, initially opposed to religious processions for fear of contagion, had to recognise the effectiveness of the Salesian assistance network, which was spiritually nourished by the processions themselves. The Eucharist, brought to the sick, thus became a tangible sign of Christian compassion.

Contrary to certain devotional models confined to sacristies, Don Bosco’s processions claimed a right of citizenship for the faith in the public space. It was not a question of ‘occupying’ the streets, but of restoring them to their community vocation. Passing under balconies, crossing squares and porticoes meant remembering that the city is not only a place of economic exchange or political confrontation, but also of fraternal encounter. This is why Don Bosco insisted on impeccable order: brushed cloaks, clean shoes, regular rows. He wanted the image of the procession to communicate beauty and dignity, persuading even the most sceptical observers that the Christian proposal elevated the person.

The Salesian legacy of processions

After Don Bosco’s death, his spiritual sons spread the practice of Eucharistic processions throughout the world: from agricultural schools in Emilia to missions in Patagonia, from Asian colleges to the working-class neighbourhoods of Brussels. What mattered was not to slavishly duplicate a Piedmontese ritual, but to transmit its pedagogical core: youth protagonism, symbolic catechesis, openness to the

surrounding society. Thus, in Latin America, the Salesians included traditional dances at the beginning of the procession. In India, they adopted flower carpets in accordance with local art; in sub-Saharan Africa, they alternated Gregorian chants with tribal polyphonic rhythms. The Eucharist became a bridge between cultures, realising Don Bosco's dream of "making all peoples one family."

From a theological point of view, Don Bosco's processions embody a strong vision of the real presence of Christ. Taking the Blessed Sacrament 'outside' means proclaiming that the Word did not become flesh to remain locked up, but to "pitch his tent among us" (cf. Jn 1:14). This presence demands to be proclaimed in understandable forms, without being reduced to an intimate gesture. In Don Bosco, the centripetal dynamic of adoration (gathering hearts around the Host) generates a centrifugal dynamic: young people, nourished at the altar, feel sent forth to serve. Micro-commitments spring from the procession: assisting a sick companion, pacifying a quarrel, studying with greater diligence. The Eucharist is prolonged in the 'invisible processions' of daily charity.

Today, in secularised or multi-religious contexts, Eucharistic processions can raise questions. Are they still communicative? Do they risk appearing like nostalgic folklore? Don Bosco's experience suggests that the key lies in the quality of relationships rather than in the quantity of incense or vestments. A procession that involves families, explains symbols, integrates contemporary artistic languages, and above all connects with concrete gestures of solidarity, maintains a surprising prophetic power. The recent Synod on Young People (2018) repeatedly recalled the importance of "going out" and "showing faith with our flesh." The Salesian tradition, with its itinerant liturgy, offers a tried and tested paradigm of the "Church going forth."

For Don Bosco, Eucharistic processions were not simply liturgical traditions, but true educative, spiritual, and

social acts. They represented a synthesis of lived faith, an educating community, and public witness. Through them, Don Bosco formed young people capable of adoring, respecting, serving, and witnessing.

Today, in a fragmented and distracted world, re-proposing the value of Eucharistic processions in the light of the Salesian charism can be an effective way to rediscover the meaning of what is essential: Christ present among His people, who walk with Him, adore Him, serve Him, and proclaim Him.

In an age that seeks authenticity, visibility, and relationships, the Eucharistic procession – if lived according to the spirit of Don Bosco – can be a powerful sign of hope and renewal.

Photo: Shutterstock

St Francis de Sales instructs him. Future of vocations (1879)

In the prophetic dream Don Bosco recounted on 9 May 1879, Saint Francis de Sales appeared as a caring teacher and gave the Founder a booklet full of warnings for novices, professed members, directors, and superiors. The vision was dominated by two epic battles: first young men and warriors, then armed men and monsters, while the banner of “Mary Help of Christians” guaranteed victory to those who followed it. The survivors set off for the East, North, and South, foreshadowing the Salesian missionary expansion. The Saint’s words emphasised obedience, chastity, educational charity, love of work, and temperance, indispensable pillars for the Congregation to grow, withstand

trials, and leave its children a legacy of active holiness. It concluded with a coffin, a stern reminder to be vigilant and prayerful.

Think as we may of this particular dream, Don Bosco had another dream which he narrated on May 9. In it he saw the fierce battles which faced the men called to his Congregation, and he was given several valuable instructions for all his sons and sound advice for the future.

[I saw] a hard-fought, long-drawn-out battle between youngsters and a varied array of warriors who were armed with strange weapons. Survivors were few.

A second fiercer and more terrifying battle was being waged by gigantic monsters fully armed, well-trained tall men who unfurled a huge banner, the center of which bore an inscription in gold, *Maria Auxilium Christianorum*. The combat was long and bloody, but the soldiers fighting under the banner were protected against hurt and conquered a vast plain. The boys who had survived the previous battle linked forces with them, each combatant holding a crucifix in his right hand and a miniature of the banner in his left. After engaging together in several sallies over that vast plain, they split, some heading eastward, a few to the north, and many for the south. Once they all left, the same skirmishes, maneuvers and leave-takings were repeated by others.

I recognized some boys who fought in the first skirmishes, but none of the others, who nevertheless seemed to know me and asked me many questions.

Shortly afterward I witnessed a shower of flashing, fiery tongues of many colors, followed by thunder and then clear skies. Then I found myself in a charming garden. A man who looked like Saint Francis de Sales silently handed me a booklet. I asked him who he was. "Read the book," was the reply.

I opened it, but had trouble reading, managing only to make out these precise words:

"For the Novices: Obedience in all things. Through obedience they will deserve God's blessings and the good will of men. Through diligence they will fight and overcome the snares set by the enemies of their souls.

"For the Confreres: Jealously safeguard the virtue of chastity. Love your confreres' good name, promote the honor of the Congregation.

"For the Directors: Take every care, make every effort to observe and promote observance of the rules through which everyone's life is consecrated to God.

"For the Superior: Total self-sacrifice, so as to draw himself and his charges to God."

The book said many other things, but I couldn't read any further, for the paper turned as blue as the ink.

"Who are you?" I again asked the man who serenely gazed at me.

"Good people everywhere know me. I have been sent to tell you of future events."

"What are they?"

"Those you have already seen and those which you will ask about."

"How can I foster vocations?"

"The Salesians will harvest many vocations by their good example, by being endlessly kind toward their pupils, and by urging them constantly to receive Holy Communion often."

"What should we bear in mind when admitting novices?"

"Reject idlers and gluttons."

"And when admitting to vows?"

"Make sure that they are well grounded in chastity."

"How are we to maintain the right spirit in our houses?"

"Let superiors very often write, visit and welcome the confreres, dealing kindly with them."

"What of our foreign missions?"

"Send men of sound morality and recall any who give you serious reason to doubt; look for and foster native vocations."

"Is our Congregation on the right path?"

"Let those who do good keep doing good. [Rev. 22, 11] Not to

go forward is to go backward. [St. Gregory the Great] The man who stands firm to the end will be saved." [Mt. 10, 22]

"Will the Congregation grow?"

"It will reach out so that no one will be able to check its growth, as long as the superiors meet their obligations."

"Will it have a long life?"

"Yes, but only as long as its members love work and temperance.

Should either of these two pillars fall, your entire edifice will collapse and crush superiors, subjects and followers beneath it."

Just then four men showed up bearing a coffin and approaching me.

"Whom is that for?" I asked.

"For you."

"How soon?"

"Do not ask. Just remember that you are mortal."

"What are you trying to tell me with this coffin?"

"That while you are still living you must see to it that your sons practice what they must continue to practice after your death. This is the heritage, the testament you must bequeath to them; but you must work on it and leave it [to your sons] as a well-studied and well-tested legacy."

"Can we expect roses or thorns?"

"Many roses and joys are in store, but very sharp thorns also threaten.

They will cause all of you acute distress and sorrow. You must pray much."

"Should we open houses in Rome?"

"Yes, but not hurriedly; proceed with extreme prudence and caution."

"Is the end of my mortal life near at hand?"

"Don't be concerned. You have the rules and other books. Practice what you preach and be vigilant."

I wanted to ask more questions, but muffled thunder rumbled through the air with flashes of lightning. Several men, rather

horrid monsters, dashed toward me as if to tear me to pieces. But then a deep darkness enveloped me, shutting everything out. I felt that I must be dead and started to scream frenziedly. I awoke and found I was still alive. It was a quarter to five in the morning.

If we can draw some good from this dream, let us do so. In all things let honor and glory be given to God forever and ever.

(BM XIV, 88-90)

Photo on the title page. Saint Francis de Sales. Anonymous. Sacristy of Chieri Cathedral

St Dominic Savio. The places of his childhood

Saint Dominic Savio, the “little great saint,” lived his brief but intense childhood among the hills of Piedmont, in places now steeped in memory and spirituality. On the occasion of his beatification in 1950, this young disciple of Don Bosco was celebrated as a symbol of purity, faith, and devotion to the Gospel. We retrace the principal places of his childhood—Riva presso Chieri, Morialdo, and Mondonio—through historical testimonies and vivid accounts, revealing the family, scholastic, and spiritual environment that forged his path to sainthood.

The Holy Year 1950 was also the year Dominic Savio was beatified, which took place on 5 March. The 15-year-old disciple of Don Bosco was the first lay saint ‘confessor’ to ascend the altars at such a young age.

On that day, St Peter’s Basilica was packed with young people who bore witness, by their presence in Rome, to a

Christian youth entirely open to the most sublime ideals of the Gospel. It was transformed, according to Vatican Radio, into an immense and noisy Salesian Oratory. When the veil covering the figure of the new Blessed fell from Bernini's rays, a frenzied applause rose from the whole basilica and the echo reached the square, where the tapestry depicting the Blessed was uncovered from the Loggia of Blessings.

Don Bosco's educational system received its highest recognition on that day. We wanted to revisit the places of Dominic's childhood after re-reading the detailed information of Fr Michele Molineris in his *Nuova Vita di Domenico Savio*, in which he describes with his well-known solid documentation what the biographies of St Dominic Savio do not say.

At Riva presso Chieri

Here we are, first of all, in [San Giovanni di Riva presso Chieri](#), the hamlet where our "little great Saint" was born on 2 April 1842 to Carlo Savio and Brigida Gaiato, as the second of ten children, inheriting his name and birthright from the first, who survived only 15 days after his birth.

His father, as we know, came from Ranello, a hamlet of Castelnuovo d'Asti, and as a young man had gone to live with his uncle Carlo, a blacksmith in Mondonio, in a house on today's Via Giunipero, at no. 1, still called 'ca dèlfré' or blacksmith's house. There, from 'Barba Carlòto' he had learned the trade. Some time after his marriage, contracted on 2 March 1840, he had become independent, moving to the Gastaldi house in San Giovanni di Riva. He rented accommodation with rooms on the ground floor suitable for a kitchen, storeroom and workshop, and bedrooms on the first floor, reached by an external staircase that has now disappeared.

The Gastaldi heirs then sold the cottage and adjoining farmhouse to the Salesians in 1978. And today a modern youth centre, run by Salesian Past Pupils and Cooperators, gives memory and new life to the little house

where Dominic was born.

In Morialdo

In November 1843, i.e. when Dominic had not yet reached the age of two, the Savio family, for work reasons, moved to [Morialdo](#), the hamlet of Castelnuovo linked to the name of St John Bosco, who was born at Cascina Biglione, a hamlet in the Becchi district.

In Morialdo, the Savios rented a few small rooms near the entrance porch of the farmstead owned by Viale Giovanna, who had married Stefano Persoglio. The whole farm was later sold by their son, Persoglio Alberto, to Pianta Giuseppe and family.

This farmstead is also now, for the most part, the property of the Salesians who, after restoring it, have used it for meetings for children and adolescents and for visits by pilgrims. Less than 2 km from Colle Don Bosco, it is situated in a country setting, amidst festoons of vines, fertile fields and undulating meadows, with an air of joy in spring and nostalgia in autumn when the yellowing leaves are gilded by the sun's rays, with an enchanting panorama on fine days, when the chain of the Alps stretches out on the horizon from the peak of Monte Rosa near Albugnano, to Gran Paradiso, to Rocciamelone, down as far as Monviso. It is truly a place to visit and to use for days of intense spiritual life, a Don Bosco-style school of holiness.

The Savio family stayed in Morialdo until February 1853, a good nine years and three months. Dominic, who lived only 14 years and eleven months, spent almost two thirds of his short existence there. He can therefore be considered not only Don Bosco's pupil and spiritual son, but also his countryman.

In Mondonio

Why the Savio family left Morialdo is suggested by Fr Molineris. His uncle the blacksmith had died and Dominic's father could inherit not only the tools of the trade but also

the clientele in Mondonio. That was probably the reason for the move, which took place, however, not to the house in Via Giunipero, but to the lower part of the village, where they rented the first house to the left of the main village street, from the Bertello brothers. The small house consisted, and still consists today, of a ground floor with two rooms, adapted as a kitchen and workroom, and an upper floor, above the kitchen, with two bedrooms and enough space for a workshop with a door on the street ramp.

We know that Mr and Mrs Savio had ten children, three of whom died at a very young age and three others, including Dominic, did not reach the age of 15. The mother died in 1871 at the age of 51. The father, left alone at home with his son John, after having taken in the three surviving daughters, asked Don Bosco for hospitality in 1879 and died at Valdocco on 16 December 1891.

Dominic had entered Valdocco on 29 October 1854, remaining there, except for short holiday periods, until 1 March 1857. He died eight days later at [Mondonio](#), in the little room next to the kitchen, on 9 March of that year. His stay at Mondonio was therefore about 20 months in all, at Valdocco 2 years and 4 months.

Memories of Morialdo

From this brief review of the three Savio houses, it is clear that the one in Morialdo must be the richest in memories. San Giovanni di Riva recalls Dominic's birth, and Mondonio a year at school and his holy death, but Morialdo recalls his life in the family, in church and at school. '*Minòt*', as he was called there – how many things he must have heard, seen and learnt from his father and mother, how much faith and love he showed in the little church of San Pietro, how much intelligence and goodness at the school run by Fr Giovanni Zucca, and how much fun and liveliness in the playground with his fellow villagers.

It was in Morialdo that Dominic Savio prepared for his First Communion, which he then made in the parish church

of Castelnuovo on 8 April 1849. It was there, when he was only 7 years old, that he wrote his "Reminders", that is, the resolutions for his First Communion:

1. I will go to confession very often and take communion as often as the confessor gives me permission;
2. I want to keep feast days holy;
3. My friends will be Jesus and Mary;
4. Death but not sin.

Memories that were the guide for his actions until the end of his life.

A boy's demeanour, way of thinking and acting reflect the environment in which he lived, and especially the family in which he spent his childhood. So if one wants to understand something about Dominic, it is always good to reflect on his life in that farmstead in Morialdo.

The family

His was not a farming family. His father was a blacksmith and his mother a seamstress. His parents were not of robust constitution. The signs of fatigue could be seen on his father's face, his mother's face stood out for its delicate lines. Dominic's father was a man of initiative and courage. His mother came from the not too distant Cerreto d'Asti where she kept a dressmaker's shop "and with her skill she made it possible for the local inhabitants to get clothes there rather than go elsewhere." And she was still a seamstress in Morialdo too. Would Don Bosco have known this? His conversation with little Dominic who had gone to look for him at the Becchi was interesting:

"Well, what do you think?"

"It seems to me that there is good stuff (in piem.: Eh, m'a smia ch'a-j'sia bon-a stòfa!)."

"What can this fabric be used for?"

"To make a beautiful suit to give to the Lord."

"So, I am the cloth: you be the tailor; take me with you (in piem.: ch'èmpija ansema a chiel) and you can make a beautiful suit for the Lord." (OE XI, 185).

A priceless conversation between two countrymen who understood each other at first sight. And their language was just right for the dressmaker's son.

When their mother died on 14 July 1871, the parish priest of Mondonio, Fr Giovanni Pastrone, said to his weeping daughters, to console them: "Don't cry, because your mother was a holy woman; and now she is already in Paradise."

Her son Dominic, who had preceded her into heaven by several years, had also said to her and to his father, before he passed away: "Do not weep, I already see the Lord and Our Lady with open arms waiting for me." These last words of his, witnessed by his neighbour Anastasia Molino, who was present at the time of his death, were the seal of a joyful life, the manifest sign of that sanctity that the Church solemnly recognised on 5 March 1950, later giving it definitive confirmation on 12 June 1954 with his canonisation.

Frontispiece photo. The house where Dominic died in 1857. It is a rural dwelling, likely dating from the late 17th century. Rebuilt upon an even older house, it is one of the most cherished landmarks for the people of Mondonio.

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.

Don Bosco's educational journey (1/2)

Following the paths of the heart

Don Bosco wept at the sight of the boys who ended

up in prison. Yesterday, as is the case today too, evil's timetable is relentless: fortunately, so is the schedule for good. And even more so. I feel that yesterday's roots are the same as today's. Like yesterday, others today find a home on the streets and in prisons. I believe that the memory of the priest for so many boys without a parish is the irreplaceable thermometer for measuring the temperature of our educational intervention.

Don Bosco lived at a time of striking social poverty. We were at the beginning of the process of large groups of youths coming together in the great industrial metropolises. The police authorities themselves denounced this danger: there were so many "young children brought up without principles of Religion, Honour and Humanity, who were ending up rotting totally in hatred", we read in the chronicles of the time. It was the growing poverty that drove a great multitude of adults and young people to live by expediency, and in particular by theft and from alms-giving.

The urban decay caused social tensions to explode, which went hand in hand with political tensions; disorderly boys and misguided youth, towards the middle of the 19th century, drew public attention, shaking governmental sensibilities.

Added to the social phenomenon was a clear lack of education. The breakdown of the family caused concern above all in the Church; the prevalence of the repressive system was at the root of growing youthful unease and it affected the relationship between parents and children, educators and those being educated. Don Bosco had to confront a system made up of "bad traits", proposing loving kindness instead.

The life of so many parents lived on the borders of illegality, the need to procure the necessities for survival, would lead a multitude of youngsters to be uprooted from their families, and to leave the place they lived in. The city became more and more crowded with boys and young adults on the hunt for a job; for many who come from afar there was also a lack of a corner to sleep in.

It is not uncommon to meet a lady, such as Maria G., begging, using children artfully placed at strategic points in the city or in front of church doors; often, parents themselves entrusted their children to beggars, who used them to arouse the pity of others and receive more money. It sounds like a photocopy of a tried and tested system in a large southern city: the renting out of other people's children, so the passer-by would take pity and begging become more profitable.

However, theft was the real source of income: it was a phenomenon that grew and became unstoppable in 19th century Turin. On 2 February 1845, nine young urchins aged between eleven and fourteen appeared before the police commissioner of the Vicariate, accused of having robbed a bookseller's shop of numerous volumes ...and various stationery items, using a picklock. The new breed of *borsajuoli* attracted constant complaints from the people. They were almost always abandoned children, without parents, relatives or means of subsistence, very poor, chased away and abandoned by everyone, who ended up stealing.

The picture of juvenile deviance was impressive: delinquency and the state of abandonment of so many boys was spreading like wildfire. The growing number of "rascals", "reckless purse-snatchers" in the streets and squares was however only one aspect of a widespread situation. The fragility of the family, strong economic malaise, the constant and strong immigration from the countryside to the city, fuelled a precarious situation which the political forces felt powerless to tackle. The malaise grew as crime organised itself and penetrated public structures. The first manifestations of violence by organised gangs began, acting with sudden and repeated acts of intimidation designed to create a climate of social, political and religious tension.

This was expressed by the gangs known as the *cocche*, which spread in various numbers, taking different names from the neighbourhoods where they were based. Their sole purpose was "to disturb passers-by, mistreat them if they

complained, commit obscene acts on women, and attack some isolated soldier or provost." In reality, it was not a question of criminal associations, but more of gangs formed not only by people born in Turin, but also by immigrants: young people aged between sixteen and thirty who used to gather in spontaneous meetings, especially in the evening hours, giving vent to their tensions and frustrations of the day. It was in this situation in the mid 19th century that Don Bosco's activities were inserted. It was not the poor boys, friends and childhood companions of his place at the Becchi in Castelnovo, not the valiant young men of Chieri, but "the wolves, the squabblers, the unruly types" of his dreams.

It is in this world of political conflict, in this vineyard, where the sowing of darnel is abundant, among this market of young arms hired out for depravity, among these youngsters without love and malnourished in body and soul, that Don Bosco was called to work. The young priest listened, went out into the streets: he saw, was moved, but, as practical as he was, he rolled up his sleeves; those boys needed a school, education, catechism, training for work. There was no time to waste. They were young: they needed to give meaning to their lives, they had a right to have time and means to study, to learn a trade, but also time and space to be happy, to play.

Go, look around!

Sedentary by profession or by choice, computerised in thought and action, we risk losing the originality of "being", of sharing, of growing "together".

Don Bosco did not live in the era of test-tube preparations: he left humanity the pedagogy of 'companionship', the spiritual and physical pleasure of living next to a youngster, small among the small, poor among the poor, fragile among the fragile.

A priest friend and spiritual guide of his, Fr Cafasso, knew Don Bosco, knew his zeal for souls, sensed his passion for this multitude of boys; he urged him to go out

into the streets. "Go, look around." From the first Sundays, the priest from the countryside, the priest who had not known his father, went out to see the misery of the town's suburbs. He was shocked. *"He met a large number of young people of all ages,"* testified his successor, Fr Rua, *"who were wandering around the streets and squares, especially in the outskirts of the town, playing, brawling, swearing and even doing worse."*

He entered building sites, talked to workers, contacted employers; he felt emotions that would mark him for the rest of his life when he met these boys. And sometimes he found these poor "bricklayers" lying on the floor in a corner of a church, tired, asleep, unable to tune into meaningless sermons about their vagabond lives. Perhaps that was the only place where they could find some warmth, after a day of toil, before venturing off in search of somewhere to spend the night. He went into the shops, wandered around the markets, visited the street corners where there were many boys begging. Everywhere, badly dressed and undernourished boys; he witnessed scenes of malpractice and transgressions: all carried out by boys.

After a few years, he moved from the streets to the prisons. "For a full twenty years I assiduously visited Turin's city prisons. I continued my visits later, though not as regularly. ...". (BM XV, 600)

How many misunderstandings at the beginning! How many insults! A "cassock" was out of tune in that place, frowned upon. He approached those abid and distrustful "wolves"; he listened to their stories, but above all he made their suffering his own.

He understood the drama of those boys: clever exploiters had pushed them into those cells. And he became their friend. His simple and humane manner restored dignity and respect to each of them.

Something had to be done and soon; a different system had to be invented, to stand by those who had gone astray. *"Whenever he had the time, he would spend entire days in the prisons and several times he conducted spiritual*

retreats there. He regularly visited the inmates on Saturdays, his pockets bulging with tobacco or bread. He was especially interested in the juveniles whom misfortune had brought there. ... By helping and befriending them, he sought to draw them to the festive oratory after their release from prison.” (MB II, 136-137)

In the “Generala”, a House of Correction opened in Turin on 12 April 1845, as stated in the regulations of the Penal House, “young people condemned to a correctional sentence for having acted without discernment in committing the crime and young people supported in prison by paternal love” were “gathered and governed by the method of working together, in silence and segregated by night in special cells.” This was the context for the extraordinary excursion to Stupinigi organised by Don Bosco alone, with the consent of the Minister of the Interior, Urban Rattazzi, without guards, based only on mutual trust, a commitment of conscience and the fascination of the educator. He wanted to know the “reason why the State does not have the influence” of the priest over these young people. “The force we have is a moral force: unlike the State, which knows only how to command and punish, we speak primarily to the heart of the youth, and our word is the word of God.”

Knowing the system of life adopted inside the Generala, the challenge thrown down by the young Piedmontese priest took on incredible value: to ask for a “Free Release” day for all those young inmates. It was madness yet such was Don Bosco’s request. He obtained permission in the spring of 1855. The whole thing was organised by Don Bosco alone, with the help of the boys themselves. The consent he received from Minister Rattazzi was certainly a sign of esteem for and trust in the young priest. The experience of leading boys out of that House of Correction in complete freedom and managing to bring them all back to prison, despite what ordinarily took place inside the prison structure, was extraordinary. It was the triumph of an appeal to trust and conscience, the testing of an idea, an experience, that would guide him throughout his

life to rely on the resources hidden in the hearts of so many young people doomed to irreversible marginalisation.

Onward, and in shirt sleeves

Even today, in a different cultural and social context, Don Bosco's grasp of things is not all all outdated, but still works. Especially surprising, in the dynamics of rehabilitating children and young people who have entered the penal circuit, is the inventive spirit in creating concrete job opportunities for them.

Today we encounter problems offering employment opportunities for our minors at risk. Those who work in the social sector know how hard it is to overcome bureaucratic mechanisms and gears in order to realise, for example, simple work grants for minors. Don Bosco used agile approaches and structures, having boys "fostered" by employers, under the educational tutelage of a guarantor.

The first years of Don Bosco's priestly and apostolic life were marked by a continuous search for the right way to take boys and young men away from the dangers of the street. The plans were clear in his mind, as ingrained in his mind and soul was his educational method. "Not with blows but by gentleness". He was also convinced that it was no easy feat to turn wolves into lambs. But he had Divine Providence on his side.

And when faced with immediate problems, he never backed down. He was not the type to enter into discussion about the sociological condition of minors, nor was he the priest for political or formal compromises; he was saintly stubborn in his good intentions, but was strongly tenacious and concrete in realising them. He had great zeal for the salvation of youth and there were no obstacles that could restrain this holy passion, which marked every step and punctuated every hour of his day.

"In the prisons he saw a great number of boys, ranging between twelve and eighteen years of age, [basically] healthy, sturdy and intelligent. He was horrified to see them

inactive, bitten by insects, hungry for both spiritual and material food while they served time, expiating through detention, and even more through remorse, their precocious depravity. They were a blot on their country, the dishonor of their families, an infamy to themselves. They were above all, souls that, redeemed by the blood of Christ, were now reduced to slaves of vice, and in the greatest danger of eternal perdition. Who knows, if these boys had had a friend who had taken loving care of them by helping them and by giving them religious instruction on holy days, perhaps they would have avoided coming and returning to these prisons. Certainly, the number of these young prisoners would be diminished.” (MB II, 49-50)

He rolled up his sleeves and gave himself body and soul to the prevention of these evils; he gave all his contribution, his experience, but above all his insights in launching his own initiatives or those of other associations. It was the release from prison that worried both the government and private “societies”. It was precisely in 1846 that an associative structure authorised by the government was set up, which resembled, at least in its intentions and in some ways, what is happening today in the Italian juvenile penal system. It was called the “Royal Society for the Patronage of Young People Released from the House of Correctional Education”. Its purpose was to support young people released from the Generala.

A careful reading of the Statutes brings us back to some of the penal measures that are nowadays provided for as alternative measures to prison.

The Members of the Society were divided into “operatives”, who took on the office of guardians, “paying members”, and “paying operatives”. Don Bosco was an “operative member”. Don Bosco accepted several, but with discouraging results. Perhaps it was these failures that made him decide to ask the authorities to send the boys to him before they ended up like that.

It is not important here to deal with the

relationship between Don Bosco, the houses of correction and collateral services, but rather to recall the attention the Saint paid to this group of minors. Don Bosco knew the hearts of the young men of the Generala, but above all he had more in mind than remaining indifferent to the moral and human degradation of those poor and unfortunate inmates. He continued his mission: he did not abandon them: "Ever since the Government opened that Penitentiary, and entrusted its direction to the Society of St Peter in Chains, Don Bosco was able to go from time to time among those poor youngsters [...]. With the permission of the Director of the prisons he instructed them in catechism, preached to them, heard their confessions, and many times entertained them amicably in recreation, as he did with his boys at the Oratory" (BS 1882, n. 11 p. 180).

Don Bosco's interest in young people in difficulty was focused over time in the Oratory, a true expression of a preventive and recuperative pedagogy, being an open and multifunctional social service. Don Bosco had direct contact with quarrelsome, violent youth bordering on delinquency around 1846-50. These are the encounters with the *cocche*, gangs or neighbourhood groups in ongoing conflict. The story is told of a fourteen-year-old boy, son of a drunkard and anticlerical father who, having happened to be in the Oratory in 1846, threw himself headlong into the various recreational activities, but refused to attend religious services, because according to his father's teachings, he did not want to become a "mouldy old cretin". Don Bosco attracted him with his tolerance and patience, which made him change his behaviour in a short time.

Don Bosco was also interested in taking on the management of re-educational and correctional institutions. Proposals in this sense had come from various quarters. There were attempts and contacts, but drafts and proposals for agreements came to nothing. All this is sufficient to show how much Don Bosco had the problem discarded children at heart. And if there was resistance, it always came from the

difficulty of using the preventive system. Wherever he found a "mixture" of the repressive and preventive system, he was categorical in his refusal, as he was also clear in his rejection of any group or structure that brought back to the idea of the "reformatory". A careful reading of these attempts reveals the fact that Don Bosco never refused to help the boy in difficulty, but he was against the management of institutes, houses of correction or directing works with an obvious educational compromise.

The conversation that took place between Don Bosco and Crispi in Rome in February 1878 is very interesting. Crispi asked Don Bosco for news about the progress of his work and in particular spoke about the educational systems. He lamented the unrest that was taking place in the correctional prisons. It was a conversation in which the Minister was fascinated by Don Bosco's analysis; he asked him not only for advice but also for a programme for these houses of correction (MB XIII, 483).

Don Bosco's replies and proposals found sympathy, but not willingness: the rift between the religious and political worlds was strong. Don Bosco expressed his opinion, indicating various categories of boys: the unruly, dissipated and good. For the saintly educator there was hope of success for all, even for the unruly, as he then used to refer to what we nowadays call at-risk boys.

"Let them not become worse." "...In time let the good principles acquired produce their effect later ... many will come to their senses." This is an explicit answer and perhaps the most interesting.

After mentioning the distinction between the two educational systems, he determined which children must be considered to be in danger: those who go to other cities or towns in search of work, those whose parents cannot or do not want to take care of them, vagabonds who fall into the hands of the public security'. He points out the necessary and possible measures: *"Weekend recreations areas, care of those placed at work hospices and preservation houses with arts and*

crafts and with agricultural colonies."

It proposes not direct government management of educational institutions, but adequate support in buildings, equipment and financial grants, and presents a version of the Preventive System that retains the essential elements, without the explicit religious reference. Besides a pedagogy of the heart could not have ignored the social, psychological and religious problems.

Don Bosco ascribes their misguidance to the absence of God, to the uncertainty of moral principles, to the corruption of the heart, to the clouding of the mind, to the incapacity and carelessness of adults, especially parents, to the corrosive influence of society and to the intentional negative action of "bad companions" or the lack of responsibility of educators.

Don Bosco played a lot on the positive: the will to live, the fondness for work, the rediscovery of joy, social solidarity, family spirit, healthy fun.

[\(continued\)](#)

don Alfonso Alfano, sdb

Don Bosco in Cambodia

Cooperation between lay people and religious for the education of the youth of Cambodia.

Cambodia is a country in Southeast Asia with over 90% of its population Buddhist and a very small Christian minority.

The presence of the Salesians of Don Bosco in Cambodia dates back to 1991, when the Salesians arrived from Thailand where they were taking care of the technical education of war

refugees along the border between the two countries, under the leadership of Salesian Brother Roberto Panetto and Salesian past pupils from Bangkok.

After training some 3,000 young people, the latter, who were about to be repatriated to Cambodia, asked the Salesians to go with them. The Salesians did not let that invitation fall on deaf ears, realising that that was where God wanted them at that moment, and that those were the young people calling on Don Bosco. The challenges were and are many, in a non-Christian cultural environment and in a very poor society.

On 24 May 1991, feast of Mary Help of Christians, the Salesian presence began in Cambodia, with an orphanage and the Don Bosco technical school in Phnom Penh, officially opened on the feast of Don Bosco, 31 January 1994. In 1992, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians also reached the country and their work offers hope to many poor and abandoned girls in a country where more than half the total population is female and where women are victims of violence, abuse and human trafficking.

The Salesians have established technical institutes and schools in five provinces of the country: Phnom Penh, Kep, Sihanoukville, Battambang and Poipet. The enormous educational and pastoral work is only made possible thanks to the invaluable contribution of the laity. Almost all the staff involved in the Salesian structures are former students who are continuously committed to giving the best to the students in formation. This is a concrete application of shared responsibility and of the many invitations to share the mission.

The Salesians have established an NGO in Cambodia with no religious affiliation. Commonly known as the fathers, brothers and sisters of Don Bosco, they are loved and respected by all. There is a great love and partnership between the Salesians and past pupils in Cambodia, which contributes to the popularity and 100% placement rate of the students over the

last ten years, as Fr Arun Charles, an Indian missionary in Cambodia since 2010, recently appointed as coordinator of missionary animation in the East Asia-Oceania region, tells us. The Salesians encourage minors to complete the primary education cycle, through support projects for children, the construction of primary school buildings in poor villages, and the management of some literacy centres. In Battambang, brick factories retain children to work as labourers, and there Salesian education aims to offer an alternative and hope for a different future.

One of the specialities of the Salesian mission in Cambodia is the hotel school, which provides instruction in hospitality, cooking and hotel management, having a full hotel to enable students to gain practical experience in their field, in addition to workshops and exercises.

The visit of the Rector Major Fr Juan Edmundo Vecchi in 1997, a very important moment of encouragement, focused on the exhortation to build an educative and pastoral community and to put Don Bosco's Preventive System into practice, has remained in their memory.

Don Bosco's missionary gaze continues to to be alive almost 10,000 km from Valdocco, always with and for the young, in the Salesian presences in Phnom Penh, Poipet and Sihanoukville.

Marco Fulgaro

Photo gallery Don Bosco in Cambodia

1 / 18



2 / 18



3 / 18



4 / 18



5 / 18



6 / 18



7 / 18



8 / 18



9 / 18



10 / 18



11 / 18



12 / 18



13 / 18



14 / 18



15 / 18



16 / 16



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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"

1 / 7



2 / 7



3 / 7



4 / 7



5 / 7



6 / 7



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