

# Fr Rinaldi at the Becchi

*Blessed Don Filippo Rinaldi, the third successor of Don Bosco, is remembered as an extraordinary figure, capable of uniting in himself the qualities of Superior and Father, a distinguished master of spirituality, pedagogy, and social life, as well as an unparalleled spiritual guide. His deep admiration for Don Bosco, whom he had the privilege of knowing personally, made him a living testimony of the founder's charisma. Aware of the spiritual importance of the places linked to Don Bosco's childhood, Don Rinaldi paid particular attention to visiting them, recognizing their symbolic and formative value. In this article, we retrace some of his visits to Colle Don Bosco, discovering the special bond that connected him to these holy places.*

## **For the shrine of Mary Help of Christians**

With the inauguration of the little shrine to Mary Help of Christians, which Fr Paul Albera wanted built opposite Don Bosco's cottage, and precisely from 2 August 1918, when Archbishop Morganti, archbishop of Ravenna, assisted by our Major Superiors, solemnly blessed the church and bells, the permanent presence of the Salesians at the Becchi began. Fr Philip Rinaldi, Prefect General, was also there on that day, and with him Fr Francesco Cottrino, the first rector of the new house.

From then on, Fr Rinaldi's visits to the Becchi were repeated every year at a steady pace, a true expression of his great affection for the good Father Don Bosco, and of his keen interest in purchasing and appropriately arranging the memorable places of the Saint's childhood.

From the handful of news items from the Salesian house at the Becchi it is easy to deduce the care and love with which Fr Rinaldi promoted and personally followed the work needed to honour Don Bosco and appropriately serve pilgrims.

So, in 1918, after coming to the Becchi for the blessing of the church, Fr Rinaldi returned there on 6 October together with Cardinal Cagliero for the Feast of the Holy Rosary, and took the opportunity to start negotiations for the purchase of the Cavallo House behind Don Bosco's.

### **Care for the work on the cottage**

In 1919 Fr Rinaldi made two visits to the Becchi: one on 2 June and the other on 28 September, both in view of the restoration work to be carried out in the historic area known as Colle (Don Bosco).

There were three visits in 1920: one on 16-17 June, to negotiate the purchase of the Graglia house and the Bechis brothers' field; one on 11 September to visit the works and the Graglia property; and, finally, one on the 13th of the same month to attend the drafting of the deed for the purchase of the Graglia house.

There were two visits in 1921: on 16 March, with Archbishop Valotti, for the project of a road leading to the Sanctuary and a Colmn and Pilgrims Area on piazzetta; on 12-13 September, with Archbishop Valotti and Cavaliere Melle, for the same purpose.

In 1922 Fr Rinaldi was again at the Becchi twice: on 4 May with Cardinal Cagliero, Fr Ricaldone, Fr Conelli and all the Members of the General Chapter (including Salesian Bishops), to pray at the Casetta after his election as Rector Major; and on 28 September with his closest collaborators.

He then arrived there on 10 June 1923 to celebrate the Feast of Mary Help of Christians. He presided at Vespers in the sanctuary, gave the sermon and imparted the Eucharistic blessing. In the Academy that followed, he presented the Cross "Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice" to Mr Giovanni Febbraro, our benefactor. He then returned there in October with Cardinal Cagliero for the feast of the Holy Rosary, celebrating Mass at 7 a.m. and carrying the Blessed Sacrament in the Eucharistic procession, which was followed by the blessing imparted by the Cardinal.

On 7 September 1924 Fr Rinaldi led the Pilgrimage of Fathers and Past Pupils from Turin Houses to the Becchi. He celebrated Holy Mass, gave the sermon and then, after breakfast, took part in the concert organised for the occasion. He returned again on 22 October of the same year, together with Fr Ricaldone, and Valotti and Barberis, to resolve the thorny issue of the road to the shrine, which involved difficulties on the part of the owners of the adjacent land.

Fr Rinaldi was at the Becchi on three occasions in 1925: on 21 May for the unveiling of the plaque to Don Bosco, and then on 23 July and 19 September, accompanied this time again by Cardinal Cagliero.

On 13 May 1926 Fr Rinaldi led a pilgrimage of about 200 members of the Don Bosco Teachers' Union, celebrating Mass and presiding at their meeting. On 24 July of the same year he returned, together with the whole Superior Chapter, to lead the pilgrimage of Rectors of Houses in Europe; and again on 28 August with the Superior Chapter and the Rectors of Houses in Italy.

### **Renovation of the historical centre**

Three other visits by Fr Rinaldi to the Becchi date back to 1927: 30 May with Fr Giraudi and Valotti to determine building works (construction of the portico, etc.); 30 August with Fr Tirone and the Directors of the festive Oratories; and 10 October with Fr Tirone and the young missionaries from Ivrea. On the latter occasion Fr Rinaldi urged the Rector at the time, Fr Fracchia, to place plants behind the Graglia house and in the meadow of the Dream,

Fr Rinaldi was at the Becchi in 1928 on four occasions: On 12 April with Fr Ricaldone for an examination of the work carried out and work in progress. On 9-10 June with Fr Candela and Fr V. Bettazzi for the Feast of Mary Help of Christians and for the inauguration of the *Pilone del Sogno*. On this occasion there was a sung Holy Mass and, after Vespers and the afternoon Eucharistic Blessing, blessed the *Pilone del*

*Sogno* and the new Portico, addressing everyone from the balcony. In the evening, he attended the light show. On 30 September, he came with Fr Ricaldone and Fr Giraudi to visit the Gaj locality. On 8 October he returned at the head of the annual pilgrimage of young missionaries from Ivrea. It was in that year that Fr Rinaldi expressed his desire to purchase the Damevino villa to use as accommodation for pilgrims or, better still, to assign it to the Sons of Mary aspiring missionaries.

As many as six visits were made to the Becchi in 1929: – The first, on 10 March, with Fr Ricaldone, was to visit the Damevino villa and the Graglia house (the first of which was later purchased that same year). As Don Bosco's beatification was imminent, Fr Rinaldi also wanted a little altar to the Blessed to be set up in the kitchen of the *Casetta* (which was carried out later, in 1931). – The second, on 2 May, was also a study visit, with Fr Giraudi, Mr Valotti and the painter Prof. Guglielmino. – The third, on 26 May, was to attend the feast of Mary Help of Christians. The fourth, on 16 June, was with the Superior Chapter and all the members of the General Chapter for the Feast of Don Bosco. The fifth, on 27 July, was a short visit with Fr Tirone and Bishop Massa. The sixth, finally, was with Bishop Mederlet and the young missionaries of the Ivrea House, for whom Fr Rinaldi made no secret of his predilections.

In 1930 Fr Rinaldi came twice more to the Becchi: on 26 June for a brief reconnaissance visit of the various localities; and on 6 August, with Fr Ricaldone, Mr Valotti and Cav. Sartorio, to search for water (which Fr Ricaldone then found in two places, 14 and 11 metres away from the spring called Bacolla).

In 1931, which was the year of his death on 5 December, Fr Rinaldi came to the Becchi at least three times: on 19 July, in the afternoon. On that occasion he recommended the commemoration of Don Bosco on the 16th of each month or the following Sunday. On 16 September, when he approved and praised the recreation camp prepared for the young people of the Community. On 25 September, and it was the last, when,

with Fr Giraudi and Mr Valotti, he examined the plan for the trees to be planted in the area (it will be carried out later, in 1990, when the project for the planting of 3000 trees on the various slopes of Colle dei Becchi began, precisely in the year of his beatification.).

Not counting any previous visits, there are therefore 41 visits made by Fr Rinaldi to the Becchi between 1918 and 1931.

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## Great saint, great manager

It is not easy to choose, from the hundreds of unpublished letters of Don Bosco that we have recovered in recent decades, the ones that most deserve to be presented and commented on. This time we take a very simple one, but one that in just a few lines summarises an entire project of Salesian educational work and offers us many other interesting facts. It is the one written on 7 May 1877 to a person from Trentino, a certain Daniele Garbari, who had repeatedly asked him on behalf of two brothers how he could found an educational institute in his area, like the ones that Don Bosco was founding throughout Italy, France and Argentina.

*Dear Mr Garbari,*

My absence from Turin was the cause of the delay in replying to your letters, which I have regularly received. I am very pleased that our institution is well received in these places of yours. The more it is known, the more it will be well-liked by the governments themselves; whether they like it or not, the facts assure us that we must help youngsters at risk in order to make them good citizens or keep them in dishonour in prison.

As for setting up an institute similar to this in the city of Trent or surrounding towns, it does not take much to begin with:

1. A room capable of accommodating a certain number of children, but with their respective workshops inside.
2. Something that can provide a little bread for the Rector and the other people who assist him in the care and management.

The boys are supported

1. by what little monthly boarding fee some of them can pay, or are paid by relatives or other people who recommend them.
2. from the little income the work provides.
3. by grants from municipalities, the government, charitable congregations, and the donations of private individuals. This is how all our trade houses are run, and with God's help we have progressed well. However, it must be taken as a basis that we have always been, and will always be, uninvolved in anything political.

Our overriding aim is to gather children at risk to make them good Christians and upright citizens. This is the first thing to be made clear to the civil and governmental authorities.

As a priest, then, I must be in full agreement with the ecclesiastical authority; therefore, when it comes to finalising the matter, I would write directly to the Archbishop of Trent, who will certainly not have any difficulties.

Here is my preliminary thought. As the matter continues and more is needed, I will write. Please thank on my behalf all those people who show me kindness.

I wanted to write this myself in my own poor handwriting, but I will hand over the pen to my secretary so that it will be easier to read.

With the greatest esteem and gratitude, I have the honour of being your

Humble servant Fr. Gio Bosco Turin, 7 May 1877

## **Positive image of Salesian work**

First of all, the letter informs us how Don Bosco, after papal approval of the Salesian Congregation (1874), the opening of the first Salesian house in France (1875) and the first missionary expedition to Latin America (1875), was always busy visiting and supporting his already existing works and accepting or not accepting the many that were being proposed to him everywhere over those years. At the time of the letter he had the thought of opening the first houses of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians beyond the one in Mornese – as many as six in the two-year period 1876-1877 – and above all he was interested in establishing himself in Rome, where he had been trying unsuccessfully for more than 10 years to have a place. Nothing came of it. Yet another Piedmontese like Don Bosco, a “priest on the move” like him, was not welcome on the banks of the Tiber, in the capital Rome which was already full of unpopular Piedmontese, certain pontifical authorities and certain Roman clergy. For three years he had to “make do” with being on the outskirts of Rome, i.e. the Castelli Romani and Magliano Sabino.

Paradoxically, the opposite had happened with the city administrations and government authorities of the Kingdom of Italy, where Don Bosco had many, if not friends – their ideas were too far apart, at least great admirers. And for a very simple reason that every government was interested in: to manage the newly-minted country Italy with honest, hard-working, law-abiding citizens, instead of populating the prisons with vagrant “criminals” unable to support themselves and their families with a decent job of their own. Three decades later, in 1900, the famous Jewish anthropologist and criminologist Cesare Lombroso would give Don Bosco full credit when he wrote: “The Salesian institutes represent a colossal and ingeniously organised effort to prevent crime, the only one indeed made in Italy.” As the letter in question well states, the image of Salesian works in which, without taking sides with the various political parties, boys were educated

to become “good Christians and upright citizens” was a positive one, even in the Austro-Hungarian Empire to which Trentino and Venezia Giulia belonged at the time.

## **Typology of a Salesian House**

In the continuation of the letter Don Bosco went on to present the structure of a house of education: rooms where the boys could be housed (and he implied at least five things: **courtyard** to play in, **classrooms** to study in, **refectory** to eat in, **dormitory** to sleep in, **church** to pray in) and “**a plant or workshops**” where a trade could be taught with which the youngsters could live and have a future once they left the institute. As for economic resources, he indicated three assets: the minimum monthly boarding fee that the boys’ parents or relatives could pay, the small income from the craft workshops, public grants (government, municipalities) and especially private charity. It was precisely the Valdocco experience. But Don Bosco was silent here about one important thing: the total **dedication** to the educational mission by the Rector and his close collaborators, priests and lay people, who for the price of a loaf of bread and a bed spent 24 hours a day in work, prayer, teaching and assistance. At least that was the way it was done in the Salesian houses of the time, highly appreciated by both civil and religious authorities, bishops first and foremost, without whose approval it was evidently not possible to found a house “that educated by evangelising and evangelised by educating” like a Salesian one.

## **Results**

We do not know if there was a follow-up to this letter. Mr Garbari’s Salesian foundation project certainly did not go ahead. Nor did dozens of other foundation proposals. But it is historically certain that many other instructors, priests and lay people throughout Italy were inspired by Don Bosco’s experience, founding similar works, inspired by his educational model and his preventive system.



Garbari had to consider himself satisfied, however: Don Bosco had suggested a strategy that worked in Turin and elsewhere... and then he had his hand-written letter which, however difficult to 'decipher', was still a letter from a saint. So much so that he jealously preserved it and today it is kept in the Central Salesian Archives in Rome.

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## **Salesians in Tarnowskie Góry**

There is a perhaps unique place in Poland where Salesians care for young people from different social backgrounds. Children and young people from urban and rural areas, rich and poor, disabled, abandoned by their parents, marginalised come together in one work. Some study at school, others have found a home, a yard, a place to meet God there. For twenty-five years, the Salesian Institute in Tarnowskie Góry has been a second home not only for young people, but also a place where different circumstances mingle, supporting people, every individual.

### **A brief history**

Tarnowskie Góry is a town of sixty thousand inhabitants located in Upper Silesia, a very special region on the map of Poland due to its original culture, dialect and numerous traditions. It is a city with a rich history, whose origins are linked to the silver mines that operated here from the end of the 15th century until the beginning of the 20th century. Dedication to work and loyalty to tradition still characterise the inhabitants of this area today.

The Salesians from Wrocław Province (PL0) arrived in Tarnowskie Góry at the turn of 1998-1999 to take over the buildings of the former rehabilitation institute for the

disabled, located in a beautiful natural park known as Repty Park. The park belonged to the wealthy Donnersmarck family, who built a palace and servants' quarters there. After the Second World War the palace was destroyed and in its place a hospital was set up for miners who were victims of accidents. The servants' quarters were enlarged and a facility was created to rehabilitate and adapt miners and other disabled people. In time, this institution was called the Rehabilitation Institute for the Disabled and was handed over to the Salesians. Once the most necessary work was completed, the Salesian presence in the town was solemnly inaugurated on 30 September 1999. It is a special presence, for it is not just a Salesian school with oratory, but the entire structure needed to welcome and integrate the disabled.

### **The structure of the Institute**

Today the structure of the Salesian Institute includes:

- Primary and Secondary School with 633 students in the school year 2023-2024;
- Special Needs School with almost 50 students with a boarding school, mainly for the disabled, where 30 pupils live;
- Care Centre for Persons with Disabilities, with about 40 persons;
- the Rehabilitation Centre, which provides almost 870 rehabilitation services each year for almost 530 young minors;
- the Oratory, where about 70 young people receive training;
- the Hospitality Centre, which welcomes various groups for retreats or recreational activities.

More than 150 people work in the Institute, caring for young people on a daily basis.

### **The schools**

The value of the schools lies in the students and teachers. The Institute's schools employ teachers who, in addition to their specialist training, have qualifications in special pedagogy and therapy. The skills of these teachers are a response to the special needs of students with physical disabilities and specific learning difficulties, which are not lacking in Salesian schools in Tarnowskie Góry. The teachers are creative, constantly improving their skills and have a lot of experience in their work.

The schools' educational programme is derived from the principles of the Salesian Educational System. At the same time, the programme defines the specific nature of the Catholic and Salesian school which bases its educational activities on Christian values. In particular, young people are educated in self-acceptance and self-formation according to their abilities and the limitations of disability; in kindness and tolerance of worldviews, religion and race; in living and acting in accordance with the teachings of the Catholic Church; in patriotism and concern for the common good; in sensitivity to the lot of others; in the ability to cope with preparation for professional, family and personal life; in truth, independence, responsibility; in communion with nature and the use of its goods; in the formation of personal culture.

### *School for Special Needs with a boarding hostel*



The Special Needs School with a boarding hostel welcomes pupils with disabilities from all over Poland. The purpose of the school and boarding hostel is to enable pupils to receive an education appropriate to their abilities and to provide comprehensive educational care, as well as to enable participation in therapeutic and social rehabilitation and to prepare pupils for independent participation in social life. This part of the Salesian work in Tarnowskie Góry makes the

home dimension present in a special way according to the criteria of Don Bosco's Preventive System and makes the entire community aware of the young people most in need.

### ***Centre of assistance for people with disabilities***

The care centre for people with disabilities is a public facility within the Salesian work that carries out the tasks of social and professional rehabilitation. It assists general development by improving the ability of adults to function as independently and actively as possible in their environment. The rehabilitation activities are adapted to the individual abilities and skills of the participants. They have access to appropriately equipped therapeutic workshops conducted by qualified therapists and instructors.

### **Rehabilitation Centre**

This is an institution established to provide ongoing and comprehensive therapeutic and rehabilitation activities for disabled pupils and pupils with special needs. This is an undoubted advantage of the Salesian Institute, as young people in need of rehabilitation can benefit from it in their place of study and residence and at times coordinated with school activities.

### **Oratory**

The Oratory is the fulfilment of Don Bosco's fundamental idea: to create an environment for young people that is a home, school, playground and church. It offers pupils and those in charge of the Centre, as well as children and young people from outside, the opportunity to spend their free time well, develop their social, artistic and intellectual skills, educate them to be active and act for the good of others, and give them the chance to deepen their spiritual life. Young people, especially schoolchildren, are trained to be "good Christians and upright citizens" in adult life; they participate in formation in the local community, but also at

the level of the Wroclaw Province. They provide a service for young people both in school and out of school, such as in the youth summer.



## **Hospitality**

The Centre provides a place to welcome guests who wish to rest, renew themselves spiritually and enjoy the beauty of the surrounding countryside. Indeed, throughout the year the Institute welcomes various groups, especially those wishing to experience moments of formation or retreat.

## **The Hill of the Beatitudes, where Don Bosco's dream is realised**

The heart of the Salesian Work in Tarnowskie Góry is a chapel dedicated to Don Bosco. On the altar there is a statue of the Turin educator pointing out the goal to St Dominic Savio: heaven. Indeed, the aim of Salesian activity in Tarnowskie Góry is education through evangelisation and evangelisation through education. It is interesting to note that the Institute is situated on a hill. It is in a sense the 'Hill of the Beatitudes': here God truly blesses young people, here he teaches them the way of life according to the Gospel Beatitudes through the hands of teachers and educators. On this hill, every day, Don Bosco's dream is realised, even if sometimes it has to be realised along a path strewn with thorns, as he himself dreamed: "Here is the field of your work. Make yourself humble, strong and energetic (...). In good time you will understand everything."

*fr. Krystian SUKIENNIK, sdb*

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# **The Don Bosco of Naples. The oratory of a thousand trades**

The origin of the Salesian presence in Naples goes back to Don Bosco himself; Naples was the southernmost city visited by Don Bosco between 29 and 31 March 1880. On this occasion Don Bosco celebrated the Eucharist in the church of St Joseph in Via Medina, assisted by a young altar server called Peppino Brancati. A few years later the Neapolitan boy went to Valdocco to Don Bosco and became the first Salesian from southern Italy; a family home in Torre Annunziata was also dedicated to him.

On the outskirts of Naples, in a district called Doganella, the sons of Don Bosco began their activities in 1934 in poor premises that were insufficient to accommodate the large numbers of young people who flocked around them.

Twenty years later, after the terrible storm of the war had passed, in 1954 they set to work on the large Institute that exists today, built with conspicuous contributions from private benefactors and organisations.

On 28 May 1959, it was opened by the President of the Republic, Giovanni Gronchi. In the centenary year of Don Bosco's death, on 21 October 1988, the Rector Major Fr Egidio Viganò opened the Don Bosco Social Centre in which the Institute was redesigned according to the needs of the times and in dynamic fidelity to the Founder.

Today the Don Bosco of Naples presents itself as a dynamic reality open to its local area. In accordance with the charism of Don Bosco, it responds to the new educational poverty found in the city.

Naples is a beautiful and complex city that generates complex problems, and it is for this reason that our Salesian house has developed in such a way that it responds to a simple unifying criterion: the oratory criterion, the Oratory of a Thousand Trades!

## **A house that welcomes**

Over the years, the Salesians have been able to reinvent its call to be welcoming, from the large boarding schools of the 1960s to family communities, more child-friendly structures with individualised educational projects. In our house we have three of them! The first is the “Il Sogno” (The Dream) family community, run by the Salesian APS “Piccoli Passi grandi sogni” (Small Steps, Big Dreams), founded in 2007. In its 15 years of existence it has welcomed 120 youngsters, mostly from Naples and the province, from both penal and administrative areas. In 2017, Naples experienced the refugee landings emergency and the Salesians responded: the community for unaccompanied foreign minors, known as “Il Ponte” was born. These are children who have faced endless journeys amidst a thousand dangers to come to Europe. For most of them, Libya was the most traumatic stage. But that is not enough... in 2018, faced with the dramatic situation of minors abandoned on the streets, especially around the railway station, the rapid reception “La zattera” community was set up. It is a 24-hour educational emergency room to which the police, social workers or citizens can always turn to provide a roof, a meal, clothes but above all the chance to start again. More than 250 young people from 32 countries around the world have passed through these two communities! Among the stories of redemption and rebirth of these young people, I like to tell Mustafà’s story, a 17-year-old from Somalia. He was found by the police lying on the ground at central station. I remember the evening when he arrived in the porter’s lodge of our centre accompanied by the social worker, welcomed by Pietro and Fr Vanni. He looked terrified, but above all I noticed that he could not walk; in Libyan prisons they had broken his hip. It has been three years since Mustafà took the third grade with us, had surgery, and now walks quite well; he has enrolled in the first year of our Vocational Training Centre. Every time I see him I think back to that evening in the porter’s lodge and I think of Don Bosco’s miracles.

## **School that prepares for life**

Don Bosco used to say, my boys have “intelligence in their hands” and this applies all the more to Neapolitan boys. Naples, however, is also the city in Italy with the highest school drop-out rate. How can we combat early school leaving by leveraging the intelligence in the hands of Neapolitan girls and boys? Vocational training! In 2018 we inaugurated a new Vocational Training Centre together with other partners who share this great educational mission: the *San Gennaro Foundation*, the *Franca and Alberto Riva Foundation*, *IF learn and do*, *Cooperativa il Millepiedi*, *Cometa Formazione*. The *School of Doing* was born, an innovative, beautiful school that makes educational focus and the relationship with companies its hallmark. With the two “logistics systems and services operator” and “motor vehicle repair operator” courses, we are giving a concrete response to local young people.

Alongside these two structured three-year courses, the Oratory of a Thousand Trades offers many workshops in which to practise, experiment, learn a trade, find one’s own place in the world: the “Anem e Pizza” pizzeria workshop, the “Cap Appost” hairdresser’s workshop, the “Le Ali” centre with the possibility it offers of qualifying as a cook, waiter and bar tender, the Don Bosco band that offers the opportunity for young people to learn and play an instrument, and many other possibilities, many other trades.

## **A Church that evangelises**

Our Salesian community runs the Don Bosco Parish in the Amicizia district. It is an evangelising presence in an area that sees in us Salesians a point of reference, a constant presence that accompanies in all seasons of life and all situations of life, given that our community also takes care of the pastoral care of St John Bosco Hospital.

The central moment of oratory life is prayer with the Salesian good night, when all sectors and all projects stop to dedicate a few minutes to converse with God in simple



words close to each day. So it is that the children who attend the day centre, the street education workshops, the territorial projects with the schools, the boys in the football school and the youngsters who freely enter the oratory recognise themselves as belonging to the same big Salesian family. Fr Michael's "call" to prayer at 5.30 p.m. represents an essential educational rite for our work, because education also needs its rites!

### **A playground to meet as friends**

The playground is the geographical and charismatic centre of our work. Don Bosco has a beautiful and spacious courtyard/playground with many fields, a large portico, a "square" on the scale of young people, the square of joy. This space is all the more precious because it is located in a part of the city that has no space dedicated to young people, who are often forced to stay on the streets with all the dangers that entails. I still remember one sunny afternoon in the courtyard when a mother arrived, almost with tears in her eyes, leaving her children in the oratory, saying "thank goodness you Salesians are here". A few minutes earlier in a nearby square, a little girl walking with her grandmother had been stuck by a bullet. Aware that we cannot educate alone, we have built a network with other agencies in the area, family, school, social services, parishes, associations.

The courtyard/playground is inhabited daily by hundreds of children and dozens of educators who make it an educational space to meet as friends. Sport open to all, then allows us to engage with hundreds of boys and girls with their families.

Over these years I have become more and more convinced that Don Bosco with his educational style, his loving-kindness has so much to give to Naples, but also that Naples with its beauty, its brilliance, enriches Don Bosco, makes him more likeable, in short they are a winning couple!

*Fabio Bellino*

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# Salesian House at Châtillon

*Located in a beautiful mountainous area at the foot of the Alps, close to Switzerland, the [Salesian House at Châtillon](#) has a special and successful history.*

In the region of Valle d'Aosta, there is a municipality called Châtillon (the name comes from the Latin "Castellum") located between Mount Zerbion to the north and Mount Barbeston to the south; it is the third most populated municipality in the region.

In 1917, during the First World War, a company, Soie de Châtillon (English "Silk of Châtillon"), was founded in this locality and started to work in the field of techno-fibres with modern technology. The presence of nearby hydroelectric power stations that supplied electricity conditioned the choice of location for the company, as there were still no extensive power grids to transport electricity.

In 1942, the company came under the ownership of Società Saifta (*Società Anonima Italiana per le Fibre Tessili Artificiali S.p.A.*).

After the Second World War, the Saifta Company, which managed the Soie factory in Châtillon, initially intended as a boarding school for female workers, called in the Salesians and put these buildings at their disposal to take in war orphans and children of Soie employees as boarders. Thus began the Salesian *Don Bosco Orphanage in Châtillon*, a name that has remained to this day, even though the orphans are no longer there.

At the end of August 1948, 33 boys began an Industrial Vocational Training course in the two specialisations for Mechanics-Adjusters and Carpenters-Cabinetmakers: the latter specialisation was very useful in the mountainous, wooded

area.

A few months later, on 5 February 1949, the Don Bosco Orphanage was officially inaugurated, destined to take in the poor youngsters of the Aosta Valley and initiate them into learning a profession.

With the introduction of compulsory schooling in 1965, the Vocational School was replaced by the Middle School, and the Technical School by the Professional Institute for Industry and Handicrafts (IPIA), in the two specialisations: Mechanical Carpenters and Cabinet-Makers.

At the end of the 1970s, the Saifta Company went into crisis, stopped supporting the Orphanage financially and put the Soie structure up for sale. The Valle d'Aosta Region, in May 1980, realising the importance and value of the work – which had developed so much in the meantime – bought the entire educational structure and offered it for management to the Salesians.

Educational activities continued, developing into the vocational school, the result of the Salesians' collaboration with local companies.

Since 1997, the Vocational Training Centre (VTC) has offered courses for carpenters, mechanics and graphic designers.

In 2004 the CFP offered courses for electrical installers and also post diploma courses.

Since 2006 there have been courses for electrical fitters, mechanics, post diploma courses and car mechanics.

From the 2010-2011 school year, with the Gelmini reform, the Professional Institute changed from a three-year to a five-year course.

Currently, the Salesian House called the Don Bosco Salesian Orphanage Institute, has various educational areas

– a Vocational Training Centre: a three-year course in car mechanics and bodywork; courses for workers and businesses (daytime initial post-diploma training courses and evening refresher courses for the employed), which are part of the CNOS/FAP Valle d'Aosta Region federation, set up in July 2001

- a Vocational Institute for Industry and Craftsmanship (IPIA), with two addresses: MAT (Maintenance-Technical Assistance-Mechanical); PIA (Production-Industrial Handicraft-Made in Italy-wood);
- a middle school, an equal secondary school, which welcomes boys and girls from the lower-middle valley;
- a Don Bosco boarding school, reserved for students attending the IPIA, which hosts, from Monday to Friday, young people from nearby Piedmont or the valleys.

The preparation of these young people is entrusted to an educating community, whose primary protagonists are the Salesian community, the lay teachers, educators, collaborators, and also the parents and groups of the Salesian family (cooperators, alumni).

However, the educational focus has not only stopped at human and professional preparation to form upright citizens, but also to make good Christians.

Even though the house – being too small – did not allow for Christian formation activities, a solution was found for these and for important celebrations. Further up and a short distance from the Salesian House in Châtillon is the ancient parish of St Peter (attested to go back as early as the 12th century), which has a large church. The agreement with the parish has brought many fruits, including the propagation of devotion to Don Bosco's Madonna, Mary Help of Christians, an invocation dear to the Salesians. The fruit of this devotion also manifested itself in the recovery of the health of various people (Blanchod Martina, Emma Vuillermoz, Pession Paolina, etc.), attested to by the writings of the times.

The sincere desire to do good on the part of all those who contributed to the development led to the success of this Salesian work.

First of all, the entrepreneurs who understood the need and importance of the education of at-risk children, and at the same time promoted the training of possible future employees.

They not only offered their facilities, but also financially supported the educational activities.

Then there was the wisdom of the local authorities, who understood the importance of the work carried out over more than 30 years and immediately offered to continue providing support for the children and also for the companies in the area, thus providing them with qualified workers.

Last but not least, recognition must be given to the work carried out by the Salesians and their collaborators of all kinds, who have done their utmost to ensure that the hope of the future is not extinguished: young people and their integral education.

This professionalism in the preparation of the young, together with the care of the logistical structures (classrooms, laboratories, gyms, courtyards), the careful and constant maintenance of the premises, the connection with the territory, have led to widespread recognition that is also reflected in the fact that a street and a square in Châtillon are dedicated to St John Bosco.

When people sincerely seek good and strive for it, God gives his blessing.

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## **Salesians in Azerbaijan, sowers of hope**

*The story of a young man expressing gratitude for the work of the only Salesian community in Azerbaijan, a reference point for many young people in the capital.*

Azerbaijan (officially the Republic of Azerbaijan), is a country located in the Transcaucasus region, bordering the

Caspian Sea to the east, Russia to the north, Georgia and Armenia to the west and Iran to the south. It is home to a population of around 10 million who speak the Azerbaijani language, which belongs to the Turkic language family. The country's main wealth is oil and gas. It became independent in 1918 and was the first secular democratic state with a Muslim majority. Its independence lasted only two years, however, as it was incorporated into the newly formed Soviet Union in 1920. With the fall of the Soviet Empire, it regained independence in 1991. During this period, the Nagorno Karabakh region, inhabited mainly by Armenians, declared its independence under the name of the Artsakh Republic, an event that led to several wars. It reappeared in the international news after the recent attack by Azerbaijan on 19 September 2023, which led to the suppression of the aforementioned republic and the exodus of almost all Armenian inhabitants from this region to Armenia.

The presence of Christians in this region is mentioned as far back as the first centuries after Christ. In the 4th century, the Caucasian king Urnayr officially declared Christianity the state religion and it remained so until the 8th century when, following a war, Islam imposed itself. Today, the majority religion is Shia-dominated Islam, and Christians of all denominations account for 2.6% of the population.

The presence of Catholics in the country dates back to 1882 when a parish was founded; in 1915, a church was built in the capital Baku, demolished by the Soviet communists in 1931, dissolving the community and arresting the parish priest, who died a year later in a forced labour camp.



Following the fall of Communism, the Catholic community of Baku was reconstituted in 1997, and after a visit to Azerbaijan by Pope Saint John Paul II in 2002, land was

obtained for the construction of a new church, consecrated to the Immaculate Conception and inaugurated on 29 April 2007.

The Salesian presence in Azerbaijan was opened in the Jubilee year 2000, in the capital Baku, the largest city in the country, with a population of more than 2 million.

The rector of the Salesian house in Baku, Fr Martin Bonkáló, tells us that the Salesian mission is embodied in different and ever new contexts, as a response to the challenges and needs of youth. The echoes of Don Bosco can also be heard in Azerbaijan, in Central Asia, a country with a Muslim majority, which experienced the Soviet regime in the last century.

Seven Salesians live and work in this house, including five priests and two brothers belonging to the Slovak Province (SLK), who take care of St Mary's parish and the Maryam Education Centre. This is a work for the integral development of young people: evangelisation, catechesis, education and social aid.

Throughout the country, Catholics are a small flock professing their faith with courage and hope. The work of the Salesians is therefore based on witnessing to God's love in various forms. Relationships with the people are open, clear and friendly: this favours the flourishing of educational action.



Young people are like any other young people in the world, with their fears and talents. Their greatest challenge is to receive a good education to earn a living. Young people seek an educational environment and people who are capable on a professional and human level, who know how to communicate the path to follow in order to seek the meaning of life.

The Salesians are committed to looking to the future, to enrich their presence in the country, to make it more international, and to remain faithful to the charism transmitted by Don Bosco, with joy and enthusiasm.



Shamil, a former pupil of the Salesian centre in Baku, recounts: "I came into contact with the Maryam centre in 2012 and that encounter proved to be fundamental for the rest of my life. At that time, I had done my military service and was finishing my education at a computer college. I needed to grow professionally, but at the same time I badly needed friends in the real world! I arrived in Baku from the province and met a friend of mine on the street who told me about the Maryam Centre. So we went together to visit it and from there a beautiful chapter in my life began. From the first day, I found myself in a different world, not easy to explain, I say in my heart that it is an island. It became for me an island of humanity, in the modern world often interested in using people, and not really caring about them.

Without me even realising it, the programme at the youth centre had started and I was part of a team. Someone was playing volleyball, someone table tennis, a group of boys were strumming guitars.... Later, we sat in the refectory and everyone was given a chance to share a word to express their opinion on the day gone by, their impressions or new ideas. I was a rather shy guy, yet I happily started talking about the day's events and general topics without any difficulty or restraint. Among the many courses at the centre, I decided to start with the Photoshop graphics course and the English language course. When I then had to leave my job for health reasons, I also lost a roof over my head. The solution was to work at the centre as a guard, with certain duties and responsibilities. I was on probation for a month and I am happy that I did not let anyone down and that I found a new home. When Fr Stefan started developing the Cisco Academy computer network project at the centre in 2014, my career path as a network engineer began. During the same period, I was able to learn three domestic trades: welding, electricity and



plumbing. In 2016, I became an official Cisco instructor and have now been working as a network engineer for six years. This job has allowed me and my family to get back on our feet after years of very precarious living. In addition to my job, I teach courses on computer networks, became an animator and help organise summer camps for children. I can only be grateful to Don Bosco for everything he has given me in life”.

There are so many stories of young people like Shamil, who have managed to turn their lives around thanks to the work of the Salesians in Baku, and we hope that this work can prosper and continue to be fruitful.

Marco Fulgaro

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## Alexandre Planas Saurí, the deaf martyr (2/2)

[\(continuation from previous article\)](#)

### The Salesian

He was close to the sick, the children. The Oratory, which the Salesians had founded at the beginning of the house, ended with his departure back in 1903. But the parish of Sant Vicenç picked up the torch through a young man, Joan Juncadella, a born catechist, and *El Sordo*, his great assistant. As mentioned earlier, a very strong friendship and ongoing collaboration grew between them, which was only ended by the tragedy in 1936. Alexandre took care of the cleanliness and orderliness of the place, but he soon proved to be a real animator of the games and excursions that were organised. And if necessary, he did not hesitate to make available the money he saved.

And he had a Salesian heart. Deafness did not allow him to profess as a Salesian, which he certainly wanted. However, it appears that he took private vows, which he made with the permission of the then Provincial, Fr Philip Rinaldi, according to the testimony of one of the rectors of the house, Fr Crescenzi.

He demonstrated his identification with the Salesian cause in a thousand ways, but in a particularly significant way by taking personal care of the house for almost 30 years and defending it in the difficult situation in the summer and autumn of 1936.

*"He seemed like the father to each of us. When, in 1935, three boys drowned in the river, the man's grief was as if he had lost three sons at once. We know that the Salesians did not consider him an employee, but one of the family, or a cooperator. Today perhaps we could say a consecrated layman in the style of the Volunteers with Don Bosco. A Salesian of great spiritual stature."*

### **Embracing the Cross, a true witness of faith and reconciliation**

The Salesians returned to Sant Vicenç dels Horts in the autumn of 1931. The unrest that led to the fall of the Spanish monarchy affected the house in El Campello (Alicante) where the aspirantate was located at that time. The decision was therefore taken to move it to Sant Vicenç. The house, although relatively dilapidated, was ready. It was able to expand with the purchase of an adjacent tower. It was here that the life of the aspirants took place, whose testimony on *el Sordo* has made it possible to draw the portrait of the man, the artist, the believer and the Salesian to which we have referred.



Christ nailed to the cross, in the courtyard of the house, by Alexandre



The Deposition in the hands of Mary, in the courtyard of the house, by Alexandre



The Holy Sepulchre, in the courtyard of the house, by Alexandre

Now is not the time to refer to the critical situation of the years 1931-1936 in Spain. Despite all this, life in the Sant Vicenç aspirantate passed quite normally. The driving force of daily life was the vocational awareness of the young people, which always inspired them to look ahead in the hope of tying themselves to Don Bosco for good at a not too distant date.

Until the revolution came on 18 July 1936, on the same day Salesians and young people made their pilgrimage excursion to Tibidabo. When they returned in the afternoon, things were changing. In just a few days, the parish house in the village was burnt down, the Salesian seminary was seized, a climate of religious intolerance had spread everywhere, the parish priest and his assistant were arrested and killed, the forces of law and order were unable or unwilling to cope with the riots. In Sant Vicenç, the "Antifascist Committee" took power, which was clearly anti-Christian.

Although at first the life of the teachers was respected because of the care for the children they housed, they nevertheless had to witness the destruction and burning of all religious objects, in particular the three monuments erected by *el Sordo*. "*How he suffered*" seeing himself having to collaborate in the destruction of what was an expression of his deep spirituality and witnessing the expulsion of the priests.

In those days, *el Sordo* became clearly aware of the new role that the revolution forced him to take on: without ceasing to be the community's main link with the outside world (he had always moved freely as an errand boy and

in every kind of need), he had to guard the property as before and, above all, protect the seminarians. "In reality, he was the one who represented the Salesians and acted as our father. Within a few days, in fact, only the Brothers and an increasingly small group of aspirants remained.

The ultimate expulsion of both took place on 12 November. In Sant Vicenç, only Mr Alexandre remained. For his last days of life we know only three certain facts: two of the expelled Brothers returned to the village on the 16th to convince him to seek a safer place outside the village, which Alexandre refused. He could not leave the house he had guarded for so many years, nor could he maintain the Salesian spirit even in the midst of those difficult circumstances. One of them, Eliseo García, not wanting to leave him alone, stayed with him. Both were arrested on the night of the 18th. A few days later, seeing that Eliseo had not returned to Sarrià, another Salesian brother and a seminarian went to Sant Vicenç to get news of them. *"Don't they know what happened?"* said a lady friend they knew who ran a bar. *"She told us in a few words about the disappearance of el Sordo and Eliseo."*

How did he spend this last week? Knowing *el Sordo's* life as we do, always faithful to his principles and his way of doing things, it is not difficult to imagine him: helping others, without hiding his faith and charity, in the knowledge that he was doing good, contemplating the mystery of Christ's passion and death, real and present in the lives of the persecuted, the disappeared and the murdered... Perhaps in the hope that he could be the guardian not only of the Salesians' property, but the guardian of so many of the people who suffered. As we have recalled, he did not want to strip himself of the crucifix even during the months of religious persecution that culminated in his martyrdom. With this faith, with this hope, with this immense love he would hear from the Lord of glory: *"Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful in small things; I will entrust much more to you. Enter into the joy of your Lord"* (Mt 25:21).

## **El Sordo's gospel**

Having reached this point, anyone, no matter how insensitive, can only be silent and try to collect, to the best of one's ability, the precious spiritual legacy Alexandre left to the Salesian Family, his adoptive family. Can we say something about "his gospel", that is, about the Good News that he made his own and continues to propose to us with his life and death?

Alexandre is like the *"man who had an impediment in his speech"* of Mk 7:32. His parents' plea to Jesus for healing would have been continuous. Like him, Jesus took him to a lonely place away from his people and said to him: *"Ephata!"* The miracle was not in the healing of the physical ear, but in the spiritual ear. It seems to me that the acceptance of his situation with a spirit of faith was one of the founding experiences of his believing life that led him to proclaim, like the deaf man in the Gospel, to the four winds: *"He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak"* (Mk 7:37).

And from here in the life of el Sordo we can contemplate *"the hidden treasure of the Kingdom"* (Mt 13:44); *"the yeast that leavens the entire dough"* (Mt 13:33); Jesus himself *"who welcomes the sick"* and *"blesses the children"*; Jesus who prays to the Father for hours and hours and teaches us the Our Father (to give glory to the Father, to desire the Kingdom, to do his will, to trust in daily bread, to forgive, to free from evil. ...) (Mt 7:9-13); *"the householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old"* (Mt 13:52); *"the Good Samaritan who takes pity on the beaten man, approaches him, binds up his wounds and takes charge of his healing"* (Lk 10:33-35); *"the Good Shepherd, keeper of the sheepfold, who enters through the door, loves the sheep, even to the point of laying down his life for them"* (Jn 10:7-11)... In a word, a living icon of the Beatitudes, of all of them, in everyday life (Mt 5:3-12).

But, even more, we can approach Alexandre and contemplate with him the Mystery of Jesus' passion, death and

resurrection. A mystery that takes place in his life from birth to death. A mystery that strengthens him in his faith, nourishes his hope and fills him with love, with which to give glory to God, made all things to all people with the children and young people of the Salesian home, and with the villagers of Sant Vicenç, especially the poorest, including those who took his life: *"Father, forgive them for they know not what they do"* (Lk 23:34). Make me, Lord, a witness of faith and reconciliation. May they too, one day, hear from your lips: *"Today you will be with me in Paradise"* (Lk 23:43).

Blessed Alexandre Planas Saurí, layman, Salesian martyr, witness of faith and reconciliation, fruitful seed of the civilisation of Love for today's world, intercede for us.

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## Alexandre Planas Saurí, the deaf martyr (1/2)

*Alexandre Planas Sauri, born in Mataró (Barcelona) on 31 December 1878, was a lay collaborator of the Salesians until his glorious death as a martyr in Garraf (Barcelona) on 19 November 1936. His beatification took place together with other Salesians and members of the Salesian Family on 11 March 2001, by Pope Saint John Paul II.*

The list of Spanish martyrs beatified by Pope John Paul II on 11 March 2001 includes layman Alexandre PLANAS SAURÌ. His name is one of the Salesian martyrs of the Tarraconense Province, a subgroup of Barcelona. The testimonies about his life also describe him as "of the family" or "cooperator", but everyone describes him as "a genuine Salesian". The village of Sant Vicenç dels Horts, where he lived for 35 years, knew him by the nickname "El

*Sord'*” “El Sord dels Frares” (The Deaf man of the friars). And this is the expression that appears on the beautiful plaque in the parish church, placed on at the back, on the exact spot where Alexandre stood when he went to pray.

His life was cut short on the night of 18 November 1936, along with a Salesian Brother, Eliseo García, who stayed with him so as not to leave him alone, as Alexandre did not want to leave the village and seek a safer place. Within hours both were arrested, condemned by the anarchist committee in the municipality, and taken to the banks of the Garraf, on the Mediterranean, where they were shot. Their bodies were not recovered. Alexandre was 58 years old.

This is a note that could have made it onto the events page of any newspaper and fallen into utter oblivion. But it did not. The Church proclaimed them both blessed. For the Salesian Family they were and always will be “signs of faith and reconciliation”. Reference will be made in these pages to Mr Alexandre. Who was this man whom people nicknamed “*el Sord dels frares*”?

### **The circumstances of his life**

Alexandre Planas Saurí was born in Mataró (province of Barcelona) in 1878, six years before the train that took Don Bosco to Barcelona (to visit and meet with the Salesians and the young people at the Sarrià house), stopped at the station in this city to pick up Doña Dorotea de Chopitea and those from Martí Codolar who wanted to accompany him on the last leg of the journey to Barcelona.

Very little is known of his childhood and adolescence. He was baptised in the city’s most popular parish, St Joseph and St John. He was, without a doubt, a regular attender at Sunday celebrations, activities and parish celebrations. Judging by the trajectory of his later life, he was a young man who was able to develop a solid spiritual life.

Alexandre had a significant physical impairment: he was totally deaf and had an ungainly body (short in

stature, and curvature of the spine). The circumstance that brought him to Sant Vicenç dels Horts, a town about 50 km from his home town, is unknown. The truth is that in 1900 he was among the Salesians in the small town of Sant Vicenç as an employee in the daily activities of the Salesian house: gardening, cleaning, farming, running errands... A clerver and hard working young man. And, above all, "good and very pious".

The house in Sant Vicenç dels Horts was bought by Fr Philip Rinaldi, former Provincial of Spain, in 1895, to house the novitiate and the philosophy studies that were to be carried out later. It was the first Salesian formation centre in Spain. Alexandre arrived there in 1900 as an employee, immediately earning the respect of everyone. He felt very comfortable, fully integrated in the spirit and mission of the house.

At the end of the 1902-1903 school year, the house underwent a major change of direction. The Rector Major, Fr Michael Rua, had created the three provinces of Spain. Madrid and Seville Provinces decided to organise formation in their respective provinces. Barcelona also transferred the novitiate and philosophy to Girona. The house in Sant Vicenç dels Horts remained practically empty within a few months, inhabited only by Mr Alexandre.

From that year until 1931 (28 years!), he became the guardian of the house. Not only of the property, but above all of the Salesian traditions that had become strongly rooted in the population in just a few years. His was a benevolent presence and work, living like an anchorite but in no way foreign to the friends of the house who protected him, for the sick of the town he visited, life in his parish, the parishioners he edified with the example of his piety, and for the children at parish catechesis and the festive oratory he animated together with a young man from the town, Joan Juncadella, with whom he formed a strong friendship. Distant yet close at the same time, with no small influence on people. A singular character. The reference person for Salesian spirit in the village. *"El sord dels frares"*.



## The man

Alexandre, a handicapped and deaf person who understood others thanks to his penetrating gaze, of the movement of their lips, always answered lucidly, even if he spoke softly. A man with a good and bright heart: *"A treasure in an ugly earthenware jar, but we, the children, were able to perceive his human dignity perfectly."*

He dressed as a poor person, always with his bag slung over his shoulder, sometimes accompanied by a dog. The Salesians let him stay at the house. He could live on what the garden produced and the help he received from a few people. His poverty was exemplary, more than evangelical. And if he had too much, he gave it to the poor. In the midst of this kind of life, he carried out the task of caretaker of the house with absolute fidelity.

As well as the faithful and responsible man, was the good, humble, self-sacrificing man of an invincible, though firm, warmth. "He would not allow anyone to be spoken ill of." Then there was the gentleness of his heart. "The comforter of all families." A man of transparent heart, and upright intention. A man who made himself loved and respected. The people were with him.



## The artist

Alexandre also had the soul of an artist, an artist and a mystic. Isolated from outside noise he lived absorbed in constant mystical contemplation. And he was able to capture the innermost feelings of his religious experience in material things, which almost always revolved around the passion of Jesus Christ.

In the courtyard at the house he created three clearly visible monuments: Christ nailed to the cross, being laid in Mary's hands and the holy sepulchre. Among the three,

the cross presided over the courtyard. Passengers on the train that ran past the farm could see it perfectly. On the other hand, he set up a small workshop in one of the outbuildings of the house where he carried out the orders he received or small images with which he satisfied the tastes of popular piety and distributed them freely among his neighbours.

## **The believer**

But what dominated his personality was his Christian faith. He professed it in the depths of his being and manifested it with total clarity, sometimes even ostentatiously, by professing it in public. *"A true saint" a "man of God" people said. "When we arrived at the chapel in the morning or in the afternoon we would always unfailingly find Alexandre praying, on his knees, doing his pious practices." "His piety was very deep."* A man totally open to the voice of the Spirit, with the sensitivity that saints possess. The most admirable thing about this man was his thirst and hunger for God, *"seeking ever more spirituality."*

Alexandre's faith was first of all open to the mystery of God, before whose greatness he would fall on his knees in profound adoration: *"Bowed down by his body, his eyes lowered, full of interior life... placed at one side of the church, his head bowed, kneeling, absorbed in the mystery of God, fully immersed in meditation on holy pleasure, he would give vent to his affections and emotions..."*

*"He would spend hours before the tabernacle, kneeling, with his body bent almost horizontally to the ground, after communion."* From contemplation of God and his saving greatness, Alexandre drew a great trust in Divine Providence, but also a radical aversion to blasphemy against the glory of God and his holy name. He could not tolerate blasphemy. *"If he sensed a blasphemy he would either become tense as he looked intensely at the person who had uttered it, or he would whisper with compassion, so that the person could hear: 'Our Lady weeps, Our Lord weeps.'"*

His faith was expressed in the traditional

devotions of the Eucharist, as we have seen, and the rosary. But where his religious impulse found the channel best suited to his needs was undoubtedly in meditation on the passion of Christ. *"I remember the impression we had of this deaf man on hearing him speak of the Passion of Christ."*

He bore the mystery of the cross in his flesh and in his soul. In its honour he had erected the monuments of the cross, the deposition and the burial of Christ. All accounts also mention the iron crucifix he wore hanging from his chest, and whose chain was embedded in his skin. And he always slept with a large crucifix beside him. He did not want to take off the crucifix even during the months of religious persecution that culminated in his martyrdom. "Am I doing anything wrong?" he would say. "And if they kill me, so much the better, then I already have heaven open."

Every day he would make the Stations of the Cross: "When he went up to the study room, Mr Planas would enter the chapel, and when we came down after an hour, he was finishing the Stations of the Cross, which he did totally bent over, until his head touched the ground."

Founded on this experience of the cross to which was added his profound devotion to the Sacred Heart, the Deaf man's spirituality was projected towards asceticism and solidarity. He lived as a penitent, in evangelical poverty and a spirit of mortification. He slept on planks without a mattress or pillow, having beside him a skull that reminded him of death and "some instruments of penance". He did not learn this from the Salesians. He had learnt it previously and explained it by recalling the spirituality of Jesuit St Alphonse Rodríguez, whose manual he used to read in the novitiate house and which he sometimes meditated on during those years.

But his love for the cross also drove him to solidarity. His austerity was impressive. He dressed like the poor and ate frugally. He gave all he could give: not money, because he had none, but always his fraternal help: *"When there was something to be done for someone, he would leave*

*everything and go where it was needed.” Those who benefited most were the children in catechesis and the sick. “He never missed the bedside of a seriously ill person: he would watch over him while the family rested. And if there was no one in the family who could prepare the deceased, he was ready for this service. Favoured were the poor, whom, if he could, he helped with the alms he collected or with the fruit of his labour.”*

[\(continued\)](#)

*don Joan Lluís Playà, sdb*

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## **Tibidabo Salesian house**

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

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

The old name of the Barcelona hill was *Puig de l’Àliga* (Eagle Hill). The new name “Tibidabo”, like other biblical names (Valley of Hebron, Mount Carmel, etc.), was given by some religious people who lived in the area. The choice of this new name was made because of the majestic view it offers over the

city of Barcelona, from a height that gives one the feeling of dominating everything.

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

Don Bosco's reaction was spontaneous: “I am overwhelmed by this fresh, unexpected proof you give me of your piety and faith. Thank you, but you must realize that in this, you are the tools of Divine Providence. As I was leaving Turin to come to Spain, I was thinking to myself, now that the Church of the Sacred Heart in Rome is almost completed, I must look for some other way to honor the Sacred Heart and promote devotion to it. An interior voice bade me to be calm, assuring me that here I would be able to gratify this vow. That voice kept repeating to me, ‘*Tibi dabo, tibi dabo!*’ Yes, gentlemen, you are the tools of Divine Providence. With your help, a shrine dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus will soon rise upon that mount. Everyone will find there an opportunity to receive the holy sacraments, and your charity and faith – of which you have given me so many beautiful proofs – will be remembered forever.” ([MB](#) XVIII,114).

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

The church's construction project was significantly delayed,

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

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

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

Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament is continued during the day, and the practice of adoration at night is encouraged.

And to those who wish to make a retreat, accommodation and food are provided within the Salesian structure.

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

*Fr Joan Codina i Giol, sdb*

*Director Tibibabo*

## Photo gallery Salesian House in Tibidabo

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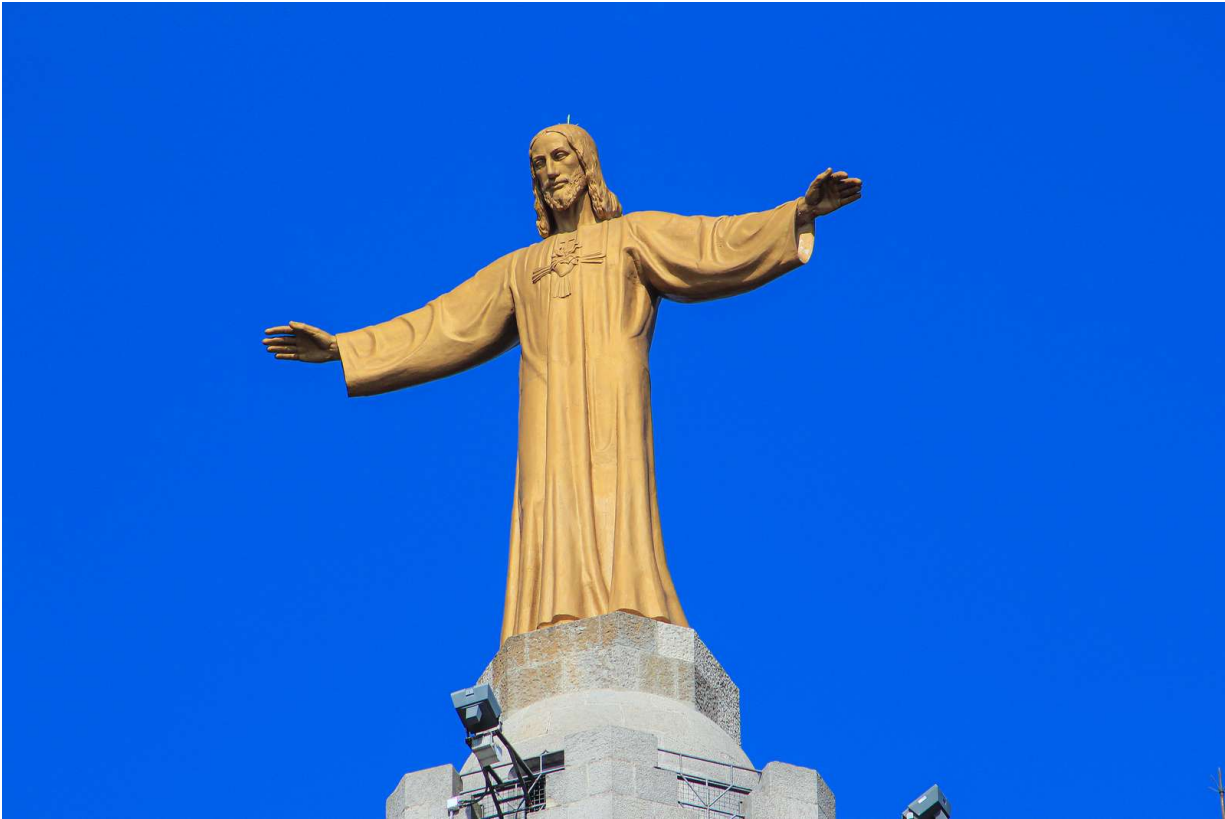


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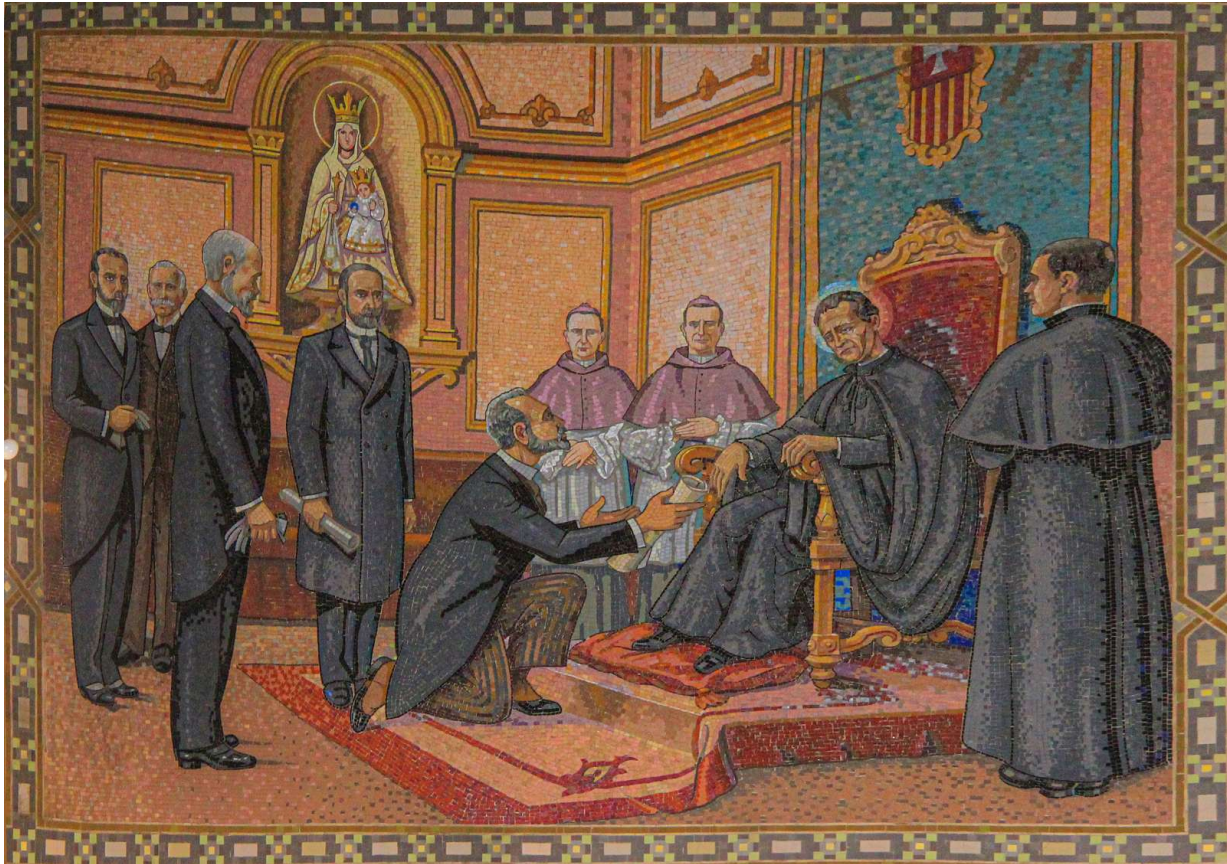


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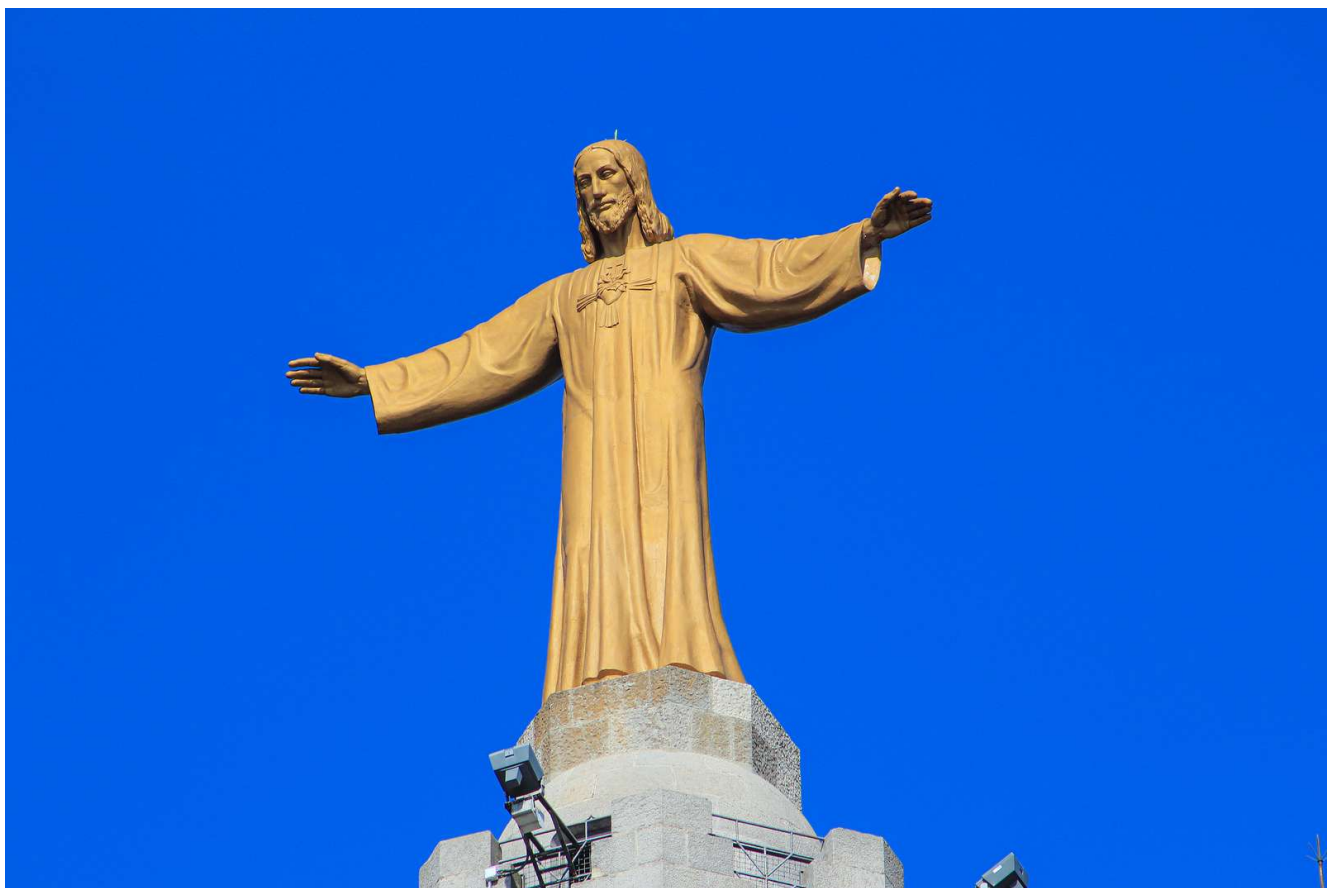


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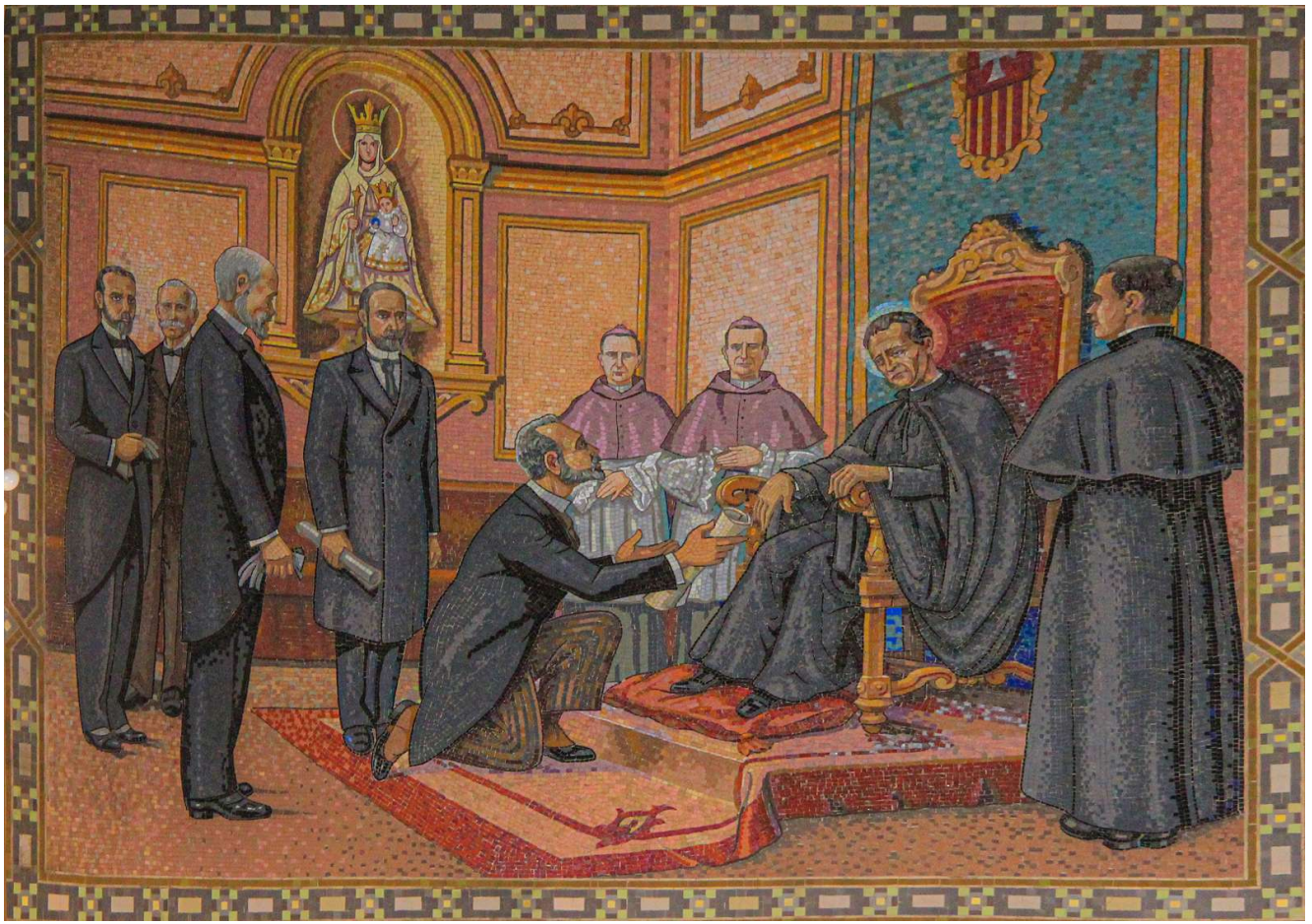
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# Venerable Dorotea Chopitea

*Who was Dorotea de Chopitea? She was a Salesian cooperator, a true mother of the poor in Barcelona, creator of numerous institutions at the service of charity and the apostolic mission of the Church. Her figure takes on special importance today and encourages us to imitate her example of being “merciful like the Father”.*

## **A Biscayan in Chile**

In 1790, during the reign of Charles IV, a Biscayan, Pedro Nicolás de Chopitea, a native of Lequeitio, emigrated to Chile, then part of the Spanish Empire. The young migrant prospered and married a young Creole woman, Isabel de Villota.

Don Pedro Nolasco Chopitea and Isabel Villota settled in Santiago de Chile. God granted them 18 children, although only 12 survived, five boys and seven girls. The youngest of these was born, baptised and confirmed on the same day: 5 August 1816, taking the names Antonia, Dorotea and Dolores, although she was always known as Dorotea (Dorothy), which in Greek means “gift of God”. Peter and Elizabeth’s family was wealthy, Christian, and committed to using their wealth for the benefit of the poor people around them.

In 1816, the year of Dorotea’s birth, Chileans began to openly demand independence from Spain, which they achieved in 1818. The following year, Don Pedro, who had aligned himself with the royalists, i.e. in favour of Spain, and had been imprisoned for it, moved his family across the Atlantic to Barcelona, so that the political turmoil would not compromise his older children, although he continued to maintain a dense network of relations with political and economic circles in Chile.

In the large house in Barcelona, the three-year-old Dorotea was entrusted to the care of her twelve-year-old sister Josefina. Thus Josefina, later “Sister Josefina”, was Dorotea’s “little young mother”. She entrusted herself to her with total affection, allowing herself to be guided by her.

When she was thirteen years old, on Josefina’s advice she took Father Pedro Nardó, from the parish of Santa María del Mar, as her spiritual director. For 50 years Pedro was her confessor and counsellor in delicate and difficult moments. The priest taught her with kindness and strength to “separate her heart from riches”.

Throughout her life, Dorotea considered the riches of her family not as a source of amusement and dissipation, but as a great means placed in her hand by God to do good for the poor. Fr Pedro Nardó had her read the Gospel parable of the rich man and the poor Lazarus many times. As a distinctive Christian sign, he advised Josefina and Dorotea to always dress modestly and simply, without the cascade of ribbons and light silk gauze that the fashion of the time imposed on young aristocratic women.

Dorotea received the solid home schooling which at that time was given to girls from well-to-do families. In fact, she later helped her husband many times in his profession as a merchant.

### **Wife at the age of sixteen**

The Chopiteas had met up in Barcelona with friends from Chile, the Serra family, who had returned to Spain for the same reason, independence. The father, Mariano Serra i Soler, came from Palafrugell and had also carved out a brilliant financial position for himself. Married to a young Creole girl, Mariana Muñoz, he had four children, the eldest of whom, José María, was born in Chile on 4 November 1810.

At the age of sixteen, Dorotea experienced the most delicate

moment of her life. She was engaged to José María Serra, although the marriage was spoken of as a future event. But it happened that Don Pedro Chopitea had to return to Latin America to defend his interests, and shortly afterwards his wife Isabel prepared to cross the Atlantic to reach him in Uruguay together with their youngest children. Suddenly, Dorotea was faced with a fundamental decision for her life: to break the deep affection that bound her to José María Serra and leave with her mother, or to marry at the age of sixteen. On the advice of Fr Pedro Nardó, Dorotea decided to marry. The marriage took place in Santa Maria del Mar on 31 October 1832.

The young couple settled in Carrer Montcada, in the palace belonging to her husband's parents. The understanding between them was perfect and a source of happiness and well-being.

Dorotea was a slim, lanky individual with a strong and determined character. The "I will always love you" sworn by the two spouses before God, developed into an affectionate and solid married life which gave birth to six daughters: all of them receiving the name Maria with various complements: Maria Dolores, Maria Ana, Maria Isabel, Maria Luisa, Maria Jesus and Maria del Carmen. The first came into the world in 1834, the last in 1845.

Fifty years after the "yes" pronounced in the church of Santa Maria del Mar, José Maria Serra would say that in all those years "our love grew day by day".

### **Dorotea, mother of the poor**

Dorotea was the lady of the house, in which several families of employees worked. She was José María's intelligent co-worker, who soon achieved fame in the business world. She was by his side in times of success and in times of uncertainty and failure. Dorotea was by her husband's side when he travelled abroad. She was with him Tsar Alexander II' Russia, in the Savoy family's Italy and Pope Leo XIII's Rome.



On her visit to Rome, at the age of sixty-two, she was accompanied by her niece Isidora Pons, who testified at the apostolic process: "She was received by the Pope. The deference with which Leo XIII treated my aunt, to whom he offered her a white sundress as a gift, has stayed with me."

### **Affectionate and strong**

The employees of the Serra house felt like part of the family. Maria Arnenos declared under oath: "She had a motherly affection for us, her employees. She cared for our material and spiritual welfare with real love. When someone was ill, she saw to it that they lacked nothing, she took care of even the smallest details." "Her salary was higher than that given to the employees of other families.

A delicate person, a strong and determined character. This was the battlefield on which Dorotea struggled throughout her life to acquire the humility and calm that nature had not given her. As great as her impetus was, greater was her strength to live always in the presence of God. Thus she wrote in her spiritual notes: "I will make every effort to ensure that from morning all my actions are directed to God", "I will not give up meditation and spiritual reading without serious reason", "I will make twenty daily acts of mortification and as many acts of love of God", "To do all actions from God and for God, frequently renewing purity of intention.... I promise God to purify my intention in all my actions."

### **Salesian Cooperator**

In the last decades of the 1800s, Barcelona was a city in the throes of the "industrial revolution". The outskirts of the city were full of very poor people. There was a lack of shelters, hospitals and schools. During the retreat she made in 1867, Doña Dorotea wrote among her resolutions: "My favourite virtue will be charity towards the poor, even if it costs me great sacrifices." And Adrián de Gispert, Dorotea's nephew, testified: "I know that Aunt Dorotea founded hospitals, shelters, schools, workshops for arts and trades

and many other works. I remember visiting some of them in her company. When her husband was alive, he helped her in these charitable and social works. After his death, she first of all saw to the patrimony of her five daughters; then, her "personal" goods (her very rich dowry, the patrimony received personally in inheritance, the goods that her husband wanted to register in his name), she used for the poor with careful and prudent administration." A witness stated under oath: "After having provided for her family, she dedicated the rest to the poor as an act of justice."

Having heard from Don Bosco, she wrote to him on 20 September 1882 (she was sixty-six, Don Bosco sixty-seven). She told him that Barcelona was an "eminently industrial and mercantile" city, and that his young and dynamic Congregation would find plenty of work among the boys in the suburbs. She offered a school for apprentice workers.

Fr Philp Rinaldi arrived in Barcelona in 1889, and he writes: "We went to Barcelona at her call, because she wanted to provide especially for young workers and abandoned orphans. She bought a plot of land with a house, the extension of which she took care of. I arrived in Barcelona when the construction had already been completed.... With my own eyes I saw many cases of assistance to children, widows, the elderly, the unemployed and the sick. Many times I heard it said that she personally performed the most humble services for the sick."

In 1884 she thought of entrusting a nursery school to the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians: it was necessary to think of the children in the outer suburbs.

Don Bosco was not able to go to Barcelona until the spring of 1886, and the chronicles amply report the triumphant welcome he was given in the Catalan metropolis, and the affectionate and respectful attentions with which Doña Dorotea, her daughters, grandchildren and relatives surrounded the saint.

On 5 February 1888, when he was informed of Don Bosco's death, Blessed Michael Rua wrote to her: "Our dearest father Don Bosco has flown to heaven, leaving his children full of sorrow." He always showed a lively esteem and grateful affection for our mother of Barcelona, as he called her, the mother of the Salesians and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

Moreover, before he died, he assured her that he was going to prepare a good place for her in heaven. That same year, Doña Dorotea handed over the oratory and the schools in Rocafort Street, in the heart of Barcelona to the Salesians.

The last handing over to the Salesian Family was the Santa Dorotea school entrusted to the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. 60,000 pesetas were needed for its purchase, and she handed it over saying: "God wants me poor." That sum was her provision for her old age, what she kept to live modestly together with Mary, her faithful companion.

On Good Friday 1891, in the cold church of Marie Reparatrice, as she was taking up the collection she contracted pneumonia. She was seventy-five years old, and it was immediately clear that she would not overcome the crisis. Fr Rinaldi came to her and stayed for a long time at her bedside. He wrote: "In the few days he was still alive, she did not think of her illness but of the poor and her soul. She wanted to say something in particular to each of her daughters, and blessed them all in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, like an ancient patriarch. As we stood around her bed commending her to the Lord, at a certain moment she raised her eyes. The confessor presented the crucifix to her to kiss. Those of us who were present knelt down. Doña Dorotea recollected herself, closed her eyes and gently breathed her last."

It was 3 April 1891, five days after Easter.

Pope John Paul II declared her "Venerable" on 9 June 1983,

i.e. "a Christian who practised love of God and neighbour to an heroic degree,"

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