

St Paul VI. The most Salesian Pope

Pope Montini knew the Salesians closely, appreciated them, always encouraged and supported them in their educational mission.

Other popes before him, and after him, have shown great signs of affection for the Salesian Society. We recall some of them.

The two Popes at the origin and development of Salesian work

There were two Popes with whom Don Bosco had direct dealings. First of all, Blessed Pius IX, the Pope whom he supported at tragic times for the Church, whose authority, rights and prestige he defended, so much so that his opponents called him “the Garibaldi of the Vatican”. He was reciprocated with numerous affectionate private audiences, many concessions and indulgences. The Pope also supported him financially. During his pontificate, the Salesian Society, its Constitutions, the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (FMA), the Pious Union of Salesian Cooperators, the Mary Help of Christians association were all approved. He appointed himself protector of the Society.

He was succeeded by Pope Leo XIII who in turn accepted to be the first Salesian Cooperator, treated Don Bosco with unusual warmth and granted him the privileges that were now essential for the rapid and prodigious development of the Congregation. He directed the first Apostolic Vicariate entrusted to the Salesians, appointing the first bishop in the person of Bishop Giovanni Cagliero in 1883. In his first audience with Fr Rua after Don Bosco’s death, he was generous with advice for the consolidation of the Salesian Society.

The two (future) Popes who sat at Don Bosco’s table

St Pius X as a simple canon met with Don Bosco in Turin in 1875, sat at his table and was enrolled among the Salesian Cooperators. He left highly edified. As Bishop and Patriarch

of Venice he gave proof of benevolence towards the Salesian Society. In 1907 he signed the decree introducing the apostolic process of Don Bosco and in 1914 for St Dominic Savio as well. In 1908 he appointed Bishop Cagliero as Apostolic Delegate to Central America. He was the first Salesian Cooperator raised to the honour of the altars.

As a young priest in 1883, Pius XI also visited Don Bosco at the Oratory, staying there for two days. He sat at Don Bosco's table and left full of deep and pleasant memories. He spared no means to quickly promote the apostolic process of Don Bosco, wanting to set no less than the date of Easter 1934, the close of the Holy Year, as the date of his canonisation. Thanks to him Dominic Savio's cause overcame difficulties that seemed insurmountable: in 1933 he signed the decree of the heroicity of his virtues; in 1936 he proclaimed the heroicity of the virtues of St Mary Mazzarello, whom he beatified on 20th November 1938. Other signs of predilection for the Salesian Society were the granting of the Indulgence of Sanctified Work (1922) and the elevation to the purple of Polish Cardinal Augustus Hlond (1927).

The most Salesian pope

If Pius XI was rightly called the "Pope of Don Bosco", perhaps just as rightly the "most Salesian Pope" was Pope St. Paul VI for the knowledge, esteem and affection shown to the Salesian society, without wishing to underestimate other previous or subsequent Popes. Father Giorgio, a journalist, was a great admirer of Don Bosco (not yet Blessed), whose autographed painting he kept in his study, and was often admired by young Giovanni Battista. During his studies in Turin, the young Montini had wavered between choosing the Benedictine life he had known at San Bernardino di Chiari (which later became a Salesian house, it still is today), and Salesian life. A few days after his priestly ordination (Brescia 29 May 1920), he asked the bishop, even before receiving his pastoral destination, if he could choose his own. In that case he would have liked to go with Don Bosco. The bishop decided instead on

studies in Rome. But after one Montini who had failed to become a Salesian came another. A few years after that interview, his cousin Luigi (1906-1963) told him of his desire to become a priest too. The future pope, who knew him well, told him that given his lively temperament, Salesian life would be good for him and so he took advice from the famous Salesian Fr Cojazzi. The advice was positive, and upon hearing the news Fr Giovanni was so pleased that his cousin would take his place that he himself accompanied him to the Salesian missionary aspirantate in Ivrea. He would then be a missionary for 17 years in China and later in Brazil until his death. Completing the Salesianity of the Montini family was the presence, for about ten years, in the Salesian house at Colle Don Bosco of one of Enrico's brothers, Luigi (1905-1973).

There is no need to say how close Bishop Montini was to the Salesians in the various responsibilities he assumed: for example as Substitute at the Secretariat of State or in the very early post-war period in Rome for the nascent Borgo Don Bosco work for the *sciuscià* (shoe-shine boys), then as Archbishop of Milan at the end of the 1950s asking them to take over the Arese *barabitt*, and finally as Pope in supporting the entire Salesian Congregation and Family, erecting among other things the Pontifical Salesian University and the Pontifical Faculty of Educational Sciences at the FMA Auxilium.

He spoke several times of his immense esteem for Salesian work, missionary work in particular, in private audiences given the Rector Major Fr Luigi Ricceri as well as in public audiences. One of the most famous was the private audience granted to the Chapter Members of General Chapter 20 on 20 December 1971. Obviously in many speeches given to the Salesians, of Milan in particular, he demonstrated a profound knowledge of the Salesian charism and its potential.

There is much more ‘thirst for God’ than you might think

Today there is so much need for listening, for free and open dialogue, for personal encounters that do not judge and do not condemn, and so much need for silence and presence in God.

Dear friends of the Salesian Bulletin, not so long ago I attended the funeral of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI. It was he himself who wrote the magnificent Encyclical “Deus Caritas est” a year after the beginning of his service as Pontiff, and in it the following statement that seems to me to be the essence of the magnificent fragrance of Christian thought: “Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction” ([*Deus Caritas est, 1*](#)). Certainly that Person is Jesus Christ.

And beginning from this Benedict XVI leaves us with statements like these:

- “Jesus Christ is the Truth made Person, who draws the world to himself.

- The light radiated by Jesus is the light of truth. Every other truth is a fragment of the Truth that is him and to which he refers.

- Jesus is the North Star of human freedom: without him, it loses its orientation, because without knowledge of the truth, freedom is denatured, isolated and reduced to sterile arbitrariness.

- With him one rediscovers freedom, recognises it as created for good and expresses it through charitable actions and behaviour.

- This is why Jesus gives man full familiarity

with the truth and continually invites him to live in it.

– And nothing more than the love of truth can propel human intelligence towards unexplored horizons.

– Jesus Christ, who is the fullness of truth, draws the heart of every man to himself, expands it and fills it with joy.”

There is a whole Christian teaching in these few compact sentences that is far from being merely “moral” or a set of cold and rigid rules devoid of life. The Christian life is first and foremost a *true encounter with God*.

And that is what I stated in the title of this message. In my opinion and deep conviction, there is much more “thirst for God” than we imagine, than there seems to be. It is not that I want to change the statistics of sociological studies or draw up some fictitious reality. I certainly do not intend to do so, but I do wish to make it understood that in the “*visa vis*” in the “face to face” encounter with the real life of so many people, of so many fathers and mothers, of so many families, of so many teenagers and young adults, what one finds, very often, is a life that is not easy, a life that must be “healed” daily, human relationships in which love is desired and necessary and which must be taken care of in every small gesture, in every small detail, in every action. And in this “face to face” there is so much need for listening, for free and open dialogue, for personal encounters that do not judge and do not condemn, *and so much need for silence and presence in God*.

I say this with great conviction. Right here in Valdocco, Turin, where I am, it surprises me and fills me with joy when a group of young people take the initiative to invite other young people for an hour of presence, silence and prayer before Jesus in the *Eucharist*, that is, an hour of *Eucharistic adoration*, and a hundred or so people – so many young people – respond to the appointment. Or in Rome, at Sacred Heart, we used to meet on Thursday evenings, and young people and young couples, some with their children, and even engaged couples

were present at this moment because they felt that their lives needed this encounter with a Person who gives meaning to our lives.



And I have experienced it as an example in many countries and places. That is why I am invite you here to do as Don Bosco would do. He did not hesitate for a moment to offer his boys the experience of an encounter with Jesus. And that God who is presence, who is God-with-us, as we celebrated at Christmas, is still the same God who calls, who invites, who reassures in every personal encounter, in every moment of rest in Him.



I remember one of Don Bosco's many "surprises" as he recounts in his Memoirs: "I was entering the church from the sacristy and I saw a young man raised to the height of the Tabernacle behind the choir, in the act of adoring the Blessed Sacrament, kneeling in the air, his head inclined and leaning against the door of the Tabernacle, in a sweet ecstasy of love like a Seraphim from Heaven. I called him by his name and he was soon roused and came down to the floor all upset, begging me not to reveal it to anyone. I repeat that I could recount many other similar facts to make it known that all the good that Don Bosco does he owes especially to his children."

Is it possible that Jesus is still the same God who wants to meet all of us today and many others, or are we ashamed and afraid to go down this road? Is it possible that many of us do not dare to invite others to experience what we are experiencing and that has been freely given and offered to us? Is it possible that because we are told that this is unfashionable and out of date, we believe too many negative messages and lose the strength to witness that many of us continue to enjoy every *personal encounter with the One who is the Lord of life?*

Pope Benedict was convinced that his life and his faith were “right” and **this is great, an encounter with his Lord**, and this is how Pope Francis bid him farewell in the last words of his homily: ‘Benedict, faithful friend of the Bridegroom, may your joy be perfect in hearing his voice finally and forever’. Let us therefore continue to promote, my friends, those encounters of Life that give us *profound life*, because there is more “thirst for God” than there is said to be or that we believe there is.