

# The festive oratory at Valdocco

In 1935, following the canonisation of Don Bosco in 1934, the Salesians took care to collect testimonies about him. A certain Pietro Pons, who as a boy had attended the festive oratory in Valdocco for about ten years (from 1871 to 1882), and who had also attended two years of primary school (with classrooms under the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians) on 8 November gave a beautiful testimony of those years. We excerpt some passages from it, almost all unpublished.

## The figure of Don Bosco

He was the centre of attraction for the whole Oratory. This is how our former Oratorian Pietro Pons remembers him at the end of the 1970s: "He no longer had vigour, but he was always calm and smiling. He had two eyes that pierced and penetrated the mind. He would appear among us: he was a joy for everyone. D. Rua, D. Lazzero were at his side as if they had the Lord in their midst. D. Barberis and all the boys were running towards him, surrounding him, some walking beside him, some backwards, facing him. It was a fortune, a coveted privilege to be able to be close to him, to talk to him. He strolled along talking, and looking at everyone with those two eyes that turned every which way, electrifying hearts with joy."

Among the episodes that have stuck in his mind 60 years later, he recalls two in particular: "One day... he appeared alone at the front door of the sanctuary. Then a flock of boys rushed to run him over like a gust of wind. But he held the umbrella in his hand. It had handle and a shaft as thick as that of the peasants. He raised it and, using it like a sword, juggled it to repel that affectionate assault, on the right, to the left, to open up a passage. He pointed it at one, then off to the side, but in the meantime the others approached from the other side. So the game, the joke continued, bringing joy to hearts,

eager to see the good Father return from his journey. He looked like a village priest of the good-natured kind."

### Games and teatrino

A Salesian oratory without games is unthinkable. The elderly former pupil recalls: "the courtyard was occupied by a building, the church of Mary Help and at the end of a low wall... a sort of hut rested on the left corner, where there was always someone to watch over those who entered... As soon as you entered the playground on the right, there was a swing with only one seat, then the parallel bars and the fixed bar for the older children, who enjoyed doing their spins and somersaults, and also the trapeze, and the single flying step, which were, however, near the sacristies beyond St Joseph's chapel. And again: "This courtyard was of a beautiful length and lent itself very well to speed races starting from the side of the church and returning there on the way back. Barra rotta, sack races and a game called pignatte were also played. The latter games were announced on the previous Sunday. So was the greasy pole but the pole was planted with the thin end at the bottom so that it would be more difficult to climb. There were lotteries, and the ticket was paid for with a penny or two. Inside the house was a small library kept in a cupboard."

As well as games there was the famous teatrino "little theatre" where genuine dramas such as "The Crusader's Son" were performed, Don Cagliero's romanze were sung, and musicals such as the Cobbler were presented by the legendary Carlo Gastini [a brilliant past pupil leader]. The play, attended free of charge by the parents, was held in the hall under the nave of the church of Mary Help, but the former oratory boy also recalls that "once it was performed at the Moretta house" [today's parish church near the square]. Poor people lived there in the most squalid poverty. In the cellars that can be seen under the balcony there was a poor mother who would carry her son Charles outside at midday. She had to carry him on her shoulders to sunbathe."

## Religious services and formation meetings

At the festive oratory there was no lack of religious services on Sunday mornings: Holy Mass with Holy Communion, prayers of the good Christian; followed in the afternoon by recreation, catechism, and Don Giulio Barberis' sermon. By now an old man, "Don Bosco never came to say Mass or to preach, but only to visit and stay with the boys during recreation... The catechists and assistants had their pupils with them in church during the services and taught them catechism. A little lesson was given to everyone. The lesson was required to be memorised every Sunday and then also an explanation." The solemn feasts ended with a procession and a snack for all: "On leaving church after mass there was breakfast. A young man on the right outside the door would give us a loaf of bread, another on the left would put two slices of salami on it with a fork." Those boys were content with little, but they were delighted. When the boarders joined the oratorians for the singing of vespers, their voices could be heard in Via Milano and Via Corte d'appello!

Formation group meetings were also held at the festive oratory. In the house near the church of St Francis, there was "a small, low room that could hold about twenty people...In the room there was a small table for the lecturer, there were benches for the meetings and conferences for the older boys in general, and a meeting of the St Aloysius sodality, almost every Sunday."

## Who were the Oratorians?

Of his 200 or so companions – but their number diminished in the winter due to the return of seasonal workers to their families – our sprightly old man recalled that many were from Biella "almost all 'bic', that is, they carried the wooden bucket full of lime and the wicker basket full of bricks to the bricklayers at the buildings." Others were "apprentice bricklayers, mechanics, tinsmiths." Poor apprentices: they worked from morning to night every day and only on Sundays could they afford a bit of recreation "at Don Bosco's" (as his

oratory was called): “We played Asino vola, under the direction of the then Br Milanese [a future priest who was a great missionary in Patagonia]. Br Ponzano, later a priest, was a gym teacher. He made us do free exercises, with sticks, on the equipment.”

Pietro Pons’ memories are much broader, as rich in distant suggestions as they are pervaded by a shadow of nostalgia; they wait to be known in full. We hope to do so soon.

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## **Blessed Alberto Marvelli: a beacon of faith and social commitment in the 20th century**

*In the panorama of the great witnesses of faith of the 20th century, the name of Alberto Marvelli shines resplendent as an example of Christian dedication and social commitment. Born in Ferrara in 1918 and living in post-war Rimini, Alberto embodied the values of the Gospel through a life spent in the service of the weakest and neediest. Beatified by Pope John Paul II in 2004, his figure continues to inspire young people and adults on the path of faith and social action.*

### **A childhood of values and spirituality**

Alberto Marvelli was born on 21 March 1918, the second of seven children of Alfredo Marvelli and Maria Mayr. His family, deeply Christian, instilled values of faith, charity and service in him from an early age. His mother, in particular, had a great influence on his spiritual formation, passing on to him a love of prayer and concern for the needy. The

Marvelli family was known for its generosity and hospitality, often opening its home to anyone in need.

During his high school years in Rimini, Alberto distinguished himself not only for his excellence in studies, but also for his commitment to sports and social activities. Passionate about cycling and athletics, he saw sport as a means to strengthen character and promote values such as loyalty and discipline.

### **His university years and social vocation**

Enrolled in the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering at the University of Bologna, Alberto tackled his studies seriously and enthusiastically. But in addition to his academic commitment, he devoted time and energy to Catholic Action, a movement that played a fundamental role in his spiritual growth and social commitment. He organised study groups, spiritual meetings and volunteer projects, involving his university colleagues in initiatives in favour of the less fortunate.

His room became a meeting place for discussions on social and religious issues. Here, Alberto encouraged his companions to reflect on the role of the laity in the Church and society, promoting the idea that every Christian is called to be an active witness of the Gospel in the world.

### **War: a test of faith and courage**

With the outbreak of the Second World War, Albert was called to arms. Even in the military environment he did not stop witnessing to his faith, sharing moments of prayer with his fellow soldiers and offering moral support in a time of great uncertainty and fear.

After 8 September 1943, with the Italian armistice, he returned to Rimini, finding a city devastated by bombing and Nazi occupation. In this dramatic context, Alberto became actively involved in the Resistance, helping Allied prisoners and Jews to escape from the hands of the Nazis. He risked his own life on numerous occasions, showing extraordinary courage

and unwavering faith.

### **Charity without borders**

One of Alberto's most emblematic images is of him riding his bicycle through the destroyed streets of Rimini, laden with food, clothes and medicine to be distributed to those in need. His bicycle became a symbol of hope for many citizens. He made no distinction between people: he helped Italians, foreigners, friends and enemies, seeing in everyone the face of the suffering Christ.

He opened the doors of his home to evacuees, organised soup kitchens for the poor and worked to find housing for the homeless. His dedication was total and unconditional. As he wrote in his diary: 'Every poor person is Jesus. Every act of charity is an act of love towards Him'.

### **Interior life and deep spirituality**

Despite his social and political commitments, Albert never neglected his spiritual life. He participated in the Eucharist daily, devoted time to prayer and meditation, and constantly relied on divine Providence. His personal diary reveals a deep union with God and an ardent desire to conform to God's will in every aspect of his life.

He wrote: 'God is my infinite happiness. I must be holy otherwise nothing.' This striving for holiness permeated his every gesture, large or small. Regular confession, Eucharistic adoration and reading the Holy Scriptures were essential moments of spiritual growth for him.

### **Political commitment as a form of charity**

In the post-war period, Alberto was actively involved in the moral and material reconstruction of society. He joined the Christian Democrats, seeing politics as a means to promote the common good and social justice. For him, politics was a high form of charity, a selfless service to the community.

As councillor for Public Works in Rimini, he worked tirelessly to improve housing conditions for the poor, promoted the reconstruction of schools and hospitals, and supported

initiatives for the economic revival of the city. He refused any form of corruption or moral compromise, always putting the needs of the most vulnerable at the centre.

### **Testimonies of an extraordinary life**

There are many testimonies from those who knew Alberto personally. Friends and colleagues remember his smile, his availability and his ability to listen. He used to say: 'We cannot love God if we do not love our brothers'. This conviction translated into concrete gestures, such as hosting displaced families in his home or giving up his own meal to give it to the hungry.

His simple and austere lifestyle, combined with a deep inner joy, attracted the admiration of many. He never sought recognition or personal glory, but always acted with humility and discretion.

### **Tragedy and beatification**

On 5 October 1946, at only 28 years of age, Albert died tragically in a car accident while cycling to an election rally. His sudden death was a blow to the community. However, his funeral became a manifestation of affection and gratitude: thousands of people came together to pay homage to a young man who had given all of himself for others.

The reputation for holiness that surrounded his figure led to the start of the beatification process in the 1990s. On 5 September 2004, during a ceremony in Loreto, Pope John Paul II proclaimed him Blessed. The beatification was not only a personal recognition, but also a message to young people all over the world: holiness is possible in every state of life, even in the laity and in social and political commitment.

### **Legacy and topicality**

The figure of Alberto Marvelli continues to be a point of reference for anyone wishing to combine faith and social action. His life testifies that it is possible to live the Gospel in everyday life, committing oneself to justice, solidarity and the common good. In an era characterised by

individualism and indifference, Alberto's example invites us to rediscover the value of love of neighbour and social responsibility.

Today, several associations and initiatives bear his name, promoting projects of solidarity, spiritual formation and civic engagement. His life is often cited as an example in educational and catechetical courses, inspiring new generations to follow his path.

### **Final reflections**

Alberto Marvelli's message is extraordinarily relevant today. His ability to combine deep faith and concrete action is a response to the challenges of our time. He shows that holiness is not reserved for the chosen few, but is a path accessible to anyone who is open to the love of God and the service of their brothers and sisters.

In a passage in his diary, Albert wrote: 'Every day is a precious gift to love more'. This phrase encapsulates the essence of his spirituality and can be a beacon for all those who wish to live a meaningful and good-oriented life.

Blessed Alberto Marvelli represents a model of lay holiness, a young man who was able to transform his faith into concrete actions for the benefit of others. His life, though short, was a hymn to love, justice and hope. Today more than ever, his testimony invites each of us to reflect on our role in society and the possibility of being instruments of peace and good in the world.

*Alberto Marvelli continues to inspire with his simple and extraordinary life. An invitation to all of us to ride, like him, on the roads of solidarity and brotherly love.*

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# South Asia. Don Bosco among the young

*Living today don Bosco's mission to the young especially those who are resource-poor in South Asia*

The Lord made clear to Don Bosco that he was to direct his mission first and foremost to the young, especially to those who are poorer. This mission to the young, especially the poorer ones became the reason for the existence of the Salesian Congregation.

Like our Father Don Bosco, every Salesian says to God on the day of his religious profession: "I offer myself totally to you. I pledge myself to devote all my strength to those to whom you will send me, especially to young people who are poorer". Every Salesian collaborator is committed to this same mission.

The latest General Chapter of the Congregation made renewed call for absolute priority to be given to the poorest, most abandoned and defenceless.

When I was given the opportunity to submit an article for the Salesian Bulletin, my thoughts immediately went to what I consider to be one of the largest interventions on behalf of the poorer youth in the South Asia Region of the Salesian Congregation, namely, preparing poor young people for employment through short-term skills training. After the 28th General Chapter, the South Asia Region made a choice to help young people remove abject poverty from their families. But before I present that, let me present to you the South Asia Region of the Salesian Congregation.

The South Asia Region comprises all Salesian works in India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, Kuwait and UAE. There are 11 Provinces and 1 Vice Province. With more than 3.000 professed

Salesians the South Asia Region accounts for 21.5% of Salesians in the world working in 413 Salesian Religious Houses, accounting for 23.8% of Salesian Houses in the Congregation. The median age of confreres is 45. It is providential that so many Salesians are working in the region that has the largest populations of youth and poor youth in the world.

The Salesian Family in the Region comprises in addition to the Salesians, the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (1.789), Association of the Salesian Co-operators (3.652), World Confederation of the Past Pupils (34.091), Secular Institute of the Volunteers of Don Bosco (15), Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians (915), Association of Mary Help of Christians (905), Catechist Sisters of Mary Immaculate Help of Christians (748), The Disciples – Don Bosco Secular Institute (317), Sisters of Maria Auxiliatrix (102), and Visitation Sisters of Don Bosco (109).

The works of the Salesians in collaboration with other members of the Salesian Family and other Religious and laity reach out to over 21.170.893 beneficiaries. A variety of works (formal and non-formal technical education, works for youth at risk (YaR), Schools, Higher Education, Parishes, Youth Centres, Oratories Social work etc) are directed to serving the beneficiaries. The other Salesian Family members have independent works that reach out to many more.

The world, under the leadership of the United Nations has set the goal to “end poverty in all its forms everywhere” as the first of its Sustainable development Goals. The Salesian works achieve these goals in manifold ways, but one prominent work among them is short term skill training offered to poor youth who are then helped to get employed and earn a living to be the protagonists who bring their families out of poverty.

The Salesian Provincial Conference of South Asia (SPCSA) set

up Don Bosco Tech (DBTech) as a vehicle to coordinate the efforts of all Salesian Provinces in this area of work. Established in 2006, the DBTech model and its name has been imitated in other parts of the world. In these years the network (DBTech India) has trained over 440.000 young people. The work is done through the various Salesian institutions as well as through a large network of collaborative work with other Diocesan and Religious Congregations and with a large pool of highly motivated lay collaborators who are committed to working for the poorer section of youth.

While the achievements over the years on behalf of the poorest youth, has been great, I would like to point to the achievements of 2022-2023 to appreciate the work of all Salesians and their collaborators to carry on the dream of Don Bosco to dedicate ourselves to young people especially those who are poorer.

I have chosen this work to be presented since it above all achieves the largest and best outcome for the poorest families.

Here we have a network with 26.243 students being trained in one year! Very few large institutions in the world would have so many students graduating (20.121) in one year. Even if they had, the graduates would rarely be in such numbers from the poorest sections of society.

Of these approximately 18.370 are employed as they finish their skills training (approximately 70% of those trained).

All these students have been given totally free training and job placement without charging fees. This is achieved through the generous contribution of benefactors and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) partners. DBTech has over 30 funding partners including Corporates, Foundations and Government.

The Salesian predilection for poorer youth is evidenced in the fact that almost all the trainees come from the "Economically

Weaker Sections” of society – 98%.

Even more important to note is that 10.987 (55%) of the already graduated 20.121 students (others being in training, awaiting conclusion of their classes) are coming from families who have an annual income less than Rs.100.000, that is approximately 1.111 Euro per year (calculated at 1 Euro = Rs.90). This is family income less than 100 Euro per month. This would mean families living on less than 3 Euro per day. We are speaking of families and not individuals!

<i>Annual Family Income</i>	<i>Approximate Daily Income of Families</i>	<i>Total Youth Trained</i>	<i>% of Youth Trained</i>
Below 1 Lakh / Below 1.111 Euro	Below 3 Euro	10.987	55%
1-3 Lakh	Below 3-9 Euro	8.144	40%
3-5 Lakh	Below 9-15 Euro	469	2%
5-7 Lakh	Below 15-21 Euro	161	1%
7 Lakh and above	21 Euro and more	360	2%
Grand Total		20.121 (+ 6.302 in class)	

Note: Euro calculated to be 1 = Rs.90

Dopo la formazione gratuita, questi giovani poveri guadagnano oggi in media 10.000 rupie al mese, il che ha reso il loro reddito personale annuo superiore al reddito familiare annuo delle loro famiglie.

After free skill training, these poor youth are today earning an average of Rs.10.000 per month which has made their personal annual income above the annual family income of their own families.

In the context of the need for outcome based transformative

interventions, the Salesian Family of South Asia with the primary role played by the young people who get skilled and employed are truly forming “honest citizens”. The young people who have been trained and placed in jobs are today contributing to nation building. The annual income generated by these students employed after free training is approximately Rs. 2.204.400.000 which is equivalent to approximately 24.493.333 Euros annually.

The training duration varies according to sectors. The trainings are provided in various sectors: Agriculture and Allied; Apparel, Made Ups and Home Furnishing; Automotive; Banking and Finance; Beauty & Wellness; Capital Goods; Construction; Electronics & IT Hardware; Food Processing; Furniture & Fittings; Green Jobs; Handicrafts and Carpet; Healthcare; IT-ITES; Logistics; Media and Entertainment; Office Management; Plumbing Industry; Power; Retail; Tourism and Hospitality and, Others.

It is also to be noted that in developing nations where girls and women are the weaker and more defenceless, the services offered by the Salesians are serving the females more. More than 53% of the trainees who completed their course are female.



Le storie dei giovani che hanno trasformato la loro vita cogliendo le opportunità offerte dalle opere salesiane sono molto importanti nella narrazione dell'attenzione salesiana verso i più poveri.

The stories of the youth who have transformed their lives through taking the opportunities provided by the Salesian works stand tall in the narrative of Salesian focus on the poorest.

The Salesians have truly received support from many generous people, foundations, corporations and government to achieve

the transformation of so many underprivileged youths to become honest and productive citizens. We are truly grateful to all of them. God has been blessing the Region with growth in Salesian Vocations too.

For more information, one could visit the website of DBTech India at <https://dbtech.in>.

Such work, as Don Bosco would tell us, is “our greatest satisfaction”! It is addressed to the poorest. It involves largescale collaboration between Religious and Secular bodies. It is a great example of lay collaboration. It is addressed to all youth – 72% of the beneficiary youth belong to Hindu religion which is the largest religion in the South Asia Region.

In the *Biographical Memoirs of Saint John Bosco* we read Don Bosco’s words: “Make sure you always stick to the poor children of the people. Do not fail in your prime purpose and let your society always have it in view: do not aspire to greater things. [...] If you educate the poor, if you are poor, if you do not make noise, no one will envy you, no one will seek you out, they will leave you alone and you will do good.” (MB IX,566).

We also present some young people whose encounter with Don Bosco’s charism has changed their lives.

### **Adna Javaid**

Adna Javaid’s struggles began at a very young age. She grew up in poverty. She was born in Bemina, a region in the heart of Srinagar, the summer capital of Jammu and Kashmir, India. Adna’s father Javaid Ahmad Bhat was a shopkeeper who could hardly support his family. She dropped her studies after completing 12th grade and remained in her home for some years. She wanted to chase her dreams, but could not find a way to fulfil them.

Despite her difficult circumstances, she began writing plays and performing them in small venues in her locality. However, her early efforts were unsuccessful, and she faced rejection after rejection. In 2021, Adna staged her first play, "I Know I've Been a Girl," in her community. The play was poorly received, and Adna lost all of her savings. However, she continued to have faith and slowly built up her future.

During the Don Bosco Tech Srinagar mobilization near her locality, Adna saw the Don Bosco Tech team and spoke to them about her problems. The team convinced her to join the training and assured job assistance, and she decided to join the CRM Domestic Voice Domain.



Adna's breakthrough came in 2021 when she realized that she was closer to her dreams after training at Don Bosco Tech Training Centre Srinagar.

Since then, Adna has become one of the most successful and influential figures in the BPO sector. Despite facing significant obstacles and setbacks, she persevered, continued to work hard, and believed in herself and her vision.

She is now working as a Customer Care Executive Process, at J&K Bank, supported by DigiTech, Call System Pvt. Ltd, with Rs 12,101 CTC monthly remuneration.

Adna is so happy about her life now, and she is also helping many girls to join the job-oriented course at Don Bosco Tech Training Centre, Rajbagh, Srinagar.

## **Peesara Niharika**

Peesara Niharika hails from a rural place located far away from Don Bosco Tech, Karunapuram center. She completed her graduation with the support of her parents, who are daily wage workers. Difficulties and shortcomings were the watchwords in her life from a very young age. At a point in life, she even

dropped her studies and supported her parents financially, by working in agri-farms with the villagers. But she longed to pursue higher studies, whenever she watched her school friends go to college, while she was working in the paddy field.

One day, as she was looking for an employment opportunity, Niharika came across the mobilization wing at Karnuapuram, organized by the staff of Don Bosco Tech Centre and made a firm decision to enrol herself in the Skill Training Program. Having an interest in Customer Relationship Management, she got herself enrolled in the CRM Domestic Non-Voice program at Don Bosco Tech, Karunapuram center.

She was found to be very active and agile during the training program, trying to efficiently communicate with everyone in her batch. She is multitalented with skills such as dancing, singing, and playing games, and also enthusiastically spreads positivity around her. Through life skill sessions, she could get rid of her timidity and stage fear.



At the time of the interview, she was hired by Ratnadeep, in Hyderabad for the role of Customer Service Representative with a pay scale of INR 14,600/- per month including ESI and PF. Now she has the capacity to lead her family and support her parents who are extremely grateful to Don Bosco Tech Society for the huge transformation in their daughter's life. Niharika overwhelmingly says that her journey at Don Bosco Tech Karunapuram center will forever remain a happy memory for the rest of her life.

### **Chanti V.**

"The difference between who you are and who you want to be is what you do".

Chanti is from a low-income family in Vepagunta, Vishkapattanam. After he completed his intermediate, he wanted



to go for higher studies but could not afford the fees. Then, he got to know about the Don Bosco Tech training centre, Sabbavaram through his neighbourhood friend and the mobilization activity in his village. He came to know from the counsellors that this institute provides free training with NSDC certifications.

After joining Don Bosco Tech, along with the E-commerce course, Chanti also learned spoken English and computer. The trainers still remember that on his first day at Don Bosco Tech, his poor communication skills and less than minimum knowledge of Computers were vividly noticed by them. There was no proper education system or facilities in his village for him to learn such skills. But his desperation towards learning a new subject and need for a better job convinced the trainers to include him in the E-Commerce Domain.

He managed to get placed in the company, Ecom Express as a delivery boy. After witnessing his talent, the company gave him higher responsibility and now he gets INR 20,000/- per month.



He and his parents were extremely happy about his achievement. He is very grateful to the institute for making him what he is today. Now, he has become an inspiration for young boys in his village who are struggling to get a decent job. He has informed many of them about DB Tech, Sabbavaram, and many have expressed their desire to join the institute.

### **Klerina N Areng**

Klerina N Areng from Meghalaya she completed her 10th in the year 2009 as a private candidate. Then she heard about the Don Bosco Tech Society giving free training plus placement out of State. She was very interested and decided to join the training.

She was enrolled under Skill Meghalaya F& B Service Associate Batch-2 in the Don Bosco Tech, Shillong Centre. All her classmates were younger than her so most of them made fun of her and called her mommy, but she just ignored them.

She was very punctual, respectful, and was a very good learner. She learned everything faster than her batch mates. In the whole 2 months of training, she showed discipline and excellent results. Finally, after the completion of her training, DB Tech offered her a job at JW Marriott Sahar Mumbai, as a Steward with a monthly salary of CTC Rs 15000.

She is very much thankful to DBTech and MSSDS Skill Meghalaya for providing her an opportunity to earn her livelihood in a decent way. Now, with the salary she will be able to support her parents financially.



*Fr Biju Michael, SDB*  
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